*a true story*

# Sent Out To Die

## An Armenian Family's Escape From Genocide

# *Sent Out To Die*

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**Edited By Daeus Lamb**

This is June 30, 1978. I am Aroot Kirishian, trying after so many years to make a history of the Kirishian family. During the First World War, the Armenian nation was massacred by the Turks. I was age 13. I recall so plainly how one early morning at daybreak, two Turkish officers came knocking at the door for us to answer, which my father did. It was their order that we must vacate from our home to a destination that was not known, and that before daybreak there would be two oxcarts to take as much clothing and bedding as we needed. That was all the time we had. This was in June or July of 1915.

My father was a manufacturer of oriental rugs and he employed quite a few Turkish girls. One of the girls came early in the morning to work in the factory and discovered that we were being driven out. She tried to help us pack. She felt very sad about the matter. She put three of the silk rugs which my mother had made into a cushion. It wasn't until several days of travel later that we discovered them.

As soon as we were out of the city limits of Sivas, we crossed the river. Human bodies were all over as far as your eyes could see, killed a month earlier. We were driven out a month or so later than the others. My father had to accept the Mohammedan religion and that saved us for a while—for that reason, and also because he was a manufacturer of oriental rugs. However, an army colonel came and asked my father to vacate our house because he wanted to live in it. We and eighteen other families were forced out, without the government knowing anything about it. We were marching to our deaths.

Of my family, my brother Megr was already in the United States. My father, mother, sister, and brothers Onnig and Mihran, and I were in Turkey.

My Uncle Pilos was saved because he was a Mason. A girl was sent to let Uncle Pilos know about us because he and his brother Masons

might do something to help us. He could do nothing, but he came and gave us a horse. Then he gave us the name of Ajam Hussein, a Turk. He was a transfer man. He had a horse and buggy, fancy wagons to transfer passengers and freight. My uncle told us to be on the lookout for Ajam Hussein who might do everything he could to help us. This man was a friend of my Uncle Pilos.

Every day, people were massacred. We were going over dead bodies, nothing to eat. We fear, not knowing what is going to happen. It was a fight between the Turks and the Kurds to see who would rob, kill, and take. The Kurds were tribes in the mountains. The Turkish officers were supposed to make sure that we were driven into the desert to die of starvation. My father promised the eighteen officers that every evening, as long as we were safely conducted, they would receive large amounts of money. My father and other Armenians were able to carry money with them, and they buried some of it along the way and made marks, so if anyone was saved, they could come back and make use of the money. The Turks knew that some of the Armenians swallowed gold, so they butchered some people. My father, however, took up collections, so instead of being lost to the Turks by being hidden or buried, the officers got some each evening and kept us safe.

Several times we were about to camp, Kurds could see Armenians being driven out and would come in to rob the Armenians. Now Turkish officers were protecting us to get our money against the Kurds who were coming to take our belongings. They would take bedding, watches, clothes—whatever. Many of the Armenians were absolutely penniless, some with nothing on. Near a creek, we saw little infants by the hundreds and hundreds laying there. Some were partially alive, some dead, others crying out for something.

We headed towards Malatya, the desert. We went up a mountain and beyond—always in desert.

So we went for fifteen days. Every day, there was something happening. On the fifteenth day, the Turkish government took the oxcarts away from us. That was at a tiny town with just a small inn for travelers named Turkenkeim.

At this point, we had just bedding left. For my mother and sister to ride, we needed something, so father tried to hire someone and thought to be on the lookout for uncle's friend. He asked a man if he knew of Ajam Hussein. Next thing, dad came to us with a man we had never seen before—a very handsome Turk with a turban on his head and a gun. He was mean to other people—he drove his horses and wagons over Armenians and knocked them down. Mother would scream and cry and he would say that he wouldn't do it again, but then he would.

Anyway, he came over and dad introduced him to my mother. He put his arms around her and called her his sister. He said, "My wagons are here and don't worry about nothing." He planned for our escape. Next morning, we started out. He planned to put us all in his wagon. We all lay down covered with a black tarp and a Turkish flag on top. That is how they ran mail coaches. In the city, they would yell and everybody would get out of the way for the mail coach, so that was how we planned to escape.

