

The First Quarter Century

Memoirs and Impressions

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To my grandsons Aram and Haro as a reminder of what our world was like, where there was no fresh food to be bought during the winter months and there were no computers, mobile phones, tablets, etc.

PROLOGUE

Some years ago my wife Mariette was telling Aram (our grandson) about her childhood in Tehran's Kuche` Iraj and their summer home in Shiaan, with all the small and funny details. Aram was listening very attentively and laughing at the thought of his Grandma having done all these unusual and childish things. Emma, who was eavesdropping on the whole affair suddenly interjected that it would be very interesting if we could put all these stories on paper, so that in future the grandchildren and their subsequent offsprings could also have the benefit of knowing how their grandparents lived.

This is easier said than done. Ever since that day the thought of putting all these memories down on paper has been in my mind but that it has been quite a daunting one. The first question that comes to mind is whether to write in Armenian or in English. Armenian is my mother tongue and I think that I can express myself better in Armenian however, there is the question of the reader! Yes, OK, our grandchildren speak Armenian as well as English but let us be realistic. Living in London and growing up in the environment that they would naturally do, it will most probably be difficult for them to read anything of appreciable length in Armenian. Yes, of course I would prefer them to read this in Armenian since some of the stories may not be translatable into English, but one has to make a choice.

The other problem is that not having a profession that relates to writing in any way except in the technical sense, I find it very difficult to put down my thoughts on paper without feeling that the whole structure or the composition is inadequate. For this I beg everyone's indulgence.

The memories and information therein regarding the families may lack details here and there. This is due to the fact that our families, like many other Armenian families have had roots in their native towns and villages, but as a result of the Genocide of 1915, and the subsequent deportations and exile - there is not much background information available to go on. I have had to do with the information gathered from grandparents and their friends and family. This may be scant at times but it is the best that can be done!

What I wish to emphasize, is that the living conditions which I was born in were so vastly different from what we have today, that it is almost beyond belief and comprehension. In the early 40's Tabriz, even the science fiction could not foreseen the internet and e-mail of today etc.

One should appreciate the modern amenities but at the same time be aware of the possible loss of human values in the environment created by the modern technologies, values - which were prevalent in the past.

London, June 2000.



1 - Tabriz, June 1939.

1. TABRIZ

The earliest memory I have as child is the smell of chloroform gas. I was born in the American hospital in Tabriz under the supervision of Dr. Lamm, who was an American doctor working in Tabriz before the WW2. I am told that when about two I was taken to the same hospital to be circumcised and my first memory is a dark red rubber cap that was put on my nose and mouth and had a very disagreeable smell - that of chloroform.

This is followed up by an episode in the village of Basminj in the east of Tabriz, where our family had gone for the summer. I remember that the older boys, Yervand – my maternal uncle , (płnh - who is all of 4 years and 9 months my senior) and Hrach – my fathers first cousin (almost the same age as Yervand) had come home late and smelled of fresh cucumbers. The room that we lodged was an elevated one, accessed by rickety wooden stairs, with mud and straw walls. As soon as they started to climb the steps my mother smelled the cucumbers and guessed that they had gone to “pick” cucumbers from the villagers’ gardens. She told them off very strongly, calling their act “stealing”, which, in truth it was.

I also have a fleeting memory of Hrach, Yervand and me trying to ford a very shallow river that ran through the village and while in the middle of the stream the level of the water suddenly rose.

My “mature” companions were ashamed to call for help but made me cry out for help in Turkish, which I did not understand or speak. I vaguely remember that one of the family members arrived and dragged us away from the waters. I was then probably between two and three years old.

Tabriz in 1940’s was a provincial city in Iran with a few asphalt streets. The streets were paved mainly with round large cobblestones, brought in from various riverbeds. These were all sloping towards the centre of the roads where at various intervals drains were provided for the surface water. Most of the buildings were elevated single storey ones made of bricks and mud, with basements and flat roofs, which did not have proper insulation



2 - With Grandfather and parents, Tabriz, 1939.



3 - With friends Armik Hatsagordzian and Aida Ayazian, 1939.

to prevent rain from coming through. Instead, they relied on thickness of the mud mixed with straw dumped and compressed on the roof. In winters after each snowfall the roofs had to be swept clean, otherwise they would leak. On the main roads the buildings had two storeys and some had corrugated sheet roofs.

Public transport in Tabriz was provided by a few ramshackle buses and horse drawn phaetons. These were drawn by two horses and there were special corners in the large squares, which served as their waiting places, like “taxi” ranks. These parts of the streets and squares were health hazards since apparently no one ever bothered to clean them. There were no taxis and very few private cars. Electricity was a novel phenomenon and was supplied intermittently and unreliably. There were no telephones at all and not many people had even heard of them.

The climate was dusty and dry. In the summers days were hot, but not unduly, but in the evenings there always was a breeze, which sometimes caused mini dust storms. The winters were harsh and cold, with lots of snow and ice on the roads.

Tabriz boasted a few cinemas and hotels, all owned and run by Armenians from the Caucasus. There was a large citadel made of mud bricks in the middle of the city, called the Ark, which was surrounded by a small park, Mellat Park.

The main streets had many shops. There were a few cafes with gardens, all located on the main street, where sometimes music was played. The customers of these cafes were mainly the Armenians, very few local Azeris did appear in these places.

Houses did not have bathrooms or baths. The inhabitants would go to the public baths to bathe and get a good massage. In addition to the local public baths there were even two public baths owned and run by Armenians.

All the delicatessen shops and most pharmacies were owned and run by Armenians too, as Muslims were not allowed to touch or drink alcohol. However, most of them drank the alcohol sold by the Armenians, but did so very covertly.



4-After a bath, at 9 mths



5 - With uncle Yervand and cousin Hrach, 1940, Tabriz

In the 1930's and 40's Tabriz was a well known center for Armenian culture and many intellectuals who had escaped from the Soviet regime in Armenia lived in Tabriz. Particularly after the outbreak of the WW2, when the Allies occupied Iran, Tabriz, which was occupied by the Russians became a center for Armenian culture. There were many schools, cultural and sports organizations where exiled musicians, poets, artists, professors etc. taught and organized cultural events and evenings. The schools' curriculum was based on that of Soviet Armenian one and the children were taught in Armenian, the Azeri and Russian languages being taught as extra languages. Although part of Persia (Iran), there was no Farsi (Persian) language spoken or taught.

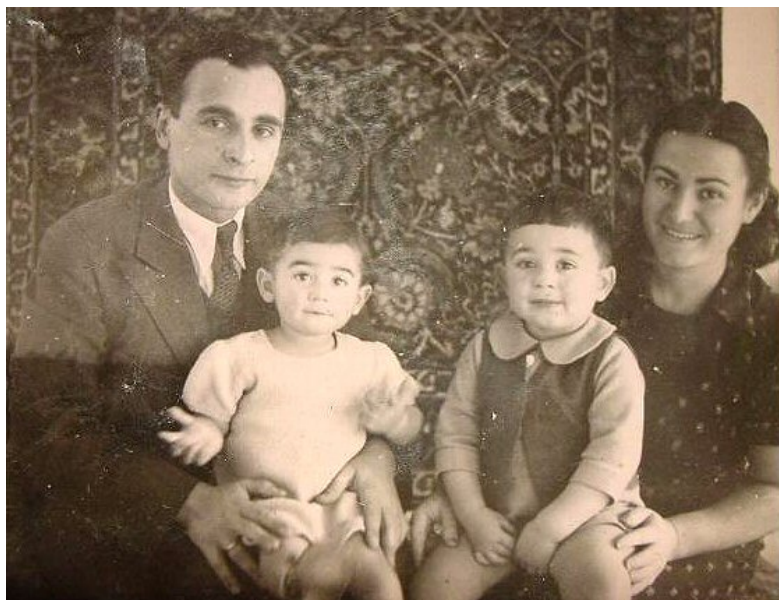
Tabriz had two Armenian quarters or if you like "ghettos". One was situated to the north of the main street and was called Ghala, (a distortion of the Persian word of "Qall'e" – meaning "the fort") the other, located at the south of the main street was called "Lilava" (distortion of the Persian name Leyli Abad – "Leyli's town"). Tabriz Armenians are famous for adopting Turkish/Persian words in their vernacular and distort them beyond recognition. For example mustard is called "khardel" in Persian, but Tabriz Armenians call it "khalidar", a typewriter was called "remekton" after the manufacturers "Remington" etc. etc. Each quarter had its own church and school. We lived in Lilava and I attended Lilava's Armenian school, the Haykazian school, which was located in the courtyard of the Armenian church of the same quarter.

Lilava also had a large Armenian owned communal garden, adjacent to the Armenian Prelacy. This was called the "Kentronakan Aygi" (Central Park) and if my memory does not betray me it had many fruit and shade trees divided by shingle filled walkways and one wider central walkway bordered by flower beds. In one corner there was a large paved area used for playing games and sports activities. The sports club called "Sassountzi Davit Sports Club – SDMM for short (Տասսունցի Դավիթ Մարմնամարզական Միություն) as well as the kindergarten were located inside the park, in a two storey building which had rooms and halls used for the classrooms and gatherings etc.

On the other side there was the building of the "Arajnordaran" the Prelacy, where the big religious boss, the famous Archbishop Melik-Tangian lived



6 - Shah Gyoli (now El Gyoli) Tabriz, in 1940s.



7 - Family photo, Tabriz, 1942.

and had offices. He was an awesome figure and all the children, when approaching this area tried to keep very quiet. We did not fail to notice that even the grown-ups were afraid of him.

Like most of the children I was a member of the SDMM (Sasuntsi Davit Marmnamarzakani Miutyun) at the age of eight and during the summer holidays every morning we would go to the club at about 7 in the morning to participate in group exercises and sports activities. The club members were split in groups of 10-15 according to their age and I started from the youngest group. On the way back home tired and hungry, I would buy fresh barbari bread, which was partially consumed on the way. This was our daily breakfast bread. Then either I or Metzapa would go to the top of the street to buy clotted cream made daily from ox milk, which came in thick layer harder on top and very soft underneath, folded over and looking like a cake, with a thick creamy filling, all white and frothy, to be consumed with bread and honey.

During the summer evenings the Central Park would be used as place for Armenian families to go together with their children, to promenade and have an ice cream or popcorn or the like. We, the children, would run about and play while the teenagers withdrew to shady corners and the parents promenaded or chatted away on the park benches.

At the far end of the main street, near the end of the town there was another communal garden which belonged to the municipality and was called the Gulistan (flower garden). This was much larger than the “Kentronakan” and was a very beautiful garden with lots of flower beds and red sand walkways and a “carousel” (merry-go-round) and even a Ferris Wheel! We would go there strictly accompanied by parents and never without them, as it was open to all. Local Azeri Turks, if they could pay the entrance fee, would come into the park and pinch the Armenian girls who were not covered as their Muslim counterparts were, therefore our parents always had to be extra vigilant and protective of us.



8 - SDMM club members preparing to attend the funeral of the loved and respected Archbishop Melik Tankian, Tabriz, 1948.



9 - After the failed Democrat uprising in Tabriz, the city prepares for Shah's visit, 1947.



10 - Family outing to Shah Gyoli, 1946.

Although Tabriz was a large center for the Armenians, living in ghettos surrounded by the Moslem and mainly illiterate Turkish majority did present its hazards. It must also be said that there were many middle class Azeri families who had close contacts with the Armenians and enjoyed each others friendship but on the whole the masses were not very friendly and welcoming. Young girls and boys had to be careful when alone in the street as they were prone to harassment by the locals. On one or two occasions I remember the elders talking about abduction of a girl by Azeris etc.

There was this girl called Bella, who was abducted by the Azeri owner of bicycle repair shop, located next to their house. I don't think anyone ever saw her again. But these incidents were scarce and far between. The Armenian community had a very active cultural and social life in Tabriz until after the end of World War II when the center gradually moved to the capital, Tehran at the expense of Tabriz.

2 – FAMILY MEMBERS

Our surname has been spelled in so many ways that I feel its evolution has been rather a speedy one. Our ancestors in Van were called Kaljian (Կալժեան). The name apparently was related to their work, which was the separation of the precious metal dust and shavings from the floor dirt taken from the silversmiths' and goldsmith's workshops.

Later on, when my grandfather went to the Iranian Embassy in Tiflis to "get" his Iranian passport, the clerk asked what the surname was. He promptly replied in Vanetzi accent "Kaldjian". Now, the Azeris in Iran mix the letters K and Gh (pronounced "r" as in French), as well as J and Ch (as in chair). Therefore to his ears this was Ghalchian. However, as most Iranians cannot pronounce two consecutive consonants, he took it upon himself to add an "i" between the "l" and "ch". This is how Kaldjian became Ghalichian. Later on, when we moved to England I tried to bring the name nearer to its origins by removing the silent "h" after the G. Thus it now stands as Galichian, although the first "i" is also superfluous and should really be removed.

My great uncles surname is more bizarre. To the question of what his name was he replied Gevork Harutiuni (patronym) Kaldjian. The clerk took the first name and added the patronym as the surname, misspelling it without the "H". Thus their surname became Archuniani! It may also have been caused by the intervention of my Great Grandmother, whose maiden name was Archounian. The end result is that the family now goes by the surnames of Kaldjian, Kaljian, Galdjian, Ghalichian, Galichian and Archouniani.

Our family like most of the Armenians in Tabriz did not originate there, but were immigrants who had originated in Van and had ended up in Tabriz via various routes. About this later! For this reason the family did not have many relatives and our circle consisted mainly of friends. The senior member of the family was my Great Grandmother (Metzmayrik - mother of my father's father) Mrs Srbouhi, who was born in 1860, had no teeth, always wore black dress and yazma (head-cover). The next in line was my fathers father, Levon, whom we called Metzapa (Grandpa), then



11- Great grandmother Srbuhi with Great aunt Araxi, 1933.



12- Father and Vanoush – Tabriz 1936 .



13- With Grandpa Levon, 1940



14-Father in his shop in Tabriz. 1945.



15 - Our Family,in Tabriz, 1948.

my parents Aram and Cosette, my aunt Vanoush (b. 1915- Van), my younger sister Sirik and myself. I remember also Tikin Sonia, a very fat and jolly lady, who came to help with the washing etc. She used to sit at our breakfast table and pour tea from the samovar, which perched at the top of the table. She was another refugee from the Soviet regime and much later on, her older son Ashot who had stayed on in Armenia, married my elder aunt Midil, who also had not left Armenia when her parents came to Iran (see Appendix 2).

Metzmayrik with her son Levon shared a bedroom in the house, which had no windows and the daylight came through the skylight only. This room was generally out of bounds for us, because she did not want us to poke our noses into her things. Under her mattress and the bed she had a veritable collection of old sweets, dried fruits and other goodies that she used to hoard for possible “bleak days” that may come (sev orva hamar)).

Metzmayrik used to drink her tea as soon as the tea glass was filled, magically without burning her mouth and lips. I still do not comprehend how she did that. Her main food in the mornings and evenings was the crusts of the stale bread that her son, Levon would discard. She would dip them in tea and munch away with toothless gums. Levon on the other hand, because of his ulcer could eat only the soft inside of the bread, which had to be stale for easy digestion. As far as I can remember, my grandfather Levon Metzapa wore metal rimmed thick lenses, suffered from ulcer, ate stale bread and drank tea and milk with honey. Generally speaking he did not work, only visited friends’ shops and helped them with their accounts and did the daily shopping for my mother.

As Metzmayrik was not allowed and indeed could not do housework, she passed her time by reading the newspaper. She came from a well to do family in Van and therefore was literate, however she was blind in one eye and could scarcely see with the other. With the partially sighted eye she would read the newspaper folding it back along one single line, holding it against the light and reading it letter by letter , putting the letters together and sometimes coming up with some incredible news stories (such as the news that she gave me one afternoon saying that she read about Armenia purchasing buttons from Egypt - how low can a country sink!!!).



16- Aunt Archav's family, Tabriz



17-With aunt Vanush, Tabriz

When Metzmayrik did not feel well she would quit eating as long as needed until she got better. This was her own medicine and most of the time it worked, and she lived to the age of 93.

Metzmayrik's family had lived in the Old city of Van (as opposed to the suburbs called "Aygestan" – meaning The Orchard). They had been quite well off and apparently had 40 water-mills as well as seven villages. From the members of the family she loved two young male members most. These were myself – her great grandson, and her other grandson Hrach.

When towards the end of her life in 1953 Metzmayrik became bedridden, she would accept only me as her occasional companion to seat by her bedside and a few days before her death she asked Hrach and myself to come to her. She then proceeded to explain about the family wealth and told us that when we return to Van, she wishes that the 40 water-mills and the seven villages are taken over by Hrach and myself and divided between us. She then proceeded to explain where the family silver and valuables were hidden. Inside the garden of their house in the Old City there was an old mulberry tree, near which they had dug a well and all the silver and other valuables were then wrapped and dropped into the well and covered by lime and dirt. She made us promise to go and find the hidden "treasures" as soon as possible. Little did she know that the Old City is now a desolate and barren area, which the Turks have flattened and left desolate. The only two or three still standing ruins are those of the walls of a mosque and a few other large buildings. There is no way to find out where the houses and the gardens/orchards were.

Metzmayrik died of old age, after being bedridden for a month or so, during which I took care of her as much as I could. She is buried in Tehran's Dulab Armenian cemetery.

As I never saw my father's mother, I shall now write about his father Levon, whom we called Metz papa (Grandpa).

Metz papa was a very quiet and reserved man, in fact so quiet that I hardly remember his voice. He was born in Van in 1888 and had spent his life in Van, that is until the infamous year of 1915. During the siege of Van by the Turkish forces in April/May 1915 he had been a fighter inside the

besieged city. He once recounted that one day when observing the Turkish gun positions which overlooked the city from the top of the Citadel, he saw the reflection of sun in a gun sight. He cautiously changed his position inside doorway that he had stood in, moving out of the sight of the gunner. In a few moments a shell crashed where he had stood and brought the roof down on him. He was dug out in shock but otherwise unharmed.

From Van they escaped to Yerevan and Tiflis and it was much later in Tiflis that he developed cataract in both eyes. The doctors attributed this to that shock in Van. He had to get both the eyes operated on and wore very thick steel rimmed lenses to the end of his life, as at that time and age lens implants were not yet done.

Metzpapa Levon and his wife Siranoush had lived in Tiflis with their three children, Aram, Midil and Vanoush. Metz papa was not the most brilliant of businessmen and tried his hand on many things, one of which was dyeing yarn for weaving of socks. He had purchased Iranian passports in Tiflis and therefore was considered a foreigner in the eyes of the Soviet law. Stalin's xenophobia caused many problems for them and when in early 1930's famine was added to the problems he decided to move to Tabriz. We were later told that the reason for the move was grandma Siranoush, who had tuberculosis and the doctors had advised Metz papa to take her to a sanatorium or a town where dairy products and fresh food would be available. For further details see Midil's Memoirs, Appendix 2.

In any case Metz papa decided to leave Tiflis and go to Tabriz in haste and did not bother to let the elder daughter, Midil – who at the time was studying economics in Moscow, know about the move. Midil only found it out indirectly and until today she has not forgiven her father for abandoning her. Although, by her own admission she would not have left Moscow for Tabriz in any case.

Metzpapa was a confirmed widower, as his wife – Siranoush (born in Van in 1896) who had developed tuberculosis in Tiflis died in Tabriz in 1934. She is buried in Tabriz' Armenian Cemetery.

Metzpapa lived a lonely and withdrawn life. Every morning he would get up very early and would go out to get the daily bread and butter or clotted cream. (In the summertime these chores would be mine.) In the late



19- Great grandfather Levon's Iranian passport.

mornings he would go through his ritual of shaving. For this he would get a small aluminium shaving-bowl and make the froth which he would then proceed to slowly put on his face with a soft shaving brush. He would then sling one end of his leather razor sharpener on a doorknob and proceed to sharpen his razor by forward and backward strokes on this special leather strip. He had two folding razors, one with black and the other with white bone covered handles. I never ceased to be amazed at the softness of his shaving brushes.

He would then seat by the dining table, where he would open his hexagonal brown leather folding mirror case and would start shaving. The whole operation would take at least 30-40 minutes. What patience!!!!

He had also developed ulcer and therefore in the mornings he would drink milk with honey and only eat stale bread. Metzapa was a smoker and smoked home rolled cigarettes. One of his rituals was rolling the cigarettes, which he did very carefully and deliberately, stacking them on the table for loading them into his cigarette case. He had a silver cigarette case where he kept his thinly rolled cigarettes and smoked 6-10 a day. Sometimes he would buy cheap "Oshnou" or the thin "Homa" cigarettes and would cut them in half, keeping the halved cigarettes inside the silver case. For smoking these halved cigarettes he used a wooden cigarette holder, which he called a Mushtook (Mundstuck in German). He used to have an engraved silver lighter, which was fuelled by benzin (petrol) and smelled very foul. When striking it you had to be very careful, since the flame could sometimes be 5cm high and very smoky.

When we moved to Tehran, life became more monotonous for him, as he could not do much of what he used to, that is the shopping. The reason was that he did speak Turkish and Azeri, the language used in Tabriz, but did not know any Farsi at all. He ended up doing part of the shopping from the shops run by the Armenians and Azeris, but for vegetables and meat shops he needed the Farsi language, therefore these were out of bounds as far as he was concerned.

He spent his time visiting various friends' shops and in 1962, when I was studying in England, on the night of the earthquake in Tehran, he died at home from the cancer of the kidneys. He is also buried in Tehran's Dulab Cemetery, next to his mother Srbouhi.



20- Sirik and I in Tabriz, 1943.

Another member of the family who lived with us until 1946 was my father's youngest sister Vanoush. About three years his junior, she was a lively and bubbly young woman, who spent a lot of time with us, the children. She taught me to read and write and would read us lots of stories. I remember her sitting at dinner or breakfast table with her black cat on her lap, whose head would be level with the table. She also had a dog and was generally fond of animals.

I am told that she fell in love with one of father's friends, Patev Malik-Andreassian, who was a very reserved man with literary aspirations. But sadly instead of him proposing, his brother Albert proposed to Vanoush. Of course Vanoush could not accept it and in order to keep away from any possible problems, she decided to forget both brothers and accepted the proposal of Jim Chalikian, a decorator who lived in the second floor of our house with his brother Shavarsh and sister Manya.

After the end of World War II, Soviet Armenia invited Armenians from all over the world to return to mother Armenia. My aunt's new family decided to return and my father also enrolled in the list. In 1946 the first caravan left Tabriz for Yerevan and on it were my Aunt Vanoush and her husband, with his brother and sister. Due to the large numbers of people having enrolled, the second caravan was delayed until the next year, by which time the political developments in Iran made this impossible, so we stayed on in Tabriz.

Later on we heard many stories about the difficulties encountered by these first batch of the immigrants. Vanoush's marriage did not work and she gradually became a bitter woman full of paranoia and suspicion towards everyone around her, even including her son and daughter-in-law.

Vanoush died a lonely and woman in March 2000. During the last year or two she had developed amnesia and hence her paranoia had become worse. She was neglected by her older son, Edik and troubled and bullied by her younger son, Misha, who is mentally ill and lives on pills and with whom she lived. Her elder sister Midil, who lived next door, was the only person who worried about her and took care of her - doing her best to ease Vanoush's burden.



21- With Sirik on an almond tree in our garden, 1945.



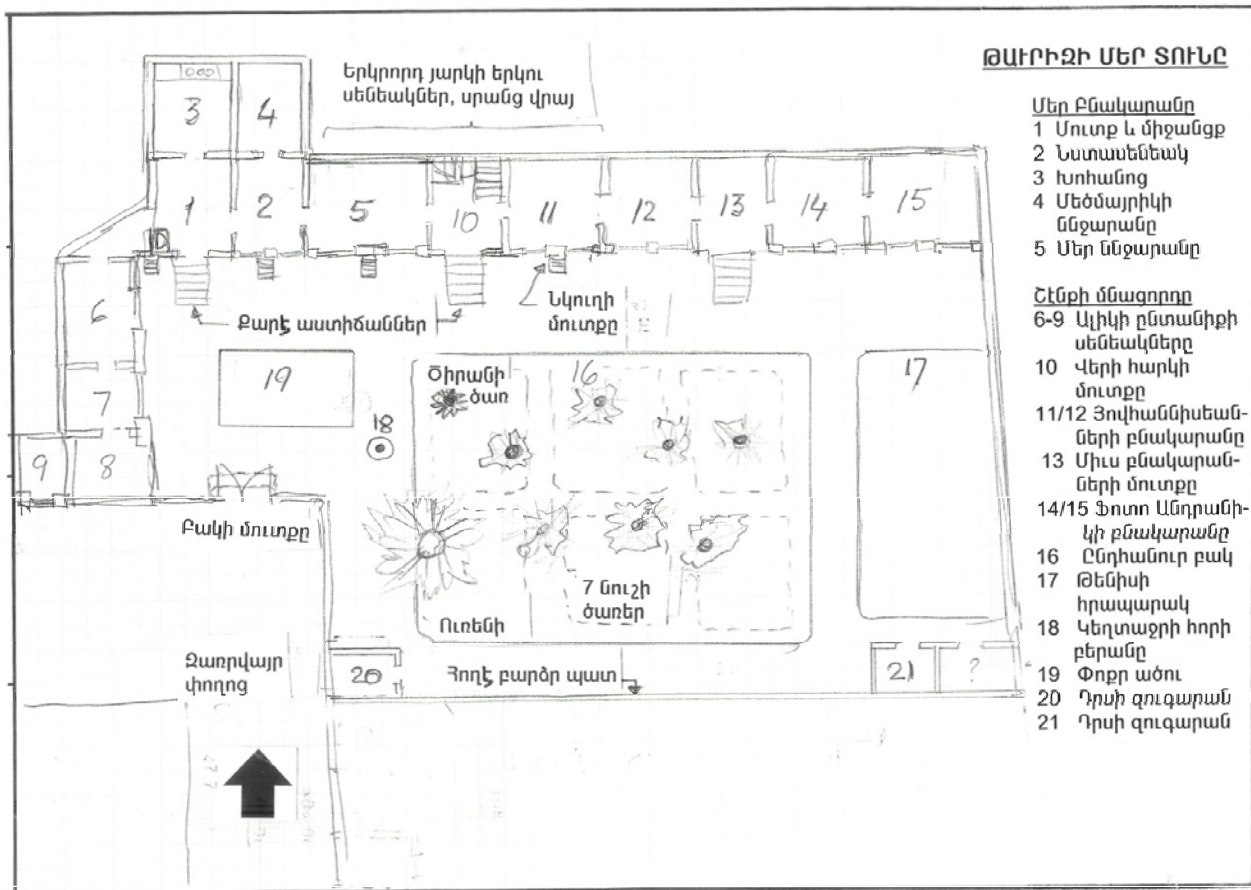
22- In the Grden< 1946.

3 – OUR HOUSE

Like most buildings in Tabriz, our home was a part of the brick and mud building with about 80cm thick walls located in a large(ish) courtyard. The house itself was located at the bottom of a downhill cul-de-sac which started from a small square of shops etc. The cul-de-sac was called “deep cul-de-sac” (վնս դարբսն) as it was very downhill from the square. To give accurate sizes of the building or the courtyard would be speculative, as I have to rely on my memory and looking that far back the scales can be very deceptive. When looking back everything then seemed larger than life and I have had no update of the information since 1950, when we left Tabriz. The layout of the house in which we lived in was as follows (see sketch on page 25). You entered through the main courtyard gate, which had a large wrought iron knocker and hinges. Each family was assigned a number of knocks, ours was one knock, therefore if there was one knock at the front gate, one of us had to rush to open it. This wasn't too bad since the gate was directly in front of our staircase. The neighbours with “four knocks” lived at the far end of the yard, which could cause a problem in the winter snow.

There were two large steps inside the gate, as the courtyard was lower than the street. Once one entered the courtyard, the building extended from the left (west) along the whole length of the north to the eastern wall of the property. The building itself was mainly a two storey affair, with basement along the whole length and elevated ground floor, which was some 6-8 steps above the ground level. The central part of the building had a second floor with two rooms. The ceilings were high and prone to leakage, as there was no insulation but only a thick layer of mud over the wooden beams and slats.

There was no inside toilet and the two outside toilets serving all the families living in the courtyard were situated at the farthest corners of the courtyard. This required a long journey, which could be a frightening one at night and specially in wintertime, when the courtyard was snowed up and ice bound, therefore the use of potties at night was prevalent.





24- Our courtyard in Tabriz, 1945



25- In our hallway during a family luncheon party, 1946.

The toilet used by us was a brick room with a rickety door full of gaps between the wood planks and had a rectangular hole of about 30x60cm, situated directly at the top the pit. For toilet paper used were squarely cut Armenian newspapers hanging from a large nail on the wall. These could be pieces of the newspaper Alik (Wave), or - if father had anything to do with it, Veradznound (Rebirth). You would squat there with these pieces of paper in you hand and try to piece together the news item or the story which was partially presented to you in the form of the loo paper.

One washed indoors at the free standing wash hand basin, which consisted of a wooden cabinet with a marble sink. The top part of the cabinet had a space behind the marble panel and mirror which hid the galvanised steel tank, holding the water. This water was made available for washing by a cock in front of the marble panel, the wastewater being collected in a bucket situated behind a hinged door under the basin. As there was no drainage facility inside the building, every time the water ran out we knew that the bucket was full and needed to be emptied. The bucket was emptied in a communal drain pit in the courtyard, which was covered by a stone bowl of about 40cm in diameter with a central hole. The most dangerous aspect of this drain system was that it was situated half way to the outside toilet and at night if you were not careful you could end up falling into it.

The drinking water was brought from “Gazran” springs by a horse drawn cart with a large barrel mounted on it and was carried into the house by buckets. The water used for washing etc. came from a water reservoir, which was built in the basement. This was a large masonry storage room, which held enough water for the use of 5-6 families for a month or so. The reservoir (called abanbar or anbar) was filled by water that was routed to each house in turns through the open and semi-open gutters (called “arou” in Armenian). For the sake of hygiene, this process was done at night(!) under the supervision of a man called “Mirab” (a Persian word that meant Chief of the Waters). There were regularly arguments between neighbours caused by the early or late delivery of water. These reservoirs normally had a access hatch, like a small door at ground level of the building, which sometimes was used as a cool storage place. There were occasions that the water from the reservoir would smell foul and the men from the families living in the courtyard would go to the hatch to investigate the matter. On a few occasions there were dead mice and once a dead cat in the water, causing this stink.

To get water from the reservoir one had to go down very wet and slippery uneven stone stairs to the lowest point of the reservoir and open the large brass cock, a feat not suitable for the children at all.

As you entered the courtyard there was a small flowerbed area and after that the rough stone stairs leading to the entrance of our home. All the area of the courtyard was paved by square bricks measuring about 20x20cm. To enter our house you had to climb the stairs, then enter a hall, which was of decent size so that there was a table and a wooden flat bench “takht” with 2-3 chairs (that my sister still uses) where we had our daily breakfast and dinner. The lounge table was reserved for our use in the winter and for entertaining.

On the left side of the entrance door stood the majestic marble and wood wash basin mentioned above. Opposite the entrance was the kitchen door with a chain and lock at the door-top, where we children could not reach. Inside the kitchen there was the work table and brickwork fireplace for cooking, which later was demolished to open space for the “free standing paraffin three burner cooker”, the prized possession of my mother. There also was a Primus pump-up stove, which in Iran is still called a “primus”, but this was used mainly for frying and as an additional cooker, since it took time to light up, pump and get it going. Once it was on, we had to check it every few minutes, as due to the dirty paraffin fuel the nozzle was prone to blockages and we had to clean it by inserting a special thin steel wire mounted on top of a metal strip and move it up and down.

The free standing stove, on the other hand, was easy to turn on and if you were careful enough, it never produced soot. This consisted of a white enamelled free standing frame with three tubular black burners, each with a wick, a window and a star shaped grill on top. The three were connected by pipes to the paraffin sump at the right hand side of the unit. The paraffin was poured into a container which was then inverted onto the sump. Simple and easy – for that time. You could even bake cakes on it with the aid of a huge sheet metal hatbox like contraption called appropriately “bourjouika” – in Russian.

The light sources for the kitchen were two panes of glass located just under the ceiling and overlooking the neighbour’s roof.



27- Sirik and I in the garden,. 1945.

As you entered our living room, on your right there were the two windows, with deep sills, so that one could easily sit on them and read or watch the courtyard. Opposite the entrance door was the door to our bedroom, to its right there was my father's desk with its mysterious drawers. The desk was of polished dark wood with one pedestal. The right hand side drawer of the two shallow ones contained my father's tools, some of which I still have. The central one contained small electrical items such as soldering iron, solder, small lamps and miniature tools. The three deeper drawers on the fixed pedestal contained mainly paperwork and other valuables, the lower one of which had a key and was always locked.

The electric wiring was done only recently, with twisted, fabric covered white cables, run on porcelain insulators and round black bakelite switches, mounted on wooden bases. The switches and outlets were installed so high that we, the children could never reach them.

On top of the desk sat our majestic Austrian made Hornyphon radio, which had superseded the previous radio (I don't remember the make). The Hornyphon trade mark was an eagle with wide open wings, head typically turned to one side and holding in his talons a large, yes this is true, swastika - in a circle. As it was wartime and Tabriz was occupied by the Soviet forces, my father very solicitously had sawn off the swastika and the eagle stayed there holding nothing in his talons. The radio was on at 8AM for the news from the front on radio Moscow (in Russian) and in the evenings we used to hear loud screams and shouts of Russian (I presumed, very bulky) sopranos singing operetta or opera arias from either radio Yerevan or radio Moscow. No one had heard of radio Tehran, and radio Tabriz at that time was non-existent.

On the wall above the radio was a large Daily Telegraph map of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. This was there for references when the news about the front was broadcast. I learned my Latin alphabet from the letters on this map when I was 5-6 years old. The only letters that I could not decipher were the gothic ones on the title saying *"Daily Telegraph"*.

My grandfather, Metzapa, was fluent in Turkish and used to listen to the BBC Turkish news transmissions on the short wave. I distinctly remember the four drum beats of the BBC at the start of the transmission. Then came



28- In our bedroom in Tabriz, 1948.



29- Jemma, Medik, me, mother, Kolya, Sirik and Robert. 1948.

“sayin dinlijiler..... son khabarleri” (dear listeners, the latest news) or something of the sort.

The rest of the furniture consisted of two single seat sofas and a three seat one plus some chairs and the small table whose top could be lifted and unfolded to reveal a specially made backgammon table. This was made for my father by his friends Partev and Albert Melik-Andreassians, who had a workshop and manufactured all sort of things. (later on they moved to Tehran and had the largest enamelled and stainless steel household goods manufacturing plant in the Middle East, called PAMA – the initials of their names).

