

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

Part III of III

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Constantinople (1915)

PART III

When Turkey declared war on England on October 29th, 1914, forty-year Constantinople resident Sir Edwin Pears could still doubt any ill-will towards the English existed in the capital: *"It was indeed my hope that I should be permitted to remain, and therefore when I saw the departure of the Ambassador and Consul and their staffs, and of nearly all of the British community who could afford to get away, it did not greatly alarm me. I knew that I had, as I trust I still have, many friends amongst the best Turks and among the Young Turkey Party now in power, and I fully recognised that the nation had been driving into war by the pushfulness and the persistency of the Germans, aided by Enver Pasha, the Minister of War."*¹ Nevertheless, the Pera district where he and Hormizd resided had taken on the appearance of a "Prussian suburb" and their foreign neighbors were increasingly resentful towards the Germans and the Government they had co-opted. As French resident Emile Edwards noted: *"The streets belong to the Germans, who govern as despots, and to the Young Turks their friends, these friends whom they will crush under their boots, if victory smiles on them on the Western battlefields."*²

As for Hormizd, a semblance of security in being a student of Turkish still seemed possible. Caleb Gates remembers: *"In view of the many conflicting reports circulating in the city and of the excitement produced by them, it might be expected that disturbances would break out among our students. They were of different nationalities; all the peoples engaged in the strife were represented among them; but, as in previous crises, no demonstrations were made in the College, and I can recall*

*no instance of strife between individual students. There was a different atmosphere in the College, and the boys seemed glad to lay aside national animosities which would have marred the peace of our campus."*³

In the ensuing days however, newspapers (namely, the *İkdam*, a Turkish paper owned by the Germans) were publishing proclamations of jihad, or holy war, against Christian infidels. As instigated by Germany, Muslims under all Christian nations --especially the Allied powers-- were urged to revolt and try to overthrow them. German Ambassador Hans von Wangenheim (characterized by American diplomat Lewis Einstein as *"cunning, and politically unscrupulous"*)⁴ nonchalantly rationalized to American Ambassador Morgenthau, *"If we can stir the Mohammedans up against the English and Russians, we can force them to make peace."*⁵ Though many dismissed this as base propaganda, a proclamation from the Sheik-ul-Islam describing a *"... detailed plan of operations for the assassination and decimation of all Christians -- except those of German nationality,"*⁶ enflamed an increasingly tense Constantinople such that, *"In the latter part of November a wave of terror swept the city. Mobs sacked foreign shops, French schools and monasteries were closed, and orphans were turned into the streets."*⁷

On November 30th, Sir Edwin was arrested. *"The police entered my chambers, packed up the contents in sacks, including everything in my safe, and then proceeded to my house and made a similar seizure there. . . . I was taken across to Stambul [from Pera], to a building set aside as a prison for non-Turkish subjects. When I arrived there I was shewn into a room, requested to turn out my*

1. Pears: 355.

2. Edwards: 90-1; 115 (November/December, 1914).

3. Gates: 214-15.

4. Lewis Einstein, *Inside Constantinople: A Diplomatist's Diary During the Dardanelles Expedition, April-September, 1915*. (London, John Murray 1917): 25.

5. Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*. (Garden City, Doubleday, Page & Co. 1926): 161.

6. Morgenthau: 163.

7. Gates: 212.



Sir Edwin Pears



Haydar Bey

pockets, and passed into the common room. I suppose it was about twenty feet long by thirteen broad. There were about five-and-twenty men in it--several Russians, three or four Frenchmen, and two or three Egyptians who had spoken approvingly of British rule. The room was filthy, and contained only one chair--an old one. The occupants were naturally interested in the new-comer, but treated me with great respect and even kindness, insisting that I should take possession of the chair. There I remained for two hours..."⁸

Friends called on Ambassador Morgenthau to whom Enver Pasha and Talaat Bey had assured that Pears would not be molested. Talaat called in the Minister of Police, Bedri Bey, to see what could be done, and only after some stern and forceful diplomacy by Morgenthau was Pears released that evening, thus not spending a single night in a Turkish prison. If only Hormizd had been so fortunate. His contacts with the English, and relation to the Patriarch of a "rebellious" Christian "infidel" people with three-quarters of a century of relations with missionaries and officials from Allied countries --not to mention recent religious discussions with the Russian Orthodox Church--put him in the worst possible place at the worst possible time.

