

# THE ARMENIAN PROTESTANT CHURCH IN MUSA DAGH, 1919-1939

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The Armenian Protestant or Evangelical Church of Musa Dagh was established on August 30, 1857 in the village of Bitias. A second one emerged at the village of Yoghun Oluk two decades later, in 1876 or 1877. The remaining Protestants in the area, those of Haji Habibli, Kheder Beg, Vakef, and Kabusiye, were treated as satellite fellowships given their small size and the limited financial resources that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, could allocate for their upkeep. Alongside spiritual awakening and faithful devotion, certain conditions hindered further growth. Such obstacles included poverty, alcoholism, internal discord, incompetence and/or misguidedness on the part of some pastors, outside interference by missionaries of different affiliations, opposition of the Apostolic Church, Catholic competition, and Armenian revolutionary activity.<sup>1</sup>

The size of the Evangelical community in pre-World War I Musa Dagh varied depending on definition and time. “Communicant membership” ranged from a low of 146 in 1893 to a high of 200 in 1903, averaging 171 persons. “Membership” was somewhat higher in Bitias than in Yoghun Oluk, in both cases including their satellite fellowships. Overall, males exceeded females by a ratio of two-to-one, but sometimes females preponderated. “Adherents” to Evangelicalism averaged 577 persons between 1890 and 1906. Church “attendees” on any given Sunday averaged 401. Last but not least, 382 individuals were enrolled in Saturday schools.<sup>2</sup>

As World War I unfolded, the Armenians across the Ottoman Empire were subjected to an exterminatory campaign resulting in genocide. Entire communities were wiped out on the spot or uprooted and marched to extinction. A few, however, chose to resist. Musa Dagh was a case in point. About two-third of its 6300 inhabitants took up arms to fight the Ottoman army, while one-third complied with the deportation order and was exiled to the Syrian town of Hama and environs. There were Protestants in both groups. Yoghun Oluk native Rev. Dikran Antreasian and many coreligionists, among others, chose to defy the government, took up arms, and fought about six weeks, during which Rev. Antreasian acted as the Chairman of the General

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<sup>1</sup> Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Armenians of Musa Dagh: From Obscurity to Genocide Resistance and Fame 1840-1915*, Armenian Series, Number 11, The Press, California State University, Fresno, 2020, pp. 111-27.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., pp. 126-7.

Administrative Body (GAB) coordinating the fights and overall civilian life. This episode ended when units of the French Mediterranean fleet rescued them and took them to safety near Port Said, Egypt, where they stayed in a refugee camp for four years, from mid-September 1915 through fall 1919. On the other hand, a number of Protestant families from Bitias heeded the advice of their pastor, Rev. Harutiun Nokhudian (Harry Serian), and were deported to Hama.<sup>3</sup>

Needless to say, the deportees in Hama could not hold worship services under the watchful eyes of the Ottoman government, the very perpetrator of the genocide. The situation at Port Said differed. Despite the hardships experienced at the refugee camp, the Musa Dagh survivors were safe and free to resume their respective religious activities—Apostolic, Protestant, Catholic—under British protection. Rev. Antreasian ministered to the Protestant congregation, assigned a Bible woman to work among the female refugees, and established a Sunday school for children.<sup>4</sup> When the war ended, the camp population repatriated to their prewar regions. The Musa Dagh Armenians returned home by November 1919 preceded by their compatriots from Hama. Both groups arrived in diminished numbers. In the case of Protestants, certain families and individuals had emigrated to the United States from the Port Said camp, while those banished to Hama had been decimated by almost half due to diseases, hunger, and exposure.<sup>5</sup> This article deals with the Armenian Protestant Church in Musa Dagh between the two World Wars. Excluded are the affiliated schools, which warrant a separate study.

#### THE BITIAS CHURCH

After the repatriation of the survivors from Port Said and Hama, Rev. Dikran Antreasian assumed the helm of the Protestant churches of Yoghun Oluk and Bitias simultaneously for two years (1919-1921), and subsequently that

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., pp. 315-412.