In the wintertime the breakfast/dinner table would be moved into the sitting room. There would also be an additional and very important item to the sitting room – the stove. This was a wood burning stove, made of blackened sheet metal. It was a rectangular box of about 80x60 cm, 70cm high, on four metal legs. Before installing the stove everything related to it had to be re-blackened, so that it did not rust. First the stove itself was cleaned with paraffin (naft) and then blackened. Then the turn was for the sheet metal flue pipes, which were first “burned” to clear the soot and other deposits inside and then cleaned and blackened. The stove was installed on a plinth of wood and metal. It had two doors and a drawer. The left hand side door was smaller and was for feeding in the wood. Underneath it there was a drawer which was for the ash to be gathered-in and be disposed-of. The right hand side door covered an oven compartment, which was used for baking. The top of the stove had two circular openings with lids, which were removed for accommodating a kettle for boiling water and pans for cooking. The best ever way of baking onions and potatoes was to bury them in the ash inside the stove drawer and keep them there a few hours. This was a most enjoyable treat available to us during the long winter evenings.

This stove was installed on the north west corner of the room. The flue pipe rose from the stove to just 30-40cm below the ceiling and then traversed to the north east corner of the room where it was fed into the flue opening. The long internal exposed flue pipe, which ran inside the room was used to maximise the efficiency of the heating system, but it had its drawbacks. As the smoke and flue gases cooled inside the flue, there would be leaks of dirty black fluid from the joints and it was not unusual to

see strategically located small buckets hanging from the flue to catch the black and evil smelling condensate dripping from the joints.

The wood for the stove was stored in a small basement room located under the stone stairs and every day one of us had to make the journey down to get the wood for the day. However, this was not a simple “go-and-get-it” job and one had to be prepared for it. That particular basement room was full of fleas and if you did not rub on paraffin or some other repellent to your exposed legs, on exit from the basement there would be a score of tiny black specs (fleas) on your legs, enjoying your blood.

The access door to our bedroom was from the living room. This was a long room with three south facing windows. The beds were against the opposite wall, facing the windows, laid out with about 60cm of spacing between them. As you entered the first bed on the left was Sirik’s, then fathers, then mine and finally mother’s. Between father’s and my bed there was a small but high bedside table with a drawer holding all types of medicines. On top of it was the table clock which had an electric lamp as well. (See page 37)

On the right hand side of the door was the small drawer unit and against the opposite wall was the pale yellowish wardrobe with a tall mirrored door. All the curtains in the house were made of lace and came down to the window sill level only. In the winters we had a small wood burning stove installed in the bedroom too.

Metzpapas and Metzmayriks bedroom was the northern room in the house accessed from the living room. This room was generally very cold and did not ever get any sunlight. In addition to being a bedroom, it also was a storage room. Our large wooden chest was there, containing extra bedding etc. There was also a table for the dried lavash bread, which were stacked on the table, one on top of the other and covered by a sheet.

From the entrance hall there was a door on the left leading to the West wing of the building, which contained 3-4 rooms. These were in our possession when auntie Vanoush lived with us but were handed back to the landlord, after she got married and left Tabriz for Armenia. This door was then closed and the rooms were let to other families. This was an ideal ground for us while playing hide and seek.



30 – With Alice in our courtyard. 1948.



31- New Year's party at our home, 1945.



32- Edik Dayan as the groom. 1946.

4 – PREPARATIONS FOR THE WINTER

We lived in relatively primitive conditions that prevailed at that time. In the wintertime there were no vegetable, fruit or animal products such as milk and meat etc. available and therefore the families had to get themselves ready to face the hardships and shortages of the coming long winter months.

One of the most important ones was the purchase and storage of wood for the stoves, which served for heating as well as cooking purposes, thus replacing paraffin during the winter.

The purchase of the wood for the stove, like so many others, was a special ritual. Metzapa would go to the street and find 5-10 donkey loads of cut tree trunks and the like, and after much haggling the donkeys would arrive in the courtyard. These donkeys were sad looking and very stubborn beasts with large amounts of wood piled on their back, on a special saddle like contraption, (palan - փալան). After the donkeys were offloaded either father or Metzapa would go to look for “hambals”, handymen who used to hang around looking for the odd job. Eventually one or two of them would arrive armed with axes, which they immediately would proceed to sharpen. Then they would start chopping the wood into manageable pieces which would have to be taken and stacked in the basement under our stairs, to dry and be ready for use in the winter.

There were a few of these “hambals” whose names and faces I still remember. There was the always sad looking Yerkar Hambal (meaning - the tall porter) who never spoke and was very tall indeed. The other one was called “Papani” who was a very kind man but very nervous and prone to getting mad at the pranks that some children played on him. On these occasions he would take refuge inside our courtyard, stand in the corner behind the closed gate and pile abuse at the villains. Then he would sit down and start crying, always remembering his beautiful and good daughter Parandzem, who was one day coming from Baku in order to rescue him. All his abuse and complaints were conducted in the Azeri language and to the tune of local laments. He was always a very sad person, most probably a refugee far away from his home and family.



33 - With uncles Yervand, Vahag, Cousin Alice, Mannik, Artoush and Hrach. Tabirz 1944.

He always smelled of sweat and stale bread. No one knew where these people lived and to find them you only had to go to the local square (meydan).

The procurement, cooking and storing of meat for the winter was another of these rituals. In the autumn Metzapa would go and buy 2-3 sheep which were brought into the courtyard and tied to a tree with lots of fodder and some salt to feed on. Then the local butcher would come to decapitate and skin the animals. The butcher then would break all the major bones and get the meat ready to be chopped up. All the livers and hearts etc would then be barbecued for the day and then the women would start the work. The women who came to help were my great uncle's widow Arshav, (who died last April in San Francisco, aged 95) whose husband had died at the age of 43, her daughter Alice and the neighbours. The carcasses would be chopped into small pieces and together with the fatty tail (ηύσλ), which sometimes weighed 4-5 kilos, would go into large cauldrons to cook slowly over a wood fire.

The process of cooking would take a whole day and at the end of the day the meat would be cooked thoroughly and the juices would be reduced to the thick gravy and lots and lots of fat. All these would be poured in large earthenware pots, each one taking 15-20 litres. Each pot would be covered with a layer of fat poured on top for protection. These pots would then be transported into the cellars for safe keeping until the winter months.

The leftovers at the bottom of the cauldrons would be a favourite evening snack for us and Arshav, who was an extremely kind person, would give us bits of bread dipped into the fatty leftovers, which contained bits of overcooked and browned mutton. A once a year experience!

During the whole of the winter months mother would go to the cellar and take a few pieces of meat from these pots and cook the daily meals with them. This pre-cooked meat was called Ghavourma and was very tasty and rich. We would kill for a piece of "ghavourma" wrapped in "lavash", but dared not touch the pots fearing punishment and disgrace.

Sometimes, weather permitting, the supplies truck would arrive from Tehran and father would come home in the evening smelling of garlic sausage. This would happen once or twice a month, and on those occasions

we could smell the garlic sausage that he was carrying home as soon as he arrived into the house. Those evenings were our feasts, otherwise we had to do with bread and cheese or leftovers from lunch - if there were any. Favourite was “tjmour” (ἄμωρ), which was dried lavash bread, broken into small pieces, sprinkled with bits of white feta cheese and added water or if we were lucky - milk, to soften the hard dried lavash. Generally speaking our main daily meal was at about 1PM, when father would shut the shop and come home for lunch. Evening meals were lighter affairs and I think this was a much healthier way of eating rather than the one that we have now in the so called “civilised” world.

Some years Metzpapa would decide to make dried meat sausages. A thin minced mutton sausage in a gut casing flavoured with a lot of spices and garlic. He would get the meat, mince it three or four times with a hand mincer, mix the spices and garlic and finally fill the guts with them, tying the two ends together and making them horseshoe shaped. These were then hung in the sun to dry before being stored for winter consumption during parties etc.



34- Galchians and friends, 1946.

Another ritual was the preparation of tomato paste. At the end of the summer hundreds of kilos of ripe and overripe tomatoes would be purchased and piled in large galvanised open vats. These would then be minced producing a thin soup of tomatoes. This soup would then be poured into dozens of shallow serving dishes of all sorts and sizes as well as any other flat container available. These would be taken to the flat roof of the house to be reduced and thickened under the summer sun. Of course there would be the wind, blowing dust into the gradually thickening paste as well as flies etc. which were sifted out daily by the women. At the end of a week or two under the summer sun there would be a thick tomato paste with excellent taste to be filled into the jars and kept for the winter cooking. The thickened paste was also subject of raids by us, dipping our fingers into the paste and licking them. This was a particular favourite of my uncle Yervand - a tomato fan.

The provision of winter cooking oil was yet another ritual. Most cooking was done by animal fat - ghee, as vegetable oils were not available and olive oil must have been very expensive. Therefore the cooking oil/fat for the winter had to be purchased and stored. This was in fact molten butter prepared from sheep's milk with all the watery elements removed. Again, sometime in the autumn there would be large flatweave baskets of fresh butter brought into the courtyard and one by one the contents would be deposited into the cauldrons to be melted and cooked over a fire. The butter came from the villages and had all sorts of impurities in it, the most innocent of all being the animal and human hairs.

Yet another preparation was the making of jams and preserves for the winter months. These would be apricot, pumpkin, cherry, sour-cherry, quince, fig and other preserves. Some of them had very complicated processes such as washing, dicing, soaking in lime to preserve the crunchy texture and then cooking with sugar.

Many types of vegetables were also pickled for the winter. These included green tomatoes, small cucumbers, something like small melons – called Kalak in Azeri, cabbages, carrots etc. They were pickled using salt water and a few spoon-full of home made vinegar.

Home made wine was the speciality of my maternal grandfather. During the autumn he would buy a few hundred kilos of red and white grapes and call one or two handymen (hambals) for assistance. First they were made to

take off their home made shoes and woolen socks, and thoroughly wash and scrub their feet with soap. The grapes would then be emptied into large wooden open vats and the hambals, with their now clean feet, would start treading upon them. The resultant juices were then emptied into large earthenware wine jars, each holding tens of litres of liquid, and left in the basement to commence fermentation.

On one occasion Yervand and I sneaked into the basement and “tried” the semi-fermented wine, which tasted deceptively sweet. The combined drinking of the “madjar” (semi fermented wine) and the fumes in the air from the fermentation process made us sleepy and we were rescued just in time by someone who sensed the unusual quiet and came looking for us, finding us asleep in the basement.

Sometimes Metzapa would buy grapes, apples and pears to store for the winter. In the basements high above the floor he would string thick yarns from wall to wall, and would suspend bunches of grapes or the individual pears and apples from it. This would keep them aerated and prevent rotting as well stopping the mice from getting at them. But you had to be careful in selecting the size and thickness of the yarn, as mice would easily walk over the thick ones and gain access to the succulent fruits.

With the end of the winter and coming of the spring, there were other annual rituals to be performed. These consisted of various activities, which signified the end of the winter and the beginning of a new year.

In Tabriz all our bedding was home made. The mattresses were filled with pure wool which first had to be fluffed and aerated, then filled into the mattress bags, with patterns sewn with thick thread to keep the wool from moving about. These mattresses were 10 to 15 cm thick. The thinner duvets were also made of pure wool, or if you were rich – filled with goose feathers, but most families had woollen ones. At the end of the winter season the wool inside the mattresses and the duvets would be compressed flat from use and would need to be re-fluffed. This was a long and arduous job taking a few days, keeping the women of the family busy.

Arshav would arrive with her special long cranberry stick and the woollen contents of the mattresses and duvets would be emptied and first washed in water before stringing on the drying lines criss-crossing the expanse of our courtyard. The smell of the washed sheep’s wool is still in my nostrils. The

wool was multi-coloured in its natural shades of brown, beige and off white and with use would become lumpy and knotted. After drying the wool would be piled onto a blanket laid on the floor in order to aerate and make it fluffy. Then Arshav would sit on the floor and start lashing at the pile of wool with her long and flexible stick, clearing the wool clinging to the stick with a sweep of her left hand after each stroke. After some time the volume of the wool would triple and although strictly forbidden, we would enjoy rolling in the clean and fluffy wool.

Then the mattresses and the duvets would need to be filled with the clean and fluffy wool and the openings would be sewn with large needles. Then the concentric patterns would be sewn on them to keep the wool from moving about. This was one of the few occasions that we would eagerly await bedtime, when we could enjoy the luxury of sleeping in the soft and fluffy beds.

Then it was the time of getting the woollen winter clothing and overcoats stored in the large storage chest. They would first be hung on the lines under the spring sun to aerate and be disinfected, after which the articles of clothing would be laid in the chest in layers, each layer covered with mothballs, to keep away the omnipresent moths. This meant that in the autumn these articles of clothing had to be aerated in the open air in order to get rid of the smell of the mothballs.

Every spring the contents of the whole house had to be aerated too. Everything in the house, which during the long winter months had not been exposed to fresh air had to be taken out of the house into the courtyard and exposed one whole day to the spring sun. This was done to get rid of various ill smelling and stale odours.

All the carpets would be taken out and laid on the paved area of the courtyard, where they were thoroughly swept and beaten up to get rid of the accumulated dust and dirt. Vacuum cleaners were not introduced to Iran until the 50's.

The washerwomen would arrive to wash the curtains in huge tubs, using home made rough cubes of soap, which smelled of just soap, not perfume! These were then hung on the drying lines and we, the children would play hide and seek between them.

The stove flue pipes would be removed by a “specialist” and cleaned before being stored in the basement. Overnight the stove itself would disappear and until today I cannot recall where it was stored during the summer months.

Suddenly the street traders and vendors would appear. These were many and had various specialties such as those who sharpened knives and scissors on their foot driven grinding wheels, showering sparks everywhere, the chine repairers – who drilled small holes in the broken pieces of chine using a wooden pole with a metal tip, driven by a thread twisted on the pole, assisted by a heavy flywheel top. The pieces were then stuck together by china glue and iron staples, which would invariably rust in no time.

The mainly copper tons and pans would be re tinned over charcoal fires by yet another street trader. To wash the plates and pans a mixture of a powdered wild plant root was used, which was slightly soapy and abrasive. Repeated washings would wear out the tin layer and these had to be re tinned every year in order to prevent the copper compounds from poisoning the food cooked in them.



35- Mom teaches Alice how to make dresses, 1945.

5 – DAILY ROUTINES & LIFESTYLE

Life in Tabriz during the 40's had its special routine, which was quite different from that of today. The daily life was full of problems and various hurdles which had to be overcome. Appliances and amenities of today were unheard of, but in many respects life then was fuller and much more enjoyable in spite of all the problems.

We had our daily breakfast with all the family gathered around the dining table and the samovar in the position of honour. Fresh bread and butter or clotted cream was bought the same morning from the shop in the small square 50 metres from the house. There would be cheese, jams and honey etc. from the larder too. After breakfast we, the children went to school and father went to his shop. Lunchtime everyone was back home and we had our lunch together, which was the main meal of the day, once again sitting around the dining table. The food prepared by mother was either Armenian - such as various dolmas, vegetable soups etc., which she had learnt from her mother, or Caucasian, which was what she had seen in Yerevan and Tiflis. Many typically Iranian dishes, specially the spicy ones were unfamiliar to us and we came to know and enjoy them only after moving to Tehran.

Readymade clothes were not heard of. Men's suits and trousers were ordered to tailors, while women made most of their own dresses at home. All children's clothes were made by mother, with the help of another female member of the family. Woollens were exclusively all home knitted.

In the mornings the washing up was done in the free standing wash basin. For bathing, however, there was no special room. In the summertime some water would be heated and the children would get into the galvanised tub, brought into the living room or the hallway. The grown-ups would follow the same procedure, but the bathing would take place in the kitchen.

The grown-ups would every so often go to the public baths, which was almost a days "work". The ladies would go in groups, taking the small children along. They would get into the pool then go into the cubicles to wash and scrub and soak, have some refreshments and eventually to come out to dry and start dressing. I normally accompanied my mother and

sister until I was about 7-8 years old, when the other women warned my mother against bringing me in next time, as I was getting older and showing more interest in the proceedings in the bathhouse than was good for me! From then on, I was sent to the baths in the company of my father. This was much quicker and simpler affair, as he used to get a private number and a helper, who used to slap and scrub our backs with some sort of very rough material worn like a mitten. His aim was to get rolls of skin out and leave the pink underlay exposed. The pinker your skin looked, the cleaner you were supposed to be! But sometimes it really hurt!

On the return journey father always took a phaeton, which was a treat in itself. We used to go to an Aslan's baths, who was an Armenian, located on the main thoroughfare of the town. However, when my cousin Artoush married Hasmik, the daughter of Grigor Khalatian, who owned the second Armenian bathhouse in Tabriz, we simply had to change our custom and go to Mr. Grigor's bathhouse instead, lest he was offended.

Tabriz did not have many fir trees, therefore it was very difficult to get an evergreen as a Christmas tree. For this reason, as well as for economic ones father would get a tree branch from the garden and would install some electric lights on it. He had wired a number of lamp-holders and tried to find decorative lamps for them, which was not an easy task. We ended up with a few decorative lamps and the rest were plain bulbs painted in various colours. To decorate the rooms Vanush would make colour paper chains and would string them from wall to wall. Underneath the Christmas tree the presents (for the children only) consisted of bags made of red cloth or crepe paper filled with nuts and sweets. Mother would organise a children's New Year party, when we would sing, dance around the tree and recite in order to get our presents.

Tabriz is located in a geologically active region and every so often there would be an earthquake. I remember two of them, when the ground shook and we were made to stand in the doorways until things would quiet down. Fortunately during those earthquakes not much damage was done.

There were other perils too. As the houses were made of mud-bricks there were many insects etc. such as bed bugs (wood-lice), wasps and scorpions.



36- New Year tree, with Yervand and Hrach, 1941.

All of us had our share of wasp stings but I was unluckier than the others and got stung by scorpions not once but twice. The first time when I was about 8, one summer day I was washing my feet on the stone stairs, when a small scorpion, disturbed by the water, crept up the crack between the stone slabs and stung me in the sole of the foot. Everyone had to have a go at sucking the venom out of the sole of my foot. It really hurt very much.

The second time I woke up in the middle of the night with an excruciating pain in my thumb. I woke father up, who immediately lifted up my pillow and we saw the culprit, a yellow scorpion curled up under it. I had apparently disturbed it by pushing my hand under the pillow. From then on every evening before getting into the bed we would follow a ritual of looking under the pillows and the duvets etc. for scorpions.

For getting rid of the wood-lice that occupied the beds another method was used. Every so often a Primus torch would appear from the kitchen shelves. The beds would be stripped of all bedding and the steel bed frames would then be subjected to the flames of the torch. Wood-lice and their larvae would thus be got rid of, not before filling the room with a peculiar stinking and pungent smell.

Shoes were expensive items and would be repaired time and time again, they would be reinforced by nailing steel plates and studs on the soles and the heels so that they would last a little longer... To get new shoes once a year or two we would be taken to the shoemaker, who, for size drew the outline of the foot on a piece of paper, tickling the foot in the process and causing much giggling. Then father would choose the leather and come to agreement for the price. We had to go for trying the fitting once or twice before the shoes were ready. In the wintertime, when the streets were full of snow and ice, the temperature would drop to -15° , -20°C , in order to prevent slipping on the snow and ice on top of the shoes we would wear black rubber galoshes, with red felt interiors. They were also useful in the thawing snow and mud for the protection of our shoes.

Before the onset of the winter the roof of the house, which was compacted soil, would be re-compacted to provide protection against the heavy snowfalls, as the roofs were not designed to bear much load, after every heavy snowfall they had to be shovelled clean. This was done by workers,



37- Our willow tree in Tabriz.1945.

who after every snowfall would appear in the streets with wooden shovels, shouting their heads off advertising their trade. The snow from our roofs would be shovelled into the front yard, into the small garden patch, where it would gradually build up and become a snow hill some 2-3 metres high. As the weather was very cold, this hillock would be there for a few months, and we would make snowmen on it and occasionally even dig a tunnels through it. This second variant was not popular with the parents, who would warn us against it collapsing on our heads.

In the springtime all the almond trees would bloom and the house would fill with their fragrance. For the lack of palm trees, on Palm Sunday the Armenian Church blessed the blossoming branches of the willow tree, which at that time were in bloom. Our garden had a huge willow tree which was near the exterior wall. From early morning on Palm Sundays the invasion of our courtyard would begin. One boy after the other would scale the wall and break a few branches of the tree to be taken to the church for blessing. They were so insistent that if the elders were not careful, the tree would be stripped of almost all of its lower limbs in an hour or so.

All the spring and summer long we would be climbing up the almond trees, first to eat the unripe green almonds, which were sour and very tasty and later to eat the already ripe ones, with juicy pips. In the autumn, the trees would be harvested of the almonds and the proceeds, which were a lot of almonds, would be divided between the neighbours. Each one would get about 50 kilograms of almonds with shells.

Another activity that took place every so often was the killing of chickens for meals. The unfortunate bird would be tucked under the arm of the executor, who would fold the wings and put them under his/her foot and proceed with cutting the head off. The bird would then be put aside, upon which it invariably took off running around the yard without the head, splashing blood all over the place. A most surreal picture!

I loved to have a bicycle but my parents were adamantly against it as being dangerous. When I was 7 or 8 years old, my uncle Yervand got a full size bicycle and as he was not ready to ride in the streets, he would bring it to our courtyard to ride. He would ride around the courtyard, keeping to the

paved areas. He would sometime let me ride on the bars. One day while carrying me on the bars he lost control and we plunged 5-6 big brick steps into one of the basements of the house. From then on he was not allowed to let me ride on the bars.

A few days before the Easter we gathered together to colour the eggs. In Tabriz all the eggs were white, but when buying them one had to be careful to select the good ones only, as the villagers would mix the old and rotten ones together with the fresh eggs and try to flog them. For this purpose when the egg seller appeared, every housewife would bring a bowl full of water to “test” the eggs by immersing them into the water. The floating eggs would be rejected. After the eggs were purchased Metzapa would get his tin box of magic colours out of its secret hiding place. This box contained many small paper packets and sachets with small amounts of colour powders, left over from his fabric and sock dyeing days in Tiflis. These would be diluted in water and the messy process of colouring the eggs would begin. For days after we would go around with multicoloured fingers.

On Easter Sunday all the young people would go to the Church to play their eggs against each other. First stage was nose-to-nose and after one of the egg's nose broke then there would be the nose-to-bum or even bum-to-bum variations, until one of the eggs had a broken nose as well as the bum. The winner would get possession of the egg. We were always warned to be careful of cheaters, who filled their broken eggs with candle-wax or other hard substance, making them virtually indestructible.

Sometime soon after the end of the war mother fell ill. We were not told anything about it and were just told to keep quiet. Sirik and I were left to our devices and there was no-one to tell us not to do this or that. Much later, we were told that mother had had a miscarriage and a boy was lost. She developed complications and were it not for the availability of penicillin, she would not have survived. She was weak for months after this ordeal.

This wonder drug was brought specially from Tehran and I remember seeing those bottles with rubber caps with some sort of white powder in them. Father used to inject them by first boiling the glass syringe in an

elongated nickel plated pan for a few minutes, then breaking a sterile water capsule he would suck the water into the syringe and inject it into the penicillin bottle. He would then shake the bottle to dissolve the powder and take the contents out by the syringe and get it ready for injecting. He had to learn how to inject, as it was not easy to get the nurse to call-in every few hours for these injections. We used to get the empty bottles and I remember having 40-50 of them to play with. Some of these bottles survived until I came back to from the UK to Tehran in 1963.

In Tabriz (and later on in Tehran) there was a young male medic called Valia, who used to go around with his leather bag and administer injections. This was his occupation – injecting, and I doubt if he had any medical qualifications at all. Since father had learned how to inject, later on he would administer the injections to all the members of the family as well as friends and neighbours, as and when required.

We grew up in a very sheltered environment and were not told anything about the facts of life. I personally had to find them out myself, mainly from friends and much later on by personal experience. I can tell you that there were many shocks in store for me.... Both our parents were very conservative in these matters and even if there was a picture of a couple kissing, we were not allowed to see it. This type of conservatism was not limited to our family but was prevalent in the Armenian community in general.

Sometimes there would be hushed exchanges of words between our parents, with anxious side glances towards us, the children. The exchanges would stop as soon as one of us approached or came to within hearing distance. In these cases they would invariably be discussing someone having a miscarriage, divorce or someone's relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

When we moved to Tehran in 1950, our lifestyle changed dramatically. First of all we moved from a large courtyard into an apartment with four rooms located on the first floor of a brick building. The ground floor and the basement were occupied by a large Iranian Jewish family, who were not the cleanest of the people that I have seen. In the mid 50's my mother's family, who by then had also moved to Tehran, moved to the lower part of the house and later they and my father jointly bought the house.

One entered the apartment by climbing stairs leading directly to the front door. Every time the bell rang either I or Sirik would have to go down to open the door. I got fed up with this and one day decided to make an electric door opener. I took two sections of a transformer, which magnetise when they are connected to electric current and fixed one part to the door frame and the smaller portion to the door latch. I wired it to the mains and put a bell push on top of the stairs. When the bell rang, we just pushed the button and the latch was pulled back by the powerful magnet making a hell of a bang and frightening the first time ringers. I then added a small spring, which just pushed the door ajar, so that the visitor could push it open.

In Tehran life was somewhat different and we did not have to make so many preparations for the winter. First of all there was the question of storage space and as we did not have a basement, this was very much limited. Then we found out that there was no need to make so many preparations, as meat and dairy products were readily available in the winter time. This left only the pickles, tomato purees, marmalades and the jams etc. which were prepared very diligently and carefully by all families.

The house was heated by paraffin burning stoves, the modern and efficient versions of which were at that time imported from the USA. We had one called Quaker, with brown baked enamel finish, which had its own paraffin tank and a thing called “a carburettor”. Once or twice a day the fuel tank had to be filled up from our paraffin storage tank, which was kept in the open balcony over the entrance door. This balcony had a roof and served as a storage larder/pantry. All the pickles and jams would be kept there in large pots or inside a cabinet in the balcony.

We bought the paraffin (called Naft) from the Naftee, an Azeri Turk, who drove around in his hand-pushed cart laden with 4 or 5 large 40 litre containers, which, for stoppers had small rolls of brown paper stuck in their spouts. He would stink of paraffin and actually was a living fire hazard.

Before Tehran had piped water, we used to keep our water tank in the same balcony. After the introduction of piped water, the water tank was converted into paraffin tank.

Summers were very hot and during the daytime the temperature could go as high as 40°C in the shade. In 1950/51 there were very few refrigerators and we used to buy glacier-ice from the muleteers, who brought it down from

the mountains in the north of the city. This ice was dirty and full of mud and not potable, therefore it was placed in a special water cooler, which had a well, made of very thin glass inside the drinking water, where the ice would be placed and would cool the water surrounding the well. The only problem was that one had to be very careful when placing the ice in the well. One careless drop and the glass would shatter and the container would be rendered useless. The whole thing was covered with wicker work to insulate it from the hot air outside. Metzhairik christened this contraption “Hassan-Philco”, after the trade name of Philco refrigerators, which were just becoming affordable and popular at that time.

Ice cream could be made at home but it was hard work. After preparing the milk/egg/sugar/vanilla mixture this would have to be poured inside the tin rotating container located inside a wooden barrel. The pieces of ice would be then mixed with salt and poured in the gap between the container and the barrel. The container would then be rotated back and forth until the concoction inside it got harder ¹. Once after too much effort in making it Yervand and I attacked the resultant frothy ice cream and ate so much that got sick and could not touch ice cream for many years to come.

When we moved to our apartment in Tehran, there even was a water-heating brick stove built inside the kitchen. This was located in the corner next to the bathroom and measured about 1x1.5 meters, with the built in flue running under the floor of the elevated bathroom to the roof. Once a fortnight Yervand and I would stock the boiler up with anything that could be burned, including the used toilet papers (bits of newsprint, which we used to pick with a long tongue out of the used paper bucket). The family members would then take a shower, as the so-called “bathroom” only had a shower and hot/cold water taps in it. After 1955 father bought a paraffin water heater, which was actually installed inside the bathroom and the brick stove was dismantled and removed from our kitchen. Its place was occupied by a GE refrigerator which is still running properly in Darya Kenar, Sirik’s seaside home by the Caspian Sea, to this day.

¹ This concoction never hardened properly and we used to end up with a frothy mixture that tasted like ice cream, but was really not.

In Tehran we lived in the central area, which at that time was bordered in the north by Shah-Reza Avenue, in the south by Third Esfand Avenue, in the east by Saadi and the west by Pahlavi Avenues. Within this area over one third of the shops were owned and run by Armenians and the homes of the Armenian community was also concentrated mainly in this area. The Armenian Club as well as the Ararat Sports club were within this area. Our home was within a ten minutes walk from Naderi Avenue, where fathers shop, “Radio Aram” was located.

In the 40’s and 50’s Tehran had two major hotels where all the foreigner would stay. These were hotel Naderi, located opposite my father’s shop and Park Hotel, not far from there. Both hotels had large gardens and in the summers these were converted into open air café restaurants, with live band and a dance floor. Both gardens had large fir trees with a central pool, surrounded by wide gravelled walkways, where the tables would be laid, covered with thick white starched linen tablecloths. In the evenings you could sit in the garden enjoying an ice cream or café-glasseé or a nice beef-stroganoff and listen to the band playing music. The music consisted of many Russian and gypsy songs as well as the western popular tunes.

The members of the bands themselves were mainly Armenians. There was a famous violinist called Zaven, that used to play in the Café Naderi band for as long as I can remember. In the mid 50’s the singer Vigen became the first person to popularise the pop songs (as they are known in the West) in Iran, by singing romances accompanied by his guitar. He actually carried on singing for over 40 years, well into the late 90’s.

One of our treats was to go to father’s shop in the summer evenings and wait until closing time, which was about 8PM, then get him to take us to café Naderi for an ice cream, or even for a meal. We would sit in the garden under the pine trees and order our meals to the mainly Armenian waiters. When the band started playing, Sirik and I would sneak behind the trees near the dance floor, watch the band and the dancing couples. Whenever we went to any one of these cafés, meeting friends and relatives was unavoidable, as everyone would go to these cool garden cafés in order to cool down after the hot summer days.

One evening we were sitting in Café Naderi and having some ice cream when a large dry cone fell from the tree and hit mother on the head. There was much blood and the waiters were running around in confusion. After

the first aid was administered, the owner who knew father well came and apologised profusely, but it wasn't his fault really. Just mother's bad luck!

In early 50's (up to the 70's) the Armenian Club also had a large garden and an excellent restaurant, where they too had a live band. The garden was always well kept and quite cool in the evenings. As this club was for members only, we could go there only if invited by or accompanied with a member of the club. In the Armenian club the atmosphere was much more relaxed, almost colonial, as the members had to be Armenian and hence no Muslim was allowed in unless invited and accompanied by an Armenian friend. Any non-Armenian seen in the club was generally an intellectual, business partner or a well connected person, who was trusted enough to be invited there. The Club had a library of books in Armenian, which I used to regularly attend and borrow all sorts of classic literature books by Armenian authors as well as translations of Russian and western writers. Although at home we had lots of books but after all there were only about 4-500 of them and many classical literature books were difficult to find and buy, therefore to read those you had to borrow them from the libraries.

On Friday noons father sometimes treated us to a Chelo-Kebab, a most typical Iranian dish of boiled rice topped with a piece of butter, served with barbecued mince and lamb fillet, accompanied by barbecued tomatoes, raw onions and a sour yoghurt drink called "dough". For this we would either go to the Armenian Club or to Continental restaurant, where the food was better since it was owned by Iranians and the cook was also Iranian. The best Chelo-Kebab in town was served in the "Shamshiri" restaurant located near the bazaar, but it was out of bounds for families and children, as it was not a safe place to visit with women and children. One went to the Tehran Bazaar only if one wanted something special or very cheap. It was out of bounds for single women and girls, who would be pinched and bothered if not accompanied (or even sometimes accompanied) by men.

Naderi Avenue, the main shopping thoroughfare had shops from one end to the other. On the northern side of the street the last shop was my father's shop, after which the British Embassy wall extended for over 200 meters up to Ferdowsi Avenue in the east. There were jewellers, shoe shops, lingerie shops, stationers, grocers, delicatessen shops, photographers, hairdressers, toyshops etc. mostly owned by Armenians. The only shops that were not owned by the Armenians were the greengrocers and butchers. Café Firouz was a gathering point for the bachelors, who would sit there quietly discussing politics and sipping coffee, some playing chess or backgammon.



38- Armenian families relaxing in Yam,1945.



39- Our family in Yam, 1945.

6 – SUMMER HOLIDAYS IN YAM

In the summer it was customary for all and sundry to leave the town and go to a summer “resort” such as a dirty old village up in the mountains which was situated near a hot spring or the like.

During the years of the World War II our family and friends had chosen the outbuildings of a tea house situated on the main road and the Yam railway station, which was on the route of the railroad leading to the USSR, located about 40 km to the North West of Tabriz. The little village of Yam was situated up on a dry mountain slope and was inhabited by Azeri Turks. It consisted of a number of mud hovels and therefore was considered to be unsuitable and of the question. However, the tea house itself was a small building situated just off the main gravel road and had outbuildings with 4-5 rooms built some distance away from the road on both sides of the tea house. These were single storey made of brick and mud. The ceilings were exposed logs with timber covering topped up with compacted mud. The walls and the floors were dirt and therefore needed carpeting of some sort, which had to be brought from Tabriz.

There were 4-5 families who were friends, most of whom were Vanetzi (immigrants from the 1915 massacres of Van), like us. There were 8-10 children between the ages of four to fourteen. Sometimes Mr Rouben and Tikin Varsik with their children, who were not from Van, would join the Vanetzi crowd for a few weeks and they would erect their own large tent on the verge of the area in front of the permanent buildings.

In the central area there was a large tree with a thick trunk under which the owner of the tea house had put a number of wooden “takhts”. These looked like beds and were covered with carpets and kilims. They served as the chairs for the teahouse customers, who would sit on them with their legs tucked underneath.

There are a few highlights of the daily life that I recall. One was the morning washing ritual. There was no running water near the camp but a few hundred yards away, in the small gorge that was the route of the railway, there were three natural springs. In order to reach them one had to cross the gravel highway, walk along the Soviet soldiers camp, get to the

railway track and walk along the track downhill to the West. The first spring was a hole in the ground by the embankment and was in a narrow stretch, difficult for access. The second one was about 200 metres further down and was located in an open area with lots of space around. You could even walk up the hill above the spring and lye down in the flat field there. Every morning a procession of mothers, fathers and children would start from the camp near the tea house to go for the morning wash. Children ran up front followed up by the parents, with teenagers dragging their feet along last. We carried towels, soap, fresh eggs and empty buckets for bringing water to the camp.

Every morning we would almost invariably go to the second spring, the choice of everyone, where we would place the eggs in the cold water, washed reluctantly and after washing were made to suck the contents of the eggshells through the little holes that father would make at both ends of the egg. This was considered a healthy diet, but it tasted disgusting. The spring water was really cold and refreshing. In fact it was so cold that we could never bathe in it.

