

'A writer of many gifts: brave, sympathetic and thoughtful'

COLIN THUBRON

PHILIP
MARSDEN
**THE
CROSSING
PLACE**

A JOURNEY AMONG
THE ARMENIANS



Philip Marsden
The Crossing Place: A
Journey among the Armenians

Аннотация

Ebook edition of Philip Marsden's classic travel book, published to coincide with the centenary of the Armenian massacres. After centuries of prominence as a world power, Armenia has withstood every attempt during the 20th century to destroy it. With a name redolent both of dim antiquity and of a modern world and its tensions, the Armenians founded a civilization and underwent a diaspora that brought many of the great ideas of the East to Western Europe. The Crossing Place is Philip Marsden's gripping account of his remarkable journey through the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus in a quest to discover the secret of one of the world's most extraordinary peoples. Caught between opposing empires, between warring religions and ideologies – at the crossing place of history – the Armenians have somehow survived against the odds. This is their story – told by one of the finest travel writers at work today.

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PHILIP MARSDEN

The Crossing Place

A Journey among the Armenians



Copyright

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Turkish massacres, Anatolia, 1915 © Bridgeman Art Library

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EPIGRAPH

The wind is singing, the leaves of the mulberry-tree are shuffling.

Eternal song; eternal life; eternal death; eternal sorrow; and eternal joy...

Vahan Totovents, *Scenes from an Armenian Childhood*,
(Trans. Mischa Kudian)

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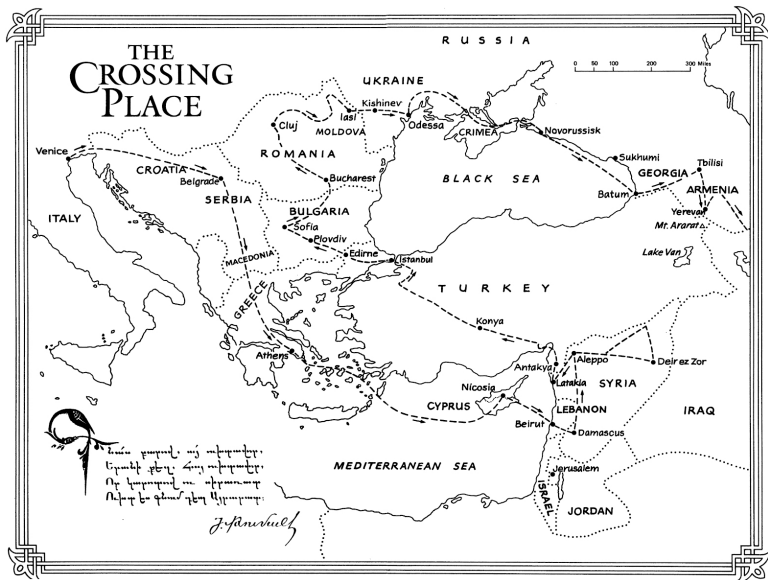
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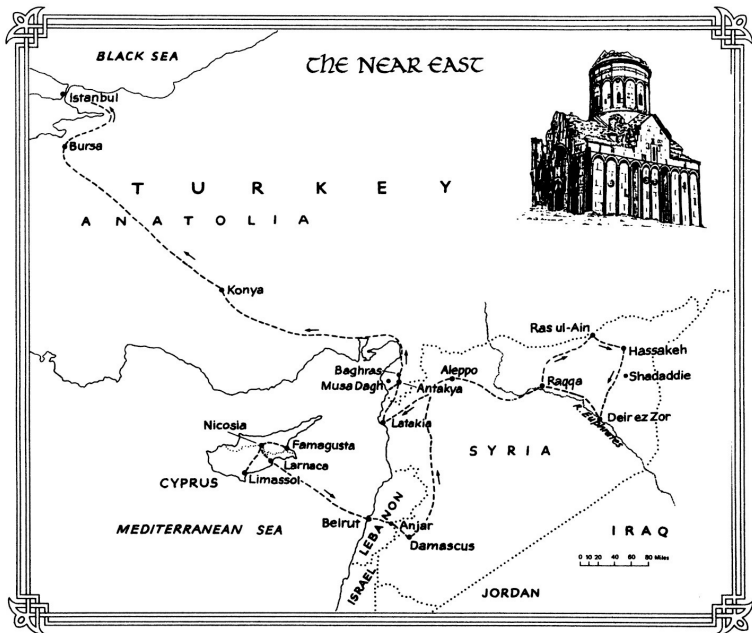
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MAP





EASTERN EUROPE

UKRAINE



RUSSIA

Gherla Suceava
Cluj Gheorgien
TRANSYLVANIA Frumoasa

ROMANIA

Bucharest

BULGARIA

Sofia

Plovdiv

Bachkovo

Edirne

Istanbul

BLACK SEA

TURKEY

CRIMEA

SEA OF AZOV

Kerc

Novorussisk

Tuapse

GEORGIA

Batum

Tbilisi

ARMENIA

Yerevan

0 10 20 40 60 80 100 Miles

GEORGIA

Alaverdi
Gogaran
Spitak
Leninakan
Dilijan
Haghbat
Sanahin
Haghartsin
Goshavank
Sevan Island

AZERBAIJAN

Noradouz
Lake Sevan

Yerevan

ARMENIA

Shiraz

Sovetashen

KARABAGH

Mt. Ararat
△

TURKEY

NAKHIJEVAN

Goris
Tatev
ZANGÉZOUR
David Bek

Ghapan

Meghri

IRAN

0 10 20 40 60 80 Miles



PREFACE TO 2015 EDITION

On a cold grey morning in January 1991 I stood beneath the departures board at London's Victoria Station, waiting to catch the boat-train to Paris. A rucksack leaned against my shins and a crowd of commuters – blank-faced and winter-wrapped – flowed past me. I was in my late twenties, and I was going to Armenia.

In my pocket I had a black oilskin notebook with a list of Armenian sites and contacts in places from Venice to Nicosia, Damascus to Sofia, Aleppo to Cluj, Istanbul to Bucharest. I had arranged them by country, and the last page was headed USSR – still in existence, just, with names in Odessa, Tbilisi and Yerevan. I was wearing new boots and a new coat. In my rucksack was a change of clothes, a towel, books, two maps (one 'Turkey and Western Asia', the other '*Osteuropa*'), a short-wave radio, a Nikon F3 camera, a lot of transparency film, a letter of introduction from the Armenian Patriarch of Jerusalem and \$2,000 in cash. I also had two passports, one with Israeli stamps and one without. In neither of the passports was a single visa.

I felt neither prepared nor unprepared; the uncertainty of the journey was too great to be nervous. I had developed an idea of the traditional Armenian diaspora as a powerful and secretive network of communities spread across the Middle East and Eastern Europe. If I locked into that network, and was accepted, all would be fine. Visas would appear, borders would open before

me. At least that was what I hoped: proving it was part of the point of the journey. My two main fears were being kidnapped in the Levant and being turned back, anywhere. I was determined not to fly.

From Paris my plan was to carry on by train to Venice, then to Athens, and by ferry to Cyprus. That was the easy part. From then on, I would need visas and luck and the help of my contacts. The first decision would be whether or not to go to Lebanon. The bombing phase of the First Gulf War was already underway; Western hostages were still being held in Beirut and the Bekaa Valley.

For months before, I'd been living in a single-room flat in the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem's Old City. I took daily lessons in Armenian with the charming Father Anooshavan, who was alleged to speak thirty-six languages. I spent a great deal of time with the poet and historian George Hintlian, who acted as mentor to my planned odyssey. I talked to monks, scholars and seminarians. I met recent refugees from Karabagh, second-generation refugees from Iran, and third-generation refugees from Turkey. In 1915 the entire Armenian population had been driven from Anatolia; many were massacred there, on the edge of dusty towns; many more were driven down into the Syrian desert. Over a million died. In Jerusalem, there were a few very old survivors who, in darkened rooms, laid their stories before me.

At that time the Old City was more than usually tense. On

to the first Palestinian *Intifada* were heaped the war-fears that had followed Saddam's invasion of Kuwait. I recall the cheek-sting of tear gas, the fear of walking in the alleys at night, of a stone to the head or a street stabbing. I recall the Al-Aqsa massacre of 8 October and watching an Israeli settler standing in the Ghawanima minaret, shooting down at Palestinians in the concourse of the mosque.

That morning at Victoria station, I carried a couple of other things with me, things I'd picked up in Jerusalem. One was a particular strain of anger that is unavoidable if you spend any time in the Middle East. I had arrived in Jerusalem with an outsider's view of the Palestinian conflict. But as the months passed and I saw the reality of day-today life, I found myself with a visceral reaction to the Israeli occupation. A similar indignation, overlaying any attempt at neutrality, had grown to colour my Armenian studies. In 1915, under threat from enemies on all sides, the Turkish authorities had every right to be nervous of Armenian loyalties. But what they did to the Armenians overshadows any political context. This book is not an attempt to explain the events of 1915; it is the record of my own experience of travelling among the Armenians, at a particular moment in world history, at a particular moment in my own life. Re-reading it now, more than two decades on, I can see how partisan I'd become, and remember how natural that position felt.

The other piece of baggage was something that would grow sharper over the coming months, that would stay with me for

years afterwards. It was the idea that violence and disorder were the way of the world, and that at that time in the early 1990s, with the Middle East in chaos and the Soviet Union fracturing, they were both on the rise. I was, I recall now, in that state of mind that sees everywhere the signs of imminent catastrophe.

Two months later I reached the Syrian town of Deir ez Zor. After days in the desert, visiting the massacre sites, I crossed the Euphrates on a bus. It was late afternoon and a dusty light hung heavy over the town, as if the sun had lost its vigour. Down a side alley, I knocked on a door and an Armenian let me in swiftly and locked it behind him.

I don't remember much of that evening, except his ninety-year old mother sitting still and silent on a stool. But in the morning he took me to see something remarkable. Amidst the boxy concrete buildings, the overhead tangle of wires, stood the Armenian Martyrs' Memorial church – only just completed.

It wasn't only a church but an entire complex of buildings – a museum, an archive, community rooms. The sunlight glowed on walls of fresh-cut, butter-yellow limestone. Into the stone were carved *khachkars*, those crazily intricate Armenian crosses that mark places of note. Down in the crypt of the church was a gallery of black-and-white photos of the massacres – beheaded men and naked starving women and, like members of a lost family, the Anatolian towns from which the Armenians had been driven. Full-length silk robes and silverware stood in glass cases. It was all that was left.

In the middle of the room were more glass cases, but these ones were set into the floor. Under the glass lay the pale bones of victims. Some of them had come from the cave at Shadaddie, where several thousand people had been burnt and suffocated. From the middle of the ring, rising from the bones like a tree trunk, was a marble pillar. Its stocky girth pushed up out of the crypt, through a hole in the floor above and into the main space of the church. I leaned in to gaze at its light-tinted top, probing the interior as if it was another world. It was named the Column of Resurrection.

The church was consecrated just a couple of months after I visited. The Armenian Catholicos of Cilicia came up from Beirut to conduct the ceremony. Over the years since, tens of thousands of Armenians have made the journey across the desert to visit the Martyrs' Memorial church. Until the recent Syrian civil war, a vast gathering took place there each year on the day of commemoration, 24 April. The memorial site is often compared to Auschwitz, built at one of the places where the Armenians were concentrated after their long march, and where they died in such numbers. It is a site that for Armenians offers a hint of solidity amidst the perennial loss – stone buildings to offset the villages and towns that were gone, the centuries-old way of life, the abandoned cemeteries and ancient *khachkars*, the generations that might have been born.

In the summer of 2014, the town of Deir ez Zor fell into the hands of ISIS. The Armenian priest received a phone call

inviting him to accept their authority. He refused. The Armenian Church of the Holy Martyrs was dynamited. Its treasures and mementoes were destroyed, its archive burnt. The charred bones from Shadaddie were buried once again, in tons and tons of rubble.

The story of the Armenian massacres did not begin in 1915, and nor did it end then. Persecutions stretched back through the centuries, flaring into periodic pogroms and forced exile. The Armenian communities set up elsewhere have proved often just as frail, just as vulnerable. When I was in Aleppo in 1991, refugees from the civil war in Beirut had pushed the Armenian population in the city to one hundred thousand; from 2012, the tide turned and the Armenians fled the opposite way.

The collective memory of 1915 has followed its own precarious and unpredictable path. For decades, the Armenians were almost silent, as if a combination of shock and shame prevented them saying anything. Then on the fiftieth anniversary, in 1965, one hundred thousand people gathered in Yerevan to demand restitution of historical lands in Turkey. The effect was extraordinary. Many in the Soviet republic didn't even know of the catastrophe, while in the diaspora the scattered victims and their descendants suddenly found a voice. Thereafter, the cries for recognition grew louder and the sense of grievance became a powerful political force.

The reaction of the Turkish state has been denial – denial that there was ever a systematic campaign to rid the country

of Armenians, denial that Armenian deaths were anything more than incidental damage caused by civil conflict. Armenian anger intensified. In the 1970s, extremists conducted a campaign of terror against Turkish diplomats. Many more have been involved in more restrained lobbying of governments around the world to recognise the genocide – which in turn has provoked further dismissal from the Turkish state.