In early March of 1915, Surma Khanum received a letter from Hormizd. While the contents are unknown, this will be, it turns out, the last she hears from him. He might have described the hushed hopes of his neighbors that the British and French fleets gathered at the Dardanelles would take Constantinople, thereby linking the Allies with Russia in the East. Rumor was that, "... The chief of police was planning to sack and burn the city if the Allied fleets should succeed in forcing the Straits," according to Caleb Gates who was fielding requests from Turk and Christian alike to take refuge in the College should the Allies invade.⁹

Hormizd probably wrote of the deserted shops and stores throughout Pera; the increased prices of food (his need for money too, no doubt), and the virtual banishment of English and French on the streets, supplanted by German and Turkish voices, signs, and communiques of "conquest" and "victory". "In the streets one hears only the grating sound of windows, scraped of their foreign signs, for the tradesmen live in terror of the police, and obey every new regulation. The only exception made is in favor of German signs," noted Lewis Einstein.¹⁰ Hormizd would have witnessed with alarm the same "typical spectacle" described by the disaffected German war-correspondent Harry Stuermer, "... Of little bands of Armenians belonging to the capital being escorted through the streets of Pera by two gendarmes in their ragged murky grey uniforms with their typical brutal Anatolian faces, while a policeman who could read and write marched behind with a notebook in his hand, beckoning people at random out of the crowd with an imperious gesture, and if their papers showed them to be Armenians, simply herding them in with the rest and marching them off to the 'Karakol' of Galata-Serai, the chief police-station in Pera, where he delivered up his daily bag of Armenians."¹¹ As fresh streams of wounded soldiers filled the hospitals where some of his fellow students and teachers were volunteering, might Hormizd have informed his sister of having joined them in an attempt to stay in good graces? Possibly. Then again, the "rayas" (Ottoman Christian subjects), said Emile Edwards, prudently keep their fezzes on and, "... Do not mix with Europeans; they walk with a preoccupied air, and if there are several of them walking in company, they speak in monosyllables and do not deviate from commonplaces."¹²

Up to this moment the Assyrians of Hakkari had managed to remain ostensibly obedient to the Ottoman

8. Pears: 358.

9. Gates: 214.

10. Einstein: 82 (1 June, 1915).

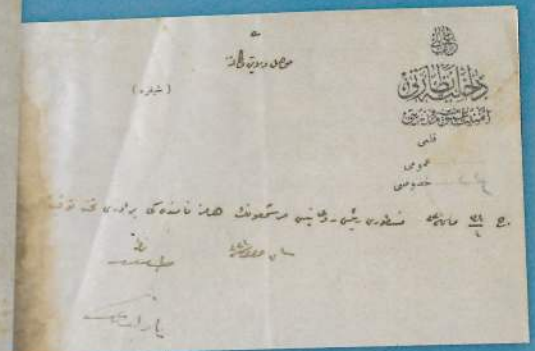
11. Harry Stuermer, *Two War Years in Constantinople*. (Hodder & Stoughton, 1917): 60.



Caleb Gates



Request for arrest of Hormizd
13 June, 1915



Confirmation of Hormizd's arrest - 20 June, 1915

State -- as attested by Sheikh Abdul-Kadir in his petition to the Minister of Education, and likewise corroborated by Surma Khanum and Shlemon Malik Ismail. But to an embittered and cynical Turkish official stuck in the remote and wild east like Haydar Bey, the Assyrian's "false fealty" consisted of little more than paying minimal taxes so as to "make themselves respected and forgiven." Forgiven, for all too frequently being unable to pay, because, as he was averse to admitting, the Assyrians (and Kurds) had long been victims of fraudulent tax-collecting schemes by unscrupulous Turkish officials in the region. In what almost passed for a death-bed confession (published in the year of his death in 1954) the septuagenarian ex-Ottoman Turk, disingenuously conceded: "While it is impossible for me to excuse and justify the Nestorian's rebellion, I cannot deny that we, through our inability or negligence, have actually helped those who forced them onto this path. We have neglected the East to such an extent, and left its people, including the Nestorians, to their own devices, that it is no wonder that this is the fate that has befallen them."¹² Even decades after the fact, Haydar is clearly less concerned about admitting to injustices perpetuated against Assyrians than about justifying his own prominent role in their expulsion; not to mention Hormizd's murder, about which, of course, he is mute.