The third spring was the farthest point that we were allowed to go and was hidden between the bushes and trees. Thinking back I understand now why the teenagers were always aiming for the third spring and would come up with all sorts of excuses not to let us join them. It must have been a real lover's paradise there.

The troop would then march back to the camp carrying buckets of spring water for the daily use. There would be a communal breakfast table laid, laden with fresh bread, cheese, butter and honey.

There was no electricity in the camp (or the village) and father's battery operated German made "Nora" radio receiver mounted on the small wooden shelf high up on the tree would be the centre of the attraction. This would be turned on and tuned to Radio Moscow for the morning and evening news from the front.

As it was during the World War II, and the USA was sending various military and non-military aid to the USSR, Iran was one of the routes used

for this purpose. The military highway ran from Tehran via Tabriz, Yam etc. to Djulfa – the border and hence our summer holiday camp was on the direct route of these supply trucks.

In addition to being a supply route to the USSR, Yam had a Soviet military camp, which was used as a resting resort for the war weary soldiers, who would be brought to their camp either by rail or lorry where they rested for a week or two before returning to the front, and in many cases, their death.

My father, being very pro-Soviet, was in good terms with the camp commandants and officers, who would come to our camp every evening to listen to Radio Moscow news. The news broadcast at 7PM was very popular with them and I remember groups of soldiers and officers gathered in our camp, all sitting on the “takhts” underneath the radio and listening sombrely to the news.

Being near a military camp had many advantages. As this was a recreational camp, the Soviets organised concerts and shows for the soldiers, and being on good terms with them we all were allowed to participate in them. Special “attention” was paid to the teenage girls, who were encouraged to go on stage and at least one of them, Camelia, did appear once on stage, if I remember correctly – doing a Russian “Yablochki” dance accompanied by a garmon (Russian accordion) playing soldier. I remember the song “Bessame mucho” being sang by a soldier during one of these performances. A song that became very much popular.

The venue for these events was an open air auditorium, which consisted of an elevated platform with three sides closed by whitewashed walls and an open area in front to fit as many benches as possible. This was situated inside an orchard located on the embankment near the railway crossing.

Sometimes an Armenian soldier would arrive, who would have a letter, a message or sometimes even a parcel from my aunt Midil, who lived in Yerevan. She used to send us toys and things at every opportunity and once I received a wound-up small military lorry, made of sheet steel painted in military colours. This lorry could carry quite a lot of load and in spite of ill treatment by all, survived all my toys until at 12 I considered myself too old to play with such a toy. What a pity, it could have been quite a rare item now!



40- The second spring in Yam, 1946.



41- Group of children in front of the Yam teahouse, 1944.

Another toy which I received from Midil, was a replica of an automatic gun, with a round magazine and leather strap, which could fire small caps. These caps were 1-2cm high conical ones made of brick powder, containing a small amount of powder, capped with a coloured paper cover. They were quite noisy affairs and not at all liked by the grownups.

On the railway siding there were one or two coaches which were used as the living quarters for the military camp commandants. They had hot water showers and on some occasions a group of women and girls from our camp would be allowed to take a shower there. They would go to the station, which was across the field from our camp and return with towels wrapped around their heads.

Every fortnight or so we would be treated to a special sight. Convoys of a few hundred large 14 wheel articulated lorries carrying supplies to the USSR. Thinking back, the amount of dust they must have raised would have been phenomenal, but we didn't care. We were thrilled when they stopped near the camp for the night, as this gave the teenage boys time to organise their raids.

The objects of the raids were the red and amber plastic reflectors and glass marbles² mounted on the backs of the lorries. I was too young to participate, but I accompanied Hrach, Yervand and their friend Vostanik (now in LA) who would get a screw driver and under the cover of darkness sneak in between the lorries, dismantling the reflectors.

This must have been quite a dangerous undertaking, considering that they were military trucks and had patrols all night long. However, either the patrols were just tired and resting or they considered us too young to do any damage to the huge trucks! Someone must have been surprised finding the reflectors missing from quite a few trucks. I kept 20-30 of these red and amber marbles for many years and we would play with them showing off, as not many other children had any marbles at all, let alone those originating from the military trucks.

² As it was wartime, the trucks had to travel with no headlights and about 20 red/amber glass marbles were mounted in a circular metal frame and fixed to the rear of the trucks in order to reflect light.

During the summer of, I think 1945, there was a big commotion in the camp. A young man of about 25, relative of one of the families had arrived from Tehran and it was rumoured that he is looking for a wife. All the girls were excited. Those eligible were Camelia, (my second cousin), Alice - my fathers cousin, Mannik – my second cousin and Rima (this one was no relation!). The young man arrived and we were surprised to see that he had white hair. This was Edik Dayan, who in a year or two married Alice and took her to Tehran.

Some of the men would stay in Tabriz and join their families on the weekends³ only. This was an occasion to have a picnic near one of the springs. We would take carpets, utensils and food and walk to the springs, where children were allowed to run about while teenagers and the young boys and girls would wander around. The parents would either sit in a group telling jokes, (always out of our hearing range) or play cards and backgammon.

Behind our camp there was a small mountain, with easy slopes and moderate height. I remember climbing to the summit with the boys and watching the scenery which opened in front of us from the top. The other side of this hill there was a shear drop of maybe 5-600 metres and below that lay the town of Marand. It was quite breathtaking sight.

In front of the camp, over the railway line and the station, there were some fields and beyond the fields stood the much mightier Moushov mountain, which probably was 1000-1500 metres high. Some of the boys claimed that they have climbed all the way to the summit of Moushov, but not many believed them.

These were carefree times for us and we didn't think and plan what we did as long as we were free to run around and play.

³ Although the official weekend in Iran was on Thursday and Friday, but at that time the Armenians strictly observed Saturday and Sunday as the weekend.

7 – OTHER SUMMER HOLIDAYS

One year my maternal Grandfather, Atom Agha (whom we called Medzhairik - Grandfather) decided to take us to the hot springs in the village of Sareiin. This was an Azeri village located near the slopes of an old volcano North East of Tabriz, not far from the town of Ardebil.

We arrived in a hired car and took up residence in a dirty mud room, infested with fleas. A smoking dung fire had to be kept going all night to keep away the fleas and the mosquitoes. It smelled foul even to the humans.

In the morning Yervand was told to go and buy butter from one of the villagers. He took me along as we walked along the narrow dirt passages of the village until we came to a house. We entered and saw the women churning milk. They gave us a piece of butter fresh out of the churn wrapped in paper and we ran home. We discovered that this was butter made from ox milk. It was very tasty and white but did contain lots of animal (and perhaps human) hairs.

The village had a few hot springs near which there were pools. In some of the pools you could see the oxen and buffaloes lying in the very hot water. Most of the springs were so hot that one could not touch them and we had to go some distance away from the source to be able to get into the water.

On the mountain slopes there were springs of naturally carbonated mineral water and once on a trip to these spring we decided to bring back a few bottles. I was sitting on a donkey with the bottles in the saddle-bag and after travelling a short distance the bottles started to explode one by one, frightening the hell out of us and the donkeys, as we had no idea what was going in.

In 1946 our summer trips to Yam had ended and father started looking elsewhere for holidays. First we had a visit from my father's cousin Roubina and her two sons Vahik (Vahe') and Armen (Bibi), who lived in Tehran and had decided to visit the parents town - Tabriz. She was the daughter of Haikak Kossioian, my great aunt Armaveni's husband from his



42- On a donkey near Ardebil, 1946.



43- With the Kossoyans in Tehran, 1947.

first marriage, but everyone accepted her as being Armaveni's own daughter.

Vahik, the elder son, who was three months older than I was a fantasizer and during the hot afternoons, when it was too hot to go out the four of us would gather under the dining table and Vahik would start telling fantastic tales about outlandish creatures, one of which was called Kakadodosh (dung toad), who ruled the world from top of a mountain.....

Vahik was also a good planner and builder. One summer he decided that we need to construct a bridge over the gully that was used to irrigate the garden patches. This was about 50cm wide and 30cm deep. With twigs of wood and supporting wooden posts we constructed a 20cm wide bridge which spanned the gully and paved it with compacted mud. It withstood the test of grownups walking over it. We would also construct various vehicles out of planks of wood etc. and the highlight of our construction work were the items that we made with the miniature German "Meccano" set that Partev and Albert, my father's friends had given me as present.

Later on Vahik attended the Faculty of Fine Arts of Tehran University and went to continue his studies in Rice University, Houston, where he still lives and works as an architect.

In 1947 we went to the seaside..... This was an unheard of adventure. No one went to the seaside for holidays! The nearest thing were the mud treatments on the shores of Lake Urmia. But we did go to the sea. We took a van from Tabriz to Bandar Pahlavi (Enzeli) on the Caspian Sea and spent a week there in a hotel. The town was beautifully laid out, full of greenery and trees and was very clean. It had many buildings in early 20th century style of Russian architecture. We would go to the beach in the daytime and in the evenings would take long walks in the streets and the parks. The beach was empty, save for a few fishermen and the odd daring holidaymaker like us. There were no facilities and you had to take your own mats and parasols if you needed them.

From Pahlavi we took the coach to Tehran and arrived at my aunt Armaveni's house in Tehran, who had by then moved from Tabriz to Tehran.



44- Ladies with children. Alice, Anya, Cosette, Mannik and Rubina.Vanak, 1947.



45- My first beach holiday, Bandar Pahlavi, 1947.

They lived in an old fashioned two storey house in Koutche Iraj, south Tehran. The landlord was a Russian doctor and lived in the ground floor. The top floor had two apartments. Armaveni's family lived in one and the other apartment was occupied by the Dayan family, my cousin Alice and her husband Edik, who lived there together with his parents. Both the apartments opened into a large communal covered balcony, which was the hub of the activities during the six warm months of the year.

Every morning Mr. Haikak would start his work on a tiny worktable, cutting and brazing small sheets of silver and making chain cufflinks which were afterwards enamelled with the miniature Mount Ararat and the typical river flowing in the foreground. Vahik and I would watch him while he placed his thick glasses on his nose and started his slow and methodical work on the pieces of silver. Unfortunately none of these cufflinks have survived in the family, although as recent as 1960's I used to see them in my father's drawers, mixed with bottles of Soviet perfume and old photographic negatives plates.

Thinking back now, I pity Haikak, who had been one of the Armenian Revolutionary Front's (Dashnaktzutioun) Van Bureau members and had been instrumental in the defence of Van in 1915. He was later a government official in the first Armenian republic in 1918-21 and after the communist take-over of Armenia he fled to Tabriz, where he earned his living by teaching and making these cufflinks etc.

Not a dignified way to end your life after dedicating years of it to politics and community affairs. It just shows that public life and serving the community is a thankless and rewardless task. If you think that someone someday is going to acknowledge and thank you for it, you must think again or resign at once!

8 - FATHER.

Father was born in Van in 1912 but the family & all the inhabitants left the city in a hurry after defending it heroically against the Turkish onslaught in May 1915.

After spending time in Yerevan and Rostov etc. they ended up in Tiflis, where he went to school and later on to the university (See Appendix 2, Midil's memoirs).

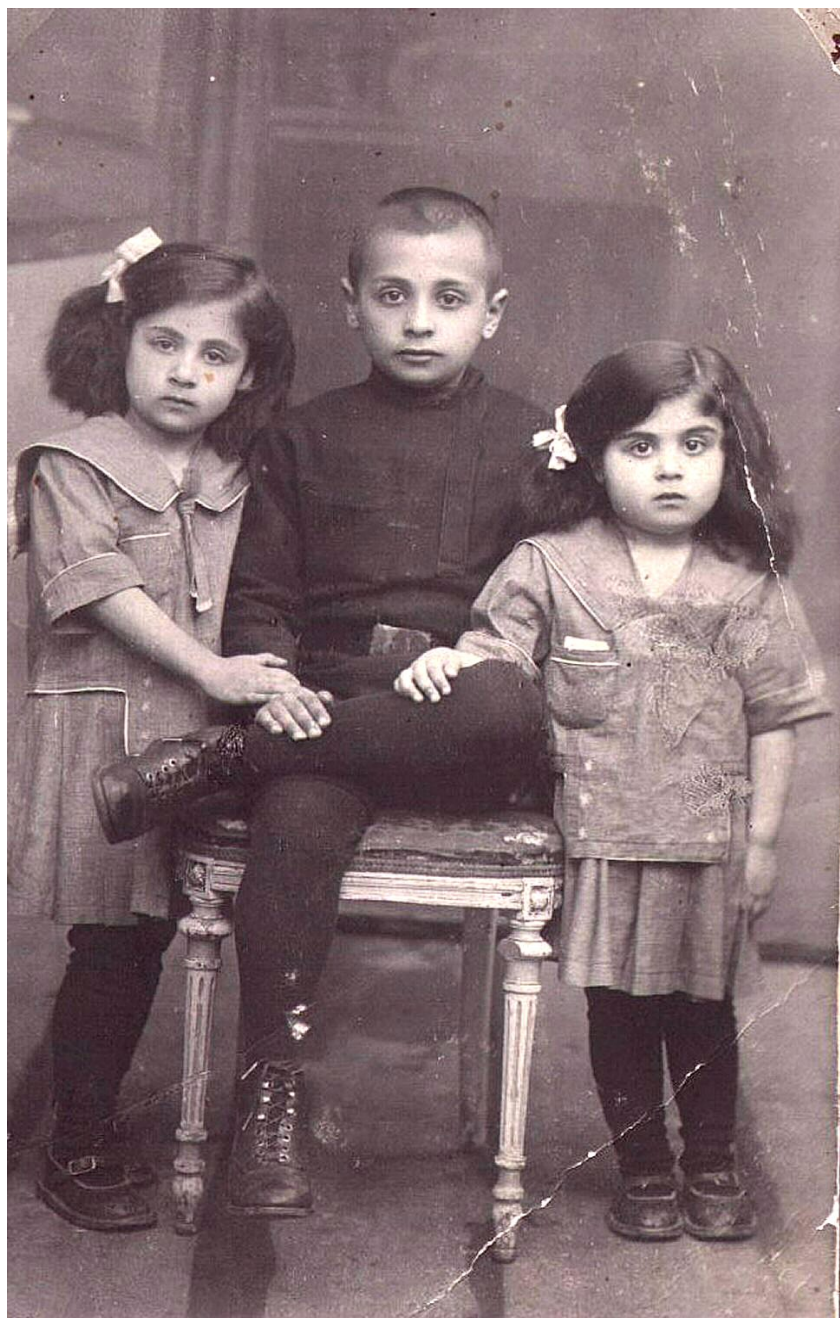
Father had every sort of skill for repairing things and having studied electrical engineering in the Polytechnic in Tiflis in 1930's and having worked in Gamish-Ges hydro-electric station in Armenia, was probably the highest qualified electrician in Tabriz.

According to my aunt Midil, who adored her brother, he could do anything with his hands. When times were hard, Metzapa would not give them any pocket money and father with Midil would go and gather old newspapers from the neighbours and would make paper bags out of them and sell to the shops. This would provide them with some pocket money to buy schoolbooks, paper and pencils etc.

At the age of 15 father would repair electric heaters, cookers and motors in Tiflis and even make electric heaters for sale. Midil always said that he had "golden hands" and could do anything, if he decided to.

In 1940's in Tabriz we still had some of the plywood photo frames that father had made in Tiflis and we even had a medicine cabinet, made of elaborately cut plywood with beautiful designs. This was probably left in Tabriz when we moved to Tehran in 1950.

During his student days father had made a radio receiver at home and according to Midil he would invite friends and family to the house to listen to the radio broadcasts using earphones. I remember having seen an old and tattered photo of a group of teenagers seated around a wooden box surrounded by home made batteries in glass jars with earphone on their heads.



46- Father with his sisters Midil and Vanush in Tiflis, 1921.

Upon arrival in Tabriz he had first worked in the municipal grain silo as an electrician and then opened his own radio repair shop, which was the first of its kind in Tabriz.

Radio receivers were then very new in Tabriz and father having had knowledge and the experience with radios decided to open the shop. It was called “Radio Aram” and until today it still exists in Tabriz under new ownership and is renamed “Aram Radio and TV Repair Centre”.

Father’s clientele outside the Armenian community were the rich Azeri families and some Kurdish tribe and village headmen. Some of them became very friendly with father and would even come to our house.

The Namsechi family was one of them. The head of the family was an educated man and trusted father explicitly. Based on his experience he started importing radio sets from Germany that father also sold. Later on in Tehran he even suggested father to join him in the company. Father, not being a business minded person of course declined the offer. Namsechi later carried on and became the representative of many manufacturing companies such as Nord-Mende, Schaub-Lorenz etc. including the first LP’s imported into Iran from the Deutsche Gramophone label back in the early 1950’s.

There were occasions that he was invited by a village chief to visit his village and bring a radio or install an antenna etc. If the village was far away then he would stay the night over and return the next day. On these occasions he invariably returned infested with lice. Mother would boil all his clothes and wash his hair with paraffin etc. to get rid of the unwelcome guests.

During the years of war when Tabriz was occupied by the Allies (Soviet Zone of Occupation) there were many Russian soldiers based in Tabriz. As father was fluent in Russian most of them eventually got to know him. He had many friends amongst the officers too. One was a doctor that also used to come to see us when we were ill. I recall once when I had a problem with my tonsils, this Russian doctor gave me a foul smelling dark blue ink-like liquid, which was to be dabbed on the tonsils with a stick tipped by cotton wool. It felt really horrible, but not as horrible as the castor oil that we were forced to drink at odd occasions.



47- Father with his friends and home-made radio, Tiflies, 1931.



48- Father, Arshav, great aunt Armaveni, Vanush, great unclke Gevork. 1937.

Another unpleasant memory is the cod liver oil that was forced down our throats in the wintertime because everyone believed that “it would strengthen your constitution and was generally good for you”...

Father's friendship with the Russians came handy, as they would come to exchange various items, including war booty, with vodka. Once he brought home a large box full of army ration chocolates. These were solid and thick bars, which were so hard that they were impossible to bite. He used to cut them into small manageable blocks with his penknife, so that we could melt them in our mouths. Yet another items was canned corned beef or pork in khaki coloured tins, which came all the way from the USA. The Americans had even given it a Russian name “Svinnaya Tushonka”! These were the perks of knowing the Russian officers in person.

These exchanges of goods included a pair of Zeiss Ikon 8x24 binoculars, a small Brno 9mm pistol, which for security and safety reasons was kept inside the radio receiver chassis.

Back in 1946-47 we were lucky enough to have father bring into the house an electric radio-gramophone for trial purposes. I even remember the make which was “Paillard”. It had a playing head which weighed something like half a kilo and you had to keep changing the needles as they were worn after 2-3 times of playing the records.

Father was extremely good with his hands and could make and repair anything. At one time he had made a film developing darkroom in the basement of the house. The particular area of the basement was so dark that you did not need to block the daylight. The main problem was to get some artificial light there to find your way by.

To augment his income father started repairing photo cameras, bringing and repairing them at home . He would sit in front of his desk, turn on the green table lamp (now in Mariette's room) open the drawer and get out the miniature screwdrivers etc. and start dismantling the camera. I would watch intently and one day when father was not home decided to “repair” the camera in the drawer, which I proceeded to do. I don't remember what the end result of my efforts were, but I do remember being punished by making to stand in the corner of the room, facing the wall and later on not being allowed to touch anything in the father's desk drawers.



49 - Father and Mother courting, 1937.



50- My parents' wedding photo, Tabriz, 1938.

When in 1943 father's uncle Gevork died, father took the elder son Artoush as his apprentice in the shop and taught him the skills of radio repairs. Artoush stayed on and took over the shop when we left for Tehran. In the meantime his brother Hrach, after quitting school was also helping him in the shop. In 1954 Hrach also moved to Tehran where he continued his trade.

In the summertime when the days were longer father would come home and take us to the Kentronakan Park or the city park "Gulistan" where we would ride on the Carousel (merry go round) and have ice cream. The best part of the evening was its close, when he would get a horse drawn phaeton to take us home. At other times he would treat us to special ice cream in the café which was next to his shop, called "Sho'a". Their ice cream as well as their nougat was famous and in the evenings you could sit in the small garden behind the shop enjoying the ice cream.

When in 1950 we moved to Tehran, father bought a shop in the city centre, at 502 Naderi Avenue, which was also, like its predecessor named "Radio Aram". This shop too exists today under the same name and is owned and run by one of his assistants who worked in the shop at the time of his death in 1976.

In Tabriz father was involved in the community affairs and was member of one of the multitude of committees, but his free time was spent almost exclusively at home with the family. He enjoyed parties and best of all loved to waltz around to the tune of Strauss waltzes. It did not take a lot to make him happy and sociable.

He also loved to groom the grandchildren. As soon as they approached, he would take comb from his pocket and start combing their hair. In the winter evenings his favourite was to peel oranges, take the skin off the wedges and feed them to the grandchildren. I suppose I have inherited the latter one from him too.

In 1965, after 31 years of absence he managed to get permission to visit his sisters in Yerevan. He spent most of his savings buying a car for them. He spent 3-4 weeks in Yerevan and returned home planning to go again soon.



51- Father in his shop with his assistant Anatole. Tehran, 1954.



УДАРНЫМИ ПЕМПТАМИ
ВЫПОЛНИМ ПЯТИЛЕТКУ В 4 ГОДА

ГРАМОТА

С.С.Р. Арменки. 200 Участок
ДЗОРАХТСТРОД

награждает

товарища *Галдфеяна*
Арама

почетным званием **УДАРНИКА**
ТРЕТЬЕГО ГОДА ПЯТИЛЕТКИ

-строителя социализма, активно
проявившего себя в социалистическом
соревновании по повышению произво-
дительности труда *на посту*
электромонтера

Предработочная
/и. Гавозек/

Секр. Дрейки В.М.Н/с/

№ 95

Нач. 2-го отдела
Инж. Гавозек

4/III 1934



Таблетка № 4 30000. Тираж 5000000

Таблетка № 4 30000. Тираж 5000000

Таблетка № 4 30000. Тираж 5000000

In his late 50's his blood sugar level increased and he started to be careful with his food. However he failed to pay any attention to his prostate problem, which eventually went out of control and the local cancer spread to his bones. He was in a terrible agony for 2-3 months and passed away in Tehran's Mehr Hospital only one day before the special radio-active solution arrived from London. I doubt if this would have made any difference to his condition, but I would have liked to be able to do for him everything that I could possibly do.

During the last weeks in the hospital, where his bones were gradually losing their hardness, whenever he wanted to get out or sit up he would ask me to help him. Even if I was in the office, I would hurry to the hospital (2 kilometres away) in order to assist him. He must have thought that with my help it would hurt less to move. I wish it were true.

We tried to lighten his burden by confirming that the disease was under control and it was not really serious. One day about a month before the end after taking the dose of painkillers he looked at me and said "you are not telling me the truth, are you?"...

He lived for the present and after his death all that he possessed was one apartment, one small plot of land with a few fruit trees and about six toumans⁴ in his bank account. After his death many of his customer "friends" did not even bother to acknowledge that they owed him money for radio and TV repair services rendered. Top of the list being the wealthiest Armenian families of Tehran!

⁴ The equivalent of about 1000 dollars at that time.



84-Mothers side of the family, 1938.

9 – MOTHER’S FAMILY

My mother’s side of the family who were also from Van, had a completely different route, via which they had ended up in Tabriz. My mother’s father was addressed as “Adom Agha” by all, but was called “Metzhairik” by us. He was a very happy and adventurous man full of zest for life and pallet for good food and wine. He also loved telling jokes and recounting all sorts of anecdotes from his earlier life in Van.

They were Vanetzi but had lived in the suburbs, Aygestan, where the family originally had had a soap manufacturing plant, hence the surname Sabouchian (soap makers).

After the 1915 massacres and the siege of Van the Sabouchian brothers, all five of them, together with their married sister’s family escaped to Ghamarloo and then to Yerevan. In 1919 they moved on to Batoumi and Rostov, then to Tiflis where they lived until 1929. Metzhairik’s father had been a builder in Van. During the 1894-6 massacres, the Turks had burnt their house down and they had lost everything. Metzhairik, who had been a teenage schoolboy had had to quit school and find work to support the family. He had worked in a silversmith’s shop and afterwards he became a silversmith himself. He had inherited some land in the villages near Van. During 1916 and 1917, after escaping Van he even travelled back and cultivated his lands, bringing the crop back to Yerevan, in the hope that they would soon return home and carry on with their life, but alas to no avail.

Mother was born in Van and the family had decided to call her “Parandzem”, an old fashioned name even then. Her maternal Grandmother did not like the name at all but being a bride in the family had no say in these matters. She was a well read woman and had recently read Victor Hugos’s “Les Miserables”. She liked the book so much that she had informed the family that the girl was going to be called “Cosette”, the name of the little girl in the novel, as Parandzem was not a suitable name for a little baby girl! That is how my mother became probably the first Cosette in Van.

She went to school in Tiflis, which had a large population of Armenians and was the hub of the Armenian Cultural activities in the Caucasus with many theatres, clubs, newspapers etc. In fact at the time in Tiflis there were more Armenians than Georgians. In 1921, after the collapse of the Republic of Armenia many of the Dashnak Armenians fled from the Soviet regime to Tabriz leaving their families in Yerevan. Metzhairik was sent to Tabriz as an emissary, to persuade them to return to Soviet Armenia. I don't think many did, with good reason too!

The Sabounchians decided that life in the young Soviet Union was not agreeable and that they should move on to greener pastures. Two of the brothers first came to Tabriz and from there moved to France. In 1929 Metzhairik with his brother Artashes and their families travelled from Tiflis to Paris by train and boat via Batoumi, which took them almost two weeks. Metzhairik was restless in Paris too. He tried to go to Marseilles, since there already was a large and established Armenian community where he felt he could fit in. There he busied himself with the dried fruit business but this did not work either. He then decided that his skills are not for the European market and he would be better off back in the Middle East, where he felt on more familiar grounds.

After a year or so in France, in 1930 he left his brothers there and moved to Tabriz. Mother, who had been going to school in Paris, was left behind to complete her studies before returning to Tabriz. She later on recounted how difficult it was for her, a teenager, to live with uncle's family. She first had to learn the language from the children in a strict boarding school that she attended, followed up by a secretarial course with little or no money to spend. She did not have money to buy lunch and usually went hungry in order to buy books etc. During her years in Paris she was very close to Hranoush and Ofik, her two cousins. Altogether she did not have a good experience in Paris.

Metzhairik's brothers and cousins who stayed on in France did not have an easy life either. Most of them were grocers and traders, with little chance of education and until the 1970's led a sheltered and traditional life in the middle of the western Europeans. Most of them even spoke Armenian with dialect of Van, which we in Iran had long since discarded for the literary version.



54- With mothers family, Yervand, Grandfather Atom, Vahag, Mother, Grandma Varditer, Dad and I. Tabriz, 1948.

It must have been very difficult for those refugees to establish themselves in a Western society and get at least partially accepted by their reluctant hosts. It took them two generations to get to that stage and most of them now consider themselves French Armenians. This is one of the reasons that when in our society in Iran the generation born in the 1930's already was getting higher education, for most of those who stayed on in France this chance came only for the generation born in the 1940's.

In 1934 Metzhairik went to Paris to bring mother home to Tabriz, who had by now successfully completed her secretarial course. They travelled by boat to Batumi and from there to Tiflis and Yerevan, dropping on the way to see his wife's family, the Tourshians, specially Iskouhi, who loved mother very much. This visit had far reaching repercussions for the whole Tourshian family. I will explain about this later.

They arrived in Tabriz, where at that time no one had ever heard of a secretary! Mother tried to find a job, but to no avail, until one of the local Azeri neighbours, who had found out that mother had just returned from Paris asked if she could do her hair. Although mother didn't even know how to hold scissors, friends advised her to do it and make a profession of it, since the women under the veil (chador) would not know the difference of a good or bad haircut anyway.

This was the reason that she became a hairdresser, working from home. She carried on this work until one day she saw lice on one the head of one of the customers and decided to give up this work. At the same time she also started giving private French language lessons, which she continued until we came to Tehran. Her last pupil was my uncle Yervand, 22 years her junior, but her attempts to teach me were not successful at all. I think this is how she met my aunt Vanush and then through her, my father. After a short engagement the couple were married in February 1939.

Metzhairik was a big man with a loud voice. When he was at home, nobody dared to speak loudly. He had tried various things in Tabriz and even had ended up in jail, due to apparent illegal export or currency exchanges. Apparently his nephew Nercess had sent him some British Pounds Sterling and he had sent some goods in return, but the values of the goods had not matched the transferred sum. For this reason he was jailed in 1941, until the occupying Soviet forces released him from confinement. However, he was not a person to be discouraged with this type or trivia.

They lived on the top floor of a large two storey brick building overlooking the Baron-Avak square, which was very central and had in one of the corners a phaeton rank with horses and all the smell and dirt that came with them. They occupied three rooms aligned on one side of the large covered balcony, which, in the summers was the hub of the family activities.

The balcony overlooked the large garden, but as the landlady, Mrs. Peprone` Gasparian who was an imposing woman lived on the ground floor, we seldom visited the garden for the fear of being told off by her. The two bachelor brothers of the landlady lived in two rooms at the two opposite ends of the top floor balcony, flanking my grandparents' rooms. One was an eccentric Professor Ashot, who had a moustache, wore thick glasses and spat through the gaps of his teeth while talking. He taught biology etc. and the other was Mr. Boghos, who was the bread earner of the family, with an office (called "kantor") in the bazaar. They must have been in their late forties or early fifties but to us they looked very old.

In the late 30's Metzhairik had opened a metalworking workshop in Tabriz, tucked away in a courtyard near the Tabriz Citadel – Ark. It had a large courtyard and was surrounded by various other workshops, one of which was manufacturing lemonade. The pool in the centre of the courtyard would always be filled with foul smelling yellow muddy substance, which was the effluent from this shop.

The workshop consisted of a large room with an electric motor running at one end and driving a shaft mounted under the ceiling via wide leather belts. The various workshop machines, such as rolling machine, lathe etc. would be driven by belts fed from the same shaft. It was an oily and noisy place.

Every so often a belt would come off the drive wheel and would flap around dangerously or be broken. This is when uncle Vahag took charge, repairing the belts or refitting them. The workshop would mainly cater for the industry and shops, rolling metal silver and steel plates, drawing wires and turning various vessels etc.



55- Grandma Vartiter, Mom, Vahag and Bavlas Tiflis, 1930.

When we visited mother's family we loved to stay the night and sometimes were allowed to do so. I recall clearly sleeping on the dining table, as there were no extra beds available and nobody in their right mind would ever dream of sleeping on the floor (probably because of insects). In the dining room there was a pendulum wall clock with chimes which would chime every quarter of hour, which was music to my ears. The particular "Rezvan" clock now hangs in Sirik's dining room in Tehran.

Metzhairik bought a violin for Yervand and for years he was made to go for private violin tuition to the famous Armenian musician family of Grigorians, but at the first opportunity he gave it up and never touched it again.

Metzhairik was the first one of the family to visit his relatives in France after the war in 1949. His trips were not only intended for visiting his brothers but also for buying and bringing various items to Tabriz such as stainless knife blades, for which they used to make silver handles.

On his trip in 1949, which was during the height of the cold war, he arrived in Paris upon which his nephew sent a telegram to the uncle in Marseilles to inform him that "Atom est arrivee". In a matter of hours the French security forces arrived at the doors of the sender and the receiver of the telegram and only left after being satisfied that the "Atom" in question was indeed not the bomb but Metzhairik, who was comparable only in size.

He recounted that on the way back from this trip he arrived in Tehran Airport Customs with lots of goods and even a violin for Yervand. The customs officer inspecting his baggage complained that he had too much luggage and has to pay duty on the thousands of knife blades and the violin etc. He claimed that the violin was his livelihood and upon the request of the official to play a tune, he proceeded to "tune" the violin and managed to break all the strings. He then turned to the officer and asked innocently if he could get him some strings so that he could play!

He had also brought with him some chocolates and sweets and in order to get the officer waive the duty he implied that he will give him one of the chocolates if he is lenient and could waive the duties. The officer let him pass through and extended his hand to get one of the chocolate boxes as



56- Summer picnic at Zargandeh, with family friends. 1952.



57- Vahag and Dora's wedding.

his reward. Metzhairik deliberately and slowly opened one of boxes and offered him ONE piece of chocolate and walked away with all his cases and the violin as well as the box of chocolates.

Metzhairik was a very good eater and he would swallow his food whole, almost without chewing. Once he did swallow a piece of sturgeon including the triangular and sharply pointed piece of the backbone, which, the next day lodged itself against his rectum causing him much discomfort. It took a doctor to get this bone out of the way of Metzhairik's digestive track!

Mother's family followed us to Tehran a few months after we moved there in the summer of 1950. As the schools were to open in September, Yervand was sent ahead of the family to stay with us and to start school in Tehran. For a few months he stayed with us and we had lots of fun together until the family arrived and took up residence in Roosevelt Avenue. Metzhairik immediately bought a shop in Shah-Reza Avenue, at Darwazeh Dowlat and installed his workshop machines there. In Tehran he also started making silver dishes etc. He was fluent in Azeri and Turkish but could not manage to learn the Farsi language as well. Notwithstanding this he would insist speaking to the customers in a language of his own which was Azeri, with a few words of Farsi thrown in here and there. The end result sometimes would be catastrophic.

Metzhairik died in 1953, after a heart attack, caused by his high blood pressure and excessive wine intake. When he died Vahag had just married and had brought his new bride, Dora from Tabriz. For the initial period of mourning I was packed off to their home to keep company of grandma or rather for keeping her busy and not have time to grieve too much.

The person in charge of Metzhairik's workshop machinery and the technical matters arising there, was my elder uncle Vahag born in Tiflis in 1924, who had quit school after the sixth grade in order to help his father in the running of his workshop. He is very clever in all matters technical and is also an innovator in his work. He is an avid reader of historical and travel literature too. He was and is an excellent machine operator, welder, braizer, turner etc., all self taught. He in fact ran the workshop, while

Metzhairik went after business. Yervand also helped in the workshop during the summer recess, sometimes tagging me along too.

I remember in the late 40's Vahag, with father and our neighbour Espero Hovanissian, who was a technician at the Grain Silo, putting their heads together and pondering on the solution of the problem of getting the wedges of a steel mould out from inside the narrow necked coffee pot (Jazveh). They eventually resolved it by making one of the wedges wide at the central hole area and narrow at the outside, so that it could slide inwards when the spindle was removed from inside the mould (too technical!). The subject coffee pots were in production from late 1940's until the 1980's and it took the competition years to find out the secret of the mould.

Even now when Vahag is 75 years old he cannot keep his hands off his beloved machines. Although in the 80's he sold the workshop, he nevertheless kept the key machinery, bringing and installing them in the basement of his house in Northern Tehran. He has his customers who would not go to anyone when delicate casting, machining etc. is required. By all accounts he is the best artisan in Iran as far as making of bronze goods are concerned.