No-one now has any direct memory of what happened in 1915. The survivors I interviewed are long since dead. Although the dissemination of evidence has grown in the intervening years, the entire episode has been successfully muddled by Turkish denial. The debate has revolved around whether or not there was a ‘genocide’, a concerted attempt to eradicate the Armenians as an ethnic group and whether it is possible to describe it with a word that was only coined in 1948. The polarisation of opinion, the fear of Turkish retribution against parliaments who vote to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, have helped to maintain the opacity of the water.

The terminology doesn’t matter. The events remain, casting their shadow over the entire twentieth century. In 2009, Geoffrey Robertson QC trawled the available material and wrote a report entitled ‘Was there an Armenian Genocide?’ ‘No reputable historian,’ he concluded, ‘could possibly deny the central facts of the deportations and the racial and religious motivations behind the deaths of a significant proportion of the Armenian people.’

I am often asked: what interested you in the Armenians? I used

to find the question surprising: who could not be interested in the Armenians once you knew their story? But I now realise that what people really meant was this: why did I immerse myself so completely, cut myself off so entirely, in order to travel through the diaspora and down to the southern Caucasus?

That year was the most extraordinary of my life, yet I still find the question hard to answer. I was motivated by the genocide, yes, the shock of discovering its details and the continuing campaign of denial. But it wasn't just that, nor even mainly that. Nor was it the extraordinary achievements of the Armenians – the perfect stone churches, those miracles of form in the treeless expanse of eastern Turkey, nor the devotional beauty of the medieval manuscripts. It wasn't the music, the repertoire of traditional laments and marriage songs, the strains of the *kamancha* or the *duduk*, which in a few breathy notes can conjure up a yearning for Armenia and its mountains even for those who've never even seen them.

All those things are astonishing but they were not what kept my curiosity alive. It was something about the Armenians themselves, their half-hidden role in history, their Zelig-like presence in the Byzantine Empire, the Mughal Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Soviet Empire. It was what they knew of the world, of the deep lessons of loss and landlessness, of living among strangers, of how to make light of borders and the obstacles of long journeys. It was the nobility of so many of their lives, the fierce conviction that our mortal endeavours should be

pursued always with energy and courage, that to be alive is to be awake, never to be complacent, never to rest, that any sense of belonging on this earth is both fleeting and illusory. Sometimes it seems to me as if long ago, far back in a collective past that pre-dates most of the world's existing ethnic groups, the Armenians discovered a secret, and swore never to disclose it but hand it down from generation to generation, wherever they happened to be. It's a secret that's been so closely guarded for so many centuries, that what remains is less the secret itself than the habit of keeping it.

That would explain their survival, the ceaseless exercise in will and competence that sustains it. It would explain the life of individuals like Joseph Emin, whose roamings took him from the courts of eighteenth-century Europe to the Caucasus to try and liberate his people. It explains too the *fedayi* I saw that first day in Yerevan, down from the mountains to bury their dead with their black beards and blue-grey eyes, and Janna Galstian, who abandoned a brilliant acting career for war in Karabagh where I met her in 1993 as deputy military commander of the Hadrout region. It explains the life and work of the great musician Gomidas, collector of a thousand Armenian folk songs, who deciphered the medieval notation system but was driven out of his mind by the experience of 1915. It explains the power of the letters of Mesrop Mashtots's Armenian alphabet and the melismatic chants of the church choirs, and the genius of Armenian masons, photographers and merchants, and of those

Armenian priests, stuck in some far-off outpost of the diaspora, in Poland or Transylvania or Iraq who say the liturgy for the last time to an empty church, then lock the door and step outside, into the dangerous world.

Philip Marsden, Ardevora, December 2014

PRELUDE

One summer, walking in the hills of eastern Turkey, I came across a short piece of bone. It was lodged in the rubble of a landslip and had clearly been there for many years. I rubbed its chalky surface and examined the worn bulbs of the joint; I took it to be the limb of some domestic animal and dropped it into my pocket.

Beyond the rubble, the land fell away to a dusty valley which coursed down to the plain of Kharput. The plain was hazy and I could just make out a truck bowling across it, kicking up a screen of pale dust in its wake. I carried on down the valley. It was a strange, still place and rounding a bluff, I stumbled on the ruins of a village. A shepherd was squatting in the shade of a tumbled-down wall, whistling. I showed him the piece of bone and gestured at the ruins around him.

The shepherd nodded, wiping together his palms in an unambiguous gesture. He said simply, '*Ermeni*.' Then he took the bone and threw it to his dog.

Ermeni: the Armenians. The guide books hardly mentioned the Armenians. No one mentioned the Armenians, yet everywhere I went over the coming weeks, every valley of that treeless Anatolian plateau, was haunted by them. Arriving one morning on the shores of Lake Van, I took a boat to the island of Aghtamar. The island had once been the court of an Armenian

king, the centre of a tiny realm squeezed between Persia and Byzantium, but now it was uninhabited.

Continuing north, around the lower slopes of Mount Ararat, I came to the ruins of the Armenian city of Ani. Its extraordinary thousand-year-old cathedral, in no man's land between the Turkish and Soviet borders, was open to the sky, shelter for three ill-looking sheep. A long way up a gorge near Digor, I found an Armenian church so perfect in its design that at first I did not notice its collapsing roof, nor the gaps in its walls.

I left Anatolia with a clutch of half-answered questions. Who were these people, and what had happened? I knew about as much as most – that the Turks had done something terrible in the First World War, that Armenia was the first Christian nation, that it had hovered for centuries on the fringes of the classical world. But it was not an explanation. Everything that I learnt about the Armenians only served to deepen the mystery, to make them more surprising, more enigmatic.

The following year I was travelling through northern Syria and came across an archaeologist in Aleppo. He knew a good deal about the Armenians and one afternoon took me to meet Torkom, an elderly Armenian lawyer with a bony face and deep-set blue eyes. Torkom lived alone, at the top of a set of winding stairs. His room was dark and musty and filled with books. A few glass-fronted cases had been built into the wall for manuscripts and they glowed with a yellowy light; they looked like preserved organs in laboratory jars.

When he heard I was interested in the Armenians, Torkom peered at me suspiciously.

‘Why?’

I said I’d been to eastern Anatolia.

‘Yes?’ I told him about the cathedral at Ani and the church at Digor. I told him about the bone and the ruined villages and he shrugged as if to say: ‘What do you expect?’

But when I mentioned Lake Van, he said, ‘My family was from Van. You see my eyes? I have Van eyes – deep blue.’

‘Like the lake,’ I said. He smiled and led me into a back room. A photograph of Mount Ararat hung on one wall. Beneath it was a large desk, covered in papers.

‘Do you know anything about the marches?’ he asked.

‘Very little.’

He opened one of the drawers and handed me the xerox copy of a hand-drawn map. Years of interviews had gone into that map, he said. He had collaborated with an Armenian truck driver who knew every town and village of northern Syria, and they had spliced the oral information with the few written records to draw the map. It looked to me somewhat like a tidal chart: a mass of arrows curling and twisting down the page. But the arrows, when I looked closely, were overlaid on a map of the Near East and they all pointed in more or less the same direction, away from Anatolia, south towards the Syrian desert.

I spent the following day in Torkom’s library.

On 24 April 1915 the Turkish authorities arrested

Constantinople's six hundred leading Armenians. They rounded up another five thousand from the city's Armenian quarters. Few of these people were ever seen again.

In the interior Turkish forces began to deport the Armenians. Torkom showed me the published report of one of the only foreigners who had witnessed what these deportations really meant. Leslie Davis had been the American consul in Kharput. He had watched the Armenian groups come and go, and had listened to the rumours. Since it was wartime his movements were severely restricted and he had been unable to confirm what he heard. But one morning before dawn he managed to slip out of the town. He rode on to the plain of Kharput.

And wherever he rode he saw the Armenians. They were casually buried in the roadside ditches, their limbs half eaten by scavenging dogs; he saw the heaps of charred bones where the remains had been burned; he saw the swollen bodies of the newly dead and in places they lay so thickly in the dirt that his horse had difficulty avoiding them. As the day wore on, Davis rode further into the hills. He reached the shores of Lake Goeljuk. Here, in the valleys leading down to the lake, the scene was the same: corpses scattered amidst the thornscrub, bunched together in their hundreds – at the foot of cliffs, in gorges, in the hidden folds of land.

Those who weren't killed at once were gathered into convoys and driven south. These were the marches. Davis had managed to compile an account of just one of these dismal convoys; it had

left Kharput on 1 July 1915:

Day 1	3000 Armenians leave Kharput. Escort of seventy zaptieh under command of Faiki Bey.
Day 2	Faiki Bey levies 400 lira from convoy for its safety. Faiki Bey disappears.
Day 3	First women and girls taken by Kurds. Open violation by zaptieh.
Day 9	All horses sent back to Kharput.
Day 13	200 lira levied by zaptieh. Zaptieh disappear.
Day 15	Kurdish 'guard' take 150 men and butcher them, then rob convoy. Joined by another convoy from Sivas. Numbers swell to 18000.
Days 25–34	Harassed by villagers. Many women taken.
Day 40	Eastern Euphrates. Blood-stained clothes on river-

	bank; 200 bodies in water. Armenians forced to pay to avoid being thrown in river.
Day 52	Kurds take everything, including clothes.
Day 52–9	Naked, without food or water. Women bent double from shame. Hundreds die beneath hot sun. Forced to pay for water. Money hidden in hair, mouth, genitals. Many throw themselves into the wells. Arab villagers give them pieces of cloth out of pity.
Day 60	300 remain from 18000.
Day 64	Men and the sick burned to death.
Day 70	150 arrive in Aleppo.

When I rose after several hours of reading such accounts, I felt dazed and numb. I walked back into the centre of Aleppo, through the high, narrow streets with their 1950s cars and the clattering souks. But I could not erase the images of the massacres. I carried on walking until well after dark and by the time I returned to my hotel had decided to try and find out more. One place in particular had struck me – a certain cave at

Shadaddie. I rearranged my plans: I took Torkom's map and a letter of introduction and left Aleppo for the desert.

South from the town of Hassakeh, the road ran straight ahead of the bus for mile upon mile. It dipped and rose and tapered towards a low horizon, but did not change direction. Beside it the telegraph poles echoed into the distance until the heat-haze dissolved everything into a shimmering mass. On Torkom's map, Shadaddie was no more than a dot in the desert. A thin arrow pointed down to it from Ras ul-Ain. Now it has become an oil-drilling station and in one of the pre-fab homes I found a technician who nodded when I gave him Torkom's letter: yes, he knew about the cave.

The technician drove me out of the town in a battered jeep. I sat half-hidden in the back and at the checkpoints crouched down behind the seat; we were now close to the Iraqi border and the oilfields were well guarded.

A dry wind swept through the flaps of the jeep. It sped out across the desert and into the jumble of hillocks ahead. It was a cool, unrelenting wind and in places it had scoured the sand from the bedrock and the quartzite gleamed beneath it as white as bone. Nothing grew here. The only things that moved were the lifeless profiles of the nodding-donkey pumps. We left the road and slowed on to a rutted track. All around it were the egg-like shapes of compacted dunes. We bumped along the track until the dunes gave way to a wide depression. The technician stopped the jeep and pulled on the handbrake. Lighting a cigarette, he

pointed into the hollow.

Flash-floods had cut a deep gulch which pushed down into the rock below. I followed its dry pipe-like channel to where it opened out suddenly into the mouth of a cave. Peering into the cave-mouth, I could see the chamber spread out as if from the lantern of a dome. I dropped down onto a damp, muddy floor. Three startled doves flew out through the skylight. At the foot of one wall, where the sun fell on it, was a green cushion of moss. Down to one side a passage led away into the darkness. The air was warm and heavy and I felt that here, if anywhere, was the Armenian story – hidden inside a muddy cupola, in an area sealed off by state secrecy, tucked away and buried in a hollow amongst a thousand other hollows, beneath the crust of a desert that stretched for hundreds and hundreds of miles in every direction. Here was where Armenia had ended.

I turned on a torch and went down the passage. There was no sign at all of what had happened, nothing to show that it had ever been anything but a vast storm-drain for the desert.

But for the zaptieh, it had provided a ready-made solution. As the mountains were emptied of Armenians so the Syrian desert filled up. The order came from Constantinople to clean up the area. All sorts of methods were adopted. Shooting was slow. Some were driven into the river. A great many simply perished from disease and hunger and thirst. Shadaddie provided its own natural apparatus. The passage was very long and very roomy.

The guards brought the Armenians here and pushed them in

by the thousand; as more fell in so the first ones were forced down the passage. Then the guards dragged scrub to the entrance and set fire to it. That night they kept a watch over the cave, camping on the edge of the hollow. Then they returned to the town.

They might have got away with it (are there other Shadaddies that went unreported?), had a young boy not been able to get enough air from the depths of the tunnel to survive and, three days later, to crawl over the bodies and the ashes of the fire, back up to the desert.

The passage went on, curving and dipping in ways I could only imagine. I could see little in the yellow tube of light. The air became still and I could no longer feel the breeze from the entrance. I felt drawn on into the tunnel by a strange irresponsible urge. Each footfall seemed to take me further from the familiar. I felt a huge emptiness behind me – but a bigger one in front. I was trespassing, a grave-robber motivated by something darker than greed: I was driven by curiosity. I knew there was nothing I would find, but I carried on. I carried on without really thinking. I carried on because to turn back was to lose what there was left of Armenia.

My feet slid and splashed through unseen puddles. I steadied myself with a hand on the damp wall. I could feel the tunnel narrow and I began to stoop. Then one foot slipped on a mud bank and the torch spun out of my hand; it clanged against a rock and went out.

