

My Brother Is But One: The Brief Life of Hormizd d'Mar Shimun (1889-1915)

(Part II of III)

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Rue de Pera (1910-15)

Constantinople (1910-1915)

PART II

Hormizd's college years in the Turkish capital coincided with four wars, fires, and a cholera epidemic. From the archival sources we learn that he resided in the Beyoglu district, a predominantly Christian quarter in the European part of the city known to old-timers as Pera (Greek for "Beyond"). French writer and teacher Bertrand Bareilles fondly recalled the district Hormizd would grow acquainted with between 1911 and 1915: "*Pera participated in all the races with which it is populated. If it was Greek in its cafes and its bakals (grocers), it was no less French in its fashions and its signs, English in its overcoats, German in its brasseries, Italian or Spanish in its serenades and its dolce farniente (sweet idleness); Turkish by its red fez, its bekdjis (watchmen), its hamals (porters), its guardhouses. At Pera, one could see the same play performed in several languages; peddlers shout out newspapers in different languages, clocks strike the hour with the turca and the franca (east & west); the week count two or three public holidays. It was at the 'Perfect Macedonia' brewery, run by a Greek from Karpenissi, but selling beer from Munich and Pilsen, that you could see Levantines whet their appetites with a glass of raki, with three olives served in a saucer, continue with Russian caviar, an English steak, all drizzled with the foamy spatenbrau. The good Turkish coffee completed this international menu.*"¹

"Stambul," as Constantinople was called by locals, was a short stroll across the Golden Horn (Bosphorus) over the busy Galata Bridge, which led into the main business district. Here were the Sublime Porte and ministry buildings, the Imperial University, custom house,

warehouses, railway station, mosques and most Turks. On walks to and from school and around the city (lit by over 8,000 gas lanterns)² Hormizd would have intermingled with some of the hundreds of merchants who, ". . . *Afterrunning around the city, basket on their back and scales in hand, line up in the evening on the sidewalks of shopping streets. Inside each basket a candle is stuck, and everyone does their shopping for fruit and vegetables before going home.*"³

Hormizd was enrolled at a French school upon arrival in late 1910 or early 1911, and then (possibly) by 1912 or 1913 at an American school. As the only American college for boys at that time was Robert College it's plausible that being an older student studying Turkish he was a "day-student", in which case his name might not appear on official student registers.⁴ Who he lived with or where precisely is unknown, though English missionary support is referred to. But perhaps more intriguing and informative than these enticing clues, are their sources; namely, a Kurdish member of the *Meclis-i-A'yan* (Ottoman Senate), and a Russian Vice-Consul stationed in the Persian border town of Urmia.

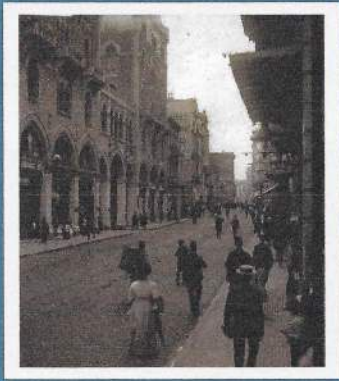
In a letter dated October 5, 1912, Sheikh Abdul-Kadir addresses Grand Vizier Ahmed Pasha at the Sublime Porte (seat of government): "*In the Hakkari district, which is subordinate to the province of Van, the hereditary spiritual leader of the entire Nestorian community, which numbers over a hundred thousand, is Mar Shimun Efendi. His brother, Hormizd Efendi, was sent to Istanbul last year for the completion of his education. In this regard, not only did they [the Patriarch/Assyrians] send a letter*

1. Bertrand Bareilles, *Constantinople: Ses Cites Franques Et Levantines (Pera--Galata--Banlieue)*. (Paris: Editions Bossard, 1918), 52.

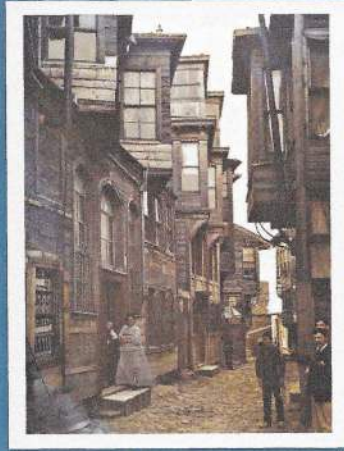
2. Vahdettin Engin and Gulsoy Ufuk, "*Istanbul in the Era of Electric Lighting*," vol. 8, *History of Istanbul*: n44.