My grandmother Vartouhi, whom we called Tatik, was a very shy and quiet woman who spoke with hushed tones and in the presence of her husband only spoke when she was spoken to.

She was the elder of three girls and a son born to the Tourshian family in Van. The family was rather well educated one and Tatik attended the missionary school for girls in Van.

After the escape from Van their family established themselves in Tiflis and after the World War 2 moved to Yerevan. There one of her sisters and brother married but soon after the war Stalin's hand reached them too and the family was sent to exile in Siberia in 1947, which lasted for about six years. The apparent reason for the exile was that during his trip from France to Iran, Metzhairik and mother had stayed with them for a few days. This was "proof" that they had close family ties with persons living outside the Soviet Union and therefore they were considered "enemies of the people" and were to be exiled.



58- The Turshian family in Van, 1905.



59- Tourshian siblings, Vartiter, Harut, Iskuhi & Ashkhen in Tiflis, 1922.

When the family returned to Yerevan in 1953, after the death of Stalin, they were told to “forget these six years” episode of their life, as if nothing had happened!

The sisters were very proud of their brother, who was a historian and a scholar, much respected and loved in Yerevan. His memoirs of the battle of Sardarabad, when in 1918 the fate of Armenia hung in balance, was considered as the most accurate account. Like most history books that tried to be truthful, his book was banned under Stalin and was only published in the 60's after his death.

The only sister living outside USSR was Tatik, whose husband Atom had emigrated to Iran. Tatik had married quite young and during her troubled life being in various stages of refugee life had borne a total of twelve children, of whom only four survived.

From stories that she recounted I remember her describing how some of the children died. Two died in Van before the Exile. One died during the escape from Van. Another one died when the young refugee mother, who worked all day fell asleep while breast-feeding and the child suffocated. Yet another died when in the icy room the cat decided to sit on the warm face of the baby in the cot. When the first son was born the family decided to christen him in the church in Rostov. The weather was so cold that the boy developed pneumonia and died soon after. My mother was the eldest and according to Tatik, was very resilient child. During the march from Van she even fell from the cart and the wheel passed over her ankle breaking it. She was taken to Ghamarloo with a broken ankle and all her life bore the scar from that fall. However, she survived it all and lived until the age of 84.

The eleventh child, a girl, was named Bavlas (meaning “enough crying”). The name was used to signify the end of the mourning due to death of the children and exile. She grew into a lovely young woman but in her teenage years suffered from rheumatic fever which affected her heart as a result of which she died in 1942 aged 20!

When they moved to Tabriz, Tatik decided that as the living conditions were relatively better, she could try for another child and this is when my uncle Yervand was born in 1934, when Tatik was already 41.



60- Sabouchians clan in Yerevan, 1923.

Left to right standing:

Nvard & great uncle Mukuch, Sirarbi, Nersess, Shushik, Haykanush (Artashes' wife)

Sitting, from left to right:

Hovhannes agha, Judith, Nazareth, patriarch - Hakob agha, matriarch Marina khatun, Atom agha, Varditer (hia wife), with Bavlas in her lap, Artashes .

First row, from left to right:

Broithers Albert and Harut, brothers Askin and Hakobik, Cosette (mom) and Ofik (Artashes's daughter).

Yervand was not an uncle but a friend to me. We used to play together, rather he and my paternal cousin Hrach would play together and I would tag along. Trying to keep up. They always were very kind and considerate towards me.

Yervand suffered greatly from the winter colds in Tabriz. His fingers would crack and bleed and the only cure suggested was to put them in henna. As a result during the winter season his fingers were coloured brownish red from the henna. In Tabriz he had bright and shiny hair but which he started to lose quite early in life, like most of the boys in our family. He has always been shy and reserved.

In Tehran he used to help in the shop and took care of gold plating of watch frames and other pieces of jewellery, which were brought to the shop for this purpose. This was another home developed industry, which needed the assistance of a chemist and my father, who built the electric power supply of the plating unit. After graduating from school Yervand attended Tehran University and graduated from the Civil Engineering Department. He even did his stint in the National Service for two years, while I was away studying in England.

When I returned to Tehran, he was still a bachelor and all the family was concerned about this state of his affairs. All the women in the immediate family were looking around for a suitable candidate. After a couple of unsuccessful episodes, one day Yervand asked me if I know a certain girl called Elo, who had studied in London and whom he had met at a friends house. Of course I knew Elo from our Sunday meetings in the Armenian Church in London and I told him so. Soon after they got together and Yervand, who was as always in a hurry, married Elo soon after we did, in 1964.

Later in life Yervand became a successful building contractor and had many large development projects in Esfahan and Shiraz, where he lived with his young family of three sons. They eventually moved to London after the so called “Revolution” in Iran and are our closest family here.



61- Second class in school. Tabriz, 1946.

10 – MY EDUCATION

At the age of five I was literate in Armenian thanks to my paternal aunt Vanoush, who used to read me stories and also made me read some simple ones. In 1943 that it was decided that I should attend the local kindergarten run by Mrs. Astghik. My mother packed the small brown cardboard lunch box with fresh “barbari” bread and cheese (another smell that still lingers in my nostrils) and got me ready to go to the kindergarten. I was taken there and immediately protested that I did not want to go to any kindergarten and should go to school. I think that after a few days my parents gave up and with the help of my aunt, who was a teacher at the local Armenian school, I was enrolled in the school in a class where all were two years older than me. (Armenian schools accepted pupils from the age of seven only).

My first year teacher was an elderly lady called Mrs. Ovsanna Aftandilian, who naturally knew my family. In Tabriz at that time all the local Armenians as well as the new arrivals from the Soviet Armenia knew each other, the only exception being the Armenians who came to Tabriz from the surrounding villages. The one thing that I remember from this class (1943-1944) was that due to the good tuition that I had received from my aunt at home, I came top of the class and received much praise.

The second year in the Armenian school passed without any memorable incidents. During the third year I had a very nice teacher, Miss Shushik, who was a beautiful lady and I liked her very much. She always had her hair done in the modern fashion and wore high heeled shoes. In the class I sat at the front row between two girls and kept an eye on her. Our school curriculum was based on that of Soviet Armenia. All the subjects were thought in Armenian and at the third grade we started to learn the Russian alphabet and took up the Azeri language too, which also used the same Cyrillic characters. However, this was not to last much longer.

After the end of WW2, the Soviet (Allied) occupying forces left Iran very reluctantly and after a brief leftist rule by the so called “Democrats”, the Iranian army entered Tabriz and took power. Even the young Mohammad

Reza Shah visited Tabriz. This was celebrated by erecting victory arches over the main street decorated with Tabriz carpets and electric lights. We were made to go and stand in the street and cheer the liberators.

Upon the reestablishment of the central power in Tabriz all the schools using the Soviet curriculum were closed down, including our school. All the local schools reverted to the curriculum as devised by the Iranian Ministry of Culture. This was based on all subjects being taught in Farsi.

Our problem was that although we lived in Iran, not many of Tabriz's populace spoke any Farsi at all. This was specially true for the students of the Armenian schools. As we did not speak any Farsi we were unable to attend the local schools. Some enterprising teachers opened private classes and continued with the Armenian education system and we had no choice but to attend them. However, in order to overcome our shortcoming we simultaneously started taking instructions in the Farsi alphabet (Arabic) and language.

To do this mother had found a teenage girl who had attended the local Farsi language schools and therefore knew Farsi well. This was Dora Badalian, who later became the wife of my maternal uncle Vahag. She would come to our house and spend an hour or so almost every day teaching Sirik and me the alphabet and then the language.

After completing the third grade in the Armenian school, for a year Sirik and I attended private Armenian classes as well as learned Farsi from Dora. After one year of private studies I was able to enrol in the third grade of a local Iranian school called Parvin, thus in fact I fell behind by two years. There was only one catch. This was a girls' school and as someone in the family knew some head teacher in the school I was allowed to attend this school for one year.

All my classmates were girls who were 2-3 years my senior and I was treated as a baby by all of them. I don't think I enjoyed that much. At the end of the year I was happy to be able to be transferred to a boys school, but this time it was in the other Armenian quarter, Ghala, which was a 20 minute walk from our home. Fortunately, my cousin Hrach also attended the same school and he would accompany me to and from the school every day.



62- Third year with Miss Shushik. End of year party. 1947



63- Private Armenian tuition class with G.Karakhanian. 1948

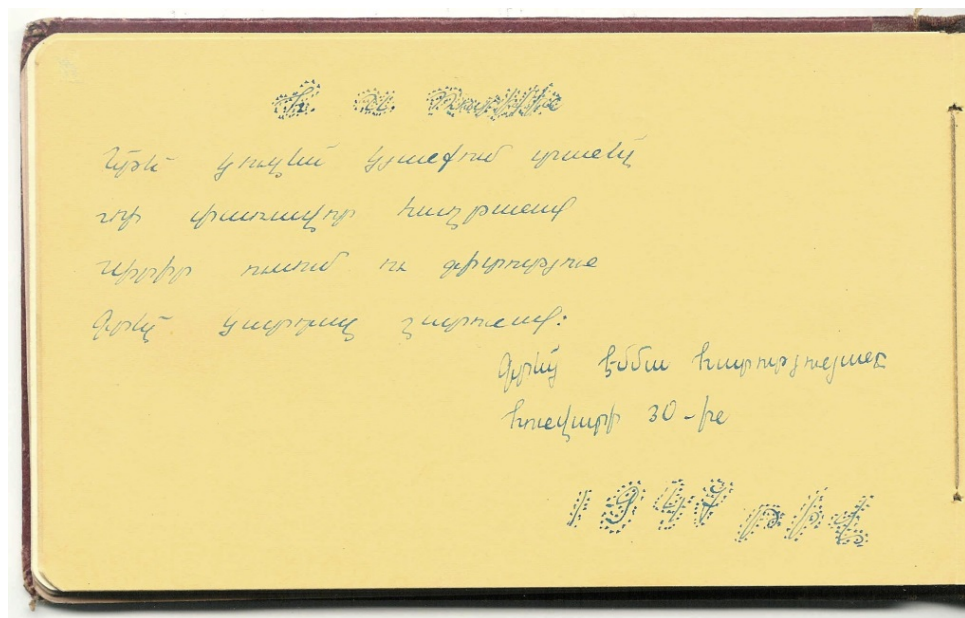
The classmates in that school were a very rough bunch and I did need the protection of Hrach in the school as well. My uncle Yervand also attended the same school as did many other Armenian boys from the closed down Armenian schools. All of us continued our Armenian language tuition in private classes and I was no exception. The class that I attended was taught by Mr. Smbat, who was an elderly and kind teacher, with a missing finger. He was really good teacher and I liked him very much.

When we moved to Tehran in 1950, mum and dad decided to enrol us in local schools, as opposed to an Armenian school. They thought that we need to improve our Farsi, which was a wise decision. It did help us a lot in the latter schooling and life inside Iran.

In Tehran I attended the Zoroastrian schools, which were located to the south of the USSR Embassy. First the primary school and then the secondary school called “Firouz Bahram”. Our house was in a close off the north wall of the Soviet Embassy and the schools were located in the streets leading out from the south side of the Embassy. Every morning I had to walk around the long wall of the Embassy to get to school. The rewarding part was that the route passed near a girls secondary school, the Nour-Bakhsh school, which made that part of the walk rather enjoyable. Later on, after graduating from the sixth grade of the Conservatory (primary school) my sister Sirik also attended “Nour Bakhsh” and I had to be vigilant and well behaved, otherwise one of her classmates could report me.

Attending local schools was good for my knowledge of Farsi, but what about the Armenian language? For this we were enrolled in the local Armenian Club’s library, from where I would borrow Armenian books. Additionally we also attended weekly classes in Armenian language and literature run by some very good teachers, such as Prof. Andre` etc.

For a year or so we had a Russian neighbour in Tabriz, who had a son called Alik. While playing we had already learned some Russian from him. This knowledge was later improved when we started to learn the Cyrillic alphabet in the school, but all that stopped after coming to Tehran. As both our parents were fluent in Russian and thought that this language is an important one, my sister and I attended private Russian language classes with Miss Nvart, who came from St. Petersburg and thought English at the



64- A page from my Personal Album, 1948



65- Playing chess with Vahik, 1953, Tehran

Armenian school. What a mix-up! (She spoke English but it sounded pure Russian.) I still remember some of the Russian that I learnt and use it with caution when absolutely necessary, although it is very rusty, since I have not used it since 1950's.

There was also the English language, which was thought at school from grade 7, but we hardly learned anything there and as far as the English pronunciation was concerned we simply learned nothing correctly. In 1956/7 mother decided that I needed to have a private tutor for the English language too. Vahik also wanted to learn the language and therefore we decided to have a teacher for the two of us. The unfortunate person chosen for the task was Mr. Hrand, who was an elderly bachelor and a seventh day Adventist. He would not even look at women and while talking to them would always cast his eyes down. We knew him as his sister was married to Benjamin, a cousin of Metzhairik. Once Vahik found out about his attitude towards women he hatched and put into effect a plan. During our sessions we usually sat around the dinner table in the dining room, but Vahik's eye was on the coffee table in our lounge, which had a glass top and a shelf under it. One day he managed to get us to sit around the coffee table in the lounge, where on the shelf under the glass he had previously laid open a magazine page showing a beauty in a bikini. As Mr Hrand would invariably cast his eyes down, he was bound to notice the photo. This was the last time that we ever saw Mr. Hrand. God rest his soul!

During the final year in school I found out that the teachers in the Armenian school, Kushesh, which was opposite my school, were much better qualified and switched to the Armenian school. In the Armenian school the subjects were taught in Farsi and the Armenian language and literature were taught as extra subjects. Although I was the only one in the class who had not graduated through all the classes of the Armenian school, during Armenian literature lectures the teachers would make me read literary works, since I could do that better than the other students. This was thanks to my weekly Armenian private schooling and reading.

During the last year in the school my father's friend Albert had presented me with a pocket slide ruler, which on its back had an adding machine. You could add and subtract by sliding strips of numbered and coloured metal strips up or down the fascia by a special pen. This was very handy for quick calculations. (The pocket calculator wasn't invented yet.)



66- At 10th grade with our building models. Tehran 1956.

In the Armenian school (1957-58) our chemistry teacher was Dr. Baghdik Minassian, who being a member of the Dashnak party had been exiled to Siberia by the soviets and had returned to his family in Iran only the previous year. His subject was organic chemistry, which dealt with large molecules with huge numbers of atoms etc. When calculating the molecular weights of these, you had to do lot of addition and multiplication. One day in the classroom while he was trying to calculate the figures on the blackboard I did it quickly on my adding machine and announced the result. He was very impressed and asked me how did I do that. I showed him the adding machine/slide ruler contraption, the like of which no-one else did have. From that day onwards, whenever there was any addition or calculation to be done, to everyone's amusement he would solemnly announce "Boy, get that thing of yours out!"....

Although I was generally top of the class, I must say that I wasn't the best behaved boy in the school. I did get involved in a lot of mischief, but these were directed mainly towards the stupid and useless teachers, from whom I did not expect to learn much.

In the eighth grade in “Firouz Bahram” school we had a Farsi language teacher, Ostad Vaziri, who wore thick, thick black rimmed yellow tinted lenses, was a short fellow as thin as a pencil, and wore a Hitler moustache. Once during the rush of the break bell, the boys pushed him and he almost fell down the stairs. When he balanced himself out he solemnly declared that “he would certainly have had fallen down, were it not for his sportsmanlike physique”.... From then on he became a joke and we called him “the Sportsman”.

While dictating to us Ostad Vaziri would walk up and down the classroom through the gaps between the benches. On a number of occasions I brought a safety razor blade from home, broke it into pieces and stuck the differently sized thin pieces of razor into the underside of the writing desk. After each word of dictation I would pluck one of these pieces and produce varying musical notes, which would be amplified by the desk acting as a sounding board. He pretended not to hear this but tried to locate the source by sudden stops during his trips up and down the aisles. The poor soul never did have any success, as I knew when to pluck the blades so that he could not detect the direction where the sound was coming from.

On another occasion I brought an electric bell with batteries and wires etc. and hid it into the cabinet behind the teachers desk, wiring it with thin wires to the battery inside my desk. Ten minutes before the break I connected the wires and the bell rang. Before the teacher realised that it was the wrong bell everyone was out of the class, including me together with the tell-tale batteries. Again there was no culprit to be found.

Through my hobbies (with the help of father) I had found out that if you connected a single battery at the low voltage terminals of a bell transformer, at the moment of making or breaking the circuit there would be a very short but high voltage pulse at the mains terminals of the transformer. If one held these two wires in the hand while someone else connected and disconnected the battery to the low voltage wires, the first person would get a very nasty but harmless shock. In fact the voltage can be so high that it can give an electric shock to a number of people who would make a chain by holding hands.

This experiment I did try in the school, during the class of geography, which was taught by a young and quite likeable fellow, Mr. Hedayat, who I knew could take a joke. The benches that we sat on were made for two

pupils and I sat at the very back of the class. A chain would be made by pupils holding hands starting from the one in front of me going to the top of the row and returning to the person next to me. These two would then hold the two ends of the high voltage terminals of the transformer and at a suitable moment I would connect the wires. The whole row of pupils would then jump up simultaneously. It fascinated the teacher so much to see them jump up in unison that we even tried it with him in the chain.

In Iran getting into the university for higher education was a problem. To gain entrance into an institution of higher education after graduating from school you had to seat for a difficult university entrance exam. The available places were enough only for about 10% of the applicants. As I was generally a good student and was not much worried about this exam but had to do some extra work in order to make sure I would secure a place in a university.

During all my school years I had not done much work at home since I tried to do my learning in the classroom. The only work and swatting I remember having done, was during the final year, when I did only study for 3-4 days before the finals. However I did plan to study and work hard to be ready for the university entrance exams, held in July 1958.

A few days after the school final exams I was gingerly walking down Hafez avenue towards my father's shop, when I met Gevik Atoian, a classmate, hurrying in the opposite direction. He asked me if I was not going to enrol in the competition organised by the National Iranian Oil Company (the NIOC) for sending students to study in England. I told him that I had no idea about this. He then proceeded to persuade me that this was a good opportunity for studying abroad and that I should also enrol. We walked back to our home where I took my ID papers and a photo, as required by the board. We went to the NIOC and enrolled at once, as it was the last hour of the enrolment. I got the participant card number 956.

A few days later I went to the Caspian Sea (Pahlavi) with the family, in order to relax before the preparations for the entrance exams. After a week or so one morning I was called to the quarters of the owner of the guesthouse where we were staying and was told that there was a telephone call for me from Tehran. Those days the telephones were a luxury in Tehran, but to get a long distance telephone call in Pahlavi was very unusual to say the least. The caller was Gevik, who had heard from my

uncle that I was still in Pahlavi and had called to remind me that the NIOC exam was starting the next day and I should return at once. This was very thoughtful of him. I left immediately and returned to Tehran.

During the next two days almost 1000 applicants took the tests, which included over 1600 questions on various subjects, with the full knowledge that only 35 applicants were to be chosen for this scholarship.

After this test was over I participated in the first stage test of Tehran University entrance exams, which was for Farsi and English language, as well as for that of Abadan Institute of Technology, which was also owned and run by the NIOC. I did pass both of these exams and was in a quandary as what to do. Should I attend the Tehran University or go to AIT in Abadan and become part of the NIOC, which would assure employment after graduation. I was in the throes of the decision making when Yervand came in the evening and said that he has seen my card number announced in the list of successful applicants of NIOC scholarship printed in the press. Of course I was not sure of my number and it took me a long time to find the card and confirm that indeed it was my numbers in the list. Unfortunately my friend Gevik, who had been instrumental in my enrolling in the competition, did not pass the first stage.

Although this was not the final selection but the short list of 70, nevertheless my father and mother now tried to persuade me not to accept this scholarship but to stay at home and go to Tehran University. My father even went as far as to promise me that after I graduated from Tehran University, he would send me abroad for further education. I knew that this was not easy for him, since living and studying abroad would cost a lot of money and he did not have much to spare. At this time my Maternal grandmother Tatik intervened and categorically stated that my parents “should not interfere with the affairs of the child and should let him take the opportunity on offer”... It was then accepted that I should go, thanks to the intervention of the grandmother Tatik. I owe this to her!

All those on the short list (70 pupils) were asked to go for a second stage interview, in order to select the final 35. The interview was in the NIOC offices and I was asked to tell a story and also was asked some seemingly unrelated questions. Anyway, the end result was that I was selected and was sent for the medical tests.

Here the problems started. I was told that I had a hernia and had to have operation before I was sent to the UK. I did so and after the operation I was asked to go for further check-ups. I was made to wait for a long time in a draughty corridor, as a result of which I developed pneumonia. The doctors first thought that the chest pains may be due to a clot in the veins, which would be very dangerous indeed but eventually they did realise that it was pneumonia and started the proper treatment.

As a result when in the middle of September the group of NIOC students left for England, I was still in bed, recuperating. This took a long time and it was the middle of October that I was ready to go. I was sent to the UK in the 13th of October with five other NIOC students, who were chosen from the children of the employees plus another one (Houshang Malek) who was delayed for various reasons.

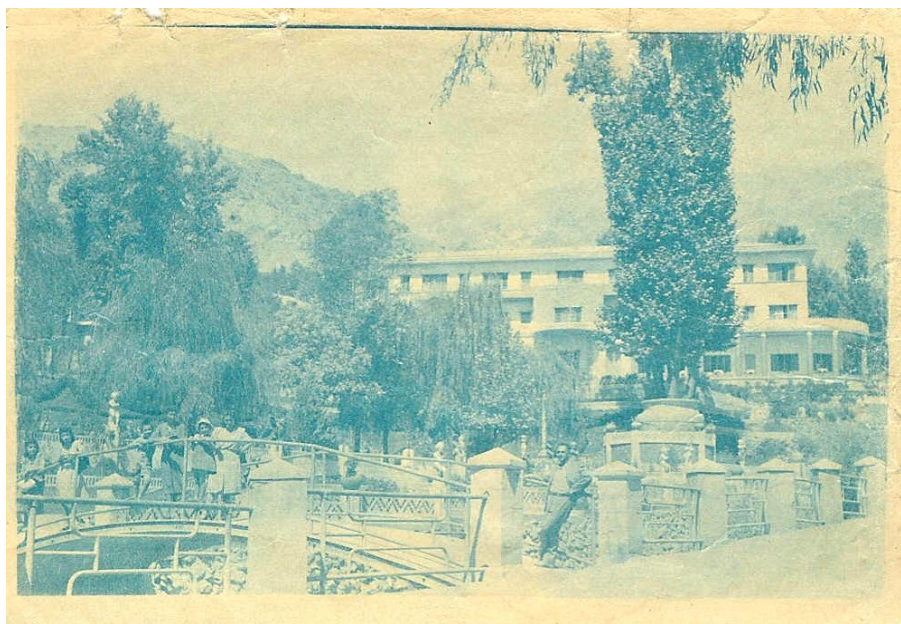
11 – HOBBIES

As far back as I can remember I was involved in doing something or other which was outside the schooling. I presume one can call these hobbies. When I was about 7-8 years old I wanted to play in the basement of our house, but these were dark and damp rooms. So I thought I should install electric lighting in the darkest basement. This I did with a pair of bare copper wires nailed to the walls/ceiling of the basement with small bakelite lamp-holder installed at the very end. The wires were then connected to a bell transformer, which father had installed next to his radio in the living room, using it as supply for a night lamp. The wires that I had installed were so thin that the lamp at the end of the run gave hardly any illumination at all.

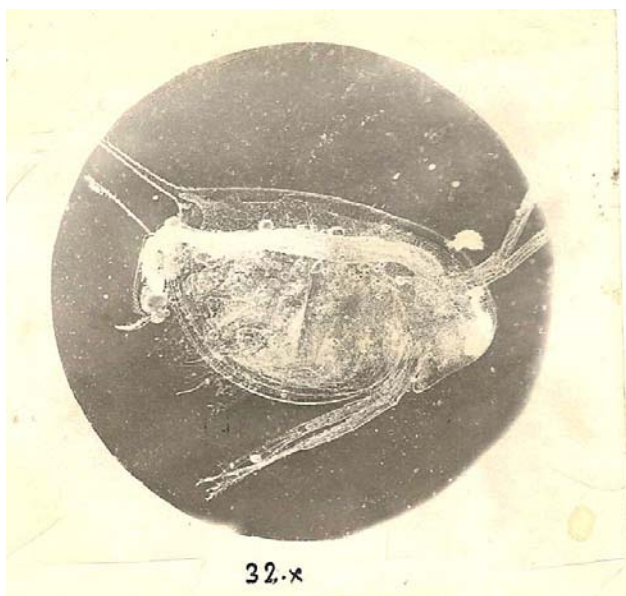
Then at 9 or 10 years Yervand got me to help him make photosensitive printing paper for printing photos from negatives. This involved the mixture of one of cyanide compounds, which was very toxic, and spreading it with a ball of cotton wool over pieces of plain paper. After they were dried in a dark place you could put a negative on a sheet, expose a few minutes to sunlight and then wash it in a tray of water. A pale blue photo would emerge. It must be said that the cyanide was “borrowed” by Yervand from their workshop, where they used it for gold plating. This started my interest with photography, which continued into the more mature years.

Then, following the example of father, I got interested in radios. In 1949 in Tabriz I assembled my first radio receiver made of a coil, a piece of galena (lead ore) and father’s earphones, all connected to the antenna that father had rigged for our radio. It worked! I could get Radio Tabriz on it, but that was all. Father gave me various pre-wound coils, which acted as wave selectors and I tried to get other stations on my radio but with little success.

Father had a Radio Amateur’s Handbook, printed in the USA, which had fascinating pictures in it. Eventually, when I could read English and had learned the circuit diagram symbols for the electronic diagrams, in



67- In Shemiran, photo on home-made paper, 1948



68- Water mite. Photo tsln by microscope. 1952

1955 I constructed a small radio transmitter from a circuitry shown in the book. The components were no problem, as they were readily available in father's shop. This did have one radio valve and would transmit on medium wave (AM) band, having a few hundred meters of range. During the school lunch breaks I would tell Gevik and Hrand, my school friends, who lived within the range of the transmitter, to go home and tune in to my program. Then I would go home, turn the transmitter on and talk and play music on the radio... Until one day father found this out. He was furious. During those days it was forbidden to have a radio transmitter in Iran and anyone using such a device would be considered by Savak (the secret police) as a spy. Our house was a mere 100 meters from the USSR Embassy walls therefore we could be suspect twice over. This was the last time I tried to transmit anything on the air.

Yet another interest was chemistry. At school I was very good in all the sciences but when it came to chemistry, writing formulae on the blackboard and indicating that "substance A mixed with substance B would result in substance C" did not mean anything to me and therefore I could not comprehend and learn it. As a result I had very low grades in chemistry. As I could not carry on like this and decided that I should try and experiment what the book said. As the schools had no laboratories, or if they had them they were kept locked, not even the teachers did have any lab experience. Therefore I decided to have a lab of my own - at home!

One of father's closest friends was Dro, who had a pharmacy opposite his shop. In fact if you could not find father in his shop the next best place to look for him was the Iran-Novin Pharmacy. This was his hang-out.

With my pocket money I first went to uncle Dro and asked him to get me a few test tubes, an alcohol burner, glass tubes, corks etc. These gradually were complemented by Lithmus paper, various salts and compounds, alkalis, a few grams of diluted acids, magnesium strips etc. I even bought some stuff from "Soofer" shop, suppliers of laboratory equipment and chemicals. Any experiment that was described in the book I would try at home and once tried and tested I would never forget them. My second cousin Vahik got also interested in these experiments and although he was one year my senior, we would sometimes to experiment together. When it came to the gases and I learned that hydrogen can be burned in the air to produce water vapour I thought that I must certainly try it.



To make hydrogen gas I had to buy a flask with a rubber stopper, which was very expensive. After some weeks of saving my pocket money I did buy it and proceeded with making a small nozzle by heating a glass tube and pulling it apart. Then Vahik and I prepared the zinc pieces, stripping them from the shell of a dry cell, cut them into small pieces, dropped into the flask and added (for the reasons of economy) diluted hydrochloric acid, pushing the rubber stopper on it, with glass nozzle inserted in position. The flask was then heated over the alcohol burner until bubbles of hydrogen started to form at the bottom of the flask.

All this was done on our breakfast table in the hall of our Tehran home, which had the kitchen and bedroom door opening into it as well as a large glass door leading to the rear balcony, which was generally kept open.

As soon as the mixture started bubbling I struck a match and held it against the tip of the nozzle, mounted on top of the flask. This was the last that either Vahik or I remembered. When we came to, we were sprawled on the floor, backs against the wall, with hands bleeding from the shattered glass of the flask, and mother running around with worried expression on her

face. The explosion inside the flask was so powerful that it had thrown both Vahik and me against the walls of the hall, where we lay unconscious. Luckily as I had a match in my hand and which I had held against the nozzle, the glass splinters had only cut my hands and had not got into our eyes. The open balcony door had also minimised the damage of the blast.

What no one had told us that we should have waited until all the air in the flask was pushed out by the hydrogen and only then try to set alight the pure hydrogen gas escaping from the nozzle. What had actually happened was that we had put a match to the explosive mixture of air and hydrogen inside the flask, as the diluted acid had not produced enough hydrogen to push the air fully out of the flask. This lesson I never forgot.

I saved money and bought five grams of Sodium and Potassium in pure metal form. These are soft metals, like frozen butter and quickly oxidise and turn into powder in the air, therefore are generally kept inside a bottle of paraffin. I had cut them into small pieces and would watch in fascination the spontaneous reaction when a piece was placed in a glass half filled with water. The pieces would react with water so violently that the metal would melt and the molten ball would furiously run back and forth on the surface of the water inside the glass.

The resultant water in the glass would become a highly toxic alkali solution. Once I spilled a few drops of it on my new trousers and in a few seconds there was a gaping hole in them the size of a small coin. Mother had to have the trousers mended and I had to wear the mended trousers for the whole year. Another lesson well learned!

One day in the tenth grade (1956) our chemistry teacher decided to bring a few items into the class and actually perform the experiments in the classroom. His name was Dr. Khatami and he was the author of our chemistry textbook. During one of the stages of his experiments he produced a five gram ball of Potassium and proceeded with dropping it into a bowl of water. The metal started hissing and after a few seconds the molten ball was flying back and forth on the surface. Knowing the cost of this piece (about 2 dollars - a lot of money at that time) I shouted "Mr. Khatami, get it out of the water, it is shame to waste it so". The clever Mr. Khatami put his hand in the water and tried to lift the molten metal out of it..... His hand was in bandages for the rest of the year and I doubt if the scars could ever have healed completely.

During the last Wednesday of the Iranian Year (just before Now-Rouz) children would explode crackers in the streets and we decided to make our own crackers. I read some literature about it and decided to make an explosive powder made of powdered sulphur and sodium nitrate. I bought the compounds and mixed them with the suggested ratio. Then Vahik and I proceeded to fill some short pieces of thin brass curtain rods with the powder so that we could make exploding devices. During the filling of one of the rods, I must have tried compacting the powder too hard, as it exploded in my hand, causing quite deep lacerations in the palm of my hand. It was then that I decided that this was too dangerous to continue.

During the summer months in Tehran we would take the beds up to the roof and would sleep there under the open sky, as it never rained there during the summers. In the early 50's there was no pollution and the night sky was crystal clear. You could almost touch the stars. Every night I saw this spectacle and decided to learn something about it. There was a library in the Soviet-Iranian Friendship club, which had many books in Armenian. Father knew some people there and I was once taken to their library where I found two books on astronomy for beginners. I borrowed them and over a period of a few months learned everything in them by heart.

The books explained about the solar system, the galaxies, the Milky Way, constellations etc. and had many sky maps in them. At night I would take father's military torch with me to the roof, would look for a constellation in the book and try to find the same in the sky. The 15 times magnifying theodolite that father had brought home did also help me in locating the smaller stars of the constellations.

With the help of this theodolite and binoculars I managed to see the four moons of Jupiter, the rings of Saturn etc. I was fascinated by it all and when I started to read about the interstellar and intergalactic distances, I started feeling very small and insignificant in relation to these. The numbers, sizes and distances were so immense that I felt like nothing at all. Not a good feeling for a teenager. As a result, I got intimidated and had to leave astronomy aside.

Back in 1954/55 someone told me that in the real movie theatres the strong projection light is created by the electric arc between the two carbon electrodes. As I used to break dry cell batteries for the zinc and could also

get the solid carbon positive element rod out I thought that I might as well try to recreate this light source at home. Taking two rods of carbon I mounted them on the insides of an empty fruit case made of planks of wood. I took two wires out of this and connected one wire to the water pipe as the neutral (yes , in Tehran we did have piping in the house, fed from a roof barrel). The other wire was ready to be connected to the electric supply's live wire. The first time I connected the wires, gradually pushed the carbon rods together until they made a contact. Suddenly a bright light appeared on the tips and as I gradually pulled the electrodes apart the arc expanded until it was too bright to look at and was accompanied with a loud buzzing sound. When I pulled the electrodes more than a few inches apart the arc broke apart and extinguished.

Next time I tried it at night and got a magnifying mirror from my mother's vanity table to help concentrate and focus the light into a beam. Then I turned the arc on and adjusted the magnifying mirror such that the beam was focused on the neighbour's balcony, where their children were sleeping. It illuminated the balcony brightly at some 100 metres distance. On yet another occasion while experimenting with the arc my impromptu wiring and connection to the water pipes gave mother an electric shock when she tried to touch the kitchen tap. This problem combined with the fact that I had carried out the experiment successfully made me drop this and consider this chapter too as closed.

The most important of my hobbies, which I have never stopped enjoying has been and is music.

12 – MUSIC IN MY LIFE

I did mention in the earlier chapters that as children we kept hearing various opera and operetta arias from radio Moscow or Yerevan during our early years in Tabriz. Thus subconsciously the love for what is called “classical music” must have developed its seeds in our brains from this period of early childhood.

Mother herself loved music and had some basic knowledge of playing the piano. In 1949 she persuaded father that we should have a piano in the house so that the children would be literate in music too. Through his Azeri friends father found an upright, a German Rhönisch piano, made about 1888, which was in a very good condition. The piano was brought into the house and occupied the place of honour in our house in Tabriz. However it was not to last long, as we soon moved to Tehran.

The importance of Tabriz as the centre of the Armenian culture was diminishing after the war and as many of fathers friends had moved, or were moving to Tehran. My parents decided that it was time for us to move too. Father went on a reconnaissance trip and after finding a flat and a shop came back and we packed our belongings in wooden crates and boxes and moved to Tehran.

The piano of course came too. During the first year in Tehran Sirik had been attending Sarvarian school, which was a fair distance away. Due to this as well as the fact that learning Farsi took up a lot of time she and I did not have time for the piano lessons. The next year it was decided that she should attend the Tehran Conservatory to continue her studies in music. The added bonus was that the Conservatory was at a mere five minutes walking distance from our home.