We arrived at a little village. Watchmen were at every corner to make sure people who were being driven out to the desert did not run away. An officer got suspicious and stopped us, lifted the canvas, and saw us laying there. Hussein said, "This was my idea. They had nothing to do with this, and I'll take them right back", so he did and we got mixed up with the rest of the group again.

Time went on. We were getting closer to the desert. Father thought

something had to be done. We had discovered the saddle bag with the three silk rugs my mother had made. Dad wondered if the mayor of Malatya, who dad knew loved oriental rugs, could save the family, especially if he knew the family could produce the rugs. He took the first rug (this was about eighteen days after we had first been driven out), and had it sent to him. We heard nothing for four days. We were two days away from Malatya, the last city. From there on there was only desert.

There was a Turkish priest traveling. My father stopped him and asked him to do us a favor—to see whether the silk rug had gotten to the mayor/governor of Malatya. There had been no answer. Father did not know if the mayor had seen the rug or not, so he gave the second rug to the Turkish priest to do the favor. He said he would be happy to. The priest asked, "Are you sure you will be saved? I would like to have your son (my brother Onnig), and if you are saved, I will return him to you."

In the meantime, Ajam Hussein had asked me if I would like to go to Malatya with him. I sad sure. When my father had accepted the Mohammedan religion, we had undergone circumcision. Armenians didn't do that. I was given a Turkish last name, Moughleesh, so there would be no fear as long as I was with Hussein.

I will never forget it. We had not had a bath in over thirty days. We went to the Turkish bath. Malatya is in a very beautiful, beautiful country—crystal clear springs that were so hot, everywhere huge grapes, and a crystal clear river. We went to the Turkish bath. He ordered a watermelon. He put it in a could spring fountain in the center of the dressing room. We took a steam Turkish bath. The bath had marble floors that were heated underneath. Steam was all over. First you got soap. You lay down and they rubbed you until there was nothing left on your skin. It was delicious to eat that watermelon, which I had not seen in a month.

The next morning, we started to come back. I drove the wagon. In one to two hours, I could see a man on horseback and a young lad coming toward us. It looked like my brother Onnig and a man on a horse. (I had never seen the Hoja, since the priest had arrived at the camp after Ajam Hussein and I had left for Malatya.) I told Hussein, so he stopped. The Hoja said, "I am taking Mr. Kirishian's son. If they are saved, I will return him."

The family had arrived at Malatya and had just started camping there when a Turk came over and asked for the Kirishian family. The priest had evidently taken the rug over. The next morning is when they came asking for father. Mother thought they were going to kill him. You get so you have no more fear. Every day has the same problems. You can't do nothing.

Father came back and told us they wanted so much money (a bribe) to take us to Malatya. My father got a hint and wondered if the mayor had received the rug and was asking for us, but the men were trying to get money out of us for saving us. Father had nothing left since it was the last day and he had already given away all of his money. Ajam Hussien got into the picture. He said, "They have given all they have to the officers already; they are very fine people, very knowledgeable." So he offered something to save us. He gave them something. So we were able to go to Malatya.

There were too many of us for Hussein to take us to his house, so he dropped the family at a vacant house in the Armenian sector and told me to come with him to his house. It had earthen walls, roof, and flooring. He had a father, eighty-five years old, who was a tiny little old thing shrunken with age. Hussein had a tiny fireplace in the one room. His father sat in front of the small charcoal fire, smoking with a long cigarette holder. Hussein introduced me, and the old man asked me to

make coffee for him—he pointed to where the water and coffee were, so I made the coffee and he drank it. Then Hussein and his wife came in. We had dinner. We took care of all the horses. We went to the Turkish bath and later I got back and stayed in the vacant house with my family. We tried to go see the mayor.

Father had a few cents left, so Onnig, father, and I started toward downtown to try to find something to eat. We were starving. We had nothing. Every Armenian could speak Turkish fluently. No problem. Our only problem was our last name. "-ian" was a trademark for Armenian last names. We walked six to eight blocks. Father said, "Boys, I don't feel good. You go on." He walked back, and we went and got whatever we could get. He stayed in bed. That went on for two to three days. We didn't have a chance to talk with the mayor.