3. Bareilles: 82.

4. "*We have offered to receive, free of tuition, five students whom the Minister of Public Instruction shall nominate; three of these are to be boarding scholars and two of them day scholars. The desire of the Minister is to have these students trained so that they may become teachers in Turkish schools.*" Robert College, Report of President (1910/11): 13 & 12.



Rue de Pera (1912)



Pera (1912)



Pera (1910-15)

to their representatives, but the governor also separately conveyed this matter to the Ministry of Education. Since their representatives were not present in the city at that time, and the gentleman in question couldn't be accepted upon the appeal to the former Minister of Education, he was unfortunately enrolled in a French school here. It is well known to your esteemed understanding that such a significant community, numbering over a hundred thousand, has shown loyalty and affection to the Great Ottoman State up until now and has never deviated from this stance. Therefore, it is needless to say and clarify that having a member of their respected family in foreign schools would pave the way for foreign intrigues in this regard. Given this, the representatives strongly recommend, for the government's interests, that the aforementioned gentleman be educated in an Ottoman manner, and to admit and incorporate him into the *Mekteb-i Sultani* (Imperial School). If deemed appropriate by your esteemed self, considering today is the last day for school admissions, it is anticipated that the Ministry of Education will receive the necessary imperial order in this regard. The command and directive in this matter are at the discretion of my master. -- *Abdülkadir son of Abdullah el-Hüseyini.*"⁵ Ahmed Pasha acknowledged the wisdom of this request and passed it on to the Minister of Education, suggesting that action

be taken, however a later reference to his being in an American school implies enrollment at Robert College.

Who was this Abdul-Kadir, and could he have been the same Kurdish "chief" referred to in Wigram's letter of four years prior in which Hormizd assisted his brother in some earlier diplomacy? Possibly, as he (Seyyid Abdul-Kadir) had by then returned to his home-village of Nehri in the Hakkari in the fall of 1908 after twelve years of exile in Medina (he had partaken in a putsch against Abdul Hamid II in 1896).⁶

In fact, Hormizd's uncle Mar Rowil and a significant section of mountain Assyrians had lent support to the Sheikh's highly regarded father, Sheikh Ubeydullah⁷ in his bold bid for Kurdish independence (against Turk and Persian alike) in late 1880. Despite supplies of Russian weapons this rebellion fell apart, and father and sons were exiled to Constantinople (where they could be more closely watched apparently). It is said that in his communications with the Sultan, Sheikh Ubeydullah



Abdulkadir

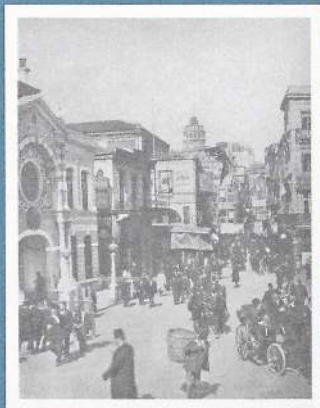
praised Mar Shimun and boasted that the Assyrians of his district were his "best subjects."⁸

Further light is shed upon these multifaceted relationships by Russian Vice-Consul Pavel Vvedensky who telegraphs his superior in St. Petersburg from Urmia: "*Mar-Shimun's brother Hormuzd, a young man without*

5. Osmanli Arsivi (Ottoman State Archives), Istanbul: 4092.306894 (Trans. Dr. Ramazan Turgut).
 6. Metin Atmaca (University of Ankara), "The Road to Sevres: Kurdish Elites and Question of Self-Determination After the First World War," *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 16 (2022): 6.
 7. He held an exalted rank amongst Sunni Muslim communities in Turkey, Arabia, and even Africa.
 8. CochranDiary: 187.



Pera 2 (1910-15)



Pera (1910-15)



Galata Bridge 2 (1910-15)

means, continues his education in Constantinople at the expense of English missionaries. Sheikh Abdul-Kadir chose him as an obedient tool for his insidious actions against the mountain Syrians in favor of the Turks and to protect his name. The districts connected with Mar-Shimun were to be destroyed in the event of a Syrian uprising. Sheikh Abdul-Kadir is undoubtedly on the orders of Constantinople to fight the Russians and raise an uprising throughout Kurdistan. I believe that he will continue to play a double game until the outcome of the Turkish struggle is clear and at that time make a move to our side so that he can continue to assure us of his loyalty. We know that his sons are fighting us under his direct orders.”⁹