For several minutes I squatted there, quite still. I passed a hand

in front of my face, and saw nothing. I turned my head one way and then the other, and soon did not know from which way I had come. I tried to imagine the smell of smoke seeping down the tunnel, and the noise – would there have been hysteria, or simply quiet resignation? Mothers murmuring for their children in the void, the few men too broken to care, the tangled bodies, the slow suffocation ...

For an instant I felt the cave spin around me. Submerged by the horror it had witnessed, I was suddenly disoriented.

It passed almost at once. I crouched and ran my hands around my feet, probing for the torch, wrist-deep in the slimy clay, pushing through the cave's damp and formless floor. My fingers struck something hard. I clutched it and with the other hand found the torch, several yards away. I thought it must be another bone but when I switched on the torch it turned out to be a large crystal – five inches of transparent calcite in the shape of an arrowhead.

Outside again, the Armenian technician clapped a hand on my shoulder and smiled for the first time. He was worried I'd got lost. He lit another cigarette and started up the jeep. I wrapped the crystal in a scarf and buried it away in my bag. It seemed an appropriate relic from the cave: Armenia may have died here, but something survived. A year or so later, in Israel, I took it with my unanswered questions to Jerusalem.

The old city of Jerusalem, the holiest square mile on earth, is divided into four distinct quarters. Three of the quarters –

the Jewish, Christian and Muslim quarters – represent the great monotheistic faiths that have sanctified and fought over the city for hundreds of years. The fourth quarter is the Armenian quarter.

That the Armenians have survived in this, the most intense of all cities, is proof of their extraordinary resilience. The Armenian quarter is in fact the longest established of them all – and it remains the most secretive. Much of it lies within its own high walls, where the laity live cheek-by-jowl with the monastic order of St James. It is closed to visitors and only for half an hour each day are non-Armenians allowed inside to visit the cathedral.

Peering into the side chapel of St James, which contains those of the saint's limbs which did not reach Compostela, I heard a voice behind me.

‘Can I be of any help?’

A man with black-rimmed glasses introduced himself as George Hintlian, the community's historian. I told him I had seen Ani and Digor and that I had brought something from the cave at Shadaddie.

‘I could tell you were not interested just in the cathedral.’

‘How could you tell?’

‘I could just tell.’

He took me up to his office and I laid the calcite crystal on his desk. He smiled and shook his head in disbelief. ‘Let me show you around the quarter.’

For several hours we wandered through a labyrinth of crypts

and alleys and sunny courtyards. He took me up over the roofs and in amongst the cloisters to meet the monks, and when I left he said, 'If ever you want to find out more about the Armenians, why not come and spend some time here with us?'

I left the crystal with George and within eighteen months I was back. My Armenian questions would not go away. I told George I wanted to get to Armenia and he said he could help. I stayed in Jerusalem for a few months, in a small, vaulted room on the border of the Jewish and Armenian quarters. The city was tense; Kuwait had just been invaded and all talk that autumn revolved around the likelihood of war. Jerusalem waited. The Israelis waited and the Palestinians waited; the Armenians waited between them. I waited – all the time planning a roundabout journey to Armenia, to seek out the Armenian communities that appeared to be scattered throughout the Middle East and Eastern Europe.

I took daily lessons in Armenian with a polyglot monk, took long walks with George, talked to everyone I could, and spent the rest of the time among the books of the Gulbenkian Library. I visited the Armenian community in Jaffa and a fifth-century Armenian monastery in the Judean desert; I spent a week with the Armenians of Cairo. And I realized more and more that the Armenian story was not so much one of massacre and persecution, as survival.

The first princes of Armenia had emerged in central and eastern Anatolia about six centuries before Christ. Five hundred

years later, Armenia stretched fleetingly all the way from the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea. At other times during these centuries the Armenian rulers paid tribute to the Persians, to Byzantium, to the Baghdad caliph, or some combination of the three. Even in these years Armenia's survival seemed improbable. Lying always on the fringes not only of opposing powers but opposing beliefs, the Armenians would adhere to no one's ideas but their own. In AD301 the Armenian King Trdat III became the first ruler to adopt Christianity – while in Rome the worst persecutions of Christians were yet to come.

When some years later Constantine chose the outlawed cult to be the cornerstone of Byzantine theocracy and the world's greatest empire, the Armenians still stuck to their own interpretation. In 451, at the Council of Chalcedon, the Byzantine bishops agreed some sort of Christian orthodoxy; the Armenians didn't even turn up – they were too busy fighting off the Sassanid Persians.

Even the earth itself seemed to conspire against them. Within a few hundred miles of Ani are the borders of half of the world's twelve major tectonic plates. In a single earthquake in the ninth century, seventy thousand were recorded as having been killed in one Armenian town alone.

Yet during this first Christian millennium, between the earthquakes and invasions, between the Mazdaeans, Manichaeans, Muslims, dyophysites and dualists, the Armenians emerged briefly to stage brilliant half centuries of their own,

writing and building with passionate skill, before being stifled again by some rampant horde. In the ninth century Armenia emerged again as an independent state, centred on the city of Ani. I had caught a scent of that city's genius, sitting in its ruined cathedral a few years before. At one time Ani was bigger than most European cities. But in 1064 the Seljuk Turks swept up out of Asia and sacked it.

What should have happened then to this small people, occupying as it does the perennial buffer between empires, the most routed, trampled-over region on earth, was a gradual assimilation into its bigger and more powerful neighbours. Its scattered families should have struggled on for a couple of generations in exile, clinging proudly to traditions before intermarriage consigned them to history's roll of honour: a set of dusty ruins on the Anatolian plateau and some glass cases in the British Museum.

Instead the Armenian princes travelled five hundred miles to the south-west. There in the lee of the Taurus mountains, in Cilicia, they established a new Armenian kingdom. Many of those who didn't flee and who weren't killed by earthquakes nor slaughtered during the Seljuk invasion, but who remained on the land, were driven in 1604 by the Safavid Shah Abbas down into Persia. And those who survived both the Seljuks and Shah Abbas, and who didn't drift away beyond the Ottoman empire, who weren't killed in the pogroms of the 1890s, nor those of 1909, but who stayed in the villages, were rounded up in 1915,

pushed down one of history's dark side-alleys and murdered.

More than a million Armenians died in the last years of the Ottoman empire, a half of Anatolia's total. The Turks had managed to do what numerous powers had tried before them: they managed to finish Armenia, though not the Armenians. In most of the world's cities you can find Armenians – Armenian newspapers in Armenian script, Armenian restaurants. In exile the Armenians are curiously resilient; only the Jews have resisted assimilation as fiercely. In the mountains of Colombia there is a small town actually named Armenia where they serve 'Antioch-style' beans. In Paris the first-ever café was opened in 1672 by an Armenian, as it had been earlier in Vienna, by the same Armenian spy who had helped break the Turkish siege. At the siege of Vienna the Polish King Jan's private doctor had been an Armenian, as was the doctor to the harem of Akbar the Great, the Mogul emperor whose adopted Armenian son was regarded by the Jesuits in India as the greatest poet of his time.

The 'Polish Byron', Słowacki, had an Armenian mother, as does the chess-master Garry Kasparov, as did Gurdjieff, as did the Abbasid Caliph al-Mustadi who ruled the entire Arab world during the twelfth century, except for Egypt where a few years earlier Armenian vizirs held power, and Jerusalem where the hereditary Crusader rulers had long had Armenian blood coursing through their royal veins. When Richard the Lionheart was married, in Cyprus, his best man was an Armenian; the last king of Armenian Cilicia, exiled in France, taught the French

king to play chess. It has even been suggested that the Man in the Iron Mask was none other than the Armenian patriarch of Constantinople.

The first yoghurt in the United States was manufactured by the Armenian family Columbissian. The particular green ink of the US dollar bills was developed by an Armenian, as was the MiG jet, named after Mikoyan, whose brother was the longest-standing member of Stalin's Politburo, and the first to denounce him. Abel Aghanbekyan, an Armenian economist, produced the blueprint for perestroika.

They shouldn't really exist at all. They should have been destroyed, written out of history by its worst horrors. But they have survived. Instead of a footnote to the story of these border regions, the Armenians can be read like a kind of subtext.

With the Gulf War imminent, the Soviet Union crumbling and Eastern Europe in a state of dangerous uncertainty, it seemed the perfect time to set off around the Armenian diaspora, to try and reach Armenia itself. I prepared to leave Jerusalem.

In the library of the Armenian quarter, tacked to the wall, were the lines of the Armenian writer William Saroyan:

I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have all crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them into the desert without food or water. Burn their homes and churches.

Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia.

Wondering what Saroyan meant by a 'New Armenia', and wondering what remained of the old, I said goodbye and left the monastery on a damp December evening. I headed for Venice, where there had been an Armenian community for more than eight hundred years.

I THE NEAR EAST

They chose the Worst Thought, and then ran to join Wrath.

From the Zoroastrian Gāthas, *yasna* 303, in which the Deceiver tricks God into letting man acquire the wrong spirit.

1

I was looking a long while for Intentions,

For a clew to the history of the past for myself, and for these
chants – and now I have found it,

It is not in these paged fables in the libraries (them I neither
accept nor reject,)

It is no more in the legends than all else,

It is in the present – it is this earth today.

Walt Whitman

Venice was cold. Small ice floes littered the canals and drifted into the lagoon like soggy notes. No one lingered long outside; the piazzas were empty. But it wasn't just the cold. From the balustrade of a palazzo on the Grand Canal, the students had draped a banner: NO ALLA GUERRA! NO ALLA CATASTROPHE! The catastrophe for the Venetians was that the Gulf war was scaring away the tourists. I had the place almost to myself.

The Mourad-Raphaelian school was the only one for the children of Venice's Armenian community. Its director looked more Italian than Armenian; he wore scarlet socks and walked with short, urgent strides. I met him hurrying away from the school. 'Please,' he called back, 'wait inside! My car is in the middle of the road. It is broken.'

'Your car?' In *Venice*? But he was already gone.

I pushed open the school's heavy oak door and entered a panelled hall. Bright sun fell across the flagstones, and through the windows was a small courtyard. But there was no sign of life. Upstairs it was the same – bare floors and echoing corridors. It seemed more abandoned palace than school. Only the walls and ceiling, flourishes of rococo plaster, gilded swags and voluptuous oils, seemed alive. Too alive, in fact. The overnight train to Venice had been a sleepless affair, and so much early-morning baroque made me a little nauseous. I found a window overlooking the canal and watched the sunlight flicker on its filmy surface.

The Armenians have long been in Venice. When it emerged as a power in the twelfth century they were already well established. Their talent for innovation, an exile's talent, litters the chronicles of the republic. Sinful Hagop set up a printing press in 1514 and produced the first Armenian printed book, while Anton Surian – 'Anton the Armenian' – built ships. Twice his own designs had helped save Venice: once with a frigate whose beam-mounted cannon swung the battle of Lepanto, and then again with a salvage ship that unclogged centuries of broken ships from the lagoon. But in recent years the community has been whittled away to almost nothing. Many of the old families have gone to Milan.

The director returned and showed me into a high-ceilinged office. The walls were refreshingly plain and hung with the familiar icons of Armenian exile: a view of Ararat, and large colour plates of half-ruined churches, standing alone in the

mountain wastes of western Armenia, old Armenia, Turkish Armenia.

‘Yes,’ sighed the director. ‘Not many are left here. You know, it’s a full-time job being an Armenian.’ He stretched his arms open wide, nodding at each of his hands. ‘Here ... and here. I struggle to keep up with my brother in Syria and Egypt, in America and Persia. If I relax for an instant, it is gone!’ His arms flopped to his sides. ‘You understand?’ He picked up the telephone and tried to track down a mechanic.

Running a car in Venice also seemed a full-time job, so I thanked him and walked out again into the frosty streets.

I telephoned Father Levon Zekiyan and we arranged to meet in a small café near the Chiesa San Rocco. Father Levon held Venice’s chair of Armenian studies. He was a tall man, with a distinct sartorial elegance. I’d been given his name in Jerusalem, but I’d seen it too at the head of various scholarly papers. He’d written a great number of papers, in several languages, and his footnotes were always a maze of different scripts. Enthusiasm for the minutiae of Armenian history set his conversation darting around the centuries, but did not make him shy of the broad sweep. When I asked him the big question – what keeps the Armenians Armenian – he paused for only a moment.

‘The whole thing,’ he explained, ‘comes down to a single idea. And the key to it is the script. Mesrop Mashtots was our greatest political thinker! In the fifth century he invented the alphabet – he realized Armenia as a power was finished. If the Armenians

were to survive without territory, they had to have a common idea, something that was theirs alone. The script embodies the idea.’

‘And what is the idea?’

‘Ah, you cannot describe it! You can give it a name but you cannot describe it. If you are lucky, you will come to know it a little.’ He took a sip of wine and smiled. ‘Our poet Sevak called it simply Ararat.’

Ararat – of course. Ararat echoes around things Armenian like a persistent cliché. It is the name of Armenian journals, Armenian books, Armenian businesses and restaurants; in the United States there is an Armenian credit card called Ararat, as is an Armenian nursing home in California. The national football team is called Ararat, and the mountain’s dual-peaked profile had hung in every Armenian home I’d seen so far. I knew it as a symbol of exile, staring as it now does into Armenia from across the Turkish border. But Father Levon’s idea was much more than that. I began to see the mountain as something more enigmatic: an article of faith, the survival of an animistic past.