She started her music courses in the Conservatory and once a week I was sent to various music teachers for private piano tuition. They were Mrs. Annik, Mrs Amalia, Mrs Haghnazarian etc., all excellent teachers. After 3-4 years of studying I even appeared on stage in the Soviet Cultural Club together with a friend playing a four hand piano piece in one of the concerts and also played a movement of a Beethoven sonata yet in another concert. I did not practice much but was progressing at an acceptable pace.

Regrettably my music studies ended abruptly when I came to study in the UK in 1958.

The reasons for this were various. During the first year in Manchester I did not have the time to devote to music and after entering the college, there was no piano in the accommodations where I lived. A great shame, but one cannot have everything! By the time I was allocated a room in the halls of residence, where there was a piano, two years had passed and my fingers were already stiff and would not obey me.

Playing the piano had made me conscious of the importance of music and how much I used to enjoy listening to it. Regarding music almost everything was new to me. In early 50's after returning home from the school I would sit in front of the radio and would start twiddling the tuning knob until I came across a transmission of any piece of classical music. I would listen to it to the end and try to find out what that particular piece of music was. Sometimes I would be frustrated when at the end of the piece either the name of the piece was not announced or more often than not it was announced in a foreign and indecipherable language. In other words it was all a "teach yourself" affair, as at that time none of the others in the family could provide me with much information about it and there was not much literature at my disposal that dealt with music. The nearest thing was mother's "Petit Larousse Illustree" which was in French!

I started keeping a notebook, where I would note the wavelength of the station, the times of the transmission and the names of the pieces I had heard. These ranged from Radio Vatican to Radio Moscow, the BBC and beyond. Not knowing the names of the composers I would make many mistakes in the spellings of their names or the titles of the works of music that were played. After 45 years this notebook makes amusing reading!

Later on, in the mid 50's Radio Tehran started airing one hour of classical music program on weekdays starting from 4PM. This was the time that I was just back from school. The presenter was a man called Mr. Ramzi who spoke with very hushed and mysterious voice, offering some background information on the music to be performed. If I could possibly help it, I would not miss a single program of Mr Ramzi.

The other radio listener in the house was Metzapa, who listened mainly to the news, I had to adjust my listening times to his news broadcast timetables. As soon as he would finish with the news and would get up

from front of the radio, I would jump to fill-in his place and would start playing around with the knobs to get to a classical music transmission, simultaneously consulting my little notebook for possible information.

I think it was in 1953 that the Tehran Philharmonic Society was formed. We participated in their organised events from the first days and Sirik and I became members from its inception to its demise. The society was headed by Mr. Joseph, who became our friend Rouzan's father in law in the 1990's. The spokesperson of the society and the presenter of the programs and concerts was Mr. Houshang Partovi, who kept his position until the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the end of the days for the society.

This Philharmonic society would organise recitals and concerts where, in the beginning various local musicians would perform. It gradually grew and had more funds available for inviting foreign musicians and performers to come and perform in Tehran. After the marriage of the Shah to Farah Diba, being a lover of the arts she became a patron of the society, thus encouraging the organisation of more and better cultural events.

My fascination with music was also mirrored in Vahik, together with whom we would spend hours discussing what we had recently heard on various radio stations.

At that time the US Information Service (USIS) had a library and a theatre in Tehran which was near my father's shop. For a few years every Friday morning (weekend) at 10:30 there would be a few short films shown on musical subjects. Friday mornings Vahik would come to our place and ring the bell so that we could go to the show together. When I opened the door he would never say let us go or ever indicate why he was there, instead he would say "I just came by to see how you were" as if afraid of admitting his love for and interest in music. In any case we always attended these film shows together.

The presenter there was also Mr. Partovi and over a course of couple of years Vahik and I saw many movies of the legendary violinist Jasha Heifetz in recitals as well as movies of Toscanini with his NBC orchestra, Vladimir Horowitz, Artur Rubinstein, , Andre` Segovia etc. This was an excellent musical education for us, as after the show we could go and ask our questions to Mr. Partovi, who was an authority on the subject and would be happy to answer our questions.

In 1954 one evening father came home with a load of record albums. These were 12 inch 78's in special albums of the following:

- Dvorak Symphony No.9 with one of the six records missing
- Beethoven's last two piano sonatas, one record missing played by Alexander Brailowsky.
- Beethoven Piano Concerto 3, one record missing, the soloist was Artur Schnabel.
- Brahms Symphony no.1, first movement only
- Gershwin, Rhapsody in Blue
- Ravel, Alborada del Gracioso.
- Beethoven, Triple Concerto less the last movement

Apparently during one of his house calls for radio repairs, father had been offered these mostly incomplete albums and he had taken them.

Now there was the problem of having these records but not having the means to play them with. So, I kept pestering father to get us a radio gramophone, which he eventually did and brought home a "Dual" German record player, that was connected to our "Blaupunkt" desktop radio and I was eventually able to play the unfamiliar records and get to know them.

I soon got familiar with them and for my next birthday I asked father to get me a record of Sarasate's "Gypsy Melodies", which I had heard on the radio and which, to my delight he did. It was a 12 inch 78, performed by Professor Hans Konwitschny (whoever he was).

Then we were told in the USIS that certain LP records of classical music recording were available for borrowing, but these were extra large 16 inch LP's, pressed specially for broadcast use. It was too good an opportunity to let go and I decided to make a record player to take up this extra large LP's. With the help of father I managed to find a basic electrical turntable and constructed an extended arm to play it. Of course the platter was the standard size (12 inch) and the oversized LP used to sag all around while playing, but it did not matter, as long as we could listen to the recordings with decent sound quality.

The recordings were of a poor quality test recordings, but and we enjoyed them all. Within a short period of time Vahik and I exhausted the stocks of

this library and it was time to turn to the real LP's that were now being imported into Iran.

One day in one of my searches on the radio I heard an extremely impressive and beautiful music. I only caught the name of the composer, which was "Beethoven". It was an orchestral work so after some months of research I found out that it was his fifth symphony. My efforts were then concentrated in getting the record of that music. My birthday was approaching and I asked the family if for my birthday they could get me this LP record. At that time in Tehran there were no dedicated record shops and I don't know where from father bought me an RCA LP, with Boston Symphony Orchestra playing the Beethoven fifth, under Serge Koussevitsky. I must have played that LP a few hundred times and I think I wore it out completely and utterly.

Later on father brought in a "Grundig" stereo radio gramophone and my joy had no bounds. A record shop opened in Tehran and then another one. All my pocket money was spent on records, which cost 100-180 rials each, a lot of money for me. I had to invent all sorts of reasons why I needed the extra cash so that at the end of a week or two I could buy another record.

When I left for England I already had about 40 LP's in my collection, which consisted of the standard repertory of pieces such as Beethoven, Brahms and Tchaikovsky symphonies, concertos etc.

Much later on, in 1960's when the "Beethoven" record shop opened in Pahlavi Avenue, I became a constant visitor and a good customer, getting to know the brothers, who owned and ran the store well. I would visit the store every fortnight and would discuss the new LP's and performances with Abbas, one of the brothers, who was quite knowledgeable in the field.

We would also discuss new LP's, performances and recording qualities etc. and as a result I would invariably leave the shop with one or two LP's under my arm.



70- Some of my collections of classical LPs.

13 – GROWING UP

The process of growing up during the adolescence is generally a difficult one and especially so in the Middle East, where problems are not openly admitted to and discussed. In our family and those around us the problems of adolescence were considered as nothing but bad temper and the best remedy was for the members of family to ignore them.

Many questions and problems encountered were left to the individual to resolve or in many cases - not to resolve. It all depended on the individual how successfully one tackled these problems.

The first sign of growing up and puberty was the sudden interest aroused regarding the opposite sex. In these matters our parents not only did not help but in fact hindered any possible accumulation of knowledge by us. For example going to the cinema involved the preliminary stage of our parents first seeing the movie and vetting it suitable for our eyes before we could be allowed to see it

The problem became very complicated when we moved to Tehran. At that time the movies shown in Tehran were all in the original language versions as dubbing had not yet been introduced in Iran. To make the dialog understandable, the movie would be interrupted at every few minute intervals and the main sentences exchanged by the actors would be projected on the screen in Farsi translation. These were normally in three lines per frame. Our parents had learned a little of spoken Farsi but could not yet read it, therefore for a period of time they stopped going to the movies, as they would not risk taking us there as translators and be faced with a kissing or love scene on the screen, which were deemed unsuitable for our ears and eyes.

To overcome this problem I was asked to teach them the Farsi (Arabic) alphabet, which they gradually did learn. However as they were beginners and slow readers, the length of the time that the dialog frames would be projected were not be long enough for them to read all the three lines of dialog. To overcome this they devised an ingenious method to overcome. When the dialog frame appeared, father would read lines one and three



71- In Pahlavi on the Caspian, 1954.



72- On our roof with neighbours, the Zeytunchians and the Bassenians, 1954.

and mother would read the middle line, then they would exchange the information and get the things in perspective.

They were very strict in the application of this restrictive practice, such that in many cases all our friends would have seen the movie that we were prohibited from seeing. We felt left out. This was a question of honour and I did “by-pass” it by going to the movies with friends at early hours after school, pretending that I had gone to visit this or that friend to work together. This carried on until we were 16-17 years old.

I did go to my first party when I was 15, but was so shy that I did not dare to even think of learning to dance. The girls were of the same age as the boys but they were much ahead of the boys in matters of partying and life in general. Eventually I did manage to learn to dance by practising with Sirik and her friends, who were two years my junior.

The first time that I danced was in 1955, when I was 17 and from then on I never looked back. So much so that we did organise dance marathons during our parties and I would be one of the last ones to give up.

Our party friends were Shahik and Annik Zeytounchian, who lived two houses away from us, Mark Grigorian, Rita Karapetian, Roubik Hovanessian, Herman Vartanian etc. The circle grew larger when through Shahik some of his classmates joined us and we grew a little older. As we grew up the female members of the group started getting more interested in older boys and we gradually lost many of them to the charm of the boys a few years older than us. I personally felt very jealous about this until such time that we also started getting to know younger girls, who were interested in boys of our age and would abandon their groups in our favour.

As Shahik and Annik were our neighbours we would meet quite often and specially when they started coming over to our place in the summers to sleep on the roof under the open summer skies. We would lie under the sky and tell jokes etc. until the elders would come and tell us off. Later on for a brief period of time another brother and sister couple, the Bassentsians joined us and I grew quite fond of Lilit, the sister, who was almost my age. Sadly in 1957 they emigrated to the USA and we lost track of them until we met them unexpectedly in London in the 1990's.



73- Our first New Year party. 1956



74- On our balcony with mom and dad, 1956

As every growing boy, I have had my share of infatuations in my early teens. These were mainly girls that we met more frequently, such as neighbours and friends' sisters, etc. However, although at the time the feelings were overwhelming and affected ones life thoroughly, these were mainly short lived and only sweet memories remain.

During the summers we used to go to the seaside for about a fortnight. In 1954 and 1955 we went to Pahlavi, or to be more precise, to Ghazian, which was across the bay. We used to stay in a pension, where the food was excellent but there was not much to do but to go to the seaside and play cards with friends in the evenings.

After 1956 father decided that we should go to Bablolsar, which was towards the eastern end of the Caspian shoreline. This was a quiet town with a shopping street and lots of gardens and wilderness to play. A river ran through the town, which was spanned by two bridges, a pedestrian bridge as well as a larger one for the wheeled traffic. As Vahik's father was from Babol (the next town), they came to Babolsar too. Together we had lots of fun.

We would either rent a room in a local house or go to Mrs. Panian's pension, who was a Russian-Armenian lady and kept a lodging house for holidaymakers. We would spend the mornings in the sea and return to our lodgings for lunch, which usually was an elaborate three-course affair and after the lunch everyone would go to their rooms for a siesta. This is when Vahik would appear signalling his presence by whistling the first half of the tune from the third movement of Beethoven's violin concerto. I would reply by whistling the second half and we would sneak out exploring the streets and the wilderness.

Early evenings was the time to watch the girls and have palpitations of the heart suddenly noticing someone that one fancied. But more often than not these ended in disappointment as neither of us had the courage to take the first step and the subjects of our admiration would be seen walking around with boys who did not lack the required courage or in some cases – the audacity.



74- New Year Party, 1956, Tehran.

In the mid 1950's my father's cousin Hrach, four years my senior, moved from Tabriz to Tehran. As he had had experience in radio repairs working with his brother Artoush in their Radio repair shop, father helped him to buy a radio repair shop on Shah Reza Avenue, about five minutes walk from our home. There he got busy repairing mainly car radios and 45 EP car record players, which were in vogue at the time.

As Hrach's shop, Radio Radar, was near our home, I used to walk there most evenings. The shop was the gathering place for Hrach's as well Yervand's friends, who would come there in evenings, just before closing time (8 to 9PM). This is where all the daily news were exchanged and amorous adventures discussed. The boys were 4-10 years older than I and their company was a good schooling for me regarding the matters of life. One of Hrach's friends, called Nikol, had fallen in love with the daughter of "Renome" delicatessen store owner, who was very much against this match and had prohibited his daughter from seeing Nikol. Nikol used to come to the shop every evening and together with his friends would hatch the plans for clandestine meetings with the girl. I thought there was more to this which I was not aware of. Suddenly one day we heard that the girl had eloped with Nikol, who was nowhere to be seen. They apparently hid in the summer residence of one of the friends and after some cooling-off period emerged from their hiding place de facto married.

Sometimes, after the closing of the shop all those present would pile into one of the cars at hand and would drive around watching girls. We would mostly end up in Shemiran⁵, having ice cream or "Noon Khameie", a kind of round eclair filled with rosewater flavoured whipped cream. On one occasion four of us had some ice cream etc. in Shemiran only to find out that no one had enough money for paying the bill. I had a new watch so we started to discuss how to approach the manager and propose to leave my watch as a pawn. Eventually one of the boys had to go to the manager and explain the situation, offering to leave the watch there with the promise of returning the next evening with money to pay the bill.

During my last year in school one of the Armenian language teachers told us that he was organising a fortnights tour to Beirut, which was going to

⁵ This was a suburb in the north of Tehran on the slopes of Alborz mountains, where the wealthy Iranian lived and in the summer it was a gathering place.



75- Picnicking at Karadj, 1957.



76- With friends at a picnic in Evin-Darakeh, 1957.

take place during the Iranian New Year holidays in the middle of March 1958. I managed to convince my parents that this is an opportunity of a lifetime and that they should let me go. I can tell you that it was not an easy task, but I somehow managed to do it, particularly that it was not at all expensive and we had to pay just a little more than the airfare. With a few friends I enrolled and even made the down payment and eagerly anticipated my very first trip abroad.

I went through all the red tape of getting a passport, visas etc. and was ready and almost packed to go. We had lots of plans for what we were going to do in Beirut. We were going to stay in the dormitory of the Haikazian college, and were going to do a lot of sightseeing. Two weeks before the departure date, the Lebanese civil war broke out and everything was cancelled!

My disappointment had no bounds and it made me decide then and there that long term planning was wrong, since one was at the mercy of the others. From then on I have never planned anything with certainty. I make provisions but no fixed plans. This was a major step in my development, which effected all of my later life.

In order to console me my parent decided to take a trip to Abadan during the Iranian New Year holidays. My mother had a second cousin living there, Mr. Benjamin Sabounchian, who raised pigs in Abadan and was quite successful in his business. He always invited us to go and visit them and this time we did take up his offer. All the four of us were going to go for a week. This involved a 24-hour train journey to Ahwaz and from there a two to three hours trip by car to Abadan.

Abadan was an Oil Company town built by the British in the 1930's to house the staff and management of the world's largest oil refinery, which they build there. The town was a typical middle class British town with all the amenities including special stores full of imported British goods catering mainly for the expatriate community. Up to the nationalisation of the oil in 1953-54, local Iranians were not allowed in Abadan's Senior's quarters, clubs or the stores. All the buildings were built to the British standard and even the door and window frames were imported from the UK. Summers in Abadan was very hot and humid. The temperature could



77- Party at Tara's rooftop, 1957.



78- Party at Piroumians', 1957.

soar up to 50°C combined with a very high humidity, which made it unsuitable to visit. The air temperature in March was 25-30°C and all those who had friends or relatives in Abadan would try to go there during the Now-Rouz holidays. There were no hotels in Abadan to cater for the tourists and therefore if one did not have a friend or relative, one could not visit it.

When we took up our sleeper compartment in the train we heard some Armenian spoken in the next compartment. Father went out to investigate and came back with the news that it was his friend Dorik Arzoumanian with his daughter Mariette, who were also going to Abadan for the holiday period.

During the 1956/57 one of our party friends, Leon (Dorik's son) brought her sister Mariette to our New Year party. She was a plump and bubbly girl with huge eyes, barely in her teens and we knew her as Leon's sister. I had seen her on a few other occasions during our family visits to their summer home in Shi'an as well as in their home, during parties thrown by Leon.

Now, out of the blue we met in the train. At once they came over to our compartment and the elders started talking. Mariette also took off immediately and entered into conversation with Sirik. In no time she was telling jokes and laughing and talking, and talking.... To keep her hands busy she simultaneously was making some sort of small needlework mats. She also did carry with her a glass of water in which she kept dipping the needlework hook and laughed her head off every time she did so. I had no idea why did she wet the hook, but it created quite a jolly atmosphere and even mother, who was quite reserved, started to join in the fun. I think that she developed a sympathetic feeling towards Mariette from those days, although I cannot say the same for Seda (Mariette's mother), whom she knew and regarded with much reserve.

We spent the next 20 hours with very little sleep and arrived in Ahwaz where Dorik and Mariette were met by their friends and were taken to Abadan. As we had some common acquaintances there, we all met on a few other occasions and also together made another sightseeing trip to Ahwaz. I came to like this chattering and bubbly big/little girl, who was all of 14 years old but had quite a developed physique. When we returned to Tehran she again gradually faded into the background as Leon's sister.



79- My birthday party. Tehran 1957.

During the spring after school hours as well as every weekday during the summer recess, which lasted three months, I would go to father's shop, which was located on a busy shopping thoroughfare. There I would help him in his work, learning a lot from him as well as watching the girls and young women walk by the shop.. One day I was approached by Mariette, who told me that there was a girl in her class called Violet, who fancied me and as she had realised that Mariette knows me had asked her to let me know about her feelings and to find out if we could meet. I told her that every afternoon I am in the shop and if she wishes, she can come and see me there. Thinking back, I may have acted very arrogantly but it was only out of shyness, as I did not know what else I could have done. The next afternoon there appeared a quite nice looking girl of about 16 and introduced herself as Violet. We made a date to go to the movies during the weekend and she departed. We did meet a few more times but I realised that I did not really fancy her that much and that she was perhaps too mature for me as she was already talking of quitting the school and finding work and perhaps getting married soon. So this episode too faded away. Later on Mariette recounted that when in October of 58 she told Violet that I had gone to England for studying, she apparently fainted and was inconsolable....

Working in father's shop did teach me much that came useful in later life. He taught me how to approach and what to look for when repairing various mechanical and electrical equipment etc. He was always meticulous and clean worker but I did not have his patience. I would watch him work and try to learn all he did. I ended up repairing radios, tape recorders (there were no cassettes then) and electrical appliances and would try my hand on repairing everything broken down that my friends could come up with. One day father was working on a radio and inadvertently touched the high voltage terminals of the DC supply. I noticed that sitting on the stool he was shaking violently and could not talk. I realised what had happened and knew that I should not touch him for the fear of being electrocuted myself, all I could do was to pull the stool from underneath him, which resulted him falling to the floor and getting disengaged. This probably saved his life. Both of us were quite frightened.

During those years it was quite common to organise picnics and travel for a day out of town into the mountains and ravines surrounding Tehran. There were many beautiful places where one could spend the whole day. The more common ones were Evin, Tochal and Karaj River areas. Evin was in

the mountains located in the north of Tehran. To access it you had to go to the village of Evin and from there walk up the mountain gorge where a fast flowing stream ran. We would walk up and find a relatively flat and wooded area where to picnic. The streams were coming from the melting snow cap of the mountain and were very cold and clear. In one area the fast flowing water had dug seven deep ponds in the monolithic granite, each about 3-4 metres in diameter and 1-2 metres deep. Looking up from down below one could see the water cascading from one pool into the other. This area was called Haft Howz (seven pools in Persian) and was a very popular spot. Tochal was also up in the mountains to the north and was accessed from Shemiran, then a summer resort for the population of Tehran, which has now been swallowed up by the growing city.

During the last summer our group organised a few picnics with our party friends. We would get a minibus or a pickup truck, pile into it with blankets and food and drive to the farthest possible point where the car would go and from then trek up the mountain gorge into the wilderness. Food was of minor importance and we would carry various ingredients for sandwiches only. I don't remember ever making a fire for a barbecue or anything else, time was rather spent with the girls. The core of the friends participating were Shahen (now in Yerevan), Markar (now in Glendale), Aris Avakian (now in Huntington Beach), Ara Karapetian (still in Tehran), Herman Vahramian (now in Milano), Leon (no fixed address) and Roubik Gharabegian (now in Toronto). The girls were our sisters and their friends such as Sirik, Mariette, Rita (later Markar's wife), Anoush (later Shahen's wife) etc.

The boys would act as brave gentlemen and would carry all the packages, also helping the girls to cross the streams and gorges, holding their hands and sometimes even carrying them over. It was inevitable for various short term or long term relationships to develop during these outings, as well as hearts to be broken. We had a game which was played with special cards and which was very popular. Each card was printed with up to 20 flower names and in front of each name there was a corny sentence in the form of a question or a possible answer to a question, which would be the expression of an really old fashioned relationship. This game used to belong to my aunt Vanoush and we used to play for fun. The pack was in the middle and everyone would gather around it and try to find his/her question or answer in the cards. After finding it you would give it to the person of your choice (always of the opposite sex) and call the name of the

flower. The answer was received in the same manner. For example you chose “Rose”, which asked:

- Why do I feel you are avoiding me today?

and would get back a card proclaiming “Hyacinth”, which said:

- My heart is afraid of being broken, etc.

We used to play it as a joke, but sometimes real feelings would also be expressed and a drama would unfold.

Our Koushesh Armenian School was for boys only, but we had a sister school called Mariamian School, which was for the girls. During my last summer in Tehran the school organised picnics for the final grades of boys and girls together and naturally this was quite an eagerly awaited occasion. Both the boys and the girls were between the ages of 18-19, but the girls were naturally more mature than us, the boys. The girls were accompanied with a chaperon, Miss Maro (I think that was her name), a middle aged spinster, who was there to oversee and control what might be excessive behaviour between the members of the opposite sexes. The boys would try to put up their best side forward to impress the girls and the girls would gather together and giggle and gossip. One of the girls called Zabel impressed me very much but I only saw her once more in a party and then I came to England to study.

Thus with some experience in work but little experience in life and not really prepared to face the world on my own I suddenly found myself getting ready to leave Iran and enter a new stage in life.



80- Mariette & Sirik on the train. Now-Ruz holiday in Ahwaz, 1958



81- Mehrabad airport. Friends and family seeing me off to UK. October 1958.

14 – THE FIRST YEAR IN ENGLAND

On 13 October 1958, an overcast morning, I joined the remaining NIOC students in the Mehrabad airport and left Tehran.

As I was the first in the family to travel abroad for the purpose of obtaining higher education, the whole family as well as classmates and friends were there to see me off. I was still weak from the operation and the subsequent complications but put up a bold front. This was my first flight and a very exciting one for me. We departed early in the morning aboard a KLM flight to Amsterdam on a DC3 and arrived there at about 10 in the evening with stopovers in Istanbul and Rome. Then we changed planes and arrived in London at around midnight aboard a turboprop jet, the latest in the aviation technology of the day. The whole journey took us about 20 hours to complete.

What I remember about the journey from the airport to the Courtland Hotel in De Vere Terrace, Kensington was that the roads were wet and the street lighting was yellow, a most unusual and sickly colour.

In the hotel I remembered that the doctor had advised that I should not lift heavy items for a week or two. Unfortunately, the room assigned to me was on the fourth floor and there was no lift. Furthermore, I could not make anyone understand that I needed help, therefore I carried my suitcase up only to find out that I have walked up the wrong stairway and should have gone up the other one. I had no choice but to repeat the process once again. We were told that our guardian, Mr. Nabavi would be joining us in the morning and that we could stay in London 3-4 days until our travels to the colleges in various cities would be organised.

The next morning we came down for breakfast and were seated around small tables laden with various items of crockery and cutlery. The first “course” was served. It was corn flakes in a bowl and we did not know what to do with this item! So, I started to eat them as they were but kept a weary lookout to see what the others might be doing with the dry flakes. Then I noticed that one of the guests was sprinkling sugar on and pouring milk over the flakes before eating with the spoon. This was lesson number one.



82- Close family members in Mehrabad, October 1958.

Then we met Mr. Nabavi, who gave us some instructions and information regarding the colleges that we would be going to. He informed that we are the last of the group of the students to be sent to England for higher education. Together with those arrived a few weeks and months previously, there were 70 of us. We were going to study in various colleges in the UK and preparing for the Advance Level exams to be taken the next summer.

The first group of students, who numbered about 15, had passed their entrance test the previous year and had arrived in the UK at the beginning of the summer. They had already had some tuition and English language courses and were miles better off than us, the newly arrivals.

Mr. Nabavi gave us some basic instructions and advice on social etiquette and warned us against wasting our funds. He told us that we were going to receive £45 per month for our board and personal expenses, which was considered to be a princely sum – much higher than what the local students would be getting for scholarship. He also gave us directions how to do some sightseeing in London during the few days that we were there and warned us of the dangers of Soho night-clubs who would try to lure us in.

My first day was spent in the Kensington gardens and Hyde Park and in the evening we decided to go to Piccadilly. This is when we realised that although we understood the written English but nobody understood what we were saying and conversely, we didn't understand anything said to us. So much for our knowledge of the English language!

At the end of a few days of sightseeing five of us were put on a train to Manchester, where we were met and taken to the British Council offices, who had apparently organised our lodgings. From there we went by coach to our lodgings and were given instruction to come back the next evening and report how we got on during the first 24 hours.

I ended up in Sale, near Manchester at number 32 Beaufort Avenue, with a kind landlady, Mrs Lawrence, whose son was in the army. She had two extra bedrooms and had taken in lodgers. I was one and the others were, Parviz Sharifi and Ashtari, both NIOC students. Next door we had another NIOC student, Farrahi, staying with Mrs. Armitage, who was a widow with a young daughter. The room and board cost me £3/10s per week.

My bedroom did not have any heating and the bed was always damp and cold. The bedding consisted of two army blankets a sheet and an eitherdown. This was very unusual for me since I was used to sleeping under a covered duvet, which was a single layer and easy to control. Here I was faced with multi-layered bedding, which was prone to self-rearranging with the slightest movement of the occupant. For added discomfort the eitherdown had a satin underside and would keep slipping off the bed so that I had to get up a few times in the middle of the night to drag it back on me. To this day I still have not resolved this problem of the silk underside!

By now we were used to the breakfast and the tea with milk but the dinners were still very difficult to eat. These consisted of a paper-thin slice of lamb, pork or beef with a few pieces of boiled cabbage or sprouts and half a boiled potato. Maybe normal fare for the average British home but inedible as far as we were concerned. However, when one is hungry anything becomes edible!

As there was no heating in the bedroom, all studying had to be done in the lounge, near the coal-fired fireplace, which we had to keep well stocked. The fire burned all evening and heated up the side of your body facing it, while the opposite side, facing away from the fire would be freezing. To keep the body warm evenly one had to do half turns in front of the fire all the time, thus making the process of reading and particularly writing full of hurdles and interruptions.

After a few weeks together I noticed that one of my friends was spending unduly long periods of time in the toilet. When I enquired if he was all right, he replied that he was OK and the only problem was that to use these European WC's one had to be a "veritable juggler". It was only then that I realised what was going on. Iranians use the Eastern type toilets which basically are an opening in the floor used to squat on. My friend was apparently trying to squat over the bowl, after balancing himself standing on the rim of the toilet bowl !

For the first academic day in England we were taken to Stretford Technical College, where we were supposed to study for "A" Levels and take the exams the next summer. Neither of us realised what we were getting into. The first session that we attended was the period of Applied Physics, with Mr. Bell. Although we were familiar with the formulae used in the process, but none of us understood what went on. The language and terminology

were unfamiliar and most important of all, there were experiments performed and conclusions made. Again, none of us had even seen an experiment in physics and at the end of the session all of us felt very depressed not having understood much. Did they, back in Iran really expect us to pass “A” Level exams in Pure and Applied Mathematics as well as Physics or Chemistry within these eight months? Fat chance!!!

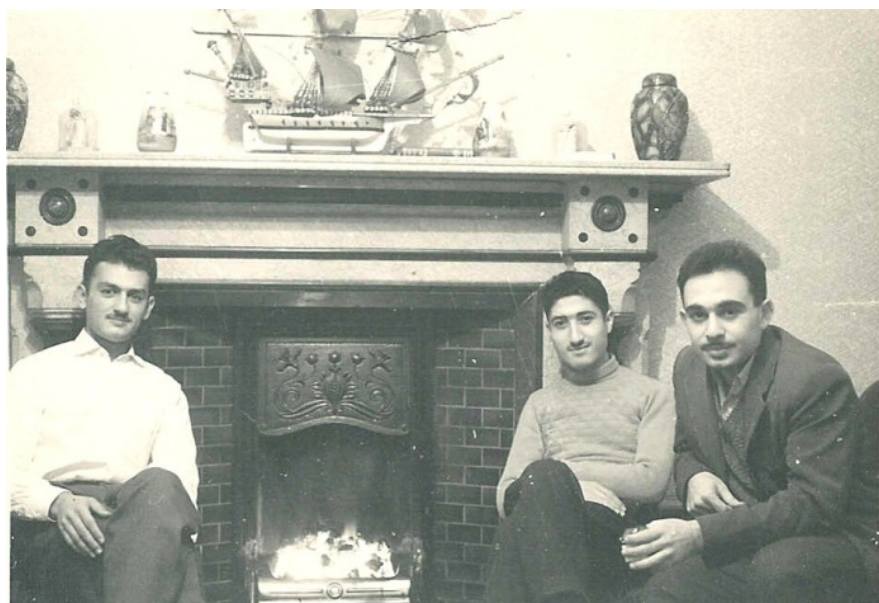
The same experience was repeated in the sessions of mathematics and chemistry. It was then that a group of us decided to go to Mr. Jones, the Headmaster, and ask for extra lessons in English language in order to help us understand the goings on. This he happily organised and we had two hours of English language sessions every week. To our amazement the majority of the students in the English class were locals. We never thought that anyone but a foreigner would require tuition in English, as this is the language of the local population and they should have no problems with it. At the end of the year, most of the Iranian students passed the “O Level” exams in English, while majority of the locals failed.

After a month or so in the college five of us decided that there was no point wasting time and attending the science classes, as we understood nothing. Instead we thought that we could spend our time going to the movies, dancing halls etc. and generally have a good time, while practising our language skills. The group leader was Mansour Hatefi, a short and jolly fellow and quite a ladies’ man, the others being Reza Nobari, Parviz Mokhtari, Taghi Nattagh and I. By now five of us had moved to a private residence hotel, called Shepherd’s Hotel, which catered mainly for long term residents. All the other guests consisted of retired and elderly single men and women. I shared a room with Reza Nobari and the other three friends had single rooms each.

After a few weeks when we had time to experience various aspects of the British cuisine, all of us came to the conclusion that the only edible British



83- With friends in Stretford Tech., 1958, Manchester.



84- With Parviz and Ashtari in 22 Beaufort Avenue, Sales, 1958.

food was the “Fish and Chips” wrapped in newspapers and sprinkled with generous amounts of malt vinegar and salt. Luckily, on the corner of the street leading to our lodgings there was the local Fish’n Chip bar, which we used to visit on the way back home from our evening outings. We had come to know the owners, who lived behind the shop and even if the shop was closed we would ring the bell and they would oblige us by getting rid of the leftovers of the evening and getting paid for it too. Everyone was thus happy. The fish cost 9d and the chips 6d (total equal to 6½ new pence).

For the first month or so I used to take the train from Brooklands station to Trafford Park, from where it was a few minutes walk to the college. Later on I bought a bicycle and a lather jacket and started cycling to college every day. The bike was a four speed one, for which I had paid £11. It served three purposes at once. It provided me with some sort of sporting activity, it saved me time and also saved me money. I used it until the summer, when one of my friends borrowed it, rode it to the Public library in Peter Street and left it there. After one week he told me that he had left the bike in the city centre, by which time it had been stolen.

For recreation a group of us started playing cards once a week. This gradually turned into friendly poker sessions and with the arrival of two gambling fellow students⁶ they rapidly degenerated into real cut throat poker games, where you could lose as much as £10 or £20. On one occasion one of the boys, Lotfali Khonji, a stiff and simple intellectual and a man of letters, who later became a broadcaster in the BBC Persian Service, lost his monthly allowance in one night. I thought this to be a real stupidity and stopped participating in these gatherings.

Once a week, on Saturday evenings we would go to the local “Locarno” dancing on Chester Road. They had a live band there, who played until 10:30 PM, when they would announce “ladies and gentlemen, take your partners for the last waltz please”. There for the first time we were faced with dances such as the quick-step, the fox-trot etc. All these were new to me, but some of my fellow students had never ever danced in their lives. I wanted to learn the new dances and some of the others wanted to learn dancing, therefore we decided to enrol in a dance school. We joined a local

⁶ The two were Javid and Zorufchi, both compulsive gamblers.

one and had quite enjoyable sessions dancing with the local girls. In a month or so I even learned how to do the Gay Gordon!

My roommate Reza was naturally a shy person and whenever we went out to enjoy ourselves, he would prepare himself by drinking spirits, in order to lose his inhibitions. Once a little drunk he would become another person. It was very difficult to prevent him from over-drinking and after every outing I had to lead him home, as he usually became incapable of walking straight. In these situations his gaze would become glassy and cold and it used to give me a very uncomfortable feeling. I hated these situations but as he was a friend I had to take care of him when he was incapable of doing so himself.

One day in December we decided to go to the Bellevue Zoo, which was a four mile bus-ride away. During the return trip a heavy smog descended on all of Manchester such that it took the bus about two hours to get us home. All this time the Conductor was walking in front of the bus, his special torch aimed at the kerb of the road, while the driver was following the red tail light of the torch.

These autumn and winter smogs (a mixture of coal smoke and fog) were very frequent events and during the heavy smogs the radio would warn the elderly and the asthmatic not to venture out. Notwithstanding these warnings, during such days the death rate of this section of the population would be many times the national average.

In early spring a fun fair came to Withenshaw Park, not too far from us. This was the first time that we had seen a fun fair and enjoyed it so much that for the whole week that the fair was on we would spend almost every evening there - spending our money on various rides and shooting galleries etc. The electric cars were one of the most interesting attractions.

