

Return to Khodorciur

Armenian Diary

A film by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi

(They live and work in Milan, Italy)

1986. 72'. Italy.

Courtesy the artists

In this video, dating back to 1986, Raphael Gianikian, the artist's father, recounted his solitary 1976 journey on foot in his native and now destroyed country in Eastern Turkey. This gave a start to the artists' rediscovery of his personal history.

Every day, they die in their hundreds. their hundreds.

And in our family many died as well.

Dad's sisters first, then it was the turn of Sahag, then Keropée. These were dad's brothers-in-law. The wife of Aristakes, who was only 16, died as well, and then, unfortunately dad died. We were in despair.

Then dad's two youngest children. And the mother-in-law.

And Zacharie the priest and his twelve-year-old son died as well.

I am a Pilgrim in search of his lost homeland at a distance of seventy years. I was born in Turkey in the age of the Ottoman Empire in 1906, in a high mountainous region called Khodorciur amongst the woods, meadows, mountains and rocks. In July last year, I left Italy. I passed through Istanbul, Ankara, Sivas, Erzindjian, Erzerum and Ispir to arrive at the village Hunud where the asphalt road comes to an end.

I had not been back to Hunud since 1915, since the deportation of the Armenian Catholics from Khodorciur. The exodus of 10.000 Armenians took place in two waves, one in June, one in August. I was deported in the second group in August.

I remember that my brother had a friend in Hunud called Mahmud and that he used to own a shop with his brothers. I see an old man looking at me curiously. He greets me and calls me "amidjia", uncle. "Are you looking for someone?" I answer him: "Yes, I am looking for a man called Mahmud Djidjioghlu who used to live in the shop". "He does not live there anymore", he tells me, "my brother lives in Areki, the last village in Khodorciur, a very long way from here, on the left bank of the river Djiorogh, on a hill near Moghorgut". I tell him: "I am pleased you are Mahmud's brother. I have come from Italy to re-visit the village where I was born, Kisak in Khodorciur. I am the younger brother of Alexan who was a friend of the Djidjioghlu brothers". He is surprised and says in a loud voice: "This man is one of us, he is from Khodorciur".

Some old people come out of the inn that was close by. They surround me and greet me warmly. An old lame Kurdish man with a stick puts his hand on my shoulder: "You must be the son of Garabed the blacksmith. I used to come in your workshop with my uncle to buy an axe, a spade and other things. You operated the bellows of the forge with your brother Gabriel. You must be about my age, 80." I tell him: "I was that child. So many years have gone by." Another more robust old man with a white beard greets me: "Mer Aba Djianik Oghlu Garabed, I was the youngest son of the blacksmith at Hunud. Perhaps you remember, I was the kid who wanted to kill you with a red knife, who ran after you in our garden and who never caught you because you fled like a hare." I reply: "I can remember it as if it was yesterday and I think respectfully about your father who, kneeling down, kissed my father's boots and cried. He used to say: Allah will save you from the massacre."

A bus stops in front of the inn. The driver approaches me and greets me with a warm smile: *Amidjia*, I am happy to find myself in front of a man from Khodorciur. My parents live in Trabizon. The people in Trabizon still remember the name Khodorciur and bemoan the memory of that grave crime, the massacre of the population of Khodorciur because it was a very rich region and a lot of good business happened there. I think that you have come to find your father's treasure. You will be very disappointed. At the place where our village was, you will only find the ruins of destroyed

houses. Since 1915, and even today, Turkish peasants search the land in Khodorciur looking for the gold that had been hidden there. Only one lucky Hunud peasant has found real treasure in an Armenian vineyard. Sadness overwhelms me and with sorrow I say to him: "I have come here to see my mother's tomb. It's the promise I made to my father when he said to me one day: "Off you go and find your mother's tomb." Friends of Hunud, I beg you, you who live in our rightful land, which is also my land, even though here I am no more than a stranger, I am a stranger that has lost his homeland. Perhaps you have forgotten that, during the war between Russia and Turkey, in 1828, the Russian army abandoned the town. The Armenian people terrorised by the violence of the Turks and the Sultan decided to emigrate. The Bishop of Hunud, Berekdji, took the lead in the emigration. At Erzerum, only twenty Armenian houses remain. The peasants from the villages survived their Bishop Berekdji and moved into the neighbouring countries of the Caucasus mountains. I am telling you this story to let you know that this bishop had sensed what the future held for the Armenians in Turkey: the tragedy of the massacre that took place in 1915. Today Turkey has resolved the problem of the Armenians. Christ died in Turkey. I am a stranger who wants to revisit his lost country."