Osip Mandelstam, after several months in Armenia, also became aware of Ararat’s peculiar presence:

I have cultivated in myself a sixth sense, an ‘Ararat’ sense: the sense of attraction to a mountain.

Now, no matter where fate carry me, this sense already has a speculative existence and will remain with me.

I had seen Ararat too – from Dogubeyazit in Turkey. But it

had left no particular mark on me. Perhaps I had to wait to see it from Armenia.

I left Father Levon in the Piazza San Marco and took a boat across the lagoon to the island of San Lazzaro. The afternoon was crisp and beautifully clear. Only two other passengers were on the boat; one of them was an Armenian monk. For more than two hundred and fifty years, San Lazzaro has been an Armenian monastery. It is now one of the great storehouses of Armenian culture, with its collection of thousands of manuscripts – pages and pages of Mesrop's script.

The monk from the boat passed me on to another monk who guided me around the monastery, Climbing the stairs to the museum, he asked me for news of the Armenian monastery in Jerusalem. I went in to some detail about the new patriarch and the bishops and the old retainers of the Holy Places, but I could see he had lost interest; they were members of the Brotherhood of Saint James, he was a Mekhitarist, a wholly different sect.

San Lazzaro's museum, on the other hand, was a testament to the cohesion of the diaspora. Each exhibit, brought to the island by devoted pilgrims, was another dot on the Armenian map. It was like the collection of some well-travelled Victorian philanthropist. Under a Tiepolo ceiling, Persian ceramics stood with Iznik dishes and Kutahya ewers; there was an ivory Taj Mahal, some ivory filigree orbs (seven inside one another, like a Russian doll), a silver Ethiopian hand cross, St Petersburg miniatures, stamps, banknotes, a Crusader sword, a Canova

cast of Napoleon's son, a Burmese boustrophedon manuscript explaining in Pali the initiation rites of a Buddhist priest, and a mummy. In 1925 Egypt's foreign minister, an Armenian, had brought the mummy, along with a Bubastis cat. The mummy was the monk's favourite exhibit.

He led me away from the main gallery to a room lined with the buckram spines of English classics. There, hanging over the door, was a portrait of Lord Byron. All through the winter of 1816, several times a week, Byron crossed the lagoon to visit the monks of San Lazzaro. He developed a fascination with Armenia, discovering among other things that it was the supposed site of Earthly Paradise.

'Their country,' he wrote, 'must ever be one of the most interesting on the globe.'

In this room Byron took on the Armenian language. His letters tell of his endeavours: 'In the mornings I go over in my gondola to hobble Armenian with the friars ... my mind wanted something craggy to break upon ... this was the most difficult thing I could discover ... a Waterloo of an alphabet ...' In Venice itself, his pursuits were easier: '... the lady has, luckily for me, been less obdurate than the language ...' After some months his visits to San Lazzaro dried up.

The next day, before leaving Venice, I called ahead to Cyprus. I told Garo Keheyan, an Armenian I'd met in Jerusalem, that I planned to be in Nicosia in a few days.

Crossing the Rialto that evening I saw the Grand Canal just

beginning to ice over. In Trieste there was a night train to Yugoslavia. It snowed heavily in the night and at Belgrade a guard stumbled along the track to thaw the points with a flaming torch. The train ploughed on, south through Serbia, through dead valleys and silent forests, beneath swollen clouds. The day slid past in a series of frozen images: a man with a gun on an icy pond, the breath of a horse at a level-crossing, a yellow pig leaping in the snow.

The following afternoon at Piraeus was warmer. A ship from Odessa was in port and the Ukrainians lined the docks' perimeter fence. By their feet lay piles of china plates, plastic dolls, knives, forks, and tins of caviar. I bought a bottle of Armenian brandy from a stern Russian woman and carried on past the ones with smiles and powder-blue eyes and no goods at their feet, prepared to go to any lengths for hard currency.

The ship to Cyprus was practically empty. Half a dozen people gathered in its burgundy lounge as if for a bad joke: a Jew, a priest, a London cabbie, and a Greek cabaret artiste. The Orthodox priest settled down to watch a TV game show while the cabbie vilified Saddam Hussein for the 'artiste'. I took the brandy and sat with the Jew, an antiques dealer with shoulder-length hair and dark, smiling eyes. He was on his way to marry a girl he'd never met. A friend in Lithuania had sent him her picture and now they were to meet at a certain hotel in Cyprus, go through the civil ceremony, and start anew in Haifa.

'Call me a fool,' he said. 'But I feel good about it.'

I drank to his bride and he asked me what I was doing in Cyprus.

‘I’m on my way to Armenia.’

‘Armenia? What are you going to find there?’

‘I have no idea.’

‘So we are both on a mystery tour!’

It was well after dark when the ship hauled in her warps and eased away from the dock. The antiques dealer suddenly thought of something: ‘I remember there were some Armenians in Cairo. Extraordinary people. They had an expression – perhaps you’ve heard it. They used to say that the Armenians were “caught between the hammer and the anvil”.’

‘And they say that if the hammer falls often enough you end up with a diamond.’

After a day and a half we berthed in Limassol and I took a bus up to Nicosia. There I went to find Garo Keheyan whom, I hoped, would be able to advise me. I was trying to get back to the Armenian communities of Syria. There were two options: to go straight there, by boat to Latakia, or to go via Beirut. A lot of Armenians lived in Beirut; it had at one time been the most important city of the diaspora. But while the Gulf war continued, I was not keen on going in. Nor did I have a Lebanese visa. But then I had no Syrian visa either; in fact I had no visas for any of the countries I wanted to visit before Armenia – nor for Armenia itself.

In part this was due to the confusion of the Gulf war and

the mess of the Soviet Union. But I saw it also as a test. The Armenians have travelled these regions more consistently, more zealously than any other people. They have always lived by travelling – as merchants, adventurers or pilgrims – with all the cunning and enterprise that it requires. That the Armenians remained so mobile, and yet survived as a distinct people, was a miracle that I still had not understood. When borders were sealed by warring empires – Mameluke and Seljuk, Seljuk and Abbasid, Ottoman and Safavid, Safavid and Mogul – the Armenians' network of exiled communities spanned them all. Often they were the only link between rival courts and carried messages in their own script like a code. Because of the eternal instability of Armenia itself, the rigours of a peripatetic life were part of being Armenian; frontiers and wars just an everyday obstacle. My own journey would have to be an experiment in this.

Garo shrugged when I asked him if I should go, and in truth I'd already decided. He knew the Lebanese consul and telephoned her to vouch for me. All I needed, she said, was a letter from the British High Commission to free them of any responsibility. I secured the visa and arranged – through Garo's own travel agency – a passage to Beirut. I had two days before the boat left; the Armenian network was already proving its worth.

Garo was not just a travel agent. He was also Cyprus's Brazilian consul, director of a bank, a property developer, a would-be publisher and a power-broker of the Armenian republic's burgeoning foreign affairs. But his real enthusiasm was

reserved for esoteric thought. He had a library full of ancient wisdom and a Great Dane named Plato.

Nicosia, he explained, had its own mystic – the Magus of Strovolos; not his favourite, by any means, but worth a hearing. That week he was giving a series of lectures. We drove through Nicosia to Strovolus, known to be the city's dullest suburb. The day's lecture was in a large shed in a leafy garden. A group of Germans filled the room and hung through the open window to catch the Magus's words. He started by talking about psychotherapy. Literally the word meant 'healing the soul'. A misnomer, explained the Magus, for the soul is the one part of us that is never sick. It is the other things, the worldly things like doubt and desire heaped around the soul that make us sick.

The 'Magus' took his title from the priestly caste of Zoroastrians and displayed in his teaching some of the dualism that they had taught. Dualism was outlawed by the early Church, like so much else that was good, but it survived in Armenia. It found its way eventually into Western Europe to become the basis for the great medieval heresies, the Albigensians and Cathars. It was Armenian exiles – ever the carriers of Oriental ideas – who are believed to have introduced it.

The Magus sat on his stool in a grey, button-up cardigan, spreading his appealing heresies in mellifluous tones, speaking of the powers of auto-therapy, of modern evils, of peace. And it was all grist to the mill for the gentle Germans who sat with eyes closed, palms upturned. His American supporters, wary of

the war, were not so loyal. They had stayed at home and sent as proxy a set of small tape recorders which whirred and clicked at the Magus's feet.

For fifteen hundred years Armenians had been fleeing to Cyprus – heretics, subversives, exiled princes and kings, poets, monks, pogrom survivors and orphans. Once there, things have become little easier. They watched the island shift from one power to the next – from Abbasid to Byzantine, Byzantine to Knights Templar, to French Crusader, to Venetian, to Ottoman, to British, and from British into civil war. Looking at the island on the map, it appears somehow anvil-shaped, and there's never been a shortage of people to wield the hammer.

The Nalchadjians had been particularly unlucky. On a hot June afternoon in 1963 the Nalchadjians were married at Nicosia's Armenian church. It was a glamorous occasion. The Nalchadjian factories in Famagusta and Kyrenia were large and prosperous, and the couple stepped from the church into a cheering bay of Armenian well-wishers, who had gathered beneath the cypresses.

Mrs Nalchadjian had kept something of her dark, Armenian beauty, but the factories had all gone. I went to see her in a small, third-floor flat in Greek Nicosia, which had the advantage of being close to the new Armenian church.

'Yes, it was a wonderful service,' she sighed, turning the page of her photograph album. 'The shooting didn't start until the reception.'

When he heard the shots the vartabed left the party and hurried through the deserted streets to lock up the church. It was never used again.

Mrs Nalchadjian turned the album's last page, which was empty. 'For our daughter's wedding. She's engaged to an Armenian doctor, a lovely man. But he lives in Beirut and things are still a bit difficult there.'

'The church,' I said. 'What has happened to the old church?'

'I don't know. Some say it's a café, others that it's destroyed. No one's been back.'

At the Greek checkpoint, I signed some papers and they let me through. I walked on past the UN checkpoint, through no man's land, to the Turkish checkpoint. There, I signed more papers and pledged I'd be back before the border closed at dusk.

While Greek Cyprus has grown fat since the occupation, and its roads purr now with German cars, the Turkish side has become something of a backwater. It is like a sleepy Anatolian town, with peasant families living in the wrecks of old Ottoman villas, grazing sheep and moustachioed cloth merchants with rolls of suiting tucked under their arms. All that still lives of a non-Turkish past are the rusting hulls of Morrisises and Hillmans.

The church was hard to find. Victoria street had looked easy on the map, but it was a Greek map and all the names had been changed. Asking for an Armenian church was even less tactful here than in Anatolia. So I idled past the fruit stalls and abandoned *hans*, the foundries and workshops, followed the zig-

zag of the Green Line until, not far in from the western wall, I spied the telling pinnacle of a church tower.

The high gate was padlocked. Its wrought-iron whorls were trussed with barbed wire. A board had been crudely tied to the gate: a victory targe with a soldier bursting from the red and crescent moon of the Turkish flag. Behind it the courtyard appeared untouched from the day of the Nalchadjian wedding. The cypresses were gone and the flagstones bordered with weeds, but it had about it the air of neglect rather than destruction.

Nor was the church a café. That too was abandoned and tufts of grass billowed from its walls. Another Armenian church in ruins. I tried to get in but on the other side was a military assault course, all raked dirt and poles and rope-nets and pits. When I went a little later to Famagusta to see what had become of the fourteenth-century church there, I found it also adjacent to an assault course. There were the poles and rope-nets and pits. I began to wonder whether Armenian churches might form some essential part of Turkish military training.

The following day I left Nicosia to catch the boat to Beirut. In Larnaca a warm wind blew off the sea. The gulls spun in idle circles above the empty hotels. Pinned to the menu-board of one, coyly avoiding any mention of the Gulf War, was a letter from the Cyprus Tourism Organization: 'We regret the decision of certain tour operators to repatriate their clients from Cyprus. It is as calm and safe as it used to be, and as beautiful for holidays.'

That evening on the docks, waiting for the French to load their

military supplies, a Lebanese came up to me. He had a three-inch scar on his jaw.

‘You going to Lebanon?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do you go to Lebanon? Lebanon is not a good country.’

‘I’ve heard it’s a beautiful country.’

‘You have friends in Beirut?’

‘Yes,’ I lied.

‘Good, but don’t go to West Beirut. If you go to West Beirut, you know what will happen.’

I could guess.

‘They will take you away.’

The exile understands death and solitude in a sense to which an Englishman is deaf.

Storm Jameson

The sun rose behind a bank of dark clouds, spreading shafts of light into the pale sky above. It gave the impression of some vast Georgian fanlight and I stood at the ship's rail, watching its reflection in the still water, watching the bow-wave as it flopped over and shattered the water. It was just before seven.

The clouds grew larger and turned out not to be clouds at all, but the mountains of Lebanon. They ran up and down the coast, sheer and very dark. Ten miles to the south they fell to a strip of flat land which stuck out to sea like a tongue. From it rose the square blocks of Beirut. Looking at the distant, sun-lit profile I felt as though I was seeing for the first time some notorious celebrity, a mass-killer, a rampant dictator, there in the flesh. Since the Syrians had mopped up the last of General Aoun's forces a few months before, there had been peace, but it was an uneasy peace. Much of the city remained in the hands of the militias, and almost all of the land outside. Beirut at that time was still the most lawless city on earth.