Accounts of forced deportations, displacement, starvation, and atrocities committed against the Armenians and Assyrians in and around Urmia on the Persian border, were becoming frighteningly common. While Talaat Pasha personally re-assured Gates, Pears, and Morgenthau that the Government "... Did not want to get rid of the Armenians, for they needed them," in due time he, "... Threw off all disguise and avowed that they were determined to finish the deportations, which were then

about three-fourths completed. He gave three reasons for this policy: the Armenians had enriched themselves at the expense of the Turks; they had planned to set up a separate government; and they had turned against the Turks and were helping the Russians. . . . The policy seemed to be the scattering of Christians among the Moslem populations until one homogeneous Turkish nation should be formed."¹⁴

In the Hakkari, hostile Kurdish tribes were unfettered. Assyrian villages in Albaq, around Bashqala, were attacked as Turkish authorities looked the other way. In a move no doubt calculated to provoke the Assyrians into hostile resistance, the new pro-Young Turk Vali of Van, Cevdet Bey secretly ordered Mar Benyamin's arrest.¹⁵ So when the Assyrian leaders assembled with their patriarch between April 12th and 17th at Mar Diz, Mar Benyamin's calculus was clear: Assured destruction by the Turks or a chance of actual autonomy as promised by the Russians. Ever since 1911 rumors of Russian annexation of Azerbaijan had flitted in the air. After the depletion and demoralization of Turkish forces in the Balkans wars, this revolutionary prospect suddenly seemed possible. Was this not then the propitious moment for all Assyrians to break free from centuries of Turkish-Kurdish vassalage? Assyrian militias in Urmia had been organized and trained by Russian officers (with the consent of local Persian authorities) since the previous fall and the Commander-in-Chief of Russian Forces in Azerbaijan, General Chernazoboff confirmed that, "If the Assyrians take up arms against Khalil Pasha's army, they will greatly help us and we will recognize them as allies in perpetuity."¹⁶

With these assurances and in the face of an existential threat, "There was but one step for us to take," recalled Surma Khanum.¹⁷ Mar Benyamin and the tribal

12. Edwards: 158-9 (March/April, 1915).

13. Haydar Hilmi (Vaner) Bey, "Turkiye de Nesturi Hadisesi." Yeni Tarih Dunyasi (The World of History), v. 16, 642. 30 April, 1954, Istanbul.

14. Gates: 216.

15. Surma: 71. Forged patriarchal letters by anti-Mar Shimun & pro-war elements likely contributed to this order.

16. RGVA: 1082, op. 2, 81, 201-2; FO: 839/23 (14 May, 1915).



heads thus concluded to forego the hopeless status

quo of repression under the Turks that had existed for ten predecessor patriarchs buried in Mar Shalita and declared their will in a letter to the Vali of Van: They would defend themselves and fight alongside the Russians.

That same month thirteen Armenian servants from Robert College were imprisoned and never seen again. This was followed by the arrest and execution of over two-hundred notable Armenians on April 24th. Hormizd's day to day life grew more precarious as the academic sanctuary of the American college began to disintegrate: *"The war had a dire effect upon living conditions in Turkey. Coal, charcoal, and oil were at prices which staggered even the well-to-do. Sugar, rice, flour, coffee, matches, and other staple supplies were sold at exorbitant rates. Many people around us were plunged into the deepest poverty,"* recalled Caleb Gates.¹⁸ The most serious shortage however was that of bread, in part, because the main bakers in the city had been Armenians. Meanwhile, the German Ambassador was threatening to have Robert College and every other American institution in Constantinople closed down should America enter the war against Turkey.

If Hormizd was scared and lonely amidst a chaotic Constantinople, now he was possibly starving too. Was escape back to Qudshanis even possible? Would Surma and the family still be there? Maybe Dr. Wigram could help, but where was he?¹⁹ . . . And Beatrice Neesan, was she safe in Urmia? Maybe she would change her mind about marriage should they come through this alive . . . Hormizd prayed. *"Qaddisha allaha, qaddisha khailthana, qaddisha*

la mayotha, ithrakham al ee. . ."²⁰ As he tried to

sleep a line from Professor Fikrit's poem simultaneously haunted and consoled him: *"Surely this graveyard-existence will be followed by refulgent resurrection . . ."*²¹