The third day, sister and mother walked out of the room and went outside. I wondered what was going on. There was a young kid who had gone through the desert and had escaped back somehow. He was telling us what he went through and what all the Armenians went through. He said there was a well, hundreds of feet deed. The Armenians would tear their clothes into strips to make rope and try to reach water. Some dove in because they couldn't take it any longer. My father said in a very weak voice, "Mi hosseer. (*Don't talk.*)" He didn't look good. I wondered what was going on. When I went out to mother and sister, they were both crying. They sent me back inside. I looked at dad and then I knew. He closed his eyes, exhaled, and was gone. I rushed outside, crying. Mother and sister were sick, crying.

Three men and myself carried him to the Turkish cemetery. Mother said, "Be sure to mark his grave so that someday we can move his body out of the Turkish cemetery." I put rocks so I would know where his body was. Three days later Mother and sister wanted to see the grave. We went, but the rocks were thrown all over. It was impossible

to find where the body was. There was no question that the body had been moved out.

Onnig and I went to see the Mayor. (Mihran was five to six years old. He was frightened terribly.) We told the Mayor father had just died and that was why we were not able to come sooner. He said he wished he had known as he might have been able to do something. Who knows?

"Bring your mother and sister and I'll show them what I want them to do," he said. He took us to his house and showed us his beautiful nine by twelve-foot carpet—a very fine piece. He said he would like us to make another one like it. Mother and sister assured him they could do a perfect job.

There had been a girl who worked in dad's factory—an expert weaver. My dad had used to have me work under her. She happened to be married to a very wealthy Turk there. She had heard that the Kirishian family was being driven out and were in Malatya. She sent her stepson in the evening. He came over and took my sister because his stepmother asked him to do that. Mother let my sister go of course. That worried me tremendously. He came back and said his stepmother and father would like to have all of us over. We walked two to three miles and had the finest meal. A beautiful table was set. We had a wonderful evening. We were assured they (this Armenian girl and her very fine husband) would do all they could for us. Her husband asked me to see him at this dry good's store the next morning. He had me build a little box with compartments. He gave me the material. He filled it up with cigarette papers, lighters, mirrors, and beads of all kinds, which farmers are interested in buying. He told me how much each item was. It was hard to memorize everything. He had me sit across the street. "If you forget, just come and ask me how much it is." So I did that until noon. I had successful business. Everyone going by bought something. Of course, I could speak Turkish fluently. No one

knew I was Armenian.

So, after a half day, he said, “Go to market now.” So I did. At four o’clock I was cleaned out—I had sold everything I had. I came back to the store. “It is about quitting time so you should go home,” he said. I turned the money in to him and he said, “You are going to take all this money to your mother.” I said, “I don’t think she will accept it.” He said, “Do as I tell you. Take this money and go home. ” I told mother what he did. We could not accept it. Mother kept it to return, but he insisted we spend it.

We weren’t desperate for food because they were feeding us anyway. Still, he insisted. This went on for two to three weeks, so I eventually stopped doing it. He knew we had enough now, so he wasn’t worried for us. With that money, Onnig and I bought watermelons and sold them in the market and made a little money.

We saw the governor and were ready to start weaving the rug. He took us to the factory where they were dying and spinning the wool. We took his rug there. They dyed all the wool to match the rug and supplied us with the warp. He had a loom delivered to our home. My two brothers, sister, mother, and I started weaving a rug 9 by 12 feet to exactly match. We hung the rug. By each square, we copied it to perfection.

Things were going very well. Nothing to fear. Inside the Turkish home, there was an elderly family with grandchildren. They were very kind to us. They brought us hot soup. We had a one room house with a porch. That’s where the loom was put—on the porch. The river below was absolutely clear spring water. Every family drank from the river. Orchards were all along it, every kind of fruit. Grapes, watermelon, and sometimes oranges floated in the river. People had too much, so they would send it down the river for people to pick up and eat.

An Armenian woman came over, saved by a Turkish priest, and told us that an Armenian girl, nine to ten years old, was being abused in a Turkish home. She wanted us to safe-keep her. So she did capture the girl, whose name was Minare. Minare always talked about her parents and how they were killed. She passed away a year and a half later.