The path is very steep. I walk slowly. I am sweating. After about an hour, I arrive at the village of Yildiz Key. I see a star on the minaret and a stork's nest. It's a recently built village with the houses and mosques looking clean and washed. At the entrance to the village I see some people on a terrace. A distinguished looking man invites me to have a cup of tea. I take off my bag. I sit down, relax and drink the tea. I notice a shiny walnut door and feel the need to touch it. The man tells me: "It's the second door of the mosque" He opens the door and invites me to follow him. I am amazed. I see a beautiful, magnificent gallery on three sides of the room and, opposite me, a large glass window which lights up the room with the floor covered in precious Turkish carpets. We go down the staircase which is covered in carpet. At the entrance to the ground floor, there is a fountain and a marble basin for ablutions and lots of copper jugs. We go into the mosque, take off our shoes, walk on the soft carpet and arrive in front of another walnut door, the main entrance. The man opens it. In front of us appears a garden full of flowers and mulberry trees. We sit down on a bench next to an orchard. He tells me that the village has been destroyed by a fierce fire." This mosque, he tells me, was constructed with my money in the memory of my father Hussuf who was the agent of the traders Emish Oghlu, Avedis and Garabed Agha from Kisak. Today there are no longer any people living in Khodorciur. They have disappeared." With a bitter tone I tell this man: "Not everyone. There is still one person who is on a pilgrimage looking for his lost homeland. I am that person, the brother of Alexan, the son of Garabed the blacksmith of the village of Kisak." The man takes me in his arms and tears come into his eyes: "You are the younger brother of Alexan, the nephew of Garabed Agha"

At night, we go back up the stairs and enter the inn. In a distressed voice, the man introduces me to some other people and to a young mullah: "This man was born in Khodorciur, he is the son of the blacksmith at Kisak." They welcome me warmly: "Amidja, welcome to Yildiz Key." The young mullah tells me: "Our mayor Hussein is old and rich. With the money found at Khodorciur, he built our mosque and the minaret." I reply "This man has done good work, Allah blesses it." He invites me to his house and calls out: "Khatum I have brought someone to see you. He was born in Khodorciur. It is Alexan's brother. Come and kiss the hand of my friend."

I am walking and I am happy. I tell myself: "This is my country." The path on the slope is long. A man is walking with two sticks. I quicken my pace and find myself beside the shepherd. I say hello and we walk together. He says to me: "I've learnt that you were born in Khodorciur and that you want to go to Varshambek. There is another ten hours walk. You haven't got a gun. At night, the bears roam on the mountains. You'd be better sleeping at our house." We get to the crest of the village of Axum. The road goes down. It's a hard, slippery route. I am careful not to fall. The sun goes down behind the village. We are in the territory of Lazistan. I am in front of the farmhouse. With the help of a ladder, we go into the first floor by a door with a 30cm plank as its entrance. There is a 4m space. I can smell yoghurt, milk and cheese. At the back, a barrel 2m in diameter hangs from the roof beams. A round oven is set in the middle of the barrel. You get the yoghurt from here and extract the butter with your hands. This part is the dairy. Near the door are bed covers in the middle of some straw mats. Above, a plate of yoghurt, an enormous loaf of bread weighing several kilos, a large butcher's knife, a dish of fruit, blackberries, nuts and figs. Wooden cups. The shepherd's little girl and I sit on the ground. The master of the house kneels down in front of the stove and recites prayers in a loud voice. The prayer lasts more than half an hour. After the meal, we go to sleep under the covers. It is dark and cold.