Fondly remembered by the Sisters at St. Katharine's as *"quaint, alert and full of life,"* Beatrice was in the throes of her own graveyard-existence in Urmia. A Sister at the French Mission reflected the anxious anticipation of the Urmijnaye in her diary on March 28: *"Our days pass very sadly! one day we hope, and the next day all hope is lost... no sure news... the Russians are approaching, they say, then the rumor circulates that they won't come yet!"*²² On April 4, an Assyrian resident named Shimon reports to a friend in London: *"All Christian villages are looted and burnt. In twelve villages 1,000 men are killed, the rest are taking refuge in the American and French missions. Mar Dinkha [a bishop of Mar Benyamin's] they hanged on a tree; two other pastors were crucified and another was burned in Geogtapa Church. Girls from five years upwards have been violated, women abused everywhere."*²³ The horror of it all so shocked Beatrice that shortly afterwards she died; of "fright," according to her father, and typhoid, according to a doctor.

On June 13th Haydar Bey telegraphs Talaat Pasha at the Directorate of Public Safety: *"As previously reported, the tribes have started to arrive in İmadiye, and the İmadiye Qaimaqam has reported that clashes with the Tyari continue. Three months ago, Mar Shimun sent his family to Tyari, to be with Malek Ismael, while he himself went into the Diz tribe to carry out revolutionary plans*

17. Op. cit.

18. Gates: 218.

19. Dr. Wigram had volunteered himself as the one "notable" of Bedri Bey's fifty English and French hostages to be symbolically deported to Gallipoli (in an attempt to stop the Allied bombing there) so as to help minister and console the others throughout the week-long ordeal. [Morgenthau: 248-9].

20. *"Holy God, Holy Almighty, Holy Immortal, have mercy upon me. . ."* Transl. fr. original Aramaic. Shimun, H.H. Mar Eshai. Liturgy of the Holy Apostolic and Catholic Church of the East (Takhsa d-Raze), 1949: 23.

21. Tefvik Fikret Bey, "Haluk'un İnancı (Haluk's Credo), Haluk'un Defteri." 1911.

22. Annales (81): 258.

23. "Plight of the Nestorians in Persia," Manchester Guardian (London), 12 May, 1915: 12.



and communicate with the Russians. He is now leading this operation. Mar Shimun has a brother studying at the Amerikan Mektebi'nde (American School) in Dersaadet (capital). The mentioned person is 18 years old [sic, 25-26], a boarder in Beyoğlu, tall, slim, dark-skinned, with black eyebrows. . . ." (With that profile every male youth in the district was conveniently eligible for deportation!) "Due to his loyalty, the Chaldean Patriarch's deputy, Father Toma Bajari,²⁴ knows and informs [us]. If the mentioned person is arrested, I will write a letter to Mar Shimun, telling him that I have detained his brother and that if he continues his betrayal, I will execute him. The decision to arrest the mentioned person is up to your discretion."²⁵ If they couldn't capture Mar Benyamin himself, then the next best thing was his brother.

As this treacherous telegram tore across the wires from Mosul to Bab-i Ali, into the Interior Ministry, and onto Talaat's desk, Caleb Gates was sitting before him answering uncomfortable questions about the source of charity money being used to help Armenians and other Christian refugees in the city. Gates calmly explained that the College's Rumeli Hisar Charitable Society fund, "Gave milk to children and food to families, provided work for widows and medical care for the sick, making no discrimination, of course, between Christians and Moslems."²⁶ The Interior Minister admonished that there was, "No objection to [your] helping the poor if [you] wished to do so, but that [we] could not allow subsidies from America," before dismissing him. Talaat picked up the telegram and, apparently impressed by the Mosul governor's efficiently cold and cruel logic, had the reply Haydar was thirsting for telegraphed back to him by

June 20th: "The religious leader of the Nestorians, Mar Shimun's brother named Hormizd, has been arrested."²⁷

"Then followed a deed as brutal and dastardly as it was characteristically Turkish," recalled an anguished William Wigram, who desperately searched for but could not find his former pupil and friend. "[I] was in [Constantinople] at the time, and remember the fact of the sudden disappearance of the lad from his lodgings into the unknown Turkish prisons. Such disappearance was indeed no rarity just then, for men of all nationalities vanished in such a way and might or might not be heard of a month later in some place of internment in the interior of Asia. . . . In the case of Hormizd, the youth was detained for some time in the capital, though no efforts to find his actual place of detention were successful."²⁸

The similarities with the arrest of Sir Edwin Pears seven months earlier (and who knows how many thousands in-between) certainly ended at the prison entrance. With no Ambassador Morgenthau to come to his rescue and Dr. Wigram unable to locate him, the fate of the promising student-turned-pawn was now in the clutches of the Young Turk war machine.