Completion of the rug took approximately two years. All this time we were living on what we could do and the Turkish family was feeding us. Onnig and I packed the carpet and the one we had made on our backs and delivered them to the mayor's government building office. At the main entrance, a window was open. It was summer time. We looked in and saw the governor/mayor in a meeting. He motioned to us to go away. He did not want them to know, so we went to his house and delivered the rug there. We never got a penny or even a tip.

After we had completed the rug, I wanted to go back to Sivas to get some of mother's jewelry which we had left with my uncle for safety. I told Ajam Hussein that I wanted to go back to Sivas. I was fifteen years old. He said it would have been impossible for me alone, but since he was soon going to go to Sivas, he would be glad to take me. He came one day and told me to be ready on a certain day. I packed and went to his house. He said, "You will drive that wagon and we will meet some people along the way, a caravan, because their boss is sick and I have to take care of them." At the outskirts of Malatya there were three to four wagons waiting. I saw a young fellow my age. He was Benny Harut, my step-cousin. My father had been married twice. Benny was from his first wife's side of the family.

Benny was driving the wagon, so I immediately realized he had told people he was Turkish. There was still danger. I waited until I could talk with him quietly. He said, "All our families are gone. I am just traveling everywhere and don't know what to do." I told him of our affairs and

of us being driven out and of Onnig, sister, Mihran, and mother in Malatya. He said he would try to come sometime. As we were traveling, a storm came up. The wind was cold and hail as big as marbles or even golf balls were hitting the horses heads and they would not go. We covered ourselves. Ajam Hussein had a beautiful pair of Arabian horses—marvelous animals. He used them for his passenger wagon since they were good to travel with, but ours were freight wagons, so my cousin suggested that we get on the horses, leave the wagons, and get to the village. We all got on the horses and rode to the village. Ajam Hussein, who had arrived earlier, had a party. He was very drunk. When he saw us, he asked for the wagons. We told him what had happened. He got mad and beat up my cousin, knocked him down, kicked his face, head, and stomach. He was bleeding all over. Finally, he stopped, came over to me, and slapped me so hard that I could count stars. It was terrible, so I ran away. He went inside. I came back to my cousin where he lay. I got someone to help me carry him into a barn where the horses were and it was warm. We lay him right under the manger. The following morning, I checked him. He was breathing, but still unconscious. It was time for us to go, so Ajam Hussein got someone else to take the wagon my cousin was driving. We left my cousin there. We got to Kurtehiem where Armenians were also gathered to be driven out into the desert.

Hussein told me that this might be the last trip he had to do (taking people into the desert.) That was how he made his money. I had no choice but to say okay. He got a family for me to carry in my wagon, and one in his. The first day leaving Kurtehiem, in three to four hours, we came to a river three feet deep but quite wide. We crossed the river. Many people got wet and stopped to dry themselves a bit. Just then a large group of Kurds came, firing, and our officers fired back. Many were killed, but we moved our wagon and were safer. We started climbing up a mountain, quite a hill. I was way back because my horse was not as good. Ajam Hussein worried about me, so he

stopped the caravan and waited for me. I got caught up and Hussein said, "stay behind me." I was the third wagon. There was a man ahead on a beautiful Arabian horse, then Hussein, and me behind. It was pitch dark. Suddenly, there was fire, bullets flying. The mountain was on the right side and on the left was a 100-foot drop into the river. I immediately jumped down because it was not good to be on top of the wagon—the drivers get shot, so the horses will run away with the wagon and the Kurds will get it. I went over to Hussein. He said, "Stay with me." I had an elderly couple and their daughter in my wagon. I was very nice to them. It was funny. The man told his wife, "There are some good Turks. Look how nice this boy is." I told him I was Armenian. They couldn't get over it. I told them to stay under the wagon, the safest place. The firing was terrible. Ajam said, "Let us get out of here." He told me to get on the wagon, but I was afraid so I ran with the horses instead. You could just barely see shadows. There was a man with one leg cut off on crutches. I saw him running too. We got to a village eight to ten miles off. We could still hear gunshots. One of the soldiers who got to my wagon during the firing told the people underneath to get in the wagon and he brought them over to the village, but about 80% of the Armenians were killed. From the village we went on to Malatya where we stayed.