During the winter months, when the coal fires would be burning, a white collar worn in the morning would already be black in the afternoon. This presented a huge problem to me, since I had to do my washing and ironing, as Mrs. Lawrence did not have a washing machine. I wrote home and asked mother to knit me a high neck grey pullover, so that I could save some of the time spent on washing and ironing.

After a few months of carefree life one day on the way to the English language class, which we dutifully attended, I came face to face with the Headmaster, Mr. Jones. He was most kind and enquired what we were up to, as he had not seen our group in the college very often. I told him the truth, he listened carefully but insisted that we start attending the classes otherwise he would have to report us. Fearing the worse the next morning we presented ourselves at the school and attended one of the science classes. To our amazement we discovered that we now understood the proceedings in the classroom. Apparently the days of carefree living and contact with the local (mainly female) youth had indeed had the benefit of teaching us some English. This was in February of 1959 and we were told that in June we had to take the dreaded “A” Level exams.

I can’t remember how much work we did do, but it was a lot. We were fed up by the boarding house atmosphere and during the Easter recess every morning we would go to the Central Library in Peter Square and study there. It was then that we discovered a Chinese restaurant, the Light of Asia, on Princess Street that would serve soup with as many rolls of bread and butter as one could eat. This became our favourite haunt until the management decided that it this item of the menu was a money-losing one and stopped the serving of soup without the main course. Later on we also discovered that the so-called butter was in fact whale fat, but who cared?

I used to keep up some correspondence with family and some friends but was surprised to receive a letter for Mark Grigorian, who wrote that he had decided to come to England for higher education. Knowing that Mark was bright but his interest was in sports rather than in the school and that he usually just made to the upper grade I replied, suggesting that he does not waste his time and his father’s money, as studying in England took a lot of work and perseverance. I told him that I could only assist him if he decided to study in earnest and promised me to do so. Soon I had his reply with a solemn oath and could not refuse to help him. I went to Mr. Jones and explained him the situation. He was kind enough to give me the enrolment forms and I happily wrote to Mark that his place in the “A” Level class is secured.

When he arrived in England I had already left Manchester but I did keep in touch with him and was informed of his excellent progress from the “A” Levels in Stretford Tech to Manchester University and then to PhD in Structural Engineering at Oxford.

In fact he used to study so much that to my pleas to come to visit me in Birmingham he usually replied that he had no time to waste and needed all the time to work and study. For holidays he used to commute to Perugia, Italy, where his girlfriend Rita (my sister's closest friend) was studying textile design. So we met Mark once or twice a year only.

One day Parviz, one of our group members, announced that he had bought a Lambretta motor scooter. The scooter was brought in and was promptly deposited in the shed of the lodging house, as none of us, including Parviz could ride it. After staying in the shed for a few weeks one night we were discussing the scooter and I did mention that since I had a bike with four speed gears and also had driven a jeep, I can probably give it a try and then teach Parviz too.

Next weekend I tried riding the scooter in the garden and in a short period of time got hang of the controls. Parviz decided that we should use the scooter during the weekends. True to this, next weekend the weather was springy and bright and we decided to go to the Cheshire countryside for a ride. I got on the scooter and with Parviz on the pillion we rode out into the fields and villages of Cheshire.



85- Summer evening at 10PM in Manchester. 1959.

About 15 miles from home while riding happily along some country lanes I heard the sound of the police car bell from behind and had to pull in. The police car stopped behind us and the policeman came to us and proceeded asking the standard questions. He first asked me for a driving license, to which I replied that I didn't have one. Then he asked for my insurance, which I did not have either. I told him that the owner was Parviz, sitting on the pillion, and he did have a Provisional license as well as insurance. The policeman told me that it was illegal for me to ride and that Parviz should ride the scooter as only he had the required insurance for it. He told me that although I was not allowed to ride on the pillion of a Learner Driver, however, on this particular occasion and in order to return home I could do so, since we were far from town and there was no public transport to get me there. All these facts were noted by the police in his little book and we were told that we would hear from them soon. After the end of the formalities I did raise the question of the reason that they had stopped us in the first place. Did my riding have to do anything with it? One of the policemen replied that it must have been our unlucky day, since he lived in the same street as we did and had seen me either taking the bus or riding a bike to college in the mornings. Seeing us riding a scooter made him wonder where the scooter came from?

When the police left Parviz told me that he could not ride the scooter and that I should ride it back home. I replied that as the police drove away from Manchester, they probably would be returning to check on us and that he should try to ride the scooter. He then started trying to ride it and after a while could just barely manage to do so. At this time we saw the police car approaching from behind and waving at us as they passed.

After a few more minutes of waiting I got on the seat and rode the scooter directly home and into the shed non-stop.

During the next week or so (March 59) one of our group, Taghi Nattagh felt weak and started coughing. He went to the GP who told him that there was nothing wrong with him and he was just homesick. The condition worsened and he was sent to a specialist for a chest X-ray. They again reported nothing unusual. This carried on for another week. One day we were all in our room sitting on the floor and playing cards. Taghi was sitting next to me and was looking at the cards in my hand. Suddenly I felt that he had put his head on my shoulder and was very quiet. He had died while sitting next to me and watching my hand. It was a huge shock for all of us to learn that

Taghi could die so suddenly, away from home and family and only with four friends around him who were themselves lost in a the new country.

We informed Mr. Nabavi who took care of the rest of the formalities and after the post-mortem Taghi's body was flown to Iran to his family. The post-mortem revealed that he had a special form of lung cancer that apparently does not show on the X-rays. As he had been screened in Iran as well as in Manchester, we had no reason to doubt this. Taghi was one of the boys who neither drank nor smoked, yet he had contracted lung cancer. How ironic! In a short while another Iranian student who was not an NIOC student but who used to be friendly with Taghi died of Leukaemia. Two casualties during the first year! Yet a third student, one of the NIOC bunch, who was the son of a labourer, lost his mental balance and was found walking through the Mersey tunnel. When approached by the police he had told them that he was on his way "home". He was dispatched back to his family in Iran and we never heard anything more about him.

A week or so after the death of Taghi the neighbour policeman arrived with the court summons. Parviz and I were to appear in the local village court, where we were stopped in the countryside. I don't remember the name of the village but it was an hours ride away on a greenline bus. Later on we found out that the policeman had originally brought in the summons on the day of Taghi's death and noticing the state of our affairs had gone back to court and asked for postponement.

It was just before the exams that we appeared in the court. When our turn came, the judge thought that both of us were Moslems and waived the requirement of swearing to tell the truth etc. on the bible. The police read the charges and we told our story. The judge found us both guilty and I was made to pay £5 fine for riding without insurance and license, but Parviz was fined £6 for allowing an uninsured person to ride his scooter. We were also warned that if this happened again we would be jailed for six months or so. We returned home relieved and ready to face the exams.

Soon after this during the weekend there was a knock at my door in the early hours of the morning. Apparently Mansour had brought a girl in and now she had missed her last bus and needed to get home. Would I take her home on Parviz's scooter? She lived only a few miles away from us, in Withenshaw. I persuaded myself that it would probably be OK as it was the middle of the night anyway. I dressed, got the scooter out and started the

motor. The girl who had a very tight skirt on, sat side-saddle on the pillion. I was about to take off when a policeman appeared slowly riding on a bike and waived me down. I thought that was the end and could already see the prison bars in front of my eyes. He approached me, got off his bicycle and calmly said that it was illegal to ride side-saddle on the pillion and that the young lady had to seat properly, straddling the pillion. The girl had to pull her skirt all the way up in order to be able to ride on the pillion in accordance with the law. We took off and I got her home, but all was not over yet. On the way back I noted that someone behind me was flashing the headlights. A police car overtook and waived me down for the second time. I could not believe my bad luck. What else now? A policeman got out of the car and approached me. When I asked what the problem was, he replied with a question asking if I knew that my red tail lamp was off and it was illegal to ride without it. Relieved that he did not ask for documents I immediately said that I will attend to it as soon as I got home. This time too I was lucky but my luck could run out any time, therefore I decided that this was the last time that I was going to ride the damned scooter.

When I settled in the boarding house I thought that I now needed to attend to my hobbies too. For music I bought a manual Emerson record player, which had a small single valve amplifier and a speaker inside the case. I bought a few cheap LP's and started my small collection. As I wanted to listen to the radio too, I bought a few components and rigged up a simple radio inside the box, with a tuning knob protruding from the front of the player box. This simple radio could get the BBC Light program on long wave, as well as the BBC Home Service stations.

Neither my roommate nor the other friends in the lodgings had any knowledge of classical music but through my listening habits two of them gradually got to like it. Later on after we split up and went to our different universities, some of them confided in me saying that they too had started classical LP collections of their own.

I found out that Manchester had a symphony orchestra called the Halle, which was conducted by Sir John Barbirolli, one of the famous British (originally Italian) conductors. Whenever I could arrange to get away from the boys and if I could afford it, I would go to the Free Trade Hall, where they performed their weekly concerts. These were the first live classical concerts that I heard and was very much impressed.

When I left Iran father gave me his Leica IIIc camera, which was an excellent one and I used it to take many slides from Manchester as well as everywhere that I visited. My slide collection started from these days and since then I have kept them all in good order. I even managed to save some money and bought an old Leica wide angle lens, which came very handy.

For the Now-Rouz holidays Mr. Nabavi had arranged for all the students to go to Birmingham University for a get together, where we were to stay in one of the residence halls and have a Persian New Year party in the Union. Almost 50 attended, as it was a good occasion to meet and get to know each other. There even were some Iranian girls, studying in Birmingham who were also invited to the party. Altogether it was quite a successful gathering and party. We even had a picnic in Stratford-upon-Avon with the whole group in a coach.

June was already upon us and we were getting ready to take the dreaded “A” Level exams. Somehow I don’t remember that period at all. I must have blocked it off, as it wasn’t one of the cherished periods of my time in Manchester. They all passed uneventfully and we were told that we would get the results in August. I thought that I could have done better had I been more attentive, but it was water under the bridge and now nothing more could be done about it.

We were told that from July to September we were going to go to a seaside town called Deal, for some instructions as well as relaxation, but there was a couple of weeks gap until then. I therefore decided to pay a visit to my mother’s side of the family in France before going on to Deal. I send a letter to mother’s cousin Hranoush, who lived in Paris saying that I would be visiting them in early July. I took the train and arrived in Paris with no knowledge of French. I managed to find my way to her home in rue Botzaris, 19th Arodissement and was greeted by her very warmly as if she knew me very intimately. She had been very intimate with mother, who kept in touch with her and she was aware of all the goings on in our family. She and her husband with her mother-in-law lived in a small two bedroom apartment in a block of flats and while staying with them I slept on the sofa in the lounge.

During the previous nine months or so I had spoken little Armenian and when in Paris I started speaking to my relatives in Armenian, it felt very strange. It felt as if it was not me doing the talking but someone else, who

was inside me, as the sound of the language was almost unfamiliar to me. A most disturbing and strange sensation, but it did not last long.

Aunt Hranoush's husband, Petros Zaroyan was a literary figure in the Armenian cultural life in France and had been editor of a newspaper in Marseilles. I usually spent my day sightseeing and returned home in the evenings. After dinner both Hranoush and Petros liked to sit and talk about our family and life in Iran, my impressions of Paris etc. It seemed that she missed my mother a lot, as she had not had any close friends after mother's departure in 1934. Metzhairik's younger brother Arshak and Hranoush's mother Haikanoush were frequent visitors and uncle Arshak liked to puff his cigarettes without inhaling the smoke and I always remember him with a cigarette in hand, surrounded with clouds of smoke

They took me to visit various relatives who lived in Paris. The first visit was to go and meet the Berberian family - mother's other cousin Offik and her husband Levon Berberian, who had been a Soviet prisoner of war in France and after the war had decided to stay there. They had two children, Seda and Raffi, who was named after his dead uncle.

After that we visited Metzhairik's nephews and their families. The two brothers Azgin and Haghop Sabounchian, who had two Middle Eastern grocery shops in rue Trevisé etc., near the Follie-Berger. One shop was called Arax and the other Massis. We visited them much later in 1981 too, with Mariette and the boys, who were not very impressed! These shops both looked like typical Middle Eastern grocery shops, with everything in an organised disorder on the floor and the shelves etc. One or two of the young men in the family had clandestine love affairs and even long term relationships with French girls, since the families were very strongly xenophobic and there was no way that the elder generation could or would accept a non-Armenian as part of the family. Most probably no non-Armenian had ever set foot in some of their homes. A very conservative and unhealthy attitude for people who had come to a foreign country for refuge. This instinctive self protection and ghetto attitude is probably emanating from the feeling of weakness and helplessness against the prevailing tide of the daily life, which would inevitably engulf all society and drag it along. Little did they realise that taboos and prohibitions were not the proper method of resistance. But how can one blame these people, who twenty or thirty years ago had been simple town folk in a remote Eastern Anatolian town, leading a life unchanged for centuries, full of

traditions and limitations who are now suddenly faced with the perils of the western “civilisation” and its permissiveness.

Azgin, mother’s late first cousin had a daughter, Lidia and a younger son Jirair, who now is a dentist. Lidia is so careless with her appearance and weight that she has not married and is now in her middle 50’s with no further prospect of marriage. The parents firmly believed that the elder daughter has to marry first and as she has not married yet, the younger brother simply can not marry. Therefore poor Jirair has to wait probably forever.



86- In Paris with Hranoush’s family, Summer 1959.

At one time in Jirair’s early career, when he had just started his dental surgery cabinet the mother would come and sit in his cabinet during his working hours, just in order to prevent or intimidate any possible flirtation by French lady patients with her son, their dentist. I found Paris a very beautiful town and would walk around all day, relaxing with a cup of coffee in the open-air bistros and cafés. Unfortunately my impression of the Parisians was not quite favourable. One day I was walking along the Seine,

in the vicinity of the Notre Dame and saw a beautiful building with turrets on the left bank. I tried to find out what building it was but could not find it in my map. Seeing young people, probably university students walking by I thought I could ask one of them, as they probably spoke at least some English. I approached a young man and asked if he could tell me what the building on the opposite bank was. He replied in fast French, which I did not understand. I asked if he could say it in English as I did not speak any French. In a quite acceptable English he replied “Why do you come to Paris if you do not speak any French” ... and walked away!

After a fortnight in Paris, which included witnessing of the celebration of the Bastille day, I returned to England and went straight to Deal, to join the rest of my fellow students.

There were about 70 NIOC students staying in Deal, accommodated in the Queens Hotel, next to the Deal Castle, on the beach. I ended up in a very large room with two others. We usually had our meals in the annexe, which was on the far side of the Castle. We had a full program in the mornings, which consisted of English language tuition, background information on the English education system, history and other related topics. After lunch we were free and luckily 1959 was the driest year for apparently 200 years and during our two months in Deal we hardly saw any rain. We came out of Deal with a good suntan and the false impression that the summers in England are sunny and warm.

We used to spend afternoons sunbathing on the pebbled beach and socialising with the locals and the tourists alike. One day I was walking along with Reza Nobari when I suddenly heard two girls talking in Farsi. We approached them and found out that they were two students from a boarding school in Walmer, which was the town next to Deal. They were also surprised to find Iranians in Deal, little did they know that there were another 68 of us there. The four of us used to meet on the weekends and one night we persuaded them to stay on the beach and watch the stars. In the early hours of the morning we must have dozed off when suddenly one the girls cried out. The tide had come in and the waves had completely soaked her. As they had to be back in the boarding house we drove them there (yes – on a scooter) and got them into the house through the ground floor window. Luckily they were not found out and escaped punishment.



87- With Roxy and Suzan in Deal, Kent. 1959.



88- With film comedy star Norman Wisdom in Deal, 1959.

The boys had targeted the local dance hall and one Saturday evening about ten of our boys had gone there and picked up some local girls. The young local males, mainly Teddy Boys, had not liked it at all (I can't say that I blame them at all) and armed with bicycle chains etc. had started to pick fights with our boys. About 50 against the ten. It was at that time that someone ran into our room and raised the alarm. In no time at all, almost thirty of us ran towards the dance hall. The locals seeing us approaching barricaded themselves inside the hall and dared not come out. Eventually they released our friends and we left them to their devices. From then onwards no one bothered our friends any more. We became famous in the town and the newspapers reported favourably about us and our activities in the town.

During late August our results came and we were to find out where each of us was going to be sent to. My results were acceptable and I passed my three "A" Levels as well as two "O" Levels in English and Chemistry. As I had not known that one should apply to the Universities in time, in order to get an offer and secure a place, therefore I could not get a placing in London University. Instead I was offered a place in Birmingham's College of Advanced Technology, also known as the Birmingham CAT⁷, which offered sandwich courses and was considered on par with the good universities in the UK.

The last weekend in Deal was a sad one, as we were going to be sent to different towns and did not know if we would meet again. For the evening we decided that each person should bring a bottle of drink. We sat in the common room of the annexe, along the four walls, talked and took a sip from the bottle in hand, passing the bottle on to the person on the left. Thus in an hour or so everyone had tasted every drink with disastrous results. This is the first time that I really got drunk and I do remember doing things that I would not normally do but had no control over my deeds. In front of the Deal castle there was an open air puppet theatre, with a small stage and benches, where a bunch of us in our drunken state did all sorts of impressions etc.

That night some of us ended up sleeping on the beach to be once again rudely awakened by the incoming tide in the early hours of the morning.

⁷ In 1962 Birmingham CAT changed into Aston University and upon graduation we were given a Diploma in Technology as well as Bachelor of Science degree.

This was the end of an era of the carefree days and now we all had to begin our studies in earnest.



89- Group of friends during the last days of our stay in Deal with Mr Nabavi, the head of NIOC office in London., 1959.

15 – THE UNIVERSITY YEARS

My first few days in Birmingham were the low point of my life in England. I arrived a few days before the course started, had no lodging and knew no one there. I didn't even know when the others would be coming. I went to the YMCA and shared a room with a young man who had been there for some time. The room was dark and bare, save for two iron beds, a table and a steel wardrobe without locks. During those few days I must have smoked 40-50 cigarettes a day, such that on the third day I developed a terrible cough and did go off cigarettes for months.

Eventually the course started and I met my other fellow NIOC classmates. In the Electrical Engineering Department there were five of us.⁸ Another two were in the Mechanical engineering department.⁹ The college had about 1200 students, out of which the only foreigners were we – the Iranians, two Indians and one Chinese boy. The rest were British. Many of them had never even met a foreigner. We were at first dismissed as second class students, but after the test results of the first quarter, when all the Iranians came at the top of the class, they changed their view and we were regarded with respect.

I tried to find lodgings through the newspaper advertisements but after a couple of occasions when they asked for my name and where I came from, reiterating that they “do not want wogs” I gave up and together with Parviz Mokhtari tried to find a place through the British Council. They found us two rooms in an elderly French-Jewish lady's house in Sutton Coldfield, a town a few miles to the north of Birmingham.

On arrival she asked us if we wanted cereals or hot food for breakfast. Then she asked if we wanted tea or toast. We decided to have the hot food with the tea, and were thus never offered any cereals or toast. The bedrooms were not heated and were very cold. I asked her for a heater but she said that we had to pay for it. As our funds were limited we decided against it,

⁸ These were Ahmad Majdpour, Siamak Fani, Behrouz Hakami, Parviz Mokhtari, Homayoun Shahriari and I.

⁹ Victor Nickravesh and Rejali.

but I decided to use my small electric heater by connecting it to the lighting circuit, which I proceeded to do with minimal results.

We decided to supplement our food by the excellent granny smith apples, which we either picked up from the trees in the garden or “borrowed” from the landlady’s larder. We could not wait to leave the place, and after we left we had a letter from her complaining that we had overheated and ruined her wiring by the use of the heater as well as about the missing apples from the larder.

Later on, after the New Year we moved to the Osborne Hotel, located at 184 Hagley Road, in Edgbaston, which suited us both financially and logistically. There were lots of buses passing Hagley Road and one or two took you to the city centre, where the college was.

The hotel was owned by a lady but was run by Albert. He was the manager, the buyer, the server, the handyman etc., in other words - the only person to see when you needed something. Not that there was anyone else to be seen, except perhaps the maid who did the rooms and the cleaning. The food served by Albert was not good at all. The meat came in transparent slices and was always raw, the potatoes - half boiled and hard. Eventually we found a way of getting slightly better cooked meals. In the mornings, after breakfast we would warn Albert that we were going to be late, as we had tutorials and lab work to do in the college etc. Thus instead of coming home at five and dining at 6 with the other guests, we would arrive at eight. During this time the dinners would be in the oven keeping warm and we hoped, gradually getting cooked as well. In any case they tasted better dry than with the ladleful of watery gravy on them.

Once I tried to barbecue a calf’s liver on the open gas fire in my room. I straightened a wire coat-hanger, cut the liver into strips and skewered the strips, holding the skewer near the gas fire. The taste was good but the juices and blood dripped on the fire and the floor and the smell was too much to bear. In any case Albert could have found out and I could be in trouble. It was not worth it. The only decent meal we had was in the college refectory, where you had quite a choice, but again these were the typical English items. As a treat to ourselves once a week we went to one of the Chinese restaurants, where for 2/6d (12.5p) one could eat a decent meal. But it was too expensive for regular visits.



90- With Gharabegian Roubik and Lova in Manchester, 1961,



91- With Gurgen Mimi and Hamo in Hyde Park, 1960.

During those years in the restaurants in England if you asked for a glass of water they would look at you as if you were from another planet. Upon detailed description of the glass of water they eventually would produce a glass of tepid tap water. God help you if you asked for some ice, the use of which for cooling the drinking water was unknown to them. Vegetable items such as egg plant, herbs, courgette etc. were also unknown quantities and wine was served only in the very expensive and Michelin rated restaurants.

One of the few other establishments that one could have edible food with decent prices was the chain of Lyon's Corner House restaurants, which were self service restaurants serving British food. The food was of acceptable quality and being self-service, one could actually chose by seeing what was on offer. The few existing Italian restaurants such as Dino's etc did not serve real Italian food but their British versions, which were stodgy and starchy items, not at all suited to my palette.

During the Christmas holidays I decided to come to London and stay in a Bed and Breakfast hotel, at 174 Cromwell Road, (where now the Cromwell Hospital stands). This establishment was owned and ran by an Armenian from Burma called Akon, who was an old man, with a pronounced limp and walked with a stick. Every morning he would walk into the breakfast room to meet new visitors and find out who they were. One morning I was having my breakfast when in waked Leon and his sister Mariette, who had arrived in England the previous September. I was very happy to meet them and we spent the next few days together. There was George (Jora) Hacopian, whose father had a delicatessen shop near my fathers shop, who lived nearby and would join us quite often too.

It was very much of a surprise for me to see Mariette again in London. Her father did not believe in the educational system of Iran and had sent the children to England for education. Mariette was barely 15 and she was sent to Clifton Girls School in Bristol as a boarder. During the holidays and half term she had to leave the school and as her guardian lived in West Kensington, he found her this hotel near him, where he could supposedly "keep an eye" on her. After couple of years she moved to London and attended Pitman's secretarial school. I decided that every holiday I have to come to London in order to be able to meet Mariette.

As my course was a sandwich course I had to work in the industry for about five months every year. The academic course being two terms of three months each per year. For the first year my practical training was to be Workshop training, the meaning of which was vague to me, but it was soon to be clarified. In January 1960 I was sent to the AEI Cable factory in Woolwich, South East London, near the dockyards, (today opposite the City of London Airport) for my workshop training. The factory was just off the main Woolwich Road leading to London and we were allocated rooms on the top two floor of a workers' café, situated on the main road. This was a smelly and greasy establishment catering for the lorry drivers and the factory workers. The owner, a woman of about 40 handed me the key to the front door of the café, as the only access to the top floors of the building was through the café, which she closed at 6PM. There were 4-5 rooms most of them occupied by NIOC students. There was also one Indian student, who used to spend about one hour every morning in the bathroom, causing great anxiety to everyone else, who were invariably late and were queuing up for their turn in the bathroom.

We were served English breakfast and in the evenings, before closing time, we had our dinners followed up by some sort of pudding, which usually was the highlight of the meal. Here I learned about Bread and Butter pudding, Tapioca pudding etc. The owner had hung a board next to the kitchen fridge with instruction that we could take anything from the fridge provided we noted down on the board the room number as well as the item taken. This was quite useful, as the café was closed on the weekends when we had to do our own cooking.

On Monday I presented myself to the Training Officer of the factory and was at once sent to the workshop. I was told that for the next 12 weeks I would be working there but as an initiation, for the first two days I had to sweep the floor and do all sort of odd jobs in the workshop. After that we were going to learn and actually make various tools and other items. With this very inauspicious start began my industrial training in England.

After the initial days I was given an uneven block of steel of about 6 cm and told to file it down manually into a proper cube. I asked the foreman if this was all that I had to do. He looked at me in amusement and said



92- In front of London St Sarkis Church, spring 1960.

“Yes!” I started the task and tried to get plain surfaces with 90 degree angles. I filed away and kept checking the surfaces, which seemed to be sloping down towards the edges irrespective of my efforts to file them straight. By the time I thought I was near getting a plain surface there was not much left of the block. Swallowing up my pride I had to go to the Foreman and ask for another block of steel. He produced the second block of steel without saying anything, but his looks were eloquent enough!

During the following weeks I learned to work on the horizontal saw, lathes, milling machines etc and by the time my workshop training ended I had made a number of items some of which I still use. These included a hacksaw, three vices of various sizes, pliers, oil can, monkey wrench, calipers, die and tap holders and a drawing implement for drawing broken and dotted lines etc. This gave all of us a good insight into what can be made in workshops and what equipment is needed for making the required piece.

In the way of amusement Woolwich did not offer much that I was interested in, but the consolation was that the Royal Festival Hall and Charing Cross Station were a mere 30 minute train ride away. This is where I spent most of my savings, buying tickets to concerts and seeing and hearing major world figures such as the Oistrakhs, Rubinstein, Heifetz, Stern, Menuhin, Parikian, Gilels, Arrau, Klemperer, Monteaux, Giulini, Khachaturian and host of others. I used to buy the choir seats (behind the orchestra), which were the cheapest and gave one the opportunity to watch the conductor as well as read some of the players scores. During my four years in England I must have attended over 100 concerts and recitals as well as tens of ballets and operas. I kept all the program notes in proper chronological order in four ring binders and took them back to Iran in 1963, however when we left Tehran in 1981 there was no way that I could take them along and had to leave them behind in our half empty apartment.

On Sundays I used to go to St. Sarkis Armenian church in London, at Iverna Gardens, Kensington, to meet friends and see who is the most recent arrival from Iran. On Half Terms and holidays Mariette would be there too, back in London from Bristol. At that time there were a lot of Armenian students from Iran who were studying in London, all of whom would be gathering in front of St. Sarkis Church on Sundays. The regular gang consisted of Smbat Assaturian, Armine Grigorian, Armnie



93- Tools that I made in Woolwich, London, 1961.



94- With mother on Westminster bridge

Nicoghossian (the Gossip), Elo, Mimi, Gourgen Yeghiazarian, Hamo, Shavarsh plus some hangers on. After the service we would all go to an Indian restaurant where the food was good and plentiful. There we would stuff ourselves so much that we could not eat more food for the next 24 hours. From there we would go to Hyde Park (weather permitting) or to the cinema. These were highly social and enjoyable gatherings. Smbat had already graduated as a dentist and was working, earning a lot of money (around £120 per month), therefore he could afford a car, a maroon coloured Ford Anglia with a silver roof. Sometimes all of us would pile into the poor little car and drive to a Greek restaurant off Tottenham Court Road, where they served home made Kleftiko and other Greek/Cypriot specialities. On a few occasions seven of us crammed into the little car and drove to the seaside. I still don't know how did we manage to evade the police while breaking the law so blatantly and piling up 7-8 people into a five seater?

During the Iranian New Year (the Now Rouz) the NIOC representative arranged for all of us to gather in Leeds, where we stayed at the University Halls of Residence. There was a lot of political talk amongst the students and a group was elected to start the preliminary process of having an Iranian Students' Union in the UK. This led to quite heated debates and exchanges of ideas, with the leftist friends getting the upper hand. Although I participated in the meetings and later on in the protest marches, I decided that I should not get involved in the organisational side of the Union. Two of the active leftist leaders, who were unfortunate enough to return to Iran, were later apprehended by the Shah's secret police, Savak. One was executed and the other served a ten year prison term.

After the Easter holidays the second term started and I was back in Birmingham, still sharing a room with Parviz. This term passed uneventfully and sometime in June I had a letter from mother saying that father and she had decided to come to see me in England for the summer holidays and perhaps we could all then go to Germany and Austria to visit some friends and do some sightseeing. I was excited and wrote them that I only have two free weeks in August and September before my next term started in college.

I decided that if I had a driving license I might possibly be able to persuade my father to send me some money for a second hand car. I knew the basics

and had driven in Tehran but decided to get driving instructions to improve my driving. I also applied for a driving test, which I duly took. During the test the instructor said that when he bangs his hand on the dashboard I should do an emergency stop. I was driving along a deserted road when he banged his hand on the dashboard. The road was covered with sand and I thought if I suddenly braked the car might swerve, so I ignored the signal completely. When I was asked why I had not stopped, I said that I did not realise that it was his signal to do the emergency stop. I did get away with it and got my driving license, but my second hand car never materialised, as it was a lot of money and in addition, my parents considered it dangerous too.

My parents arrived in August and after spending a few days in London, where I showed them the important sites. Together we travelled to Hamburg, where father's friend Partev was staying at the time. We stayed in a small hotel and after about two years I had my first chelo-kebab in a Iranian restaurant on the Alster See. One evening we were walking in the streets and somehow ended up in the Ripperbahn, the red light district of Hamburg, with shop windows full of almost bare women standing and sitting in various suggestive poses. Father and I were very much surprised at the sight but mother was upset and we had to turn back without delay. Meanwhile I discretely took a mental note of the location of the street for possible unaccompanied sightseeing visit later during our stay in the city.

From Hamburg we travelled to Hanover, where some distant relatives, the Kodikian brothers were studying. Their parents were also visiting them and this way I could join the younger generation on their evening outings, while the elders "enjoyed" each others company? One evening the brothers Sourik and Martik took me to a night club, where each table was equipped with a telephone set and a large plaque on the table advertised the extension number of the telephone. You could ring the girls sitting at any table that took your fancy and chat with them or invite them to dance. Very sophisticated indeed!!!

From Hanover we travelled down to Vienna where Rouzan (one of our party friends) had moved during the past year, after marrying a rich Armenian merchant's son. Another friend, Roubina, who was also studying there had reserved a Gasthof for us in a good area of the city. I had many school friends who were studying either in Graz or Vienna and it

was a welcome opportunity to see some of them. Shahik Zeytounchian came from Graz and stayed with us during these few days, which was a very enjoyable surprise.

It just happened that Rouzan's parents, who were very close friends of my parents, were also visiting Vienna and here again my possible problem of spending all of my time with my parents was resolved. Usually there would be 5-6 of us who would go round daytime and join again for dinner and after dinner activities (mainly walking down the Kertnerstrasse and visiting one or two cafés). Through these friend I was introduced to the delights of the Wiener Schnitzel, which was a far cry from the tasteless English cuisine that we were used to. Here I departed from my parents to come back to good old Birmingham and they returned back home.

My practical training that year was at George Ellison Switchgear works in Birmingham. I started my training in September and was told that I will be working in the switchgear assembly shop. My first job was to wire some free-standing electrical cabinets. These had some equipment mounted on them and we had to wire the equipment from inside the panel. To do the wiring special jigs were constructed and we prepared the wire bunches with the correct shape and length on these jigs to be installed the inside the panels. After the wire bunches were installed, we had to connect the ends of each wire to the appropriate item of equipment in the panel. For the first few days I was watching on to see what were the electricians doing and after that I started to do the work myself. After about 3-4 weeks I got used to it and was doing 4-5 panels a day when one morning I was summoned to the union office in the works. The shop steward warned me that I was doing the work too fast and if I carried on doing it then the workmen would have to go on strike. I was flabbergasted at this warning. All I was doing was to learn to work but apparently the union regulation was that each electrician should wire NOT MORE THAN three panels per day. After 3-4 weeks training I was doing 4 to 5 panels per day and this was considered as a threat to the workmen and hence the warning to go on strike over a non-union worker (me). I was not paid anything for the work and did not want any trouble, therefore I asked to be transferred to another shop, where they were assembling oil filled switches. By this time I had learned my lesson and after learning the job I did as little as possible in order not to cause further trouble. So much for efficiency at work?

In our course there were about 18 of us, five NIOC students and 12 British scholarship students, plus Roger David Cliffe-Jones. Roger was a very well to do young man, whose father had established an electrical component import business and had married a Belgian lady. He had died early and the business was now run by his wife with the help of a Polish man who was considered to be part of the family. Roger did not socialise with anyone in the college except me. During the first year in college he had married Margaret and by the second year they were already expecting their first child. They lived in a large mansion house in the middle of Edgbaston with huge grounds and a swimming pool. He used to drive a red Aston Martin sports car and in addition to this he (and the family) had 6-7 other cars as well.

He was a gourmet eater and wine drinker and liked visiting good restaurants and spent whole evenings there. As I did not have much other social life in Birmingham, our friendship developed along these lines. Once or twice a month on Friday evenings I would visit their home, where we would start the evening with champagne, as he never drank any other aperitif. Then we would go through the Michelin Good Food Guide and find a restaurant within a 50 mile radius and the three of us would then drive there. He was a very daring and fast but safe driver. We would spend the whole evening in the restaurant, where he used to order good quality French wines, which at the time were not available in the ordinary restaurants. I could never afford this type of lifestyle and could not reciprocate, instead I would help Roger with his work and act as a tutor, sometimes spending long hours going through the lectures etc. with him.

His daughter Suzy was born in 1960 and with quick succession they had three other daughters and only later in 1964 – a son. Roger and Margaret would travel to exotic places twice a year and had their ski holidays in Switzerland, where he had a villa. At that time currency restrictions were in force and one could not take more than £50 out of the country. As Roger did like spending money, he needed much more than that for his expenses and every time he decided to go for a holiday we would get a box of king size cigarettes, empty the tobacco from them and replace it with rolled up £20 notes¹⁰.

¹⁰ Roger became a heavy wine drinker and in spite of the advice of his doctors would not keep away from the bottle. He died in 1998 from liver failure at his dream home, which he had built in the Scottish highlands.

During the Christmas holidays I was back in London at our favourite haunt, 174 Cromwell Road, and for the New Year the Armenian youth had organised a party at one of the hotels in West London. The whole group plus Mariette were there and we had dinner and had just began to enjoy the party and dance when one of the hotheads of Dashnak youths, Jirair Gharibian had an argument with an elderly man called Chalikian and smashed a bottle on his head. This was just after midnight and the party had to be broken up and the police was called in. We left the party very disappointed and the boys decided to go to Gourgen's room in Kingston-upon-Thames and play poker until dawn.