In the morning, the shepherd leads thirty goats to pasture. We greet each other. He says to me: "*Amidjia*, peasant from Khodorciur, when you come back my wife and my son will be happy to see a man from Khodorciur"

I look at my route. It is on a slope in the middle of a gorge. I walk for long interminable hours. I almost wish I hadn't come. A woman approaches wearing a white shawl covering her mouth and a red dress with yellow flowers. A young girl is sitting on the back of a donkey. The woman with her head bowed passes by. A bit later some men on horseback go by. I arrive at the village of Kush Kili, which means "bird song". In a little square, at the entrance to the village, a man with a child in his arms comes towards me and says "Pilgrim from Khodorciur, welcome to my country." I am astonished. Reading my thoughts, he says to me: "A child from Yildiz Key sent me a message from the mayor that you were travelling across Tatos Dagh." The peasants on the roadside call out and greet me: "Welcome to our country, man of Khodorciur"

In the house of Mr Doran, you can smell the aroma of the kitchen. The living area is small. There is a clay cooking stove alight, a rifle on the wall and a revolver on the table. At the back of the room, there are bedcovers and an old man on his knees, praying. He introduces his family, his wife, his daughter-in-law, his son, his nephew and his niece. Doran invites me to come and eat at the laid table. I see a cheese omelette, a dish of halva and a dish of pachlava. I sit down to eat and they look at me very curiously. Doran is staying here in Kush Kili. He lives in Smyrna where he owns a bakery and a cake shop. His son teaches in a school in Erzerum. He is spending a few days here with the family. Doran tells me: "My father and I know Khodorciur because my father was a builder and he worked on the construction of a workshop at Kisak, which belonged to the blacksmith, Garabed. Alexan used to sell merchandise in the hamlets and villages. In the spring, he asked the peasants to prepare the roads so that he could travel with his mules. We are grateful to him because if the roads are still in a good state, the credit goes to the Emishian family."

I get up and set off in the direction of Tatos Dagh. I walk along an irrigation channel. On the bank of a river, I take off my shoes to cross it. I step into very cold water. Very carefully, I manage to

cross. On the high plateau of Tatos Dag, I see horses grazing, the stables looking buried with their roofs at the same level as the fields, a shepherd, the brother of Doran, some horses. I sit down on top of a rock. I have always been afraid, terrorised by large snakes. In front of me an enormous snowbank stretches out. I say to myself: "In this valley, my uncle Krikor and my cousin Pascal were killed by a big avalanche while they were searching for a stag." Out loud I recite in Armenian an Ave Marie, an Our Father to the memory of the dead. I will be relieved to complete this pilgrimage.

Under the snowbank, I cross the rocks. I climb to the Varshambek pass. I see in the wet ground traces of chamois, hares and an enormous bear footprint. My aunt Varara comes to mind. She used to say: "I am more afraid of the Turks than bears. The bear is our neighbour, it made the naughty Turks flee." In one way, my aunt was right. Women were afraid of the Turks. I have not seen a bear for seventy years. I fear nothing. The bear is good, it avoids men.

I want to go back to Hunud via Tatos Dag, towards Hunud Dag. I had taken this route with my grandfather, Adji Melkon, whose name means "hunter". I set off again. I chant: "My sweet country, your last son is looking at you with love and anxiety, with a heart full of pain and love."

I don't have the courage to come down from the pass. There are ravines, rocks and I cannot see any paths. At the bottom of the valley is the village of Hunud. I retrace my steps and I am at the course of the stream amongst the big pebbles, flowers and lush greenery. A lovely waterfall falls from the top of Varshambek. I drink a mouthful of water. Below, on the bank of the river, smoke rises. I see people, horses and a group of children running towards me. They are happy and surround me asking for candy. There is a large pot boiling over a fire. Doran mixes the soup with a stick. I sit down on a small rock. The meal is ready. Doran fires a shot in the air. Everyone runs towards the pot with a wooden plate. I am invited by the mayor, Doran the teacher, by Osman the singer and by the mayor of Kush Kili. I take a mutton chop with my hands from a large dish. We eat, dance and sing. Doran, the wise one, speaks to me: "You are a lion who runs alone through these mountains, these villages and has no fear of being killed." I reply: "I am a lion but old, toothless and without claws. I have never imagined that anyone might kill me. It is seventy years since I left my lost homeland. The peasants offered me something to eat and drink." The teacher tells me: "You were our neighbour but today for us you are a stranger. I fear that something bad will happen to you." I thank him: "At my age however it would be destiny to die in the house where my mother's tomb lies."