Shortly later, Uncle Pilos from Sivas met an Armenian traveler driving wagons and told him to pick up our family—as many as he could. We were afraid for all to go. We sent sister Nazik, Onnig, and Mihran to Sivas. Mother and I stayed in Malatya another three months. After that, Uncle Pilos got a passport from a Turk, a brother Mason, who saved his family. He sent us a passport to travel to Sivas. There came a man, one day, with a donkey caravan and he had a letter and this passport. The passport would give us some protection, but no guarantee of safety.

So mother and I started out, mother on a donkey. I walked all the way from Malatya to Sivas. We took an Armenian girl about twenty-two

years old to Sivas with us. We saved her. We traveled twelve days on mountain roads and short cuts. We arrived in Sivas and stayed with Uncle Pilos. One of his sons and I went to the mountains and cut roots and trees for winter fuel, and then, to make a living, Onnig and I worked in Sivas. We tried to sell our jewelry so we could afford passage to the United States.

Mother and I moved to Tokay, which is a three-day trip from Sivas, toward the Black Sea. We stayed there a year. We bought a donkey very cheap because one ear was cut off. We carried fruit to a flour mill. They would exchange it for wheat. We made it into flour at the mill and took it to market for sale. We made a good profit.

Meanwhile, sister Nazik's husband got sick, so I went three days by donkey every six weeks from Tokay to Sivas to see how my sister was getting along. Uncle Pilos sold me a small wagon so that my donkey could carry a lot more. I paid him in syrup. They made a lot of syrup in Tokay. Every time I went there I took him some syrup in exchange for the wagon.

There was a woman working with Uncle Pilos. She got Armenian girls from Turkish homes and put them in orphanages. Uncle Pilos told her, "My nephew comes to Sivas now and then, and he can bring a girl." So the woman came to see me and asked when I was going back again. I was ready to go. The woman told me that I would have to come in the dark to do something important, so I did and collected the girl. "Take this girl to your uncle who knows all about it," I was told. The girl was dressed up like a boy. We left in the dark. I was ordered to go into the forest, not to stay on the roadside. For three days, we slept in the wagon—way in the forest. We got up early in the morning and passed the villages. Once or twice we were almost caught. There were army dodgers who would arm themselves and kill people and take their money.

One day, we were going uphill. I was pushing and she was walking. I saw three gangsters sitting up ahead. I told her to come pretend she was pushing so they would think we were both boys. I got her safely to Sivas.

When we got to Sivas, I went to the court and demanded our property back and my sister's property and home. By then, I was 15 1/2. It took me nearly a year and a half. I could speak Turkish fluently, write, and read. Uncle Pilos lived in a home owned by a wealthy Armenian, Yeye el Fendi. He knew every part of the government where things needed to be done. He gave me advice to do this or that and with his help I succeed in getting the property back.

When I was getting our properties back, the papers had to go to different offices to prove that I was Sarkis Kirishian's son. When I went to one office, the man was shocked to see me. He asked what had happened to my father. I said he died in Malatya. When I gave the man's name to my mother, she immediately said, "That is the man who, before we were driven out, came to your dad and wanted to buy two rugs and some of our furnishings. Dad was afraid to turn him down. That was before the massacres started. He said he would pay, but he knew the massacres were going to start and he never did pay." So el Fendi said, "When you get all through, your next job is to get everything back that he took."

So we served papers on him. I went o the police department to make our claim and they chased me out and said, "You have no claim. Go home." I told el Fendi and he said, "In that case, go to the government building. The ruler (the 'wali'), when he is going to go to lunch, rings a bell for his escort. When he does that, walk up the steps to greet him." I did so. I heard the bell ring and saw the door opening. I saluted the man and told him my name and the case. He said, "My son, come

with me." He brought his bodyguard with him while we walked. There was a policeman who had said earlier, "Send the boy away. He has no claim." This man was outside, smoking a cigarette. They are not supposed to smoke on duty. The wali—the ruler—said, "Put it out. Where is Mr. So and so? (the man whose job it was to prepare papers)" The policeman said, "He went to lunch." The wali said, "When he comes back, you tell him all the papers have to be finished properly and the claim continued on, and you are deprived of a week's salary for smoking on duty." So my papers were finished. I went with Uncle Pilos to get the claim papers in the daytime. When we got there, the man who took our belongings served the coffee. I was worried that he might have poisoned it, so I wouldn't drink it until I saw my uncle drinking the coffee. The man said, "You cannot take anything out of this house in daytime." Uncle, Onnig, and I ended up coming back at night and as we were rolling up the rugs, the man said, "Someday I'll have the privilege of taking those back again." That meant that our lives were in danger. We walked the three to four miles back to our house.