Like father, like son, Abdul-Kadir knew the necessity of hedging his bets when it came to contemplating any risky resistance to Ottoman authority and forging favorable alliances with the Assyrians. Mar Shimun was no less politically prudent, for as Vvedensky’s British counterpart in Mosul, H.C. Hony speculated: “. . . I think that Mar Shimun is playing a double-game, so as to get money from both English and Russians, and to get protection from the latter, as they cannot get it from the former.”¹⁰

Hormizd’s life in the capital got off to an apocalyptic start. Not long after his arrival, in July of 1911, a massive fire (probably started by celebratory fireworks) fanned by heavy winds destroyed several thousand wood-built houses and left many thousands homeless. This was contemporaneous with a raging cholera epidemic which caused almost 1,500 deaths across the city.¹¹ As a day-

student Hormizd could have been temporarily prohibited from attending classes by government decree. Another major fire struck in October, and when that subsided, an outbreak of smallpox became widespread enough that vaccinations were ordered. On top of all this, Italy declared war on Turkey over its possession of Libya. Hormizd might be forgiven for expecting earthquakes and floods to follow.

Turkish Studies at Robert College was comprised of courses in reading, writing, penmanship, and conversation at increasing levels. Also included were courses on civics, history, social economy, geography, and biographies of celebrated men in the Ottoman Empire -- about four to six hours a week.¹² One of the teachers in the Turkish Department was Tevfik Fikret Bey, the founder of modern Turkish poetry (and critic of Islamic conservatism and nationalism). Hormizd may very well have read and appreciated his poetry.

The following fall on October 17th, 1912, Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia formed the Balkan Alliance. War was once more declared against Turkey, this time over its possession of Macedonia, which was claimed by each of those countries for ethnic and cultural reasons. The war was essentially an effort to expel the Ottoman State from the Balkans, not just politically, but also demographically, and as such, a war of nationalism and ethnic homogeneity.¹³ Hormizd would have witnessed pro-war demonstrations and a general mobilization of soldiers throughout Turkey, followed not long after by streams of wounded flooding into the city -- “20,000 and counting”

9. Rossiiski gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv (Russian State Military Historical Archive): F.133, 470, 42, 208. 23 November, 1914.

10. British Foreign Office Records: 424/238, 90 (28 March, 1913).

11. Robert College Report of President: 1911-12, 44.

12. Robert College Catalog: 1912-1914, 47-8.

13. Engin Kilic, “The Balkan War (1912-13) and Visions of the Future in Ottoman Turkish Literature,” PhD diss., (Universiteit Leiden, 2015): 36.

14. Annales de la Congregation de la Mission (French Lazarist Mission/St. Vincent de Paul journal): vol. 78, 57.



Constantinople (1908)



Constantinople (1914-15)



Pera I (1910-15)

according to the Sisters of Charity at the French Lazarist mission on November 5, 1912.¹⁴ *“The skies were grey and the air was damp, and the streets looked more than usually squalid and dishevelled,”* observed travel writer Maurice Baring. *“But besides all this there was in the air a feeling of great gloom, which was intensified by the chattering crowds in Pera, laughing and making fun of the Turkish reverses, by the chirping women at the balconies, watching the stragglers and the wounded returning from the front, and listening, in case they might hear the enemy sullenly firing.”*¹⁵ Hormizd wrote home of hearing the cannon fire along with the rest of the city.¹⁶ *“One Sunday [November 17], during the attack that the Bulgarians were making upon the Chatalaja fortifications only nineteen miles away, the booming cannon could be heard all day long, and we were waiting in suspense for the issue of battle,”* recalled Caleb Gates, President of Robert College (which was temporarily being guarded by U.S. Marines).¹⁷ Another captive listener was Pere Lobry of the French mission: *“For several days, we have heard the cannonade of the battle engaged 20-30 kilometers from our home. Sunday especially, it lasted*

*all day.”*¹⁸



Concurrent with the ebb and flow of soldiers in and out of the city of over a million people came the dreaded return of disease. *“Another enemy that alarms us,”* wrote Lobry, *“is cholera which caused a huge number of victims in Istanbul and among the Turkish soldiers. Many mosques are filled with the sick and in Istanbul, there are more than 150,000 refugees. It is a lamentable situation. The battle continues and we hope it will be over, so that, for their part, the sisters can, alongside the wounded, also treat the cholera patients.”*¹⁹ The octogenarian English barrister Sir Edwin Pears remembered: *“We in Constantinople watched the progress of the struggle from day to day. We saw thousands of wounded being brought into San Stefano [a historical village to the west of the city], an absolute breakdown in Turkish military and sanitary organisation, and the general belief was that the Bulgarians would soon enter the city triumphantly.”*²⁰

In these agonizing days, the atmosphere at Robert College, which had a diverse student-body of Bulgarians, Greeks, Armenians, Albanians and Turks --in addition to possibly one Assyrian-- remained civil and collegial, such

15. Maurice Baring, *Letters from the Near East 1909 & 1912*. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1913): 144-5. 21 November, 1912.