But for me, it was indispensable. Beirut had long been Armenia's unofficial capital-in-exile. In the good years the Armenians had operated like a semi-autonomous republic; more

than a quarter of a million of them had lived here, with powerful links all over the world. They controlled a great deal of Beirut's trade and much of its industry. Although half of them had emigrated, the community had survived. The Armenians were the largest of the Lebanese minorities to have remained neutral throughout the war.

I had exactly a week here before the deadline for the land offensive expired in the Gulf. I did not want to be in Beirut for that. I wanted to be well clear of the Lebanon, to have reached Syria. It had been a long, sleepless night. The bars and decks of the ship echoed with the chatter of returning Lebanese. They were all young, all Christian, and all draped in a kind of transparent, satin-jacketed machismo. Among them tottered the relief guard for Beirut's French embassy, making the most of their last few hours of leave. I talked for a while with a group of officers while they gesticulated over half-bottles of claret; others played roulette with fat, gold-chained Beirutis, while the ranks with their tanned Legionnaire faces burnished with sweat, bellowed at each other around the bar, then dozed head-down on the saloon tables. And over the whole scene, ignored by all, the Saudi desert flickered from two televisions.

In the morning, the French looked groggy and depressed. I waved goodbye on the quay at Jounie and headed up the short ramp and on to the street. I watched the open-backed trucks take them away and the bleary faces staring back as if from a guillotine tumbrel.

I placed my bag on the sea-wall, contemplating my next move. I looked up the road, and looked down the road. I leaned against the wall. Beside me were a couple of crates of red mullet and a fresh ray which flapped about in the dust. A fisherman sat on the rocks mending his nets. The sun had cleared the mountains and shone on the wheelhouse of a scuttled coaster; the torn fringes of a shell-hole curled out of its top-sides. It was a lovely Mediterranean morning, but I felt ill-placed to enjoy it. Who could I trust? Which areas of the city were safe?

I found a taxi; the St Christopher dangling from the driving-mirror was reassuring. We drove in towards Beirut along a coast road littered with the signs of war, between the shoreline and the stern rampart of the mountains, beneath a thirty-foot, Rio-style Christ and the church of Notre Dame de la Délivrance crying 'Protégez-nous!' from its concrete pediment. And everywhere hung the faces of half-ruined buildings, shrapnel-scarred and lifeless.

Ten miles was about half-a-dozen checkpoints. We were waved through them all. A convoy of war-weary tanks rattled past. I watched the phalanx of Beirut's tower blocks grow larger in the windscreen and thought how normal they looked. But their approach made me nervous. When in Antelias I saw a church and its drum and the distinctive crenellated cone, I felt a sudden relief; I recognized it as an old friend.

'Here!' I leaned forward. 'Drop me here.'

The taxi swung off the main road. Weaving to avoid the shell-

holes, it pulled up to a pair of black, wrought-iron gates. On them were fixed the twin crosier and mitre of the Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia.

From Cyprus I had tried to telex the monastery in Antelias, the main centre for Beirut's Armenians. But my message had failed somewhere. At the gate they had no idea who I was. I presented a to-whom-it-may-concern letter, in Armenian, from the patriarch in Jerusalem and the young priest nodded. He led me to the residence of the Catholicos and left me with a secretary who in turn took me into a large, teak-panelled office. At the far end, behind the broad raft of his desk, sat an elderly cleric.

His Holiness, Karekin II, Catholicos of Cilicia, spiritual leader of perhaps a third of the world's Armenians, was a man of some presence. He was a small, thick-set man with canny blue eyes that missed nothing. He had had a difficult war; that much was clear from the weariness in his face. He would tense occasionally with some sudden irritation and, half in jest, blame the war every time he reached for one of his cigars, their silk bands personalized by a loyal Armenian from Kuwait: HH KAREKIN II. In Beirut, even spiritual leaders had to behave like warlords.

We had lunch alone in his private dining room. There was a long table and two windows. One of them looked out on to the coast road and over the Catholicos's shoulder I could watch the traffic limp up on to a battered fly-over. Beyond the fly-over was the sea.

'Artichoke,' he said. 'I hope you like artichoke.'

‘Artichoke’s fine.’

‘My doctor says it’s good for the nerves.’

For a while we tugged at the leaves in silence. The Catholicos’s cook stood attentively at the kitchen door, an elderly Armenian with his shirt done up to the neck. He took away the plates and the Catholicos began to talk.

‘Can I make a point to begin with? That you look at the Armenian Church not, as so many others have, as a thing of archaeological interest, but as a living church.’

I told him that was exactly what I was looking for in the Armenians as a whole. ‘But perhaps some Armenians are guilty of that too.’

‘What makes you say that?’

‘Well, Armenian history – it’s quite a burden to bear’.

I told him of an image of the poet Gevork Emin’s that had particularly struck me: he had compared the Armenians and their past to a peacock and his fan – all that was most impressive was behind them.

He nodded. ‘Of course the Church must combine tradition and hope. In the East we integrate things much more. You in the West, you think religion and politics must be separate. It is absurd to divide things like that!’

And there I thought I heard the echo of his critics, the dilemma of his own position: a religious leader caught between the complexities of Armenian politics and the Lebanese civil war. For years he had struggled to keep the Armenians free of

the local feuds and alliances. It had just about worked. Now, he said, the country's leaders were coming to him privately and admitting that perhaps the Armenians had been right all along. 'Positive Neutrality' the Catholicos called it, but it made me think of the hammer and the anvil. Muslims suspected the Armenians because they were Christian, and Christians chastised them for not being true to their colours. But the real Armenian battle was always elsewhere – with the Turks and the lost lands of Anatolia. On the boat from Cyprus, a Lebanese had said that the Armenians were feared – 'tough like old boots', ruthless in the defence of their neutrality. If one Armenian died, he said, the next day there'd be two or three bodies lying in the streets of the perpetrators.

The Catholicos finished eating and unwrapped another cigar. 'It was the shelling that got to you,' he said.

The last year had been the worst. Aoun had been up there in the hills, the government forces down below. The monastery was in between.

The monks took shelter in the underground printing press. The young ones would run across the compound to the store for food. For two months they spent the nights down there, sketching each other by the light of hurricane lamps, playing Risk, while the Catholicos would sit apart from them all, grimacing at each blast, chewing on a cigar and writing a long meditation on the war entitled: *Cross Made from the Cedars of Lebanon*.

The Catholicos gave me a room in the monastery. There was a

patch of new plaster where a shell had fallen through the ceiling. I spent the evening there reading *Cross Made from the Cedars of Lebanon*, struck by the sense of constriction of an urban war.

In the morning an engineer drove me into Bourdj-Hamoud. The deadline in Kuwait was ticking away; the engineer said Saddam would pull out, but I wasn't so sure. More than seventy years earlier, in the wake of another war, the Armenians had arrived on the edge of Beirut. They were in rags and, for the most part, without shoes or possessions. They were the dazed survivors of the Turkish massacres and scavenged and combed the beaches for anything of value. In time a crude shanty grew up and this they called Camp Marash, after the region they had left. They knew that soon the order would be given to return. But it didn't come. The Armenians were still there. The shanty had survived in pockets but in the main Bourdj-Hamoud was a modern town. And it was the only place I saw in Beirut that seemed busy. With the city centre off limits, it had come into its own. The place bustled and thrived with commerce, attracting Beirutis of all factions to do what Beirutis like doing best – shopping.

'You know what the Armenian hobby is?' The engineer was striding down Bourdj-Hamoud's main street.

'What's that?'

'Building. When a Lebanese gets some money, he'll buy clothes or a car. But an Armenian, well, he'll get some bricks and put them one on top of another.'

It was true – Bourdj-Hamoud was scattered with mini-

cranes and cement-mixers. And there was something else. I had been nowhere yet where Armenians were in the majority, where shop signs were first in Armenian, then in Arabic, where Armenian was spoken in public, where Armenians were treated by Armenian doctors, had their teeth pulled by Armenian dentists, meat cut by Armenian butchers, and cloth cut by Armenian tailors, where the bookshops had whole sections on Charents, Totovents and William Saroyan. There was an Armenian football team and everywhere, splayed out beneath shrapnel-dented cars were the bodies of Armenian mechanics. The streets bore the names of the lost towns – Aintab, Marash, Adana – and there seemed to be in them an assurance, a swagger, I had not seen before. It was almost as if the Armenians belonged here.

I left the engineer at one of his building-sites and went off to track down a painter who they'd told me about at the monastery. Yervant lived on the second floor of a rocket-scarred block. It was his parents' flat, but they were seeing out the war in Cairo. He was in his mid-thirties and had swarthy Armenian looks, with thick, wedge eyebrows and a heavy flop of dark hair. His stance was sprung with a peculiar, rigid intensity, as though in constant anticipation of something. He would often run his hand across the bristly nape of his neck.

His flat was a dark place. Though he'd been there for years, it still had an empty, itinerant feeling to it. There was a blood-red carpet on the tiled floor and blood-red seat covers.

Over the sofa, like an antimacassar, was a Manchester United scarf.

‘I have a Manchester United t-shirt, Manchester United socks and Manchester United pillow. You know why Manchester?’

‘Because of the Armenian community there?’ Manchester was where the first Armenians settled in Britain.

He shook his head, and flashed a smile. ‘When I heard the name, I thought – it is Armenian: *manch-es-ter*. “You are a baby!”’

Off the main room was a studio where stacks of canvasses leaned against the walls. Yervant was an expressive painter, with a pallet of subdued, earthy colours – grey-blue, brown, and a dull mustard-yellow which cropped up in all of them. Some were figurative – portraits with wide eyes and no mouth; others little more than swirls of colour slapped on like butter. The best ones were a series of dark, misty shapes which seemed partly dead rock and partly alive: mountains, he explained, Armenian mountains, which he’d never seen.

‘Eight months work. All of this.’ There were dozens. ‘Two hundred – when I began I could not stop. I had no control. Then last year two tanks were down there shooting. All night they fired. First one, then the next. I took my brushes and after that, when there was shooting and everyone went to take shelter, I came to my studio and painted. I could not stop!’

Through Yervant the war began to come into focus. It seemed to have forced out of those who did not flee a kind of raw

volatility, which became so ingrained that no one noticed it any more. If they did, it was as a matter of pride. *Liberté totale* was something Yervant mentioned often. To him it was the principle for which the war was fought, but to me it seemed no more than a description of its worst excesses.

We walked later by the sea. Yervant loved the sea. He did not notice the years of dirt and broken things that swilled about in its swells. He breathed in deeply and squinted along the shore.

‘I like the peace here, don’t you?’

The traffic bumped and growled along the freeway behind us. A couple of fishermen argued on the rocks. I nodded.

Yervant carried on answering my questions about the war. He ran through a catalogue of chaos, bombings, kidnappings, snipers, checkpoints when they killed at random, days when they fired ten shells a minute, all day.

One morning last year he had been shaving when there was a massive explosion. He thought it was an earthquake; on the radio they said it was an earthquake. But in fact it was a gas storage-tank hit by a shell. One piece of the tank had landed outside an Armenian school in Bourdj-Hamoud, nearly two miles away. The piece, said Yervant, was big enough to park two cars underneath.

On another occasion a running street-battle had spilled over into Yervant’s building. There was shooting on the stairs and a militia man burst into the flat. Yervant was waiting there with a revolver. He killed the man before he even knew anyone was there.

Yervant gripped my arm. He pointed to a flock of herring-gulls gathered to squabble over some waste. 'You like birds?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Me too. In the war I would come down and shoot them with my gun. My friend in Canada says there you cannot do it. You must have a licence. A licence – imagine that!'

One afternoon, through a series of introductions, I traced another side of Beirut's Armenians in another darkened room in Bourdj-Hamoud. Here the atmosphere was quite different. Half a dozen men in track-suits sat around a television, cracking pistachio nuts. There was none of Yervant's eccentric tension, but instead a kind of palpable toughness.

The youngest of them was Manouk. He was little more than twenty and was small and wiry and wore a neatly clipped moustache. It didn't take long before we were talking about Karabagh. The Turks and Soviets, he said, were helping to flush the Armenians from their villages. Every day they were being killed. Driven from their villages and killed – just like 1915. Now. Today! And what was the West doing? Nothing. As always. Just carrying on their love affair with the Russian reformers.

I told him that Armenia would have to fight its own battles from now on and he agreed. And in fact I knew that they were, these ones in this room. I had heard of the arms that filtered through from Beirut to Karabagh. There was a sharper spirit here. It was in Manouk and the others, in their crunching of pistachios, in the pages of the Armenian magazine *GAYDZ!*

(meaning ‘flash of fire’), with its images of oppression, of heads under boots, nooses and cages, and the technical diagrams of a Chinese grenade-launcher, an M-16 and a Kalashnikov. It had been there also, in the late 1970s, when the Armenians too learned the effectiveness of small paramilitary units.

Both were based in Beirut: ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia) and JCAG (Justice Commandos of the Armenian Genocide). Of the two the JCAG were much the more secretive and sinister, and operated with surgical efficiency. One FBI officer was quoted as saying, ‘The Justice Commandos were known as a singularly effective group of assassins. When they went to work somebody usually died.’ There was something very Armenian about the JCAG. Their operation in sixteen different countries, their attention to detail and meticulous planning, their expertise with firearms and explosives, the way they traced the movements of their victims (invariably Turkish diplomats), getting so close to the cars when shooting that powder burns were often found on the skin.