On one of the weekends of February 1961 I visited Bristol, where Mariette was a boarder at the Clifton High School for Girls. We spent the whole day walking around the city having a wonderful time. Things were getting serious with us and I was very much confused as to what to do. It was during one of the holidays that Markar, Leon, Mariette and I were staying in our hotel that a certain man in his middle thirties arrived from Vienna. Apparently when Mariette and her father had visited Vienna during the previous Easter they had met this gentleman there and this man had now followed Mariette to London. None of us knew anything about it but when Markar found out the reason of his presence in London, he threatened him in no uncertain terms to leave London and go back to "his Vienna" as soon as possible. That was the end of that affair and consolidated my position with Mariette further!

The Spring term was an academic one and I spent it in Birmingham. During the end of the term I found out that Mariette is moving from Bristol to London and was going to do some courses there. This gave me an incentive to travel down to London more often to see her as she was freer now and the restrictions of the boarding school applied no more.



95- In Babolsar beach, by the Caspian Sea.

Summer was arriving and I had two weeks of holidays. My parents wanted me to go to Tehran. During one of my dates with Mariette I found out that she was going to go to Tehran too and decided that I should certainly go. As soon as I arrived our family went to Babolsar (a seaside town) and stayed there one week. Mariette's family very conveniently came to Babolsar too. There we would meet every day, first on the beach with all the family around us and later on in the evenings we would go out with friends. We all stayed in Panian's Pension house. The pensions served excellent food and had a beautiful garden with hammocks etc., where we would spend the afternoons and late evenings. One evening I borrowed Hrach's huge 8 cylinder Chrysler and drove to the seashore to watch the sunset and be alone with Mariette. I must have driven too close to the water's edge, as we got stuck in the sand and I had to run beck home to get the boys to come over to help to push the car out of the sands. A most unromantic ending to the promising evening.



96- With Mrs Raffi of 13 Porchester Gardens, 1960.

After our return to Tehran I used to go and visit Mariette at their home and on one occasion I noticed that she was bruised and her eyes were red. After much persuasion she explained that her brother, Leon had beat her up saying “how dare she have a boyfriend under his nose!!!”. This was the first (but not the last) time that I came across the violent side of Leon’s nature. After this episode and some serious discussions we decided to make our relationship official and according to Armenian tradition my parents and I would have to go visit her parents and officially ask for her hand. However there was a snag. I was returning to London in a day or so all the ceremonies had to be carried out in my absence. A most unusual state of affairs! I later learned that my family had gone to see Mariette’s parents and everything had gone smoothly except for the fact that her father had been shocked at the prospect of letting his daughter go at such a young age and soon after she was to be back home from England.

After her return from Tehran Mariette stayed in London in a room rented from Mrs. Alexy Raffi, the widow of Arshak Raffi¹¹. Mrs Raffi lived alone in a house at 13 Porchester Gardens, Bayswater. The terraced house had four small bedrooms one of which she occupied herself and the other three were let out to young men and women. There was a small kitchen and a lounge/dining room, where all the entertainment would take place. Strictly no visitors upstairs! She was a kind soul but had some unusual and odd habits. In the middle of the night she would go to the basement and “talk” to her husband’s spirit, later on relating how she had had an interesting conversation with “Arshak”. One day she declared that all the Iranians as well as most of the Middle Eastern people would suffer the agonies of hell eternally, since they mistreat Jesus’ favourite animal, the donkey, making it carry loads and work hard instead of worshipping it as a holy beast.

The others who stayed at the house (not in chronological order) were Rita Eminian – quite a lively, talkative and somewhat outgoing girl my age, another young girl nicknamed Doushka – who had had a plastic surgery and had ruined all of her face and therefore was depressed all of the time. There was also Mina Riahi – another bubbly Iranian girl, whose sister Bahar was later to become Mariette’s colleague and closest friend, before becoming aware of her previous connection with her sister. The only male person that I could remember was a quiet young Englishman called Simon,

¹¹ Arshak was the son of the famous Armenian writer Raffi, who had been a professor at Oxford.

who worked in the city as a trainee and must have had quite a bewildering time in the middle of the three or four young and not so young very un-English women.

I used to go to London almost every other weekend and stay at a hotel in Bayswater area, near Mariette. This was the time that we started to get to know each other properly as we had lots of time to spend together. We used to walk in the parks and sit for hours in coffee shops over a cup of coffee or lemon tea and talk about everything. Our favourite place was a coffee shop called “Wayang” on Earl’s Court Road, opposite what now is Waterstone’s bookshop. There was a rear sitting area with small tables and lights suspended just over the low tables. It was dark and cosy and we must have spent at least 4-5 hours every weekend in this cosy café. When in 1984 we moved to our Bramham Gardens flat, I was very disappointed to see that the coffee shop had been converted into a Chinese restaurant.

In the winter Mariette moved out of Mrs. Raffii’s house to 67 Castletown Road, where her friend Adda lived with three other Armenian girls. Neither Mariette nor I knew the girls. They were Juliet Mnatsakanian and the two sisters Linda and Diana Petrossians all of whom became very close family friends. Regrettably Diana, the most beautiful of them all, died a year or so after childbirth in the early 1980’s but our friendship with the other girls is still ongoing today.

The house was owned by Mr. and Mrs. Hanlan and five rooms were let out on full board basis, however, after first few dinners none of the girls dined at home, if they could help it! My visits to London continued, but now I had to find hotels in the West Kensington area. Sometimes all the girls and I would go out to the park or the moves and generally have a good time together. Each and every one of them had problems of their own such as boyfriends, family etc. On many occasions we would sit and talk until the small hours of the morning airing problems and boyfriend troubles.

In London Mariette and all the girls at the lodging were attending a secretarial course in Pitman’s college. Something that was not at all approved by her father and which she regretted at later life.



97 – Our engagement reception “in absentia”, Tehran, 1961.



98- With elders of the family, Tehran, 1961.

In 1961 my practical training was in the research laboratory of Marconi's in Chelmsford. There I was given the task of designing a High Frequency Amplifier for a microwave radio link. During the second week while testing a prototype I managed to burn a transistor which cost over £300 and was warned if I did that again I would be removed from the program¹².

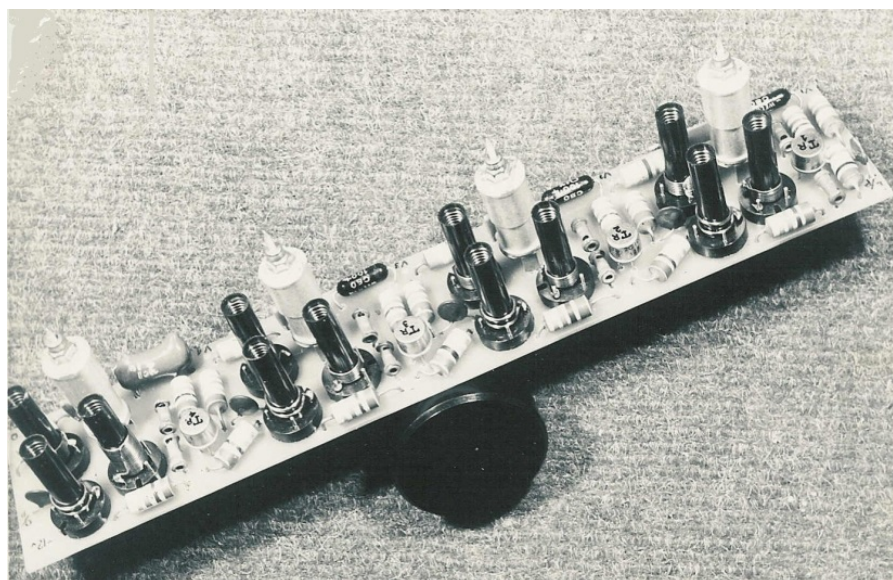
Chelmsford was nearer to London and I used to spend all the weekends in London. There was nothing to keep me in Chelmsford, where I lived in an old boarding house, inhabited mainly by old age pensioners. They normally sat in front of the black and white television set, consisting of a large floor standing box with a small oval shaped greyish screen about 10 inches across, and watched whatever was on.

After returning to Birmingham I was offered a place in the newly build Gracie Hall of Residence, which was in Wake Green area. This was an excellent hall with all the modern facilities. I stayed in the hall until the end of my studies, first sharing a room again with Parviz Mokhtari, then in a single room.

¹² The same transistor now costs a few pence only.



99- In Hyde Park, 1961.



100- HF Microwave amplifier I made at Marconi.Chelmsford, 1962

The double rooms consisted of a sitting room of about 4 metre square with two small sleeping areas, each with a bed, washbasin and bookshelf. For washing the clothes there were electric boilers, where we used to dump the clothes with the soap powder in the morning and get the “over-cleaned” and still boiling washing out of the boiler in the evening.



101- At Gracie Hall of Residence, Birmingham, 1962.

My training period of 1962 was at Plessey's in Liverpool. I stayed in one of the worst lodgings while in there. It was so depressing that I did not even wish to see the sights of the city. The only places I saw in Liverpool were the waterfront and the cathedral. I counted days when the training would be over so that I could return to the hall of residence in Birmingham. Fortunately my work was interesting as I was working on the production and testing of what was called an “Atomic Clock”. This was an electronic clock accurate to one or two seconds a year. This was considered a high tech unit (according to the standards of the time) the size of a car battery and cost thousands of pounds. A similar unit, but measuring only a few millimetres, can now be purchased for a few pence!



102- Christmas party with the girls – London, 1961.

During the Easter holidays Mariette and I decided to hire a car and drive to Wales. I hired a Mini Van and Mariette arrived by train in Birmingham, from where we drove west. We spent the first night in Wales in a villager's home off the main road, who had advertised with a sign saying B+B on the main road. The next day I decided to take the country roads, which were more scenic. I was happily doing about 30MPH on a single-track country lane, when around one corner in front of me I suddenly saw a 4 litre Rover driving up the depression in the road. The Rover being in the low point had been invisible over the hedges from around the corner and there was nothing I could do to prevent the accident since the road was barely 9 ft wide.

I don't remember what happened except that after a few seconds I heard Mariette shouting that she cannot see! The shock had blinded her momentarily. Luckily I had held the steering wheel so tight that the column had broken and hit the windshield before our heads could hit it. We had thus escaped serious injury and only my left leg was bruised from hitting the gearstick. The car was a total write-off, as the engine had broken loose and all else was twisted. The Rover had suffered only minor bumper

damage and drove off after the bumper was pulled away from the wheel. The police gave us a lift to Aberystwyth, where in the Police Station we were interviewed and spent a miserable night in a hotel, returning back to Birmingham and London in the morning. The next day I could hardly walk, as the whole of my leg was black. That was our short driving holiday, but we were lucky not to have suffered more serious injury.



103- Mariette on Vahe's bike. 1961.

Back in Birmingham during one of the weekends I asked Mariette to come there instead of me travelling to London all the time. I met her at the station and took her to the hall of residence, arriving late, so that no one could notice us. There, for two days she stayed in my room clandestinely, as we were not allowed to have visitors staying overnight. The only problem was going to the toilet, which were communal. I would go and check if there was anyone around and whisk her to the loo, keeping guard on the door to ward off the unsuspecting residents. To keep away the



104- Mariette in Castletown Road, 1961.

inquisitive eye, for those two days the curtains of my window stayed drawn! We did get away with it and no one became the wiser!

The summer of 1962 was very cold and freezing. The central heating in the hall of residence had been turned off in May, but even in July we needed electric heaters in the rooms. It was then that I saw a notice in the college notice board, advertising the National Union of Students organised trip to Greece, costing £64 for four weeks, inclusive of travel (by train) and full board. Parviz and I decided to go and get a little warmth.

The group consisted of about 28 students, mostly girls, of various nationalities. We got on the train in Victoria Station and arrived in Athens three days later, sleeping as best as we could. On one occasion I climbed up the luggage rack and spent the night there and when during one of the border crossings the border guard arrived and asked for passports, he was surprised to see my hand extending down from the rack holding my passport.

We had a very relaxing holiday, the first ten days in Paros, where at that time there was only one taverna, catering for the local population and there were four or five tourists other than our group. As there were no hotels in the island, we used to stay in the rooms let out by the villagers. On the first day I woke up and saw a pair of black suspenders hanging on a line. I thought we must have a girl staying with us in the same house too, but on closer inspection it proved to be an octopus, hanging to dry under the sun. At that time backgammon was not known in the West but I knew how to play it from Iran and sometimes to the amazement of the locals I would sit with them in the taverna and play backgammon, on some occasions causing much aggravation by winning the game. Another week was spent just outside Athens, in Voulighmeni, which was a deserted place with a few huts and a small yacht club. I remember driving from Athens to Vouliaghmeni at nights along the deserted road dotted only with a few tavernas here and there. During the last week we travelled by coach to various tourist attractions of Greece, such as Mount Olympus, Temple of the Zeus, Corinth, Epidauros, Mycena, Elefsis etc.

Back in the college, one last academic detail was left to be finalised. This was the choice of the project work for the final year. From the existing list of projects I chose the one that was called "A sampling oscilloscope", which was the development of this high-tech apparatus, still in its infancy.

It must be said that at this time the educational system was changing and our college was renamed University of Aston. The conversion was due to the fact that the college had all the facilities of large universities and additionally the graduates did have the advantage of some practical training. In fact the head-hunters from Massachusetts Institute of Technology often visited and interviewed our college for possible talented post graduate students, offering them to continue further studies in the MIT, including scholarship etc.

Notwithstanding all this, the college had one computer that occupied a large hall in the basement, it was however out of bounds to us the students. This computer was strictly a research tool and its capacity and speed must have been a fraction of the smallest desktop computer of today.

Thus the final year of studies arrived and the prospect of the final exams loomed over the horizon.

16 – THE FINAL YEAR

When I returned from my holiday in Greece, Mariette was getting ready to go to Heidelberg for a year's study of German language at the University of Heidelberg. One year was a long time to be apart from each-other and before she left London we decided that in the winter we would go to Italy together. But before she went to Germany, we decided to take a trip to Manchester to see Markar as well as her brother Leon. We took the train to Manchester and stayed in Leon's apartment in the suburbs. Markar was now married with Rita, who was there too and we spent a quiet weekend together.

Back in Birmingham I got busy on my project work and started to study the available literature for this equipment. There wasn't much data and I had to improvise circuitry to get the thing working. This was easier said than done. All the theoretical calculations were fine, but when you start working with real components, life is not so simple. At this stage the theoretical calculations become approximations and real life takes over. One has to work and rework to get the needed result (if at all). I used to toil in the laboratory over my project, take notes and then come home and start organising the notes and the diagrams. It was hard work.

That term passed very slowly, the only reason that I visited London on a few occasions was the presence of Silva Djerbashian, a distant cousin from Argentina. Silva, who was a year older than I, had had an affair with her boss in Buenos Aires and the parents had decided to send her away to visit her relatives in France. After a few weeks in Paris she had decided to come to London to improve her English. Her aunt Hranoush (the same Hranoush) rang me one day asking to look after Silva when she arrived in London, as she did not know anyone else there.

As soon as the Christmas holidays began, I took the train to Heidelberg and together with Mariette travelled on to Rome. We spent a week in a small pension house off via di Quattri Fontani in Rome, seeing the standard sites and from there went to Graz to spend a few days with Shahik Zaytountschian, a close friend of both of us. We arrived in Graz at about 10PM. It was snowing and everything was frozen. We took a taxi to



105- In Manchester with Markar & Rita, 1962.



106- Christmas in Rome, 1962.

Shahik's address, which after much skidding and sliding arrived there only to find out that there was no one at home. We sat on the front door steps in the street for quite some time, until suddenly I saw two tall figures approaching talking in Armenian. They were Shahik and Boris, who shared the room. Seeing us they both were quite taken aback since the letter that I had written, informing Shahik of our decision to visit them, and asking him to get us a hotel room had apparently gone astray.

We spent a memorable New Year's Eve in Graz, with 10-12 school friends who were all studying there. There were even some girls studying in Graz that Mariette knew from Tehran and we enjoyed ourselves tremendously. A few days after the celebrations we embarked on our return journey. I left Mariette at the Mannheim station, from where she was taking a train to Heidelberg, and carried on to London.

As soon as back, I got busy with my project and the general course work, until the Easter recess, when I had decided to go to Heidelberg and spent a week with Mariette. My social life during this period was nil. The only outings that I permitted myself were the concerts of the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, which took place in the old concert hall plus our ritual dinner trips with Roger and Margaret.

Thinking back, it seems that the Easter holiday week in Heidelberg flew past very quickly. Although we spent a very happy week together and the weather was kind too, it seemed that the week took only a fleeting moment and I was back on the train, standing in the corridor all the way to London. In the train I met Jora, a friend who was studying in London, with a French girl, Sylvie, returning from their holiday in France. This encounter made the trip more bearable as we kept talking and I did not have time to think of my predicament.

As soon as I was back in Birmingham, it was time to prepare for the final exams. We were five NIOC students in the halls of residence and all of us decided that we did not intend to spend the last few days before the exams just swotting, but needed some sort of relaxation prior to them. We decided that on the eve of each exam, which were arranged to take place every other day, we should study all day but finish studies by dinner time, around 6PM. After dinner we would sit down and play poker from 9 to

11PM and then go to bed. All of us adhered to this regime very strictly and the results were very good.

Finally the exams stated and I plunged into them with confidence. The first exam was Electrical Measurements, which was taught by Professor Karo, an Egyptian man full of humour. I thought that I had done well until I met him the next day just before the other exam. He beckoned me and excitedly said he should not be talking to me but he had to tell me that I got 98% on his exam. It was very good news but the fact was that he looked more excited than I was!

In one of the subjects (three phase power engineering) in my usual haste I misread the question and solved the whole problem correctly, based on a 60° angle, while the angle in the question was given as 30° . I only realised this after the exam, when we compared notes with Parviz. I was disappointed with myself and thought that I would lose 25 marks for this error. After a few days I met the lecturer on this subject and told him what had happened. He already had seen and marked my paper and instead of the 98% mark, he had given me 96%, deducting only 2% for lack of attention. I was hugely relieved!

When the last exam was over, the whole class, all 17 of us, went to the pub and celebrated the end of the era and after the pub we went to see the Italian movie called "Mondo cane" (It's a dog's world), which I remember in detail to this day. It was a series of unusual and ridiculous real life episodes, relating to the modern life. After dinner and lots of drinks, just before midnight Roger instigated a trip to the open air swimming pool in a girls public school in Edgbaston. Whoever could, piled onto Roger's red Aston Martin and he drove us to the fence nearest to the pool. There we quietly scaled the fence, stripped naked and jumped into the pool. Our enjoyment did not last long as after a little while some lights came on in the main school building and we had to withdraw in haste, getting into our clothes and piling onto the car half wet. The return trip felt much colder than the onward one and only the alcohol content of our blood kept us from catching cold.

After the final exams, the head of the NIOC office, Mr. Nabavi invited the Dean of the Electrical Engineering Department, the principal lecturers and us to an official dinner at the Midland Hotel in Birmingham. After dinner

he expressed his thanks and appreciation to the Dean for accepting us in the University and helping us to complete our courses.

Professor May, the Dean of the Electrical Engineering Department then stood up and responded. He said that that when the staff had come across our applications they did not know what to do, as we were unknown quantities to them. However, he said, they decided to give us a chance and were later pleasantly surprised at the quality and the hard work of the Iranian students and that in the future they would accept Iranians with open arms. He then proceeded to address us saying that now that we had graduated we may think that we knew everything, however, we should bear in mind that as yet we know absolutely nothing and all that we had really learnt during these four years was in fact HOW TO LEARN. I have always remembered his words and in later life whenever I have come across new and unfamiliar problems, I have tried to learn how to deal with them. Only then does one realise how little one knows!

Soon the results of the finals were announced, two of us, Parviz and myself got First Class Honours (average of about 94%), two other Iranians and one British got Second Class Honours and then the rest of the Iranians, followed by the British students. As soon as we had the results an American visitor to the University invited me for an interview and proposed postgraduate studies at M.I.T. with the necessary scholarship. I was very honoured but did not accept it for two reasons. The most important was that Mariette and I had already decided to go back and get married soon and the other was that I did not want to be away from my family another two or three years (or perhaps for good). Over and above these there was also my promise made to the NIOC to return to Iran after the graduation and work for them. Thus I decided that I should not accept the offer but return to Iran. Had I decided otherwise, who knows how different my life would have been developed!

After we got the results Parviz Mokhtari, Victor Nickravesh¹³ and I decided to go camping in the Lake District, as this was the only chance that we could get to see the area. We borrowed a tent and utensils and hired a red Mini Morris and as I had a driving license, I drove to the Lake District where we spent a few days in the beautiful lakes and mountains, notwithstanding the rainy weather. In some places, notably on a hill called

¹³ Victor was in the Mechanical Engineering Department, with Rejali.

Rhinose Bottam, the car could not negotiate the steep gradient and the boys had to get out and push, while I was trying to get maximum power out of the engine.

Then I left Birmingham for the last time and travelled to London where I started getting ready for the trip back home, but first I had to complete my final period of the practical training, which would have been reflected upon my final diploma marks. This time it was luckily in the Telephone Manufacturing Company situated in Kent, in a small town called St. Mary Cray. I decided that there is no way that I am going to spend my last few months in England cooped up in a small village away from London. Therefore I decided to take up residence in the girls boarding place at 67 Castletown Road, and share a room with John, the brother of Juliet, who at that time was staying there too.

I packed my belongings, which consisted of one large suitcase and another smaller one of clothes and personal stuff plus a large aluminium trunk full of books, notebooks and papers, and papers, and papers... The bad news was that this trunk weighed about 80 kilos, however, the good news was that the NIOC was going to take care of it and send it to Tehran.

So, I moved to London with my suitcases and took up residence with Mariette's friends. My daily journey to work was quite a long one. I took the tube to Victoria station, from there I took the train and then a ten minute bus ride plus and another ten minute walk to the factory. To confess the truth I was already fed up with working in the inefficient British factories and in the TMC did absolutely the minimum possible in order to get my certificate and go. I stayed there probably not more than eight weeks.

During these weeks I shared room with John and later with a Chinese boy and later still with Vahe Assatourian (Boche` - as per his Spanish roommate), who at that time was working in London. The girls took good care of me and Juliet once even tried to make me a lentil pilau, which smelled terrible. After close inspection it proved that the lentils had contained mouse droppings? She was so embarrassed that for a whole week blushed when our paths crossed.

At the end of the summer Mariette returned from Heidelberg and occupied her old and very small room next to the large one I shared with various roommates. At that time her father's affairs were in a bad shape and she

was worried about him and thought that she should be back home as soon as possible. Apparently their dried fruit export business, which was established by her grandfather's family, after being successful for a long time now hit a bad patch and could not recover due to the archaic ways that it was operating. The business closed down and all their personal belongings were confiscated by the creditor banks.

Mariette's father or Dad, as everyone in our family called him, was a very intelligent and well read man, and in spite of his lack of university education, could be considered as a self made and intellectual man. In my books he was not a businessman but could easily have been an entrepreneur. He was a lover of Russian literature and had lots of books in Russian. He was also interested in geography and loved to travel. He loved carpets and cars and would change them constantly. His old carpet dealer friends from the Tehran Bazaar would bring new carpets and lay them on the floor of the lounge for a week or two. This was the way carpets were sold. It was done in order to give the prospective purchaser the feel of and the interaction with the particular carpet. After much trying and testing one day the old carpet would disappear and a new one would take its place. With cars it was a somewhat different affair. Out of the blue Dad would start talking about say Fiat cars, how reliable they were and how modern they looked etc. This was a sign that the old car was due to be replaced by a Fiat! Once I asked him why did he change his cars so often, every time losing a lot of money during the process. His reply was that he changed his cars to make changes in his life, since he regrettably could not change his wife! He said this as a joke with an element of truth in it. He loved Mariette and was very much attached to her, a feeling reciprocated fully by her. Hence her desire to return to Iran and be next to Dad during his hour of trouble.

I finished my training in September and after a month of preparations and further packing etc. in early November of 1963 we returned back home to Tehran to start a new life. This was the eve of my 25th birthday, marking my first quarter century of life on this planet earth.

17 – BACK IN IRAN

As soon as we arrived back in Iran we started to discuss the wedding arrangements and related matters. We had no intention of living with our parents but neither had the income for renting a decent apartment. Father came up with the bright idea of building another flat on top of our house, as, according to Yervand - the civil engineer, the structure was strong enough to withstand this additional load. This would be ideal for us. We would have our own apartment but would also benefit from the perks of being with my family. Both of us were working and with this arrangement would not have to worry about everyday cooking and cleaning etc. We could join my family for meals etc. and move to our flat when we needed privacy. This would also be sort of “living together” with my family, which they were looking forward to. At the time many young couples lived with one of the parents, who would help them in the early stages of married life and also could look after the children when they were born. My fathers offer was accepted by all and at once building work started on our house.

As for work, I already had my employment in the NIOC as part of our scholarship agreement, but as we were to get married as soon as possible, I did not want to be posted to the South of Iran or even outside Tehran. Through his friends father got to know a certain high official in the NIOC management by the name of Garnik Tomas, who asked to meet me. I went to see him in the new 12 storey NIOC building not far from our home. He took me to the head of the Engineering & Design Department of the NIOC, Mr. Hadi Entekhabi, who asked me what I had studied and why I wanted to stay in Tehran etc. I explained the reason and he told me to go to the personnel department to arrange my employment as junior electrical engineer in the design office, which was situated on the tenth floor of the same building. If you knew the people, it can be as simple as that!

After a few days of rest and adaptation I started work in the design office as junior electrical design engineer. This office was responsible for the design of all NIOC buildings and small projects including the Fuel Distribution and Storage Depots, Petrol Filling Stations, Administration



107- With head of engineering of NIOC, Hady Entekhabi and colleagues. Tehran 1963.

buildings, holiday homes etc. There were 3-4 of my fellow students also working in the design office, which had a staff of about 15 engineers and 12 senior draftsmen. The majority of the graduates returning from their studies in the United Kingdom had received positions in Ahwaz, Abadan and other oil producing areas in the south of Iran.

In the design office my first assignment was to design an electrical sub-station. I had never seen a sub-station let alone know how to design one. I was given the responsibility of preparing the plan of the building and the electrical equipment that went into the sub-station. Terrified at the prospect of failing my first assignment I went to the office manager and asked him if there were any sub-station designs around. He directed me to a drawer unit which acted as a filing cabinet for large drawings and gave me a list of the relevant drawings, letting me to do my own digging. Eventually I got what I wanted and almost copied the whole of the already existing design. From then onwards, this became my source of reference and learning. I studied so many designs and drawings that in a couple of years became the electrical standards expert in the office.

My boss, the Chief Electrical Engineer was a man called Shakib. He was around 50 and did not much like working. He would pile all the work on my desk and leaving instructions would walk away. I had to do the calculations, design and prepare the drawings for the project and afterwards explain my actions to him. Thinking back, I think this worked to my advantage and I had to learn a lot to do the work that I was left with.

At this time Mariette was also seeking employment and had eventually found work not far from the NIOC building, in the Azerbaijan Office of the Planning Organisation of Iran, where she was employed as bilingual secretary. To qualify for the job she had to learn Farsi typing in a short period of time, which she did unwillingly. This was no easy task as for typing in Farsi everything had to be reversed, since the Farsi script uses the Arabic alphabet and is therefore written from right to left.

Meanwhile the construction of our flat was progressing slowly due to the winter weather conditions. It was planned that the flat would be complete in March or April and we planned to get married around May. Mariette's mother Seda was dead against any marriage in the month of May and forbade us getting married during that month. Her reasoning was that



108- Our engagement ceremony. 29.4.1964



109- Our wedding party. 29.4.64.

according to Russian tradition (to me – superstition) says that all those married during the month of May spend a life wondering around¹⁴. As we neither wanted to go against her wish, nor delay the wedding until June, we decided on the date of 29th of April 1964.

Meanwhile most of our friends from the UK were back in Iran and we started our regular gatherings with most of the people that we knew in London. These were Smbat and Armine who had already married in London, their friend Vigen who was a geologist, Armineh Nicoghossian and his uncle Simon, Linda and Diana, Adda, Juliet, Gourgen, Vahe etc. We would organise parties almost every week and the group gradually expanded with new friends joining in. At first the parties were held in the homes of our respective parents until gradually and one by one most of us established homes of our own.

One day I had an unexpected visit by an old school friend, Vartan Hovian, who said that he was getting married and would like me to be the Best Man in his wedding. We were not close friend but I could hardly refuse him this request. The only objection that I had was that I was not familiar with the Armenian traditions in this field and did not know what the Best Man's responsibilities were. This was in early December and the wedding was to take place in a month or so.

When grandma Tatik and Arshav heard about it they told me that traditionally the Best Man has certain duties that have to be performed, but they were not so sure as to what they were. I told them that I had already warned Vartan about my ignorance of the facts and that if necessary he was going to guide me in these matters.

Vartan told me not to worry about my responsibilities as there was not much to it anyway and if necessary he would let me know what is to be done and when to do it – and I trusted him. The next day an official delegation of the bride's and groom's parents arrived in our house with loads of presents plus a bottle of brandy and a box of chocolates in order to formalise the arrangement.

¹⁴ Perhaps because the word "maietsya" in Russian means "Wondering" and the month of May is called Mai.

Tatik advised me that we should reciprocate and that the Best Man's wedding present should be delivered now rather than on the wedding day. We were also advised in no uncertain terms that the Best Man's present should be a necessary and important item of the household. This sounded very ominous, but what could we do now? Mariette and I had no choice but to go and buy a good quality bone china (Nouritake) dinner service as our present and visited Vartans parents one evening, taking along our present and some flowers.

One day Vartan called and said that we should go to the Registry office in the Armenian church in order to take care of the preliminary registration formalities. Together with Anoush and her father we went to the registry office in the churchyard, completed the formalities and signed the books etc. After this was over I was told by the clerk that I had to pay the registration fee, which I did. Then the priest approached and asked me how many of the candelabras did we need to be switched on during the wedding ceremony? I told him naturally that all lights should be on. He then informed me that the fee for the use of the church would be so much, which I had to pay again. I recall that this was an appreciable chunk of my monthly salary (which was about 12,000 rials per month). I found out later that the church fee is dependant upon the number of candelabras to be switched on for the ceremony.

The wedding day arrived and Mariette and I were invited to be in the groom's house early in the afternoon, before the church ceremony, when the betrothal ceremony was to take place¹⁵. We dutifully attended and upon entry I was at once accosted by Anoush's mother and asked if I had brought the groom's and my buttonholes. I pleaded ignorance (as I indeed did not know that I should have brought them). These had to be improvised by cutting a few flowers from the bride's posy, but then the second question came. This was whether I had brought the chocolates and the bottle of brandy which were going to be served after the betrothal ceremony. I again pleaded ignorance (as above) and told the prospective mother-in-law that I could go and buy a bottle of brandy from the shop around the corner. This I proceeded to do, but no chocolates were to be found in the nearby shops. Eventually a box was located in some drawer in the house and this problem was also resolved.

¹⁵ This ceremony is traditionally performed in the bride's house.

Then the bride's dowry was presented to the guests, and the Best Man had to be in the first row of the spectators so that he could verify the authenticity of the announced articles. The ceremony of the opening of the packages and suitcases started and as each package was opened it was accompanied with noisy announcements of its contents by the mother of the bride. These consisted of "four large sheets", "six towels", "twelve pairs of nylon knickers" etc., with each article held high for all to see and applaud. What a nightmare!

Then came the actual church ceremony and the reception. Mariette and I had to ride in the bridal car with the happy couple and arrived at the reception hall in full honour. We were seated next to the bride and the groom on the top table. As Armenian ceremonies go, there are not many speeches but lots of toasts and after the dinner everyone starts dancing until late in the night. Every time someone proposed a toast, one of the guests, an elderly gentleman sitting at the other end of the hall, would get up with a glass in hand, come to the top table, approach me and say, "to your good health" and walk back to his seat across the hall. I did not even know who he was!

This hurdle was eventually overcome and the next morning while in the office I had a call from the bride – Anoush. She invited Mariette and me to "sweet tea" the next evening. Thinking that this was the final part of the wedding ceremony I promised to go. In the evening I told Tatik that I have been invited to "sweet tea", upon which she gasped and said "my God, how can they do that?". I asked what the matter was and she reluctantly explained that after the marriage is consummated, friends and family are invited to "sweet tea". During the pouring of the "sweet tea" for the invited guests, the wedding night's bloody sheet is presented to the guests and later it is hung outside the house for all and sundry to see. As far as we were concerned this was the last straw. We never wanted to mix with them and never kept direct contact with the couple, although we sometimes met them at various friends' houses.

My salary in the NIOC was quite low and was barely sufficient for our expenses. This was compensated by the free medical service with an excellent hospital and specialists as well as employee pension scheme and loans for all NIOC employees, which were unusual in Iran at that time. Notwithstanding the benefits I thought that I needed some supplementary income to allow us living a better life and was looking for any possibilities.

In the spring of 1964 Alice's husband Edik announced that they had decided to emigrate to the United States and he was going to leave his job as a draftsman as well as his private part time job of photo camera repairman. His camera repair shop was located above my father's radio repair shop on Naderi avenue, ten minutes walking distance from our home. Edik was one of the only two camera repairers in Tehran. He would repair all types of cameras himself but when it came to electronic and battery operated flashes, he would send them downstairs to my father for repairs. I thought that this may be a possibility and asked him if it would be OK for me to take over his work and he said that it was a good idea, as it will provide me with some extra income. For 3-4 months I would go and watch him work, learning the various secrets of the trade such as how to dismantle and reassemble cameras without having number of "excess" screws and washers left over etc. How to clean the interior mechanisms and what fluids and materials to use.

Edik used very primitive methods to test the shutter speeds and focusing of the lens after the repairs were done. For shutter speed testing he would use his ear for low speeds, comparing the timing against a properly working camera. For higher speeds a visual check would be made. For focusing, the infinity would be set with looking at the distant treetops and the nearer distances would be checked with measuring them in paces. These gave good enough results for the average camera.

When I took over in the autumn I decided that I needed some test gear. I designed and made an electronic gadget for measuring time within $\pm 20\%$ accuracy and for focusing made a pattern on a sliding rail which could be set from 30 to 150 centimetres. For the infinity setting the same treetops were used. From October to April after finishing my work in the NIOC at 4PM, I would go to the shop and repair still and movie cameras, flashes, projectors etc. which were sent in by various camera shops as well as brought in by private individuals. In the summer the NIOC working hours were from 7AM to 2PM without a lunch break, after which I would go home and pass the hot time of the day at home, coming to the shop only after 5PM and closing it at 8. Although I worked until late but we managed

to have an active social life and would go out 3-4 evenings in the week, returning home well after midnight¹⁶.

At last our flat was ready and we even had installed evaporating water coolers for our flat as well as my parent's flat downstairs. Now the wedding date was approaching. Mariette and I had decided that we do not want a wedding reception, which invariably gives rise to complaints and people getting offended for this or that reason. We were also reluctant to spend the money that we did not have and had to be borrowed. We just wanted to go to the church and after that have a small reception at home for some select friends and family of about 20 persons and then leave for our honeymoon. My parents agreed but it was difficult to persuade Seda to forego a large and elaborate wedding reception. We eventually did so but Seda decided that the betrothal ceremony, which was going to take place at their home was to be a grand affair with all the close and distant family and friends invited. We left this to her and proceeded with the invitations and the other formalities etc.