For my entertainment, Osman sings for me the wedding songs of Khodorciur. The children are happy. The meal and the festivities finish. The youngsters dance a Turkish dance. The baker Doran fires a shot in the air. The party has finished and everybody goes back to Kush Kili on foot or on horseback. Accompanied by a group of children, I go along the side of the canal and we arrive at Kush Kili. The mayor invites me to his house. In the living area, tea is served. The youngsters arrive at the same time as the teacher and his son. I sit down near the teacher. I listen to the radio which is broadcasting Turkish songs. The young people dance and drink. They invite me to dance. I feel a bit dizzy and I enjoy myself. I drink a mouthful of rakhi. I forget that at my age, it is a bit ridiculous. Later on, everyone goes home.

In the morning, the baker Doran is waiting for me in the square.

A builder speaks respectfully about the baker from Smyrna. I learn that the baker, on horseback and armed with a rifle, has gone up to the pass to ensure my protection. I am overwhelmed.

I walk along the 1915 road. It has not changed. We rediscover the paved road to Khodorciur. By the river Djiorogh, the countryside is delightful. To the right and left, woods full of fir trees, pines and larch. Mustapha is looking for prey with his binoculars. Fortunately, he has no rifle. We arrive at a little square. My eyes light up: I see the river Khodorciur which descends into a narrow valley to flow into the river Djiorogh. I go down towards the bank of the river. For years and years, I saw it pass below my house and heard the unchanging symphony of my childhood, the source of life. So, after 70 years, I see it again. My soul is flying on the waves of the water of Khodorciur. I find the same feelings that I once had listening to the melody of my lost homeland. The river retraces eternally my old misfortunes. As a child, I was baptised in this water. I want to be baptised again in the river Khodorciur. I enter the river. I swim under the waterfall. Mustapha smiles and understands my joy.

We cross the river by a bridge. We are in the valley of Djiorogh. From the heights, I see the ruins of the fortress of Mamigonian destroyed by an army chief of the sultan. We are on the road to the little village of Oshnakh, a country of red rice, wheat, fruit and grapes.

We leave the mule trail. The ground is dry. It is hot. I climb bare-chested. Poor Mustapha is wearing his Sunday clothes. He is sweating. The ascent is tiring. He is looking for the source of the water. Higher up, on our left, we notice the stony bed of a stream and, up above, a wooden gutter which carries the water. We are under a little oak tree. Mustapha disappears. I am alone. I have my little camera. I look far away in the direction of the river Djiorogh. I see the village of Godrashen and, on a hill, the village of Garmirk, where my dear friend Erikian Serope was born. These villages are too far away for me to get there. I am dreaming. I think of Erikian Serope, my lost friend. We had decided to return together to Khodorciur. I think of all my friends at Khodorciur. They are dead today. Everything is past.

Mustapha appears. He is content, happy and refreshed and he says to me: "Your turn now. You go down there and you will find a round basin. It is a well fed by water flowing through some pipes. The water is nearly lukewarm." I am happy. I run towards the bottom and undress completely and with great difficulty go into the well. The water comes up to my mouth. I stay there about a quarter of an hour. I feel good. Tiredness disappears. Around me, in 1915, it was a garden. Today, everything is abandoned. I look again at the villages of Erikian, Garmirk and Godrashen. In two of these villages, Catholic Armenians of Khodorciur lived in the past.

Refreshed, Mustapha and I, walk in the middle of the oak and walnut trees. We climb for another hour and we finally arrive exhausted in Areki. Two young peasants cut barley in two small narrow walled fields. We climb the walls, wave to them then we arrive at a fountain. We sit down on a bench to regain our breath, to recover a little from tiredness and to dry out our sweaty bodies. We have been walking for ten hours. I get out two paper cups which I fill with water. We drink together. Then we set off again. I am very disappointed with the village of Areki. I can only see a fountain and an old house to which we make our way. In the past, it was the priest's house. Today Mahmud

Djidjioghlu lives there. In front of the house, we see three magnificent looking children who look at us wide-eyed and curiously. Where are the other houses?