And it occurred to me, listening to Manouk recounting their methods, that I’d heard precisely the same language used to explain the pre-eminence of Armenian goldsmiths.

This is how it would happen. You’d be in a taxi. You’d be watching a wrecked building pan across the window or the sun play on a sheet of high glass. You’d be thinking about something else entirely. In Kuwait there would be some atrocity and you wouldn’t yet know and the taxi would pull up in a strange

courtyard and there they'd be waiting for you, five of them in black t-shirts tugging at your door. And then? Would the Armenians be any help? Part of me wanted to find out. But another part, and much the larger, feared kidnap more than death.

I was thinking about that after my meeting with Manouk. It was a bright afternoon and I was in a taxi with three Arabs. I was looking at the sun play on the sea and thinking that I now had only two days before the land offensive was due to begin when the music on the radio was interrupted and I could make out the names – America, Saddam Hussein, Kuwait, Britain. The Arabs started talking with the driver – about what? About the Bastard Americans, about the Bastard British! About the Great Satan and the Little Satan! About me. I cursed my foolishness. We plunged into the back-streets, heading west. I leaned forward and said where are you going, I wanted Bourdj-Hamoud. But the driver just shook his head. Damn it, what's happening? The car slowed and turned into a courtyard and the Arabs got out and one of them leaned back in and said: 'My friend, you better be careful.' And the driver pulled away again and the buildings in the streets seemed suddenly sharper as I searched desperately for something I recognised.

Armenian script. When I saw it appear above the shops, I felt for the second time the relief of sanctuary and realized how much, in a Middle East where I felt an unwelcome alien, I depended on the Armenians. So much so that later that day I gave

in. I'd promised myself I would not go into West Beirut: West Beirut was under Muslim control, kidnap country. But there was an Armenian there going to Yerevan and I needed to speak to her. The Armenians said they'd get me in, by ambulance, and we were waved through all the checkpoints.

As I waited to meet my contact, the door of the office suddenly burst open. A man stumbled over the threshold, sweating and short of breath. 'You have a British here?'

'Yes,' I said.

'You must leave at once. You have been seen.'

I left. I climbed into the back of the ambulance and we headed out of West Beirut towards the Ring and the burnt-out strip of the Green Line. An Armenian nurse sat with me. 'Don't worry, we'll soon be through the checkpoint.'

'I'll be glad to get back to Bourdj-Hamoud.'

'They took two yesterday. A French and a Belgian.'

'Where?'

'Just near here, but they were drug dealers. They shouldn't have gone in. We have an expression in Armenian that a broken jar breaks again on the way to the rubbish tip.'

The evenings in Antelias, with the monastery gates locked after sundown, were long and dark and empty. On my last night a thunderstorm tumbled down from the mountains. The lights failed, came on again, then disappeared altogether.

I stood up from the desk in my room and went to the window. The rain was falling with a tropical ferocity. It sluiced off the

flat roofs and filled the headlight beams of the traffic – bobbing Buicks, battered Mercedes, empty trucks swishing into the night. A pack of wild dogs splashed through the puddles. Two Lebanese soldiers crouched beneath their rain-capes on the turret of a tank. Then for an instant Beirut was lit up by lightning and the thunder again took a whip to the hills.

There was a knock on my door. A young priest holding a candle said His Holiness would like to see me. I followed him through the darkened passages to a room with a great arched window that rose from the floor and surveyed the courtyard below. Often I had looked up at that window and watched the bishops pace behind it like caged birds. Now the rain spotted its surface and ran down it in wide rivulets. The Catholicos sat alone watching it in the dark, preying on a large cigar.

‘Please, sit down,’ he said.

We sat in silence for a moment, looking out at the rain.

‘You will not see me again,’ he announced.

‘Oh?’

‘Lent is coming and I am tired. I shall go to Oxford to rest.’

‘A retreat?’

‘A retreat.’ He looked away and again we were silent while the rain hissed outside. The Catholicos looked down on the flooded courtyard like a brooding general. Then he asked, ‘And you?’

‘Damascus,’ I said. ‘I will leave tomorrow for Syria.’

‘You will have trouble in Syria.’

‘I was hoping perhaps you could help me cross the border.’

‘I will leave a letter for you, but I would not go to Syria. The police will make trouble.’

I could not tell him that in fact I would be relieved to be out of the Lebanon, that at least in Syria there *were* police. So I thanked him for his advice and for all his help, and wandered back through the unlit cloisters to my room.

Early the next day an Armenian photographer took me into Bourdj-Hamoud to find a lift to the Syrian border. It was a bright morning. The night’s storm had left its mark in shining pond-sized puddles and the traffic was heavy. Cars queued three deep at the checkpoints, impatient to get into the city to trade and shop and busy themselves in the Beirut way. No one, except me, seemed at all bothered that in about twelve hours’ time the deadline for the land offensive in Kuwait was due to expire.

Coming through the checkpoints in the other direction were dozens of vehicles with skis strapped to the roof. That year on Mount Lebanon the snow had been frightfully disappointing.

‘Terrible,’ the photographer lamented. ‘All thin and slushy.’

‘I’m sorry to hear it,’ I said.

‘But this year they are all going skiing. If there’s one thing the Beirutis are good at, it’s forgetting,’ he chuckled. ‘I mean, does this seem to you like a city that’s been sixteen years at war?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘It does.’

3

History will search in vain for the word ‘Armenia’.

Winston S. Churchill

After all, who now remembers the Armenians?

Adolf Hitler, discussing use of his death-squads

The main road from Beirut to Damascus had only been open a few weeks. Lebanese government forces controlled it to the pass below Mount Lebanon, Syrians beyond that. Shared taxis had begun to ply the route between the two cities, braving the checkpoints for the sake of a good fare.

Looking back down towards Beirut, it could have been any Mediterranean town with its bushy-pine slopes and the dust and the terraces and the olive groves. From a distance it looked like Nice or Genoa. But the road was scarred with tank tracks and by the time we reached the abandoned hill resorts of Aley, Sofar and Bhamdoun all the villas – once the summer courts of the Gulf sheikhs – were utterly destroyed. At the pass of Dahr-al-Baidar, where the Syrians took over, fog brushed the mountain slopes and piles of snow lay beside the road. At the checkpoint, an old Volvo burst into flames. The Syrian soldiers dashed about in a panic, piling snow on the bonnet to smother the fire, barking orders, letting the traffic through without question. The Armenian taxi-driver accelerated past them with relief and we started the long, sweeping descent towards the Bekaa valley.

For me, the Bekaa embodied all the most dangerous aspects of the Middle East. From years of news reports and hearsay, I imagined a place something akin to the Valley of the Shadow of Death or one of the inner circles of Hell. I saw a dark shadowy declivity into which crawled extremists too extreme for Beirut; I pictured Western hostages tied to the bottom of cars and, from above, Israeli planes bombing and strafing its southern reaches. Out of the valley came trained terrorists and hashish (for both of which it was the world's leading supplier), and each year the Syrians earned more than a billion dollars from the opium. Even its name sounded dark and threatening: Bekaa – like a rifle shot or a cry of *jihad*.

So it was a surprise to find that the valley was very beautiful, that the Hizbollah and their hostages woke to mornings of a brilliant, feverish light; that the militias – Palestinian, Shiite, Kurdish – could run their combat training against a backdrop of sensuous, flesh-smooth slopes. But I was pleased to get across it, through the narrow corridor of Syrian control, up to the Lebanese frontier on the far side. At the Syrian border beyond, I waited seven hours for a visa. President Assad scrutinized me from three walls with his benign bank-manager's stare.

Just before four o'clock, an official summoned me to the desk. 'Border closing.'

'My visa?'

'*Bukra*. Tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow Damascus will say yes?'

‘Maybe yes, maybe no.’

Damn you. I was now caught in no man’s land – unable to get into Syria, and unable to re-enter Lebanon; I’d used up my ‘une seule visite’ visa.

Only a few carefully placed US dollars eased me back across the Lebanese border, back into the Bekaa. In a few hours’ time the allied forces would launch their offensive in Kuwait and the Bekaa Valley was the last place I wanted to be.

Once again the Armenians were able to offer me protection. Just up from the border post I found the village of Anjar, where a series of bubbling springs leave a smudge of green on the dry slopes. The village was made up entirely of Armenians and they welcomed me in. Just outside, the Syrian secret police had set up camp. I didn’t think I had much to thank them for, but the sight of all their military hardware between me and the Hizbollah was something of a relief.

There was a doctor named Caspar who ran an occasional clinic in Anjar. I’d met him in Beirut but today he was here. I found him in his surgery with a queue of patients; he said he’d be half an hour and advised me not to leave the building. So I waited beneath the anatomical diagrams and listening to the stern advice to young mothers, reflecting that in fact I was glad to be in Anjar, to have the opportunity to trace one of 1915’s few episodes of successful defiance.

The story of Anjar is a story of exile and return, and exile again. A conglomerate of six old Armenian villages, Anjar’s

people came originally from an area around the mountain of Musa Dagh, at the far northern end of the Levantine coast. The town is divided into six segments, which retain the names of the villages that they left. When in July 1915 the deportation order reached Musa Dagh, Armenian opinion was divided. Some said they should resist. Others saw there was no point; the Turkish forces were far too strong and the order, after all, was only for deportation. About sixty families complied with it. They were never seen again.

The rest took to the mountain. On its seaward edge they stretched two large shrouds between the pines. One had a cross on it, the other, in English: 'CHRISTIANS IN DISTRESS: RESCUE'. The opposite slope they defended against repeated Turkish attacks. There was little ammunition and still less food. After more than seven weeks, supplies were virtually exhausted. But then one morning, the wind blew away a sea-mist and just off the coast lay the French ship *Guichen*. Four thousand villagers scrambled down the cliff and were ferried aboard. They were taken south, to Port Said.

For four years they sheltered in tents on the edge of the Sinai Desert. After the war Musa Dagh came under French rule, so it was safe to go back. The Armenians returned to their beloved villages and found their clapboard homesteads half-hidden by mulberry trees, and the apple orchards a tangle of weeds. They set about clearing the orchards and restocked the mulberries with silk worms.

But in the 1930s, new pressures came to bear on the region. Eager to keep the Turks at bay, the French conceded to them the sanjak of Alexandretta – which included Musa Dagh. Once again the Armenians were forced to flee. This time the French gave them land in the Bekaa Valley. Many died in the harsh winters but others held on, convinced, like those of Bourdj-Hamoud, that it was only a matter of time before they'd be allowed back. It soon became clear after the Second World War that Musa Dagh would remain in Turkey. The Armenians resigned themselves to permanent settlement in the Bekaa, not at the camp, but at Anjar where the spring-fed soil and distant peaks reminded them of home.

Below the springs they cut irrigation ditches and planted poplars along their banks. They'd grown apples before, so they grew apples here; before long Anjar's orchards were the best in the country. They built neat houses, neat and diligent in the old way, and laid them out in a grid with a church at its head. They prospered in Anjar; there was something about the site. One man, ploughing nearby, unearthed some old stone which turned out to be the remains of an Umayyad palace, now one of the Lebanon's most prized ancient sites.

During the most recent fighting Anjar had swelled with refugees from Beirut. Caspar explained to me that it wasn't just the shelter, it was the land itself. The springs and the poplars and the abiding sense of a distant mountain; there, he said, people felt more at ease, closer to Armenia. In times of trouble they

gravitated to Anjar.

Mount Sannin was undoubtedly a powerful presence. It rose steeply from the far side of the Bekaa, screening Beirut. Its snow-topped peak shone in the sun. And perhaps for the Armenians it made a good substitute not only for Musa Dagħ but for that other mountain, the first mountain, the one they had fled centuries before. For local lore has it that from Anjar's spring the first rainbow rose and, using it to navigate, Noah had steered the Ark to shore on Sannin's rocky summit.

Caspar helped me track down Tomas Habeshian, one of Anjar's grand old men. We met him on the church steps, a tall, straight-backed man in an astrakhan hat. He stretched out his left hand to greet us; his right was crippled with arthritis.

Driving down through the town (the Armenians forbade me to walk: 'Not safe,' they said) we spent much of the rest of the afternoon in Anjar's tea-room, while Syrian jeeps bounced back and forth outside the window, and the proprietor laid his best cakes before us. 'On the house!' he said in honour of Tomas.

He had been little more than ten when he fled with his family up the slopes of Musa Dagħ. The whole thing, explained Tomas, had really been a big adventure. No, he didn't recall being frightened. He remembered climbing the trees and larking around the rocks, but fear, he didn't think that was a part of it. What he did remember was Kavanēs and his quixotic antics. An Armenian of the old school, Kavanēs had lived all his life on the land and was full of a peasant pride that Tomas, as a boy,

found comic. He was nearly sixty when they went up Musa Dagħ armed only with hunting rifles and flint-locks, and a few sticks of dynamite. Early on, Kavanēs stepped forward to volunteer for an attack.

‘He took the dynamite and put a pistol in his belt. Down the hill he went.’ Tomas leaned forward and hushed his voice. ‘Slowly, slowly, from tree to tree. He came out of the woods and crept up to the slope above the Turks. He lit the fuse and lobbed the dynamite down. One, two, three ... Nothing! So he lit another. This time – PAF!

‘You know, I think Kavanēs was more surprised than the Turks! We watched him turn and run back up the hill in fright. He felt sure the Turks were following him. They were running at him, they grabbed his coat, but still he tried to run away, pulling and pulling. He took the pistol and fired it over his shoulder, and the noise terrified him so much he thought it was him who had been shot and fell to the ground.