After being rebuffed by the Patriarch a frustrated Haydar Bey turned once more to the Interior Minister and insisted that having Hormizd in his own hands, in Mosul, was essential to bringing Mar Benyamin to his senses and the Assyrians to their knees: ". . . It is therefore imperative that he be dispatched immediately and the utmost care should be taken to prevent escape during transit."²⁹

Talaat again obliged and had Hormizd served up to Haydar shortly after. If any further warnings or demands were forwarded to Mar Shimun they went unanswered,

24. Chaldean Patriarchal Vicar in Pera from 1909-1920. The revelation of his collusion in locating Hormizd reflects the historical discord between the Church of the East and their more government-friendly Catholic-Chaldean brethren, not least of which were well-documented intrigues of a malcontented faction of Catholic-convert cousins within the Patriarchal Family itself (possibly connected with Toma Bajari).

25. OA: DH.SFR.475/62 (Trans. Dr. Ramazan Turgut). 26. Gates: 218.

27. OA: DH.SFR.54.81 (Trans. Dr. Ramazan Turgut).

28. LivChurch (64): 9.

29. OA: DH.SFR. 485.65 (24 August, 1915; Trans. Dr. Ramazan Turgut).



Talaat Pasha



for the patriarch had been away on two secret missions to and from the Persian border for arms and support from the Russians, as well as to coordinate the reception of a mass exodus of his people from the mountains.

On or about September 13th --two and a half months after being imprisoned-- Haydar made good on his threats and had the honorable Hormizd d'Mar Shimun hanged in a public square in Mosul. At that moment Mar Benyamin was burying his youngest brother Eshaya who had fallen ill and died at Mar Audishu while the Turkish military were closing in on them. Shlemon Malik Ismail memorialized these events in his diary entry of September 22nd: *"At that time, the Patriarch Mar Benyamin was suffering from three shocking fits of grief. First, not receiving any hope from the Russian government as was expected. Second, the loss of two of his princely brothers, Hormizd and Ishaya, in a span of ten days. Three, the destruction of all of his people at the hands of the Turkish government and the Kurdish Ashirets. With all this His Holiness never faltered from his trips to this side and that side of the community. Like a flying eagle with his maneuvers to all sides of the Ashirets, until he gathered all of his people under his wings, in the village of Qotranis. . . Almost all Assyrian tribes followed the appeal to leave the country, since they realized the situation could not be militarily sustained without assistance. . . . The exact number cannot be determined. Perhaps 50,000 people were prepared to move out of their high mountain valleys in order to temporarily reach safety."*³⁰

Hope of Hormizd's survival lingered on for a time afterward in the heart and mind of his sister, for as late as April 14th, 1916, Surma Khanum responded to an English lady friend in London: *" . . . You most kindly asked after Hormizd. I wish we knew his fate, dear boy; we have no news of him since the 5th of March, 1915. I asked Mrs.*

*Wigram if she would be able to tell us something of him by way of Dr. Wigram's letters; we are most anxiously looking forward to the answer. . . ."*³¹

The sacrifice of Hormizd is symbolic of the innumerable tragedies suffered by Assyrian Christians as they valiantly strove for security, peace, and prosperity wherever they found themselves. Along with hundreds of thousands of Christians at that time he was the victim of a resurgent Turkish nationalism that systematically sought to sweep away all opposition, whether real or perceived. Hormizd embodied not only the Mar Shimun family's long tradition of faith, hospitality, and diplomacy, but also its spirit of leadership and education. His potential to reconcile diverse and disparate peoples sharing contested geographies persists in the personal and professional achievements of the descendants of those Assyrians whose ancestors fought, and found, brighter futures -- *"desert islands of delight"* -- for their children.

For more information about the Mar Shimun Patriarchal family lineage and history, or to order books on related topics, please visit marshimun.com.



30. Malik Ismail: 57. These diaries are edited by his brother Yacu some years later. The mountain Assyrian refugees began arriving in Salmas, Iran at the end of September, 1915.

31. MarShimun: 143.