We arrive at a place where there is no longer a path. There is a ruin. I look at it carefully. There is a stone arch and on the right is written the name of the church and the name of the priest: Father Vartan. On the ground, I see a marble plaque and above it a cross. I say to Mustapha: " This was the church at Areki. Nearly 150 people used to live there. They had a priest called Father Vartan. There was a garden there, a vine and some animals. The butter and the cheese from here were famous. The honey too. The peasants used to go and sell their produce at Ispir, on Fridays, at the market."

With Mustapha, I decide to climb the hill at Areki to see the fortress in the distance on the mountain chain of Khatchkar and the village of Moghorgut. At the top of the hill, we discover the ruins of the fortress of the Madonna. In 1915, in the fortress, there was a little church, and a dedicated, miraculous fountain which kept people safe from danger. In the church, on the altar, there was the image of the protective Virgin. The young girls of Khodorciur came there to ask for blessing before leaving for exile. Miracles always used to occur in this place. I haven't the time to go and see the sacred mountains of Khodorciur.

Mustapha tells me: " Let's go down, because I can see the horse of my uncle who is coming from Moghorgut" In front of the fountain, Mustapha says to him: " Uncle Mahmud, I present to you this man who has come from Italy. He is the brother of Alexan. He has come especially to see you and speak to you." Mahmud's children appear. Mahmud asks me for any news about my brother. I inform him that Alexan died in exile at Tiflis, and that his wish was that I come here to convey his affectionate greetings. Alexan died without having the chance to see his homeland of Khodorciur again for one last time. I tell him:" Mahmud Aghia, I bring you a letter written by my brother four years ago. I have brought some photos as well which were taken in 1910." I get them out of my bag and show them to him one by one; Kisak, Micintagh, Khntazor, then Djidjibagh, and Sunez and finally Krmank. Mahmud says to me:" I have seen all these villages and travelled through them. I feel a great sadness. Today these villages no longer exist." The sons of Mahmud add: " Khodorciur was a magnificent and rich place; today we live here in misery." Mahmud suggests staying at his house, in the living area. After Mahmud has said his prayers, the children bring the meal which is like the one I used to have at home, the one that my aunt Varvara used to prepare. Mahmud's step-daughters join us after the meal. They are very beautiful women. Mustapha, Mahmud and I sleep under the covers. Here I feel fine and sleep until the morning, until the moment when I see Mahmud get up and say his prayers. We drink some tea and go out.

Mahmud Agha appears with his horse and accompanies us to the road that goes down to Djidjibagh. He offers me his horse. I tell him : "Thank you but I prefer to walk in the company of Mustapha. We are fairly quick. I don't need a horse." I hug him in my arms and bid him farewell. We start our descent. We find ourselves in front of the ruins of the stables and barns which are destroyed. In winter, in this region, the Armenians used to put the cattle, sheep and goats in these stables. Everything is destroyed. We quickly resume our route.

A large building, entirely white, rises up in front of us which in the past used to be the church of Djidjibagh. In the field, we notice two peasants. They are brothers. We all go together in the