‘He touched his forehead: no blood! He got up and started to walk towards us. I can walk! And he looked behind him and all along, it had been a branch that had caught his coat. There weren’t any Turks. All of us in the trees were laughing so much, but he was trying to look like a returning hero!’ Tomas took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. ‘Oh, that Kavanēs!’

Tomas was one of the few still alive who had survived the whole saga. He gazed now through the window, quiet and sad after his picaresque tale, and the sun brought out the creases on

his face. I felt a strange awe at the alien experience of this man's life and how its suffering had not left him bitter like so many, but poised and full of humour.

I asked him, 'Do you have a family?'

'Yes. In America mainly. Los Angeles.'

I couldn't picture this proud old man in California. 'Have you been there?'

'Oh yes.'

'And you liked it?'

'I liked it.' He looked away. 'But I could never live there. America is no place for an Oriental man.'

Caspar passed me on to some friends who said they could put me up for the night. Four generations sat on divans around a hot barrel-stove. A two-year-old girl sat on the knee of her great-grandfather, tugging at his whiskers. Her mother, Anahid, carried in a tray of rattling glasses. It was a warm, homely room and, for a moment, I forgot all about deadlines and the hostility of the Bekaa.

A man with a feathery moustache leaned over and poured me a glass of arak. 'What are you doing here?'

'Trying to get to Damascus.'

'Well, I'm trying to get back to Kuwait.'

I said that perhaps now he would not have to wait long.

'I have waited long enough!'

'Why the hurry?'

'Three kilos,' he winked at me. 'I have three kilos of gold in

a Kuwaiti bank.'

I pictured the gold sitting now in a Baghdad vault, but did not mention it. I turned instead to Anahid who had retrieved her daughter from the old man's hair. 'You know, it's not a bad place, Anjar. Better than America – I'd never bring up children there!'

'Why not?'

'It's so dangerous.'

'And the Bekaa is safe?'

She sighed. 'Well, it's home. I went to Los Angeles and I felt afraid even to step outside. All those drugs and murders. I was glad to get back.'

I'd never thought I would hear that from a Lebanese Christian, here in the Bekaa. Anahid's brother, Levon, had come down from Aleppo for a couple of days. He was more Levantine than Armenian, with eyes full of dark, undirected resentment. He heaved down another shot of arak, leaned towards me and jabbed at the window. 'He's just a few kilometres up there.'

'Who?'

He grinned at me and sank back in his chair, but did not answer.

'Who?' I said, annoyed.

'Your Terry Waite!'

'Levon!' snapped his sister. 'Quiet!'

I told her not to worry, but the cosiness of the room had gone. There was silence and no one could look at me. Levon proposed a toast to the Western hostages but it was timid and forced, and

fell flat. Later they all left and I was shown into a small bedroom. I pushed open the window and looked out across the valley. It was a clear night and very cold; the moon glowed deep blue on the snow of Sannin.

In Kuwait the deadline was about to pass but here in the Bekaa, with its strange medley of militants and the dispossessed, its gaolers and hostages, all was quiet.

4

In exile one lives by genius alone.

Vladimir Nabokov

Behind the wheel of his crimson, 1960s Plymouth Fury, its interior flushed with bordello-red velvet upholstery, Stepan looked very small. But he was the wiliest man I met in the Middle East, where wiliness counts for everything. He could only have been Armenian.

I met Stepan in Anjar. He had quick, dark eyes and his energy palpitated from a wiry frame. He was going to Damascus and on a sunny morning we drove back to the border. Today the Lebanese would not let me out of the country unless they were sure the Syrians would let me in. And I couldn't confirm that without getting across the two miles of no man's land. It posed no problem for Stepan. To him and his Red Beast, the route between Anjar and Damascus was routine. He took my passport and swung the Beast round in a wide arc up towards the frontier. He didn't even slow down to go through it, but simply hung an arm out of the window and waved to the border guards. They waved back.

In less than an hour the crimson roof topped the hill and was back.

'It's good?'

He nodded. We accelerated up over the hill, through no man's

land and down to the Syrian border. There I left it all to him. We passed from one office to the next, waited while a South American diplomat checked two feather-boaed dancing-girls into the country; collected stamps and filled in forms; I fielded strange questions about my family and my contacts in Beirut, and assured them I'd never even thought of going to Israel (I'd hidden all my letters of introduction from the Jerusalem patriarch). At some stage Stepan paraded the palms of the border guards before me: 'Ten US dollars here ... five there ... nothing for him ... one hundred Syrian pounds.'

And then with a nod we were through the frontier, with a Syrian major propped between us on the bench seat, being waved through customs and the remaining checkpoints, bouncing and rolling down a runway of a road into Syria, towards the desert, beneath a winter sun that picked out every crease and knuckle of the dry cliffs.

Stepan slid a tape into his cassette machine. 'Frank Sinatra – "Fly Me to the Moon". My favourite one!'

'Stepan, you did well,' I said. 'Thank you.'

He laughed and said, in Armenian, 'This man here is secret policeman. I know them all and this one is bad. He told me they sent four telexes yesterday about you to intelligence in Damascus. You are lucky!'

Not luck, I told him, but another triumph for the Armenian network. It had been the toughest border to date. After several weeks on the road it seemed a great achievement and bolstered

my faith in the Armenians. The dozens of other hurdles between here and Armenia looked smaller and strangely, unexpectedly, I found I was delighted to be back in Syria. I really didn't think I'd get in.

Between us, the secret policeman leaned forward and pointed down a bank. The wreck of a car lay upside down thirty feet below. 'Yesterday,' he said, 'I was in that car. Three times it turned over.'

'Weren't you hurt?' asked Stepan.

'My driver, he is in hospital. But I was all right. God makes sure the good men survive.'

Stepan banked the Red Beast down through the outskirts of Damascus. The modern city was little more than a series of wide, straight boulevards and elaborate fountains, the sure mark of a grim dictatorship. We left the major on the steps of a ministry building and headed towards the Old City. Stepan pulled up at one of the gates.

'Follow the Street Called Straight until you reach the Gate of the Sun.'

I nodded.

'There on the right you will see the Armenian church of Saint Sarkis.'

'Right.'

'Ring the bell many times. The doorman is often drunk.'

But it was Sunday and the door was open. The liturgy had just finished and half a dozen Armenians sat drinking coffee with the

priest.

I handed him my letter from the Catholicos in Beirut. He received it with enthusiasm and he showed me a room at the top of the Armenian school. The place was only half built and building-dust lay like a patina on the mattress. For a long time the door wouldn't open, then it wouldn't shut.

'I hope it's all right,' he said.

'It's fine. I'm very grateful.'

I meant it. In Beirut I'd been warned about Damascus hotels: full of dangerous extremists. I wasn't sure I believed it, but was pleased – at this time especially – not to have to find out.

Off the Street Called Straight, in amongst a warren of cobbled alleys, I found a sun-lit courtyard which corresponded to my directions. Cloistered by horseshoe colonnades, the tiled floor was awash with soapy water. A woman bent over it, scrubbing vigorously.

'Hagop?' I called.

She gestured to a staircase in the far corner and eyed me as I tip-toed across her morning's work. She was not pleased and a hail of Koranic curses followed me up the stairs.

Hagop was a friend of Yervant, the gull-shooting painter in Beirut. 'See him,' urged Yervant. 'See if he is OK. He has had some problems ...'

Hagop had the Armenian penchant for dark rooms. All I could see to begin with were narrow strips of light slanting through the shutters. The window was open and I could smell the baker's

ovens below and hear the hum and clatter of the souk. Hagop sat on a divan and the smoke from his cigarette rose and curled in and out of the strips of light. He had a thick, modulated voice and his English was good.

‘How is Yervant? I think the war was bad for him. I don’t know why he didn’t leave.’

‘He’s glad it’s over.’

I could see Hagop more clearly now. He was a compact figure in t-shirt and jeans and no shoes. His legs stretched along the divan, crossed at the ankles. All his movements were slow and measured and his thin lips twitched slightly as he spoke.

He re-lit his cigarette. ‘I have been planning for some time to return to Beirut. When this Gulf situation is sorted out, I will go back. For now I have taken this room. I feel happy in this room.’ He pulled his palm slowly across his forehead. He did not look happy. ‘I have been reading some things by our Gregory of Narek, from his Book of Lamentations. You like his work?’

‘Yes – very much.’

‘For me Gregory is a master. I hear his voice between the lines. You know how he writes and it seems so hopeless? About how he feels like the foal of an ass, or a broken lock in a door, and that he could not tell all his sins even with a sea of ink and a grove of reeds? Yet I feel such joy reading him.’

Hagop smiled to himself. He and Gregory had little in common. Both of their families had come from the mountains around Lake Van, both shared the Armenian passion for

jeremiads. But Gregory, born in the tenth century, had been an intensely pious man, a mystic, devoting his life to prayer and rarely moving from the monastery. Hagop on the other hand could hardly keep still. His story as he told it, of a water-boatman life skimming across the surface of the Middle East, made me realize how precarious the diaspora now was. He had spent fifteen years in a worldly frenzy of travel; there were few towns in the Middle East he had not been to, few things he had not traded. Borders of every kind had tumbled in his path and now there was nothing new.

But he had resisted going to Turkey. Someday he would, but for the moment, well, Armenians are not welcome. I tried to describe for him Lake Van and its high, blue light and the mountains around it. He sighed and shook his head; it was a world away from here.

Hagop's grandfather had been seven when he'd seen Lake Van for the last time. The Turkish zaptieh came to the village and drove them all out. Those who weren't shot at once were marched down from the mountains towards the desert. Twenty-five of his family left; only he and a cousin survived. The old man never spoke of these things. But shortly before he died he sat young Hagop at his feet and calmly told him everything.

The village was not big. There'd been a fountain in the square where the horses drank and sometimes water from the trough would slop over into the square. The people gathered at the fountain before the march. He remembered then how

silent the older marchers were and the shouts of the zaptieh. He remembered them taking his sister, and the woman who wandered off into the desert with the guards running after her and shouting, 'Come back! Where are you going?' and she saying simply, 'I am going to the funeral of God.' He recalled the thirst of those dry regions of southern Anatolia; the marches followed the old road beside the river but they could not drink. His brother cried and begged for water and his mother scooped a cupful from the imprint of a donkey's hoof. A day later the boy died; his mother was dead within a week.

Hagop's grandfather and his surviving cousin had somehow reached one of Aleppo's orphanages. From there they moved to Beirut. They both married at about the same time orphaned girls from the same region around Van. But for his cousin the weight of what they had been through overwhelmed him. With his wife expecting their first child, and the next generation ensured, he hanged himself.

Hagop's father meanwhile built up a business in Beirut retailing European clothes and again had one child, a son. Hagop himself grew up to an easy life. He was bright, indulged by his father and exposed to all the temptations of Beirut in the late 1960s. Studying at the American University he became involved in the lucrative fringes of Beirut commerce. Within a few years he was running a dubious venture trading antiquities. The war stifled that operation, but soon all sorts of other things were passing through the crumbling capital: raw opium, guns, hashish

from the Bekaa valley.

Hagop was drawn in by it. His business spun higher; the possibilities seemed limitless. But he began to make mistakes and for six months fretted in an Egyptian jail convicted of currency smuggling. Then he began to dip into his own bags.

One night in northern Iraq, in the town of Mosul, he stepped on to the flat roof of an apartment block. It was a hot night and he was twitchy and wide-eyed from months of cocaine use. He stood on the parapet and saw the edges of the night flashing with orange. Part of him knew these were the well-head fires of the desert oil stations, but as he watched them, they grew, ringing his own horizons so that he could no longer move. He thought he was in Hell. All that his grandfather had told him came back. He saw the Turkish zaptieh riding beside the convoy. He felt his throat parched and saw the damp imprint of the donkey's hoof. He felt his tongue fur up and stick in his mouth. His face flushed with heat. When he looked down and saw his own skin peeling, he tore off his shirt and ran inside. Drinking from a bottle of water, he had hallucinations of a quite different kind: the village near Van with his young grandfather squatting in the shade of a walnut tree, splashing in the fountain's overspill.

'That was worse than the flames,' said Hagop. 'I realized then what it was to be Armenian. That village I saw is now always with me.'

Thereafter Hagop was a different man; he became a committed Armenian. He started to study music seriously and

combined it with his other resolution – to live in Armenia, Soviet Armenia. He gained a place at the Conservatoire in Yerevan. That was two years ago.

He lit another cigarette and looked at me darkly. ‘Let me tell you about Armenia. Great Armenia! When I first arrived in Yerevan, I couldn’t believe it. Armenians in an Armenian city, in the shadow of Ararat. I got involved in everything – political meetings, the arts. I spoke to the composers and the poets and read many books of Armenian history. I even started to write an opera based on the court of the Bagratids at Ani. I became a “Good Armenian”. But after a while something changed.’

Hagop was there when they started to kick against Moscow. Yerevan became charged with the idea of change; intellectuals saw the hold of the Kremlin weakening. At last they could speak out. But the new climate had its darker side: liberalism belied anarchy, nationalism became a by-word for banditry. Guns fell into the wrong hands and decades of bitterness and frustration spilled over in peculiar ways.

Late one October night Hagop was walking home through Yerevan. A car pulled up and the rear door opened. Two Armenians climbed out and bundled him into the car. They pressed the muzzle of a Kalashnikov to his cheek and drove him up to the mountains. There they forced him to kneel and to clear the rocks from a small patch of ground.