We decided to ask Smbat Assadourian, our dentist friend from London, to be our Best Man, which he accepted graciously. Because of my bad experience I promised him that he would be required to do nothing at all, except to be there at the wedding in proper attire. No traditional duties etc.

In the late afternoon of the 29th April, I and all our immediate family members went to Mariette's home, taking with us the traditional presents, such as the bridal gown, the veil, the sweets, chocolates, brandy etc. All the other guests were already assembled and the priest and the deacon performed the brief betrothal ceremony at home, blessing the bridal gown, veil etc. After this ceremony my parents gave Mariette the traditional presents of jewellery, necklace, ring (my mother's bridal present from her mother) etc., then chocolates and brandy were passed around for

¹⁶ After two years one of NIOC's Architectural Consultant, Yahya Ittihadiye, who had British connections, asked me to do some electrical services design for one of his projects in the South of Iran, using the British standards. I started to do this sort of design work from home and over the subsequent years in Iran up until 1980, I had done the electrical service designs for a fair number of large projects for various architectural consultants. These included Office Blocks, Technical Schools, Hospitals, the Museum of Modern Art and the 25 storey Municipal Building of Tehran etc., altogether a total of over 120 projects.



110- Party at our Tehran home, 1964.



111- Elo with our family, 1964.

the guests and congratulations were in order.

This hurdle was over and now some friends and females of the family took Mariette to the bedroom to be changed into the bridal gown, with a hairdresser in attendance - in case of emergencies. After about one hour or so she emerged in her white dress. Seeing all this it now dawned on me that this is the **real** wedding and I was so excited that I could do nothing. There were the Armenian musicians (sazandar), playing Armenian dance tunes on the traditional and not-so-traditional instruments such as zourna (shawm), dhol (drums), clarinet and accordion to which the bride was made to dance some traditional dances. One of Seda's elderly relatives tried to push me to the floor, but I was shy and could not do these dances so I pulled back and stood at the back of the guests so that no one could notice me and try to push me into the dance-floor. After some food and drinks we all left for the church, where the main ceremony was to be performed at about 7:30PM.

Tradition requires that at that time the musicians play a certain tune called "Tanoum en, tanoum en Nani jan" (Oh mother! they are taking her away) and that the bride's mother stays at home as a sign of protest of losing her daughter. It is the duty of the groom and his friends to go after her and persuade her to join the wedding entourage, which by now is getting ready to leave for the church.

The church ceremony took about 40-45 minutes, after which all the guest queued up for further congratulations etc. which lasted another half an hour or so. When we were emerging from the church to get into the bridal car Seda's cousin, Offik belatedly arrived and seeing that we were already departing complained that we had already become "English" and did everything on time and by the clock!

After the church ceremony some of our friends and family came to our flat, where we had prepared some cold buffet. There, after changing into normal attire we said goodbye to the guests and the car took us to Hilton Hotel, located in Shemiran, north of Tehran, where we had booked a room for the weekend.



112- With Adda during the 1964 New Year party in the Armenian Club, Tehran.

We had barely arrived in the hotel when there was a loud banging on the door and when I opened I was surprised to see 3-4 of our closest friends, barging in with a bottle of champagne for further congratulations and celebrations.

After the wedding we settled in the flat and the daily routines of work, visiting friends etc. began. According to the Armenian tradition, within the next 40 days we had to pay reciprocal visits to all the guests who had attended our wedding ceremony, at least this is what Seda told us we should do. Having had over 100 guests, we could have had a busy schedule for the next few months. Tradition or no tradition, we decided to visit only those people whom we liked and respected or were close with, leaving some of the guests' names out of our list of visits.

One night during a rainstorm in late May we heard a loud bang and running to the lounge I saw that a large chunk of the plaster from the ceiling had fallen on the dining table and the floor. The rainwater seeping through the insulation had caused this problem. It was a very dirty business cleaning the mess and trying to cover the roof with temporary insulation (sheets of plastic). Eventually we found out that the workmen who had put on the insulation sheeting on the main roof, had laid them on the live lime with no intermediate layer of protection, thus causing almost complete disintegration of the insulating sheeting. This problem stayed with us for many months and even after 5-6 years, after a heavy rainfall we would sometimes see wet patches on our lounge ceiling.

As we now had a flat of our own (after the repairs following the disaster), we had our friends visit us regularly, since we both enjoyed entertaining them very much. For my enjoyment of music I had made large speaker boxes, rigged up a pair of huge speakers inside them and managed to buy a Leak amplifier from expatriates leaving Iran, therefore was considered having the best Hi-Fi set amongst our friends. These were later augmented by an Akai tape recorder (the best available then), and a Swiss Thorens precision turntable with SME arm, which I had brought from England. In the summer afternoons when everyone was having a siesta, I used to sit in the lounge and listen to my music, relaxing under its influence.

Those days (as well as now) military service in Iran was compulsory and I had to register for it, however due to the excessive number of graduates

and school leavers, some applicants were exempted by drawing lots. At that time the Shah had organised various military construction and other service offices in various rural areas, which were given the task of planning and building small buildings in rural settlements. Most of the university graduates in military service were sent to work in this sort of camps as part of their military service, named the “army of builders”.

In late 1964 I really thought that I might be called for the military service and thus be away from home for some time. We thought that in order to keep Mariette busy, we ought to start a family, so that even if I went away for a few months, she could be kept busy raising a baby. As my parents lived downstairs she would not have any problems raising a child by herself, since she would not really be alone at all, but would have the help of my mother, not to mention grandmother Tatik and Dora, who lived in the ground floor flat of our building.

It was then that we heard that the NIOC personnel department had possibly come to terms with the military to exempt us from the military service completely, provided we carried on working in the oil industry, but all this had to appear as the luck of the draw. As these were unofficial and rumours only, we could not rely on them fully.

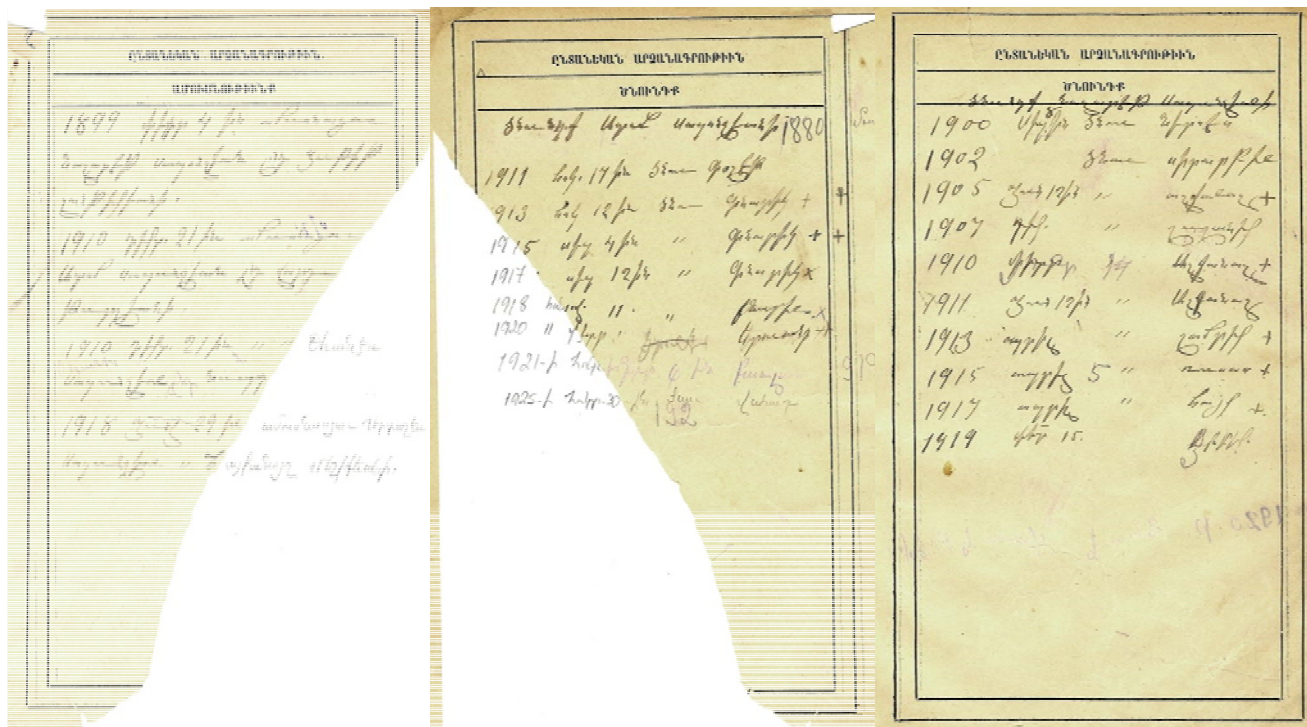
The military authorities announced that all university graduates born on certain dates were to be present at an indoor stadium on a certain date. When we arrived there the NIOC representative greeted us and instructed all the NIOC employees to stand in a certain queue. We understood that there was something behind it but could not say a word for the fear of giving the game away. My friend Gevik Atoian, who was instrumental in getting me enrolled for the NIOC test was there too. He had just graduated from Tehran University Architectural Department and was eligible for the service too. I asked him to come and stand in the queue with me. He thought about my offer but at the end said that he had a hunch that the other queue was going to be exempted. I insisted but to no avail. When the lots were drawn from the nine or ten queues in the stadium only ours was exempted from service and Gevik lost out the second time around and had to do the 18 months of military service.

The worrying thought of having to leave Mariette alone for extended periods of time was now over and as we looked for a reason to hold a party, as we had to celebrate my exemption from the service.

Thus the first twenty five years of my life had gone by and I was settled in Tehran, thinking that this is and was going to be home for a long time to come. Little did we know that future events would uproot us and land us in England. At least for the moment!

Delving into the history of our family I suddenly realised that my grandparents had gone to school in Van. My parents schooling was in Tiflis (and Paris), my own school years were spent in Tabriz and Tehran and my sons have been to schools in Tehran and London. Who knows where the youngest generation of the Galichians will end up going to school - London and where else?..... Will all this wondering eventually lead back to the origin? Who can tell!

London
August 2000



227
Zins- und Kupon-Zins 1888

1919 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1921 Kupon-Zins 20/2 abgeben +

1922 Kupon-Zins 8/2 abgeben +

Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1888 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1919 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1921 Kupon-Zins 20/2 abgeben +

1922 Kupon-Zins 8/2 abgeben +

1923 Kupon-Zins 12/2 abgeben +

19
19
19
19

Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1912 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1914 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1916 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1918 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

1922 Zins- und Kupon-Zins

Appendix 1

Memoirs of Great Aunt Yevgine` (1902 Van – 1998 Yerevan)

The following is an edited translation of my paternal grandmother's younger sister's memoirs, whom I asked to note down whatever she remembered. She noted the following down in 1996-97 in Yerevan aged 95.

Great Aunt Yevgine was a very bright and alert woman and when in Armenia we would ask her opinion about the new shows, exhibitions and various art functions.

When she became immobile and feeble and could not keep up with the daily life, she decided that this sort of life was not worth living and she had had enough. She died after a few weeks of this decision.

The city of Van was divided into two sections, the Old City (Kaghakamedj) and Aygestan. These were one hours walking distance apart from each other. For transport people used either horses or horse drawn carriages. In the Old city were located the commercial centre of Van, artisans' workshops, shops etc. My father was a well known merchant (Piroumian) who worked there and our in-laws, Kaljians¹⁷ also had a shop in the city.

The streets were narrow and there were small squares at some intersections. In the city the buildings mainly were two storey ones with attached gardens and orchards. The staircases and the floors of the buildings were wooden and the rooms had high ceilings. Houses had from two to ten rooms and the rooms were lit by decorative paraffin lamps.

In the Old City there were a number of churches, two of them were St. Nshan and Mother of God. There were two Armenian schools and one American school for the girls, where my in-laws daughters were studying. The Armenian girl's school was called Shushanian School and the boys school was named after the church, Mother of God (Diramayr). On festive occasions the schools would organise cultural events and parties, where everyone enjoyed themselves. On some Saturdays picnics were organised and we all used to go out of town together.

¹⁷ This was the way our surname was spelled in Van (RG)

In the old city of Van the local Armenian and Turkish population lived peacefully side by side. We had a singer boy called Tango, who went to America and after earning lot of money through his voice returned to Van a rich man.

The Citadel of Van was in the Old city, one part of it was in the Armenian quarter and the other end was in the Turkish quarter, where there was a communal garden, frequented by the population of Van on festive days. Behind the Citadel there was a wide expanse at the end of which was the town of Avantz, with its houses and orchards, which were famous for the fruits. To the west of Avantz was lake Van and the small port, from where boats used to sail to the island of Akhtamar, with its beautiful Cathedral and the adjacent boys boarding school, where many youngsters from Van were students.

The water of the lake Van was very salty and there was only one type of fish, Tarekh, that lived in the lake. This was either cooked fresh or dried in the sun for consumption in the winter. The waters of lake Van were used as a cure for various maladies and fevers.

In the North East of Avantz there was a mountain called the Mountain of Haralez (Mountain of the Perpetual Lickers), on top of which according to the legend were laid the remains of the Armenian King "Ara the Beautiful". Ara was famous as the most handsome man and the Assyrian Queen Semiramide fell in love with him and wanted him for her husband. When Ara refused, she gathered all her forces and attacked Armenia, warning her troops not to kill Ara but to bring him to her alive. Ara was killed in the battle and Semiramide ordered her Gods to lick his wounds until they were healed and his life was restored. In spite of their power, the Gods were unable to revive Ara and Semiramide lost her king.

Nearby there was a clean spring stream named after Semiramide, which was flowing all year. We used to spend many festive days on the banks of the stream, enjoying food and the clean mountain air. We never saw anything resembling the tomb of Ara the Beautiful.

I was about then years old when our family moved from the Old City to Aygestan, where the air was cooler and healthier. We let our city house, which had ten rooms and rented a house in Aygestan. Later on my father bought an unfinished house in Aygestan with a large garden and orchard at the cost of 400 gold coins. The house was located opposite the Turkish garrison near the Khanjian's house. At the other side of the garrison was the house where Khriamian Hairik, the Catholicos of All Armenians had lived, where now his brother's family lived. Lower down there was the church and the Armenian cemetery. Opposite the house on the mountain was Mher's Gate, who was the legendary hero of Armenians and his arrival is awaited eagerly.



115- Great Aunt Yevgine' with friends



116- Aunt Yevgine in Tbilisi with friends, 1919 and in Yerevan, 1996.

My father planned to complete the house, which was going to have three storeys and ten rooms. Sitting in the unfinished rooms I used to dream and pray that I could go to school in Tbilisi.

Aygestan was a beautiful town with wide streets and open expanses, 2-3 storey houses and gurgling freshwater streams flowing through the streets. The houses had windows facing the street and the gardens were located away from the street. The front part of the gardens had large flowerbeds with many colourful flowers and plants. Behind the flowerbeds would be the orchards with fruit trees of all types.

Aygestan had a water-mill for grinding flour which in early 1915 was converted to run by electricity. Everyone came to see the new wonder. The town had a library used by many, run by Mr. Mkhitarian, located on the main street the Khach Poghan (Street of the Cross). A new theatre building was under construction, which was left incomplete.

In those days the famous painter Panos Terlemezian had returned from his trip abroad. His house was full of his paintings of various landscapes of areas around Van. He was not only an excellent painter but a good fighter too. During the siege of Van he was buried in the ruins of the fortifications but was brought out unscathed.

Aygestan had many Armenian schools as well as schools run by the English, French and German missionaries. The most famous Armenian schools were the Yeremian boys school and the Sandoukht school for girls. My sister Vanouhi attended the French school, where in addition to the regular subjects they learned French language and had piano lessons. In 1915 these schoolrooms served as refuge for families who escaped the massacres of the surrounding villages.

Aygestan was a sprawling town and at the Eastern end of it there was a stream called Friday Stream (Ourbat Arou) where many locals would go for their weekend outings. The two villages of Shushantz and Karmravor with their churches were located on the slopes above the stream. Not far from Aygestan were the two famous monasteries of Narek and Varag. During the 10th century the Armenian thinker and poet Grigor of Narek lived and worked in Narek monastery. His book titled "Book of Lamentations" written in classic Armenian, being one of the important oeuvres of the world literature, has been translated into many languages.

The Narek monastery had a clean and healthy air and our family and friends sometimes spent one or two months there for our summer holidays. We used to sleep under tents but the provisions were kept in one of the rooms of the monastery. One day my older sister Siranoush went up the hill to read under the shadow of a tree when she was confronted with a huge snake. Her shouts attracted the attention of the men who "rescued" her from the predicament.

Varag monastery was a large complex of churches, boarding school, refectories and room and cells for the monks and the students. On the name day of St. Varag there were important festivities in the monastery. After the Mass all the youngsters would play and dance and be merry. We also used to attend these festivities for a day or two, occupying one of the classrooms of the school. The monastery was

located on beautiful hillside surrounded by trees and streams of cold spring water. From the top of the hill of St. Varag one could see the snow capped peak of Mount Ararat.

When I was a child I used to carry letters from my sister Siranoush to Levon Agha (Mr.) and from him to her. On the day of their wedding I remember reciting while standing on the bridal chair. Levon's father Harutiun lived on the top floor of their house and he was the person who lit the stove in the mornings and then withdrew to do his reading. During the summers they used to go to Avantz on the shores of lake Van, where we would also go for visits. In the middle of the house floor were the rooms of my sister Siranoush and her husband Levon. The younger sister Armaveni would look after their children. Little Midil was constantly crying and the sound of her cries would be heard all over Avantz. In their garden they had a huge mulberry tree and vine, from whose grapes they used to make wine in the autumn.

The head of our family was my father Hovhannes Piroumian. The children were Satenik, Karapet, Yervand, Simeon, Noush, Iskouhi, Hudith, Yeghishe, Yevgine (me), Mkrtich, Carmel and Artashes. Young Yervand was a revolutionary and was imprisoned by the Ottoman government for his ideas. After three months my father managed to get him out by bribing the authorities. He was sent to Europe for higher education and studied in Sorbonne, Geneva and Bruxelles. Every month my father used to send him money, but Yervand would spend it all on books and almost nothing on food etc. In 1913 he graduated from the University of Geneva and was preparing to return to Van when he died of tuberculosis caused by malnutrition, before he could start his journey back home. Only his books arrived and were stored in my father's warehouse!

Hearing the news my father suffered a stroke and my mother also became bedridden. In August of the same year my elder sister Satenik also died, leaving behind a husband and three children, who emigrated to Russia and later on to Tbilisi. Under the Soviets my younger brother was sent to Azerbaijan as a Young Communist worker, but died there under suspicious circumstances.

The Kaljian family consisted of the father Harutiun Agha, the mother Srbouhi, the first child, a daughter called Hripsime, then Levon, Gevork, Armaveni, Armenouhi and Araxi. The last two girls used to attend the English school. Hripsime was married and lived in Aygestan. Levon and Siranoush lived in Van. Armaveni married Haikak Kossioian, moved to Tbilisi and after 1921 they moved to Tabriz.

When in April of 1915 Van was attacked by the Turkish army, the population organised self defence until the Russian army arrived in May and the Turks retreated. The Russian army was greeted as liberators and various events and celebrations were organised in Yeremian boys school in their honour.

When at the end of May the Russians were ordered to retreat the Armenian population was given the option to follow them, since if they stayed on they would have been massacred by the Turks. The whole population of Van and Aygestan (some 23,000 Armenians) then took to the road. When we reached the village of Berkri father decided to rest. There he met commander Dro, one of the leaders of

the Armenian Army, who advised him not to stay on as the Turkish army was reorganising to attack the refugees. Dro helped father to get some provisions and we started our long walk to Igdir. This took us 12 days. From Igdir we took the train to Tbilisi, which was a town with a huge Armenian population. My sister Siranoush and her husband Levon with their family were also on the march. To escape the heat they had come to rest in Gharakilissa, where Levon's father Harutiun had died. When they arrived in Tbilisi Siranoush had their third child, a girl, who was called Vanoush after their hometown of Van.

When we reached Tbilisi, the four families of Terlemezian, Piroumian, Pandikian and Der Hakobians lived in one single apartment. We had barely rested in Tbilisi, when there were rumours that the Turkish army is going to attack Tbilisi via Batoumi, in order to complete their plan of the Armenian Genocide.

The Armenian population of Tbilisi, including our four families hired carts and once again got on the move towards Armavir. On the way we were attacked by bandits, who stole all our property, including all the possessions and wealth of my father. Our shouts and protestations reached the ears of some Armenian soldiers who pursued the bandits and managed to get back all our belongings. We reached Vladikavkaz (later Ordjonikidze) and after a weeks rest continued the way to Armavir. Near Armavir we were caught in the crossfire between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. A shell fell near my pregnant sister in law, who was so frightened that after a few weeks she aborted the child. She died soon after due to the subsequent complications but the child survived.

In Armavir our family and the Kaljians lived together in one courtyard. When the Bolsheviks occupied Armavir, we had no choice but to flee the city through the orchards and gardens. The men left in the morning and the women and children in the afternoon, getting on a train that took us to Rostov-on-Don. From there we went to Nor-Nakhidjevan located next to Rostov and settled there.

Nor-Nakhijevan was an Armenian town adjacent to Rostov, with wealthy local population who were mainly traders and artisans. It had two Armenian schools and an active cultural life. We lived there for two years until the Communists took over this town as well. It was then that the four families decided to return to Tbilisi and be among other refugees from Van.

My brother, brother in law Levon and others used to go from Rostov to Constantinople (Istanbul) to bring much needed supplies and make a living. During the return from their last trip the Communists authorities confiscated all their goods in Odessa and my brother returned home empty handed, with his bags only.

We settled in Tbilisi and each family occupied an apartment of their own. Our wondering days were over and we thought that we were settled there for good. It was then that we heard that Levon had decided to emigrate to Persia and was getting ready to move out of Tbilisi. At that time his elder daughter Midil had been accepted as student of economics and banking in an Institute in Moscow and had

gone there. I was at that time in Gharakilissa¹⁸ and decided to go to the railway station to meet them on their way to Tabriz. I waited in the station with my children until one in the morning but the train did not arrive. We went home empty handed only to find out later that the train had in fact arrived at 3AM. I never saw my sister again.

¹⁸ Later named Kirovakan and after the independence of Armenia – Vanadzor.



117- Yung Midil Galjian in 1938

Appendix 2

Concise Autobiography of Aunt Midil (1913 Van – 2010 Yerevan)

The following is an edited translation of my father's middle sister's memoirs, whom I asked to note down whatever she remembered. She noted the following down in 1996-98.

At 87, a mall and wiry lady, she still is going strong and is the pivot of the whole family. She has her own strict rules for everything in life, which make her a very special and kind person. Up to a few years ago she attended sports classes and enjoyed them immensely, until her tutor moved away to California. She has acted as hostess to me, our family as well as lots of our friends and relatives on many occasions, accommodating us in her two room apartment, often moving her bed to the kitchen to let the guests have the large bedroom and the lounge.

I was born on the city of Van on the last Sunday of the month of July 1913. In 1915 we fled Van pursued by the Turkish army and from 1915 to 1918 lived in Tiflis. At that time there were rumours that the Turks were preparing to attack Tiflis in order to annihilate all the Armenians. Terrified of this prospect, together with a few close families we gathered our belongings and went to Vladikavkaz, Novorossiisk and then to Rostov-on-the-Don, travelling in railway freight carriages. We stayed in Rostov until it was felt safe to return to Tiflis in 1921.

In Rostov I accidentally poisoned myself twice but survived both the occasions. Once I mistook the bottle of petrol for water and gulped it down. I had passed away and from the smell on my breath my parents had realised reason, rushing me to hospital and bringing me back home in good health. On the second occasion I had eaten so many bitter apricot kernels (containing cyanide) that had again lost consciousness and fallen down the steps into the courtyard. My uncle had taken me to the hospital where they had washed my stomach and once again I survived.

When we arrived in Tiflis, I was 8 years old but had not attended school. After taking private tuition I entered second grade of No.70 School and graduated in 1931. I always was an average student but in mathematics and geography I usually got top marks. My brother Aram studied in the same school and was an excellent pupil. During the breaks he used to be very relaxed and quiet while I used to jump

around and make a nuisance of myself. The teachers had told to my father that your son should have been a girl and your daughter – a boy.

As father was mostly unemployed and even when employed his income was so low that we never had any money to buy notebooks and stationary. Our income was supplemented by Aram, who at 15 used to repair electric stoves, heaters and other appliances and even make electric heaters and sell them. The three of us also used to make paper bags out of used books and notebooks as well as other sheets of papers found in the basement, which we sold to the grocery storeowners for a few kopeks.

One day uncle Gevork was apprehended and imprisoned for no apparent reason. After a few months he was released since the arrest was made by error and he was in fact imprisoned instead of another person. A case of mistaken identity. While he was in prison I used to take him food and clothes and he would send me small decorative toys and dolls made of dried bread, painted meticulously with various pigments that he could improvise. He was an artisan of the first order and of the highest quality.

Between 1921 and 1923 our family consisted of ten members. In 1923 my younger aunt married and went to Yerevan, the other aunt got married to a man with a big moustache and moved to his house, my paternal uncle Gevork got married to Arshav but did not move away! In 1928 uncle moved to Tabriz with his wife, son Artoush and daughter Alice.

After completing my schooling I entered the institute of accountancy created by the National Bank of Transcaucasia, which guaranteed employment in the bank after graduation. One month prior to the end of the first year the head of the bank announced that the Central Bank in Moscow was opening an institute for higher education offering various banking courses. He called out five names, including mine, and asked us to see him the following day. The next day he told us that our names would be put forward for acceptance in the course of Economics and that we should prepare all the required documentation. A few weeks later he announced that only two students had been accepted, myself and another student.

From day one father was against my going to Moscow, reasoning that I had no suitable clothing for survival during the Moscow winters. Since father and I could not come to some sort of agreement he invited all the relatives and announced my intentions to go to Moscow as well as his reasons for opposing it. He then added that he could not even afford to pay my train fare to Moscow, let alone helping me financially during my studies, concluding that I should not go! Majority did not agree with him, specially when I said that during the past four months I had not spent any of my stipend (160 Roubles) and with that money I could buy a pair of shoes as well as my ticket to Moscow and have some spare cash left over. This did the trick and I left for Moscow in October 1931.

During the 1932 summer holidays I returned to Tiflis to spend couple of months with my family. I went back to Moscow to my studies and when during the next summer recess when I returned home, mother met me at the station and told me that we are

going to go to uncle's house. To my question "why aren't we going home first" she replied with tearful eyes saying "we have no home any more". All the family belongings were packed and stored in uncle's house. Aram was not back from work yet and Vanoush had gone to Moscow-Leningrad with her classmates. It was then that father told me that they intended to emigrate to Iran. I was stunned with the unexpected news and protested why he had mentioned anything about this in his weekly letters. His reply was that it was difficult to live under the Soviet regime and here he could not provide the fresh food and treatment required by my mother, who was suffering from tuberculosis. I suggested that I could leave my studies, take mother to the resort city of Dilijan¹⁹, where I could work and support her during her convalescence in the clinic. My uncle supported my idea, specially that at the same time Vanoush was being sent to Akhalkalak on assignment and there would be only Aram and father left at home, but father would not hear of it. He reasoned that he already has had the Iranian visas and documents it was not possible to return them.

As our family, like all the other refugees, were fugitives from Van, we did not possess any sort of documentation. Father had managed to purchase Persian passports (at the cost of a few toumans), claiming that they were in fact born in Tabriz. Apparently the Persian consulate in Tiflis was handing out passports at a cost.

Thus, on 13 August 1933 we all boarded the train to Yerevan, where in the station I said goodbye to all my family never to see my mother again. Two of Aram's teachers were in the station begging him not to go and promising that they would make sure that he attends post graduate courses and with his talent was guaranteed an excellent position. Alas it was not to be!

During the New Year holiday of 1934 all my fellow students were in party mood but I was worried not having had any letters from mother for the over two months. As if some force pushed me towards the post office, from where I sent a telegram to Tabriz, asking after my mother's health. I did not get a reply, but later Vanoush wrote to me that the telegram had arrived when mother had only just died and her body was still warm. When in 1946 Vanoush returned to Yerevan, she told me that mother had apparently intentionally drank a strong antiseptic solution, knowing that it would kill her. She had left a short and faded note on the back of a photograph of her parents, where she said "goodbye my beloved ones, I cannot stand this suffering any more...".

For the New Year of 1935 Aram sent me some money with which I bought a skirt and a blouse. In the summer of the same year I was preparing for the finals when I was informed that father was coming to Tiflis for surgery on his eyes. I had to postpone my exams and travel to Tiflis where I stayed and worked for a year. Father met me at the station and was very apologetic for having opposed me.

¹⁹ Dilijan is a resort city situated in the wooded mountains about 50km from Yerevan..

In 1935 the Bank of Transcaucasia was closed and instead each of the three Transcaucasian Republics²⁰ opened their own Governmental Banks. I did not know much Georgian therefore I was left out of work. I was offered a position in the bank, provided I could learn Georgian, alternatively I was offered positions in Kirovakan (Armenia) or Baku (Azerbaijan). I did not accept either offer and decided to return to Moscow and take my final exams, which I did and was even offered a position in Moscow (but no living quarters yet). I decided to return to Tiflis and took the train back. On the way to Tiflis I stopped in Rostov to visit Manuel, a close family friend who lived in there. Hearing my story he suggested that as I was alone and no family awaited me, I could try to find work in Rostov, which I did, obtaining a good position in the Government Bank without much difficulty.

I used to stay with Manuel's family, who treated me as their daughter but as soon as their son, Ishkhan was accepted into the Military Academy I had to leave their house. Having a family living outside the USSR made me illegible to stay with any Soviet family having ties with the military. I had to rent a room in the same courtyard but only slept there, spending my time at home with Manuel's family as before. I had time for my sporting activities and enjoyed daily life to the full, however this did not last very long and 1938 arrived, full of persecutions and terror. People were thrown out of work for no apparent reason, were imprisoned and exiled. Foreigners were made to leave the country or be banished. I was offered to go and work out of town but I did not agree. Subsequently, my case came up for discussion in the Young Communists meeting and my ties with my family in Iran were "revealed" for which I was reprimanded and asked whether I intend to keep my contact with my family. To which I replied that I intended to keep up my correspondence with my family. I was unanimously stripped of my membership and the following week was released from work reasoning the reduction of work force.

That evening Manuel suggested that to forget my problems I should go to the movies. I did so reluctantly and when leaving the theatre left my handbag hanging on the back of the seat. I immediately went back for it but it had already disappeared together with my ID, savings book, silver powder case (made by uncle Gevork) etc.

To get an ID I had to advertise in the paper, which cost money, but I had lost my savings book and therefore could not withdraw any of my funds. I had to borrow from Manuel and advertise the loss in the paper. Fortunately the thieves had thrown my papers in the post box and they were restored to me. Later on I found out that the reason given for my release from work was not correct and that the same boss had hired two persons after sacking me "due to reduction of workforce". I appealed to the union court and was eventually reinstated with back pay, but could not work in the same place and asked to be transferred to Yerevan.

In spite of father's advice not to live with aunt Araxie ever, she managed to convince me to do so, which cost me very dearly. I took pity on her because her husband had been sent to the front and she was left with her 10 year old son. I

²⁰ Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan.

spent all my savings there and was left with nothing, not even a word of gratitude. Luckily my boss liked me and I was offered a senior position as head of planning for our customers in the food industry. After that I worked in the same bank in various capacities and in August 1979 retired from work, having had 45 years of service.

In September of 1946 I was on my annual holidays in Dilijan when I was called to the telephone and informed that my sister Vanoush had just arrived from Iran and was waiting for me in my room. I immediately returned to Yerevan and found out that Vanoush with her new husband Jim and his bother Shavarsh and sister Manya had arrived and were allocated a plot of land in Kharberd area (10 km south of Yerevan). They had decided that this was not suitable for them and had moved temporarily to my room. In my 8 square meter room I could hardly accommodate five adults and therefore Vanoush, Jim and I had to sleep on the communal kitchen floor while her brother and sister in laws enjoyed my room. Fortunately they found a room and moved out soon but Vanoush and Jim stayed with me until such time that they could build a home in Yerevan.

Through his contacts Jim managed to get a plot of land in a central avenue of the town and obtained permission for building a two-storey house. We decided to build a house with four apartments, one for Vanoush and Jim, another for Shavarsh and Manya, the third for me and the last one for Aram, whom we expected to arrive with his family in 1947. With my savings and through contacts I bought all the building and construction materials and the two brothers constructed the building. The construction lasted over six years but Vanoush decided to move into the unfinished apartment after two years. We had not completed the building when the municipality decided to widen the road and construct 4-5 storey apartment houses on the widened road. As our building was on the way it had to be demolished to give way to the new road etc. After many meetings and complaints we were offered an agreement whereby the municipality proposed to pay back all that we had spent on construction of our building and provide us with an equal living area in one of the newly constructed apartment houses.

Four of the better apartments each having four rooms and 70 sq. metres area each in one of the newly constructed building were earmarked for us. The Secretary of the Communist Party on one of his visits found these apartments indeed to be excellent and of large size and notwithstanding our agreement decided to keep them, in order to allocate them to his cronies. We eventually ended up with 2 and 3 room apartments, much smaller than our private ones which were demolished.

From the first days aunt Yevgine` disliked Shavarsh and warned me against him. The "brother in law" did everything in his power to discredit me and Aram. He wrote anonymous letters to my boss saying that I was an unreliable person and a spy and much, much more. He even managed to turn Vanoush and Jim against each other and poisoned their relationship completely, which eventually ended up with their divorce. He finally died of a heart attack in 1961, leaving his sister to continue his dirty work up until her own death in 1995.

Vanoush had a miserable life, first in the hands of her in-laws, later because of the divorce and the mental problems of the younger son Michael and the estrangement of the elder son Edik.

In 1954 I got married to Ashot Assatourian, whom my relatives considered “unsuitable” for me, but with whom I spent many happy years, surrounded with family and friends. After his death in 1985 until today I keep my ties with his side of the family.

Ashot was not much of a traveller but for seven years we spent our holiday together in Leningrad, Tallin, on the Volga-Don canal, Moscow, Odessa etc. In 1965 Aram arrived in Yerevan after 31 years of absence. We travelled together to Leningrad and Moscow, the next year we took a cruise on the Danube and visited six countries. . In late 1970 I flew to San Francisco to meet my uncle Gevork’s family and spent a few months with them. In 1975 I visited Aram and his family in Tehran, meeting the young generation for the first time. I even visited London together with Teresa and David in 1989, the year following the earthquake.

Midil Galdjian
1996 London



118 - Midil in 2002.

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