direction of the church. On the left, there is a cemetery. Above the entrance, in Armenian, is written: *Kerezman*. I ask permission to visit the church; I want to see the tomb of my great grandfather. A peasant answers me: "Today it's a mosque. It is we who saved this building, they had decided to destroy it. It is 30m long, 20m wide and 15m high. The walls are made of marble and in the design of a cross. The roof needs repairing; the rafters are rotten. It is in danger of total collapse. Today the mosque is closed. The mullah has the keys. He comes on Friday, the day of prayer." In the house, the young wife is preparing the meal. Once again, the cooking is just like what we used to eat in the past. This family lives in the only house in the village. It was the house of the priest Der Garabed Tchakhalian, my mother's grandfather. The young wife gets up, kisses my hand and invites me to go and see a house. We walk together and we arrive at a ruined house behind the cemetery. She then informs me: "In this ruined house, a peasant from Hunud found a bag full of gold coins. It was in the time of sultan Hamid of Istanbul. I beg you, do you know where to find your father's treasure, who was very rich. We too want to have something because we are very poor." I say to her: "My dear Katum, I was very young when I left my country. I do not think that my father left any riches there. He used all the money he had to build a new workshop in Kisak. But I remember that my cousin buried some large clay pots in the kitchen garden. Perhaps you will find something there." She replies sadly: "Everything was stolen by a family from Hunud; now there is nothing." I then add: "You have a house here, cattle and land that you can cultivate. You can live in peace and benefit for ever from this blissful country that I have lost. I came here to cry for my misfortune." She replies to me: "What you say is not true. This land is cursed by the people of Khodorciur. Here, nothing grows well. The wheat and fruit do not ripen and vipers are everywhere amongst the ruins. We want to emigrate to America."

I decide to visit the cemetery. I am amazed that all the graves are intact. The headstones are hidden by the grass. At the angles of the cemetery, four mulberry trees carry ripe fruit. I want to go to Kisak, to the place where I was born. Mustapha and the two brothers from Djidjibagh go with me. We go through the orchards and poplar trees surround us.

I am at Kisak, my home village. I walk along a stream. There are no houses. In contrast, I see gigantic poplars and magpies jumping about in the branches. They form a sort of vault. I continue. I notice an enormous oak in the middle of a field. I don't see the stables of my brother Alexan. Wheat pushes up in the cemetery. Fifty paces from there, piles of stones, pebbles and marble spread out along the river. The ruins of our house. I see the destroyed workshop near the field of maize. Amongst the debris, two walls, two walnut trees and a peasant. I ask him: "Where are the grave stones from the cemetery? I am looking for the graves of my family." The peasant replies: "My master, Adji Djielal, from Hunud, sows this field that was the cemetery." He finds the grave stones for me. I read the names Takuhi, Krikor, Harutiun, Aristakes. I recite an Ave Maria: "Mother, I bring you greetings from Father who died in a foreign land. Here, nobody brings you the smallest bunch of flowers. I am a pilgrim and live in a far off country. You are lucky, Mother, that Jesus Christ came to find you here to take you to heaven. You died on your land. You have not suffered the torture and humiliation of a tragic exile."

I am sitting on the ruins of my house, under two red mulberry trees. They are in front of the secondary door. I have a photo of Kisak on my knees. I think of the distant past and of my childhood. Eighty years have passed by. I find myself alone in Khodorciur, in a region that is ravaged and buried under rubble. The young Turks Tikri, Djielal, Mustapha and Suleiman look at

the photos of the past. It was a lively and pleasant village. They say to me: "How rich and beautiful was the village of Kisak." Yes, we were rich. The Emishian brothers had a local bank which used to lend money, without interest, to the peasants of Hunud. About 10.000 people lived in Khodorciur. Djielal asks me: "To which country did the people of Khodorciur emigrate?"

So I tell the young Turkish peasants the story of how the Armenian Catholics died.