16. SurmaDiary: 20 December, 1912.

17. Caleb F. Gates, *Not To Me Only*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940): 203-4

18. *Annales* (78): 59.

19. *Annales* (78): 59; Gates: 203.

20. Sir Edwin Pears, *Forty Years In Constantinople: The Recollections of Sir Edwin Pears 1873-1915*. (London: Herbert Jenkins Ltd., 1916): 327.

21. Gates: 204.

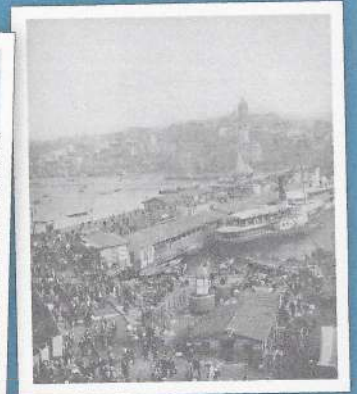
22. *“The earth is my homeland, my nation all humankind . . .”*; *“Blood nourishes violence and violence blood; this enmity is a flame in the blood that blood never quenches, so do I believe . . . Surely this graveyard-existence will be followed by refulgent resurrection . . .”* Tevfik Fikret Bey, *“Haluk’un Inancı (Haluk’s Credo), Haluk’un Defteri.”* 1911.



Constantinople (1910-15)



Constantinople (1910-15)



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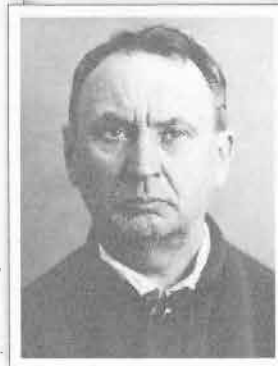
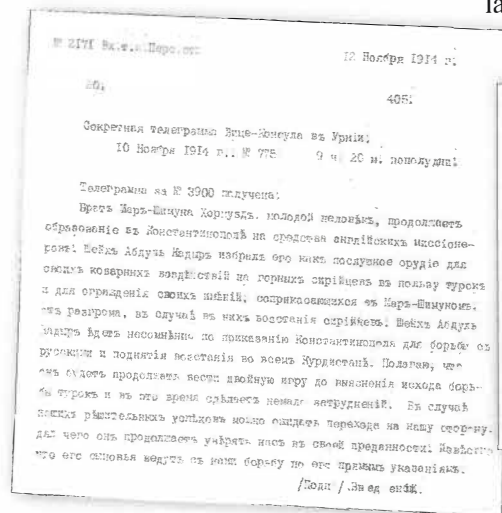
that, “Students frequently told each other that when they graduated they would do their best to prevent such wars.”²¹ On campus or in the cafes along the Cadde-i Kebir (Grand Avenue) of Beyoglu, Hormizd would have certainly been among this good-will group, perhaps practicing his Turkish while discussing Professor Fikret’s new poem “Haluk’s Credo” with friends over coffee and a pipe: “*Yeryüzü vatanım, insansoyu milletimdir benim . . . Kan şiddeti besler, şiddet kanı; bu düşmanlık kan ateşidir, sönmeyecek kanla, inandım. . . . Elbet şu mezar hayatı zifiri karanlığın ardından aydınlık bir kıyamet günü gelecek. . . .*”²²

On January 22, 1913, a coup d’etat led by Enver Pasha and Talaat Pasha of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) Party led to the assassination of the Minister of War and the forced resignation of the Grand Vizier. This solidified the power of the main Young Turk movement, and in turn, their repressive, pan-Islamic policies which encouraged crackdowns on the Christian millets. Still, just eleven days after the coup Tahsin Bey, the Vali of Van wrote to Talaat Pasha informing him that he did not currently believe Mar Shimun and the Assyrians were “inclined to Russian propaganda,” though he suspected they might still be influenced by the Orthodox Church. A Turkish military officer stationed in or near Qudshanis at this time reported that Mar Benyamin had “made a good impression” on him, lamenting that if the Government

could only free itself of the wars in the west, more attention could then be paid to properly collecting taxes and governing in the east. He warned that if not, then the Assyrians would continue to be susceptible to outside influences.²³