‘Now, dig a grave!’

For three hours they toyed with him, threatening to shoot him,

abandoning him for a while, then returning. Just before dawn they took him down to Yerevan and dumped him outside the railway station.

‘I still don’t know what they wanted. They knew I was from abroad. I offered them dollars – but it wasn’t money. I stayed in Yerevan a few months longer, but after that night, things were not the same. If you reach Armenia, be careful.’

‘And are you still a “Good Armenian”?’

He smiled for the first time. ‘I’ve no idea. But I am certainly more Armenian.’

When I left Hagop it was almost dark. For some time I wandered, half lost, through the narrow streets around the souk. Not for the first time I felt numb and baffled by Armenia. I was haunted by the image of a flame and the Armenians spinning round it like moths; like Hagop I now felt by turns drawn in and repelled by it. At the end of the evening I returned to the gate of the Armenian compound. I rang the bell but there was no response. I called and threw pebbles at the guard’s window. Nothing. I was tired and distracted and abandoned myself to going into the city centre, and the hotels I had been warned against.

Two of them turned me away when they saw my passport. In a third they grunted and gave me a room. I lay on the bed and idly watched the cockroaches pad across the wall. In my fatigue they became allied tanks in the Iraqi desert ...

I woke from a sweaty dream in which Palestinian guerrillas

were kicking down the door. I took off my shirt and saw with some alarm the Hebrew letters of its label. I'd bought the shirt in a department store in West Jerusalem. All the anxiety of the past few days spilled over. Convinced I'd be taken for a Mossad agent, I pulled out the label and cut at it until the patterns of the letters were no more than formless shreds of cotton on the floor.

The following morning I took a bus to Aleppo and saw again the wide-open face of Syria. Between the bunched-up chaos of Damascus and Aleppo the horizons fell to a flat, featureless desert. The gates had closed on the hubbub of the souk, the everyday mayhem of Arab towns, and the world was suddenly still and quiet. I thought of the silence two years ago at Shadaddie and the dark silence of the cave, and before that the silence of the hills around the plain of Kharput. Silence was the seal on the Armenian massacres: Turkish silence, Armenian silence, desert silence.

I still had the sketch map I'd been given then in Aleppo. It was now annotated with dozens of notes and I planned to go back with it to the desert north of the Euphrates. But first I needed a few days in Aleppo, a few days of planning, a few days with those who'd survived. Since the exodus of Armenians from Beirut during the civil war, Aleppo's community has swelled dramatically. Now there are close to one hundred thousand Armenians living in the city.

If Aleppo can be considered something of an Armenian centre, then its own centre must surely be the Baron Hotel. At

the foot of the Baron's sweeping double staircase dozed a portly golden retriever. From time to time a chamber-maid or guest would step over her but she did not move. Crossing the parquet floor I propped my bag against the reception-booth and asked for Baron Mazlounian. ('Baron' is the Armenian 'Mister' dating from the Crusades when the Armenians noticed that all the best French names were preceded with 'Baron'. Mazlounian was the hotel's proprietor.)

'At a quarter past ten every evening he comes in to do the telexes.'

So I wrote him a note, arranged a room and, in the late afternoon, stepped out into the fading yellow of the town. Aleppo was fleshier than Damascus: more Arab, less Ba'athist. Along the outside of the pavements, loose calico swung against the hips of the desert drovers; on the inside hawk-eyed merchants squatted beside cheap watches, lighters and rainbow racks of useless plastic things. In the shadowy hinterland were the cinemas. Posters made banal promises of semi-nudity, gun-laden banditry and rough justice. In one were rag-doll bodies swinging from garrets, in another beckoned the pink chiffon charm of Scheherazade, through another galloped the Mongol hordes. I plumped for *A Town called Bastard* and paid fifteen Syrian pounds for a broken seat.

Ten minutes was all I could stand – and all it took for the carnage on-screen to spill into the aisles. Several boys wrestled on the floor. Others yelled support or argued nonchalantly in

groups while bursts of automatic gunfire rattled unnoticed from the speakers. It all seemed too familiar.

Behind the cinema were the open-fronted workshops of the Armenian mechanics. A bare-footed boy was chasing and coaxing a tractor tyre along the cobbles. The monochrome interiors echoed with metallic sounds and it seemed that nothing in that street was not dedicated to restoring – as swiftly as possible – life to broken cars. The row of workshops looked like beds in a busy field hospital. I thought of the adage about Armenians in Syria, that without them the government would collapse: Assad depends on his secret police, and the secret police depend on their cars – and no one can fix cars like the Armenians.

Near the place of the mechanics was a subterranean arcade full of photographers' studios, many of them also Armenian. I needed a new stock of passport photographs for my on-going quest for visas and pushed open the door of Kevork's Yerevan Foto Studio. Photography, like fixing cars, is also a talent of Armenian exiles. Karsh of Ottawa, who gave us the grizzly-sad picture of Hemingway, who snatched Churchill's cigar from his mouth in order to make him angry enough for that famous bullish portrait, was born of Armenian parents in Mardin, southern Turkey. In Beirut I'd been to the studio of Varoujan Sethian who flicked through his portfolio of official portraits: the leaders of Qatar, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain (not Jordan, as King Hussein has his own Armenian photographer). He had had four Lebanese

presidents in his studio in recent years (two had subsequently been assassinated). And his pictures of President Assad had now been reproduced and posted in offices, in car windows and on almost every street corner in Syria.

Kevork's Foto Studio was more commercial. He cupped my chin in his hand, then bent down behind an old plate camera.

'Yes, sir. Very good. Hold it like that. You married? ... You have pretty girl? Very ... nice!' His flash bowl bathed everything in a sudden white light and it was done.

Kevork had started as a darkroom assistant when he was fifteen. His parents had both been from the orphanages, too young to remember anything about how they got there from Armenia. They had had one child and no money. When he was sixteen Kevork borrowed thirty dollars from an American to buy a camera. The American clearly did not expect, or want, the debt repaid. But Kevork turned up five months later at the Baron Hotel and gave the American his cash.

'I used to work sometimes all night in the darkroom, but the chemicals made me ill.' Now Kevork had his own family to help him out. 'Let me introduce you!'

He assembled them in the studio. 'Now. This son, he do video US system. Other son do video European system. My wife, she do Muslim weddings.'

'Why don't you do the weddings?'

'Christian gentleman no go to Muslim wedding.'

'Why not?'

‘They may kill him.’

‘So what sort of photography do you do?’

‘Propaganda photo.’

‘Propaganda? For whom?’

‘All people – government people, family people. I do work for blind.’

‘Blind people?’

‘Yes. They like holy place propaganda. I do moskies and shrines.’

‘But they cannot see your pictures?’

‘Of course not – they are blind.’

I was back at the Baron by ten fifteen and Krikor Mazlounian was there in his office, checking the ledger against the day’s telexes. As the hotel’s tourist trade had slackened so its telex machine rattled into service for Aleppo’s Armenians. Soviet Armenia was opening up and the Levantine diaspora was again learning to combine its two driving passions: business and the homeland.

It was a high-ceilinged room, with the telex in one corner and Armenia’s modern iconography pinned to the flaking walls. The snowy summit of Ararat hovered above Krikor’s head; on the opposite wall Yerevan’s Martyrs’ Monument stretched its brutal limbs over the Eternal Flame and, above a battered grey filing cabinet, a map showed the borders of old Armenia stretching across the east of Turkey.

Krikor reached into the filing cabinet and fumbled around. He

came out with a bottle of Armenian brandy. ‘You don’t speak German, by any chance?’ he asked, filling two plastic beakers.

‘No.’

‘Pity. Chief of Police gave my son this letter he’d been sent. Asked him to work out what it says. I know a little German, but this baffles me. Something about love or something ...’

He shook his head and muttered while he looked for a place to put the letter. He had an old-world charm but his speech, like all his movements, was slow and listless. He was blind in one eye and pretty blind in the other. Light annoyed him and around his forehead he wore a visor made from an old box of washing powder: ‘Omo for the brightest wash – Omo for the cleanest whites’.

After some minutes he closed the ledger, pulled down his visor, took the beaker of brandy and began to talk. The story of the Baron Hotel, like most Armenian stories, starts in Anatolia in the last decade of the nineteenth century. It was then that Krikor’s grandmother left Kharput for her pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In Aleppo she stayed in a *han*, with the desert merchants and their animals. There was no hotel. So she bought a small premises near the souk. ‘Being a good Armenian, she named it the Ararat Hotel.’

Her son later rebuilt it, with an Armenian architect from Paris. And since then it has remained more or less unchanged. The parquet floor is still the same, the dark stained panels and the dark double staircase; the prints on the landing are still of

the London – Baghdad Simplon Express (seven days: safety / rapidity / economy), and all the place lacks as a perfect period piece is a few aspidistras, spreading their languid fronds across the foyer.

During the First War the hotel was taken over by the Turks. ‘What champagne will you be serving at your Easter?’ asked Abdulahad Nouri Bey, a notoriously cruel member of the Deportations Committee.

‘Easter’, replied Armenak Mazlounian, ‘begins on the day of your departure.’

When they got news of their own deportation, the family managed to escape to the Bekaa valley, with the old matriarch, Krikor’s grandmother, claiming that the eighty children she brought with her were all her own kin. But the hotel came into its own after the war, with Syria under French control. The 1920s and 30s were heady days at the Baron. Aleppo stood at the exotic end of the Grand Tour and the Baron was the only place to stay. Krikor had a bi-plane and would take favoured guests flying over the desert to the ruins of St Symeon Stylites. Amy Johnson stayed at the Baron, so did Diana Cooper. Agatha Christie sat in one of its rooms, writing *Murder on the Orient Express*; the Household Cavalry stayed and ran a mock hunt up and down the stairs. A framed copy of T.E. Lawrence’s unpaid bill stands in the reading room. But now few people came to Syria, still fewer to the Baron.

The fat old labrador squeezed through the door. ‘Oh. Pasha,’ muttered the Baron fondly.

‘Pasha?’ I said. ‘Like the Turkish governors?’

But he laughed. ‘No, not *Pasha*. *Portia* – Shakespeare. *Merchant of Venice*.’

The Baron asked me to lunch the next day. ‘Just something simple’ was five courses and didn’t end until it was almost dark. Our table of seven was the only one laid in the hotel’s large panelled dining room; the Kurdish waiter was attentive to a fault, serving everyone with great scoops of green dal and running round in a frenzy of high spirits. He had just heard from Radio Monte Carlo that the Kurds had shot down three of Saddam’s combat helicopters.

At the head of the table Krikor sat flanked by three fat Armenian women on a week’s holiday from Yerevan. They looked very Soviet in their long black leather coats and dyed hair, and said nothing throughout lunch. I felt a little low to think that Armenia, the object of my journey might in fact be more Soviet than Armenian. But Mrs Mazlounian, English by birth, had a different view of Soviet Armenia. ‘Sometimes I think I like it more than my husband does.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes, they’re so gay. I had thought it would be grey and drab, you know, *Russian*. But when I got there, it was livelier than Aleppo.’

‘You surprise me.’

‘And Edjmiatsin’s so beautiful. I defy anyone to go there and not come out a better Christian.’

Opposite me sat an American journalist.

‘We don’t like journalists very much,’ challenged Mrs Mazlounian. ‘They’ve come here before and written some frightful nonsense.’

The American muttered some apology, but he was a little nonplussed. He was Jewish and Jews in Syria – beyond the walls of the Baron – are not very welcome.

‘Where are you based?’ I asked.

‘Bonn.’

At the end of the table Krikor’s eyes lit up from amidst his silent menagerie. ‘Bonn! So you speak German. The letter! Where’s that letter?’

The Kurdish waiter went off, a little too eagerly, to get it from the telex room.

‘Well, it’s a strange German,’ said the journalist. ‘From Slovenia, I think. A girl ... she’s fallen in love with a Syrian policeman. “I need that man!” She cannot live another moment unless she finds that policeman.’

‘Poor girl!’ said Sally Mazlounian, who had also lost her heart in Aleppo. She had come out in 1947 as a nurse from England. Krikor was enchanted by her; they used to meet beneath an almond tree on the hotel balcony and within a short time were married. She had lived at the hotel ever since.

Yet her introduction to Aleppo and its Armenians had come much earlier. When she was a girl in England between the wars, Sally used to watch with particular dread the approach of a grey,

willow woman up her family's Yorkshire drive. This woman would come selling strange things from abroad. They used to call her Pilgrim-Frances but Sally saw her as somehow ghostly and cold. Even the woven, rainbow-coloured runners that Pilgrim-Frances brought with her seemed pallid when Sally thought of who had brought them. Pilgrim-Frances had a sister – known universally as Miss Roberts. They had both come from a small village in mid-Wales. They were devout, serious girls and, when they received a ten thousand pound legacy, decided to dedicate their lives to the Armenian orphans of Syria.

Pilgrim-Frances stayed in Britain, knocking on the doors of country houses, while Miss Roberts went to Aleppo to receive the money that her sister raised. She lived with the orphans, sleeping on a damp mattress and, even on the coldest days of winter, wearing only cotton dresses. One day Miss Roberts heard from Pilgrim-Frances that in England King George V and Queen Mary were to celebrate their jubilee. At once Miss Roberts set her orphans to work on embroidering a special tablecloth. She designed it herself, with a set of matching napkins.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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