In the month of June 1915, the Kaimakan from Kiskim, that is to say the prefect, arrived at Khodorciur with ten policemen. Within several days, he deported a large part of the population. So there were 850 left in Khodorciur: old men, pregnant women, boys, girls and lots of children. Luckily, the families of Emishian and Alexan had stopped in Hunud. My father shut his workshop and became a baker. Our reprieve did not last long. In August, we see Khali Ciavush arrive at Kisak. On two mules, he carries Alexan's children and grandmother Tanid. He says to us: "Prepare yourself to leave Khodorciur very quickly, because the Kaimakan is on his way with some policemen and wants to deport you." In the region, the majority of the population has neither mule, horse nor donkey. In a few hours, we prepare ourselves for the exodus. The Kaimakan from Kiskim arrives at the dead of night with the police. He lays siege to the villages and, with quicklime, burns alive the disabled inhabitants who were incapable of moving on, in a ditch at Krmark. The displaced exiles go through Kisak, and go along a wheat field, below our workshop. The Kaimakan, a friend of our family, sees to it that my grandfather and his grand children have mules. Two days later, we get to Djiobergantz. We stay there for ten days. We have the vague hope to be able to go home because the Armenian Catholics are not condemned to exile. The policemen behave well with us. One morning, we discover ten men hanging in front of the little church. They have their mouths open and tongues hanging out. The parents of the victims are desperate. The policemen are full of cruelty towards them because they forbid them to bury the dead. Exhausted, we arrive at Hunud. For two days, we camp outside the village at the foot of the hill. The peasants of Hunud are not very kind to us. The rumour is that we will be massacred on the outskirts of Axumn, near the bridge at Djiorogh. A band of thugs led by the Tchete wander through the region on horseback. They must be our murderers. We leave Hunud and, two days later arrive at Axumn where we camp on the bank of the river. Terrified, we discover that twenty thugs are looking at us wickedly in front of the post office. They are armed with axes and knives. During the night, they enter our tents and remove twenty young girls. That night, we thought that the moment of our deaths had come. We see, high in the sky, the flames of a fire. In the morning we decided to escape from the camp. The policemen arrive and make us walk in the direction of the town of Ispir. Along the river Djiorogh, we see the burnt out ruins of the inn and the post office. The acrid smell of burnt flesh fills the air: the young girls that had been taken and violated, had been burnt alive by their executioners.

After walking for thirty days, we arrive at Baiburt. We climb, we descend, we go through Kopardagh, a pass 2.300m high. We camp on the banks of the Djiorogh. We are in the middle of an orchard. We go to a market where a baker who knows my father says to us: "The families of Alexan and Emishian have passed through here and have gone to Erzindjian. Ten policemen on horseback are protecting the group." The population is angry with us and shouts at us contemptuously: "We will kill you all, lords of Khodorciur". Some people who know my father come to greet us. They take my father in their arms and say to him: "Demirdji Garabed, Allah protect you!" We finally arrive at the ruined fortress of Erzindjian; from this place we notice the oval basin of the town and of the Euphrates. For a whole day, we have not been able to drink a drop of water. Our mouths are dry.

We arrive in front of the fountains in the town but the soldiers move us away with their bayonets and fire shots in the air. We are terrified and run through the streets. The policemen try to calm us down and take us to the Armenian cemetery. We collect ten pieces of gold and offer them to the chief of the police for having defended us from the violence of the soldiers. We are free to leave the camp. We go to the market to buy something to eat. An Albanian policeman says to my father: "On the banks of the Euphrates, in the barns, 10.000 children from Erzerum and Khodorciur have been burnt. If you have any children younger than three years old, hide them in your baskets." The Kaimakan is very strict and in particular with Armenian Catholics. By chance, at the market, we learn through people we know that forty days earlier, my brother Alexan and the Emishian family passed through Erzindjian and have settled in the town of Aghin! We leave Erzindjian and get to the banks of the Euphrates, which flows from Erzerum. The river is full of unburied bodies. A terrible smell impregnates the air. We enter the gorge of Kemagh, in the middle of very high mountains. Above the river, we see a bridge on which are hanging human skeletons and animal carcasses. In the fields of Kemagh, after the men from Erzerum had been killed, carts and small carriages lie abandoned. The policemen let us rest at the banks of the river. Two young horsemen living in the mountains unexpectedly snatch two seven or eight-year-old children. Their desperate mothers throw themselves into the Euphrates.