In May of 1920, all the Kirshian family left Sivas and started for Constantinople, which is known as Istanbul. We told them we were getting more knowledge in weaving and dying to go back into the rug business. A few days later, Uncle Pilos left and also told them he was going to Constantinople, but he had trouble. They stopped him on the way and questioned him, delaying his trip. Uncle came to Constantinople one to two weeks later. He told us that he had seen the man who had possessed our house and rugs in Sivas. Of course, we had taken the house and rugs back, but this man still had most of our belongings. I could have claimed more against him, but that would have taken too much time.

We went to Athens, Greece from Constantinople. There was no problem getting passports there because it was such a big city with lots

of nationalities.

Why were we able to get back? Because everything was settled politically to cover up what they had done. We got the house back, but we only got a fraction of its value. We sold the house to a very wealthy man, a fine person, who gave us 10 gold dollars. See, we couldn't even sell it. That is the money we spent to come to the United States after we got to Athens, Greece. We made an application for our passports.

Uncle Dikran and brother Megr sent us our passports from the US and all of us came on the same ship on the eighth of June, 1920. We had sent a letter from Sivas to brother Megr who was in the US, saying all was well except that our father had passed away. We didn't say so many were massacred because they censored letters. They answered back. They were happy to hear from us. "Megr is here with Uncle Dikran. Megr is fine. He just got back from serving in the army." When we got the letter, we felt better. We were sure after we got to Athens Greece that we were safe.

(*After we arrived, we went to California to work for them and then to Portland. Megr went all the way from Portland to New York City to meet us. Megr came to our cousin's house in New York, the Cartozians*.)

Here is the most exciting part of this. We arrived at Ellis Island all sound asleep. We were young and all the way down in third class, Onnig, Mihran, and I. Mother and sister were in first class. Mother came down saying, "What is the matter with you? Why don't you get up? We are in New York!"

Everyone was hollering for their relatives. "Oh!" I said. I jumped up and put on my clothes and immediately rushed up on the deck of the

ship. When I got on deck, the bow was very low. Everyone was there, hollering for their villagers. I pushed myself through. I started screaming for "Cartozian!" "Who are you?" asked a voice. "I am Aroot Kirishian!" My brother hollered back, "I am Megr Kirishian! We'll take a small boat and meet you in the back." I immediately went back and told mother and all of them. We couldn't believe it. We were in tears.

They told us you could not wear a mustache in America, so I shaved mine off. Onnig wouldn't. We went to the back, talking back and forth. Mother and sister cried in happiness, you know, for about an hour. Megr and the Cartozians said, "Don't worry, we will get you out soon. We are going to go to the Cartozians' house. Everything is ready."

They marched us from the ship to a huge room. There were people sitting on a stage—government people checking those coming in. Uncle Megr walked in to claim we would be well cared for here. They questioned him—his relationship. He said, "Cartozian is my uncle, my mother's brother. Mrs. Kirishian is my mother, and these are my sister and brothers." He was wearing his US Army pin. When asked if he served in the US Army, he said, "Yes, I was wounded." Before we were released, we saw others being questioned for thirty or forty-five minutes. We just walked through.

All of us marched out.

Thanks for reading this true story. If you agree that this is a tale that others need to read, then please help spread the word by sharing this book on social media.

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Hi! This is Daeus, the great-grandson of Aroot Kirishian. I put this book together because stories are important to me. So important, in fact, that I have become a novelist in order to create the stories that I feel need to be written.

In the spirit of making new friends, I would like to invite you to take advantage of my exclusive offer to get a free copy of my novella, *Treachery Against The House Of Fairwin*. It's a great way to check out my writing style at no risk to you.

You can get your free copy here: http://www.thescratchingquill.com/treachery-against-the-house-of-fairwin-free-book/

Enjoy!

—Daeus Lamb