Word reached Qudshanis of the war between Turkey and Bulgaria in March, by which time the first Balkan War was almost ended, and a second war, to win back lost territory from Bulgaria, initiated a few months later. That fall, the Sultan conferred the Order of Osmanli on Mar Benyamin (the medal is sent to him by a *qaimaqam* (local governor) from nearby Julamerk). In addition to an increase in annual salary, medals and honors were the Sublime Porte’s age-old method of attempting to keep the remote millets “loyal”. This was followed by a visit in the summer of 1914 by Tahsin Bey (bearing further gifts)

who sought both to convince Mar Benyamin of the State’s support for them, as well as demanding further assurances of his people’s loyalty to the State.²⁴ The ever-present fear of internal instability and the pro-Russian orientation of the Assyrians (and Armenians), coupled with missionary influences and a history of supporting Kurdish liberation had the Porte perpetually on edge. “. . . *The Nestorians have always remained suspect to the government [due to] their predisposition to be influenced*



Pavel Vvdensky

23. Tarik Ziya Arvas. “Osmanli Belgelerinde Nasturi-Kurt Asiret Anlasmazliklari (Nestorian-Kurdish Dispute in Ottoman Records (1856-1914),” Journal of Karatekin Faculty of Literature, 5, no.5 (2015): 80. OA: DH. İD, 116/no.57.

24. OA: DH. ŞFR. 42/44; DH. EUM. 4Sb. 23/113 (16 June, 1914).

25. Gaunt: 128; OA: DH.ŞFR, 46.78 (26 Oct, 1914).

26. Bareilles: 53.



Mar Benyamin's medals, the Osmanli Hamidiya and the Majidiya.



Robert College (1912)



Mobilization

by foreigners and become a channel and instrument [for them],” explained Talaat Pasha to Tahsin Bey in Van. “Because of the operation and efforts in Persia, the concern of the government over Nestorians has increased, particularly about those who are found along our border with Iran. The government’s lack of trust of them results in their chastisement - their deportation and expulsion from their locations to suitable provinces such as Ankara and Konya. They are to be transferred and dispersed so that they henceforth will not live together in a mass, but will live exclusively among Muslim people, and in no location are they to exceed twenty dwellings. . . .”²⁵ Ottoman-era coercion through more diplomatic means had been replaced by a policy of ethnic cleansing under the guise of military necessity and war.

On September 10th, 1914, the sanctuary of schools from the swirling geo-political storms outside was breached when the Sultan made good on earlier years’ threats and issued a decree abolishing extraterritorial rights of foreigners. Up until this time, the European resident had “. . . Escaped Turkish law, tax officials and the hassle of an arbitrary regime. At Pera he had his schools, his churches, his newspapers, his post offices where he entrusted his letters, a consulate where he carried his complaints, an embassy which supported him with his authority.”²⁶ Henceforth, all were ostensibly equal under Ottoman law.

By October there could be no mistaking that Turkey was on the brink of yet another war, and this one

much greater in scope. From the Ortakoy neighborhood French writer and resident Emile Edwards observed on October 30th: “In the streets the ordinary crowd, but a silent and gloomy crowd; Christians and Muslims are appalled. It’s the war; although, none of the parades, the tumult, the clamors which preceded and accompanied the Balkan campaign. Everyone, on the contrary, from whatever background, whatever race they belong to, looks discouraged and desperate. The people stopped at the edge of the sidewalks speak in suppressed voices, so low that their lips barely move. It’s a day of mourning: people speak quietly in the room of the dead! Groups of curious people park in front of the embassies of the Triple Entente, where there is a continual coming and going of cars and vehicles.”²⁷



Wherever Hormizd happened to be at this pivotal moment the panicky chatter of the foreign residents over the coming catastrophe was surely unnerving. He envied those who had somewhere to flee, sensing along with Edwards, “The horror of feeling like prisoners, separated from the rest of the world; the horror of being deprived of news;” or letters from home. “The anguish of those who remain is exaggerated,” wrote Edwards, while he, Hormizd and thousands of others anxiously wondered, “What do they know, those who flee, to flee like this, and what terrible things are being prepared in the shadows for those who remain?”²⁸

To be continued.....

27. Emile Edwards, *Journal d'un Habitant de Constantinople (1914-1915)*. (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1915): 64.

28. Ibid: 73-4.