We are now in the Dersin region. We go through some villages. We stop in the village of Baghatch, far from the Euphrates. My grandfather Melkon the hunter dies in this place. Grandfather's mule-driver stays with us, for our service. We climb in the direction of the town of Aghin, going through villages hidden from Ushin. We cross the Euphrates by means of the Aghin bridge. We enter the main street of the town. On the door step of the cake shop, we notice my brother Alexan and the brothers Emish Oghlu. We stop and look at each other in silence, with joy in our hearts, after six months apart. The policemen do not allow us to greet our relatives. In the morning, a delegation of peasants from Khodociur asks for an audience with the Kaimakan, who lives in Kisak. The Kaimakan is a person proud of his rank. He tells us that there are not enough places to house us, that foodstuff is rare, that snow will fall soon and that the village will be cut off for four months. He adds that at Arapkir and at Kharput, there are lots of empty houses. My father receives permission to open a workshop in Aghin. My father does not want to abandon his companions. The Kaimakan gives him hope of being able to settle in Arapkir. It's a very rich town. The government gave the Armenian Catholics the freedom to settle in the villages. We leave Aghin early in the morning. The Kaimakan comes to see us. After ten days, with hearts full of hope, we camp at the empty fruit market in Arapkir. The peasants have baskets full of delicious grapes. They sell some of them to us at a low price. The Kaimakan appears on a magnificent horse. He looks at us contemptuously. He orders the policemen to take us away, Catholics in rags. He does not want an epidemic to be declared in this region. We imagine that our extermination is close. We know that we are on the road to death. The policemen tell us: "We will soon be in Malatya."

We cross the bridge at Kersgoes. Headless bodies float in the middle of the river. Further on, we find ourselves in front of a large inn. There are seats made of the trunks of polished walnut. In front of us, in the square, there is a crowd with axes and sticks. On these trunks, men from Khodorciur and Erzerum have been beheaded. We are threatened. They want to massacre us. The policemen defend us with their bayonets. By chance, horsemen appear and chase off the furious peasants.

After ten days, we get to Malatya without encountering any serious incidents. We stop at a place called Furundjiular. They allow us to camp in the desert for as long as we want. A canal of cold water passes in front of our tents. In the morning, a delegation of doctors and nurses, accompanied by officials and soldiers, comes to see us. Spades and picks are thrown out of a cart. They lead us to a wheat field strewn with thousands and thousands of bodies. The doctors tell us: "You must bury the bodies at a depth of 1m." We become the gravediggers of Furundjiular. Four women and a man, who is lame, come and visit us. They tell us that the dead are from Khodorciur. These five people have escaped the massacre. After days and days of digging graves, the field became a real cemetery. We call it the cemetery of Khodorciur. Fifteen days later we leave Furundjiular. We climb the mountains, that are controlled by Zenial Bek, one of the most famous murderers of the population of Erzerum and Khodorciur. It rains. It snows. In a village, some peasants allow us to sleep in the stables and offer us a plate of lentil soup. The next morning we climb down the mountain again, we cross a wood and stop near a river on the outskirts of the town of Samsad. We do not see the town. We set up camp. We kill our cow. We eat the meat together. A man on horseback arrives. He is called Keroghlu Osman Agha. He is looking for a blacksmith for his village of Boyuk Bagh which can be found a few days from the camp. Osman Agha leads us to a stable where we settle down. We separate ourselves from the others. In the morning, we see the departure of our companions. We then walked for eighty days before stopping at Boyuk Bagh.

We are in the workshop where we have worked for a week. Two men on horseback stop in front of the shop. They give my father a packet and leave. We open the packet. There is a child's shirt on which some words are written in blood:" Uncle Garabed, our close friends and relatives are dead, drowned in the river Euphrates. I am alive. My daughter is dead. I send you ten Turkish lira. I will meet you in Khodorciur. I will take vengeance for as long as I live. May God bless you, my dear uncle."

There we are, young Turks. You have heard the sad story of the 10.000 from Khodorciur and their tragic end.

I remain alone with my friend Mustapha in the ruins of my house. We look at each other. He says to me:" Djianik Oghlu, let's return to Hunud." No, I want to see the church of St Gregory the Illuminator. We make our way towards the church. It is a minute on foot from the ruins of my house. I stop in the square where the church rises up. I see only white polished stones. They are pieces of white marble. I then shout out in Armenian:" Christ died in Khodorciur." We go down towards the stream, near the ruins of my workshop. We walk to the mill of my grandfather Adji Melkon. Mustapha says to me: "This road takes us to Hunud. Do you want to go and see the beautiful villages of Khentatzor?" I tell him: "No, I want to follow the route of the 1915 deportation. I want to follow this route for a second time."

I am the wandering pilgrim who carries on his shoulder the Cross of Jesus Christ. Mustapha follows me as if he were the apostle Joseph.

(Text translated by Michael Webb)