<sup>4</sup> American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) Archives, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, ABC: 3.3, vol. 13, #276, Stephen Trowbridge to Dr. James L. Barton, October 27, 1915; ABC: 3.3, vol. 5, #22, Rev. Dikran Antreasian to Trowbridge, November 4, 1915; Mary E. Kinney, "Relief Work at Port Said," *Life and Light for Women*, XLVII: 3 (March, 1917), pp. 14, 115.

<sup>5</sup> Vahram L. Shemmassian, *The Musa Dagh Armenians: A Socioeconomic and Cultural History, 1919-1939*, Haigazian University Press, Beirut, 2015, pp. 1-5, 181-90; idem, "Armenian Genocide Survivors in Palestine and Transjordan at the End of World War I," in Antranik Dakessian, ed., *Armenians of Jordan: Proceedings of the Conference (22-24 May 2016)*, Haigazian University Press, Beirut, 2019, pp. 126-8; idem, "The Repatriation of Armenian Refugees from the Arab Middle East, 1918-1920," in Richard G. Hovannisian and Simon Payaslian, eds., *Armenian Cilicia*, Mazda Publishers, Inc., Costa Mesa, CA, 2008, pp. 444-6; idem, *The Armenians of Musa Dagh*, pp. 88-9, 408-12.

of Bitias alone for three years (1921-1924).<sup>6</sup> These were trying times: Houses and other community buildings cannibalized by wartime Muslim settlers; the fields left unattended and the orchards damaged; food shortages reaching catastrophic proportions; deadly diseases felling lives; orphans needing shelter; demobilized Légion Arménienne volunteers left unemployed; Turkish and Alawi armed bands infesting the region; anarchy and insecurity reigning; and internecine bloodshed between the villagers of Bitias and Haji Habibli tearing apart the very fabric of a significant segment of Musa Dagh society.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to his pastoral duties, Rev. Antreasian played a key role in resolving some of the above issues. In 1919 and 1920, he was elected twice and served the longest as Chairman of the Central Body of the Armenian National Union (ANU), whose task it was to govern and coordinate all aspects of Musa Dagh life under the grave conditions described. As such, he traveled to Adana and Mersin with prominent companions to raise funds for food and procure other necessities; corresponded with the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) representative in Cilicia to secure compensation for the discharged legionnaires; sought shelter for parentless children; negotiated with and succeeded in obtaining \$7000 from the American Near East Relief (NER) in Beirut for the purchase of potatoes and outright monetary disbursement; asked for assistance from the British Friends of Armenia Society, which obliged with £200; and co-chaired a panel constituted to find a solution to the Bitias-Haji Habibli conflict.<sup>8</sup>

Information is scanty concerning purely church matters in Bitias during Rev. Antreasian's pastorate. In September, 1920, the Bitias and Yoghun Oluk Protestant churches had a combined constituency of 120 communicants.<sup>9</sup> These figures must have shrunk further the following year as some 15 Protestant families from Bitias reportedly left the denomination and joined the Apostolic Church.<sup>10</sup> The statistical givens for 1923 showed growth: 294 constituents, 63 communicants, 8 added by confession, 165 Sunday school pupils. The ABCFM

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<sup>6</sup> ABCFM Archives, ABC: 16.9.5, vol. 27, #39, Table of Statistics for the Year 1920, Aintab Station, prepared by Dr. Merrill in September, 1920; idem, #41, Table of Statistics for the Year ending June 30, 1922, Aintab Station, Central Turkey Mission organized in 1847, Prepared by J. Merrill in June, 1922; Rev. Dikran J. Khrlopiian, *Vosgemadian. Badmutiun Merts[avor] Arevelki Hay Aved[aranagan] Miutian* (Golden Book: History of the Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East), vol. 1, Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East/Shnorhokian Press and A. Der-Sahagian Press, Beirut, 1950, p. 342.

<sup>7</sup> Shemmassian, *The Musa Dagh Armenians*, pp. 1-46.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 6-7, 10, 17-8, 23, 26-7, 44.

<sup>9</sup> ABCFM Archives, ABC: 16.9.5, vol. 27, #39, Table of Statistics, September, 1920.

<sup>10</sup> Khrlopiian, p. 342.

contributed \$106 for “Christian work” and \$268 for “other objects.”<sup>11</sup> An official survey conducted by the French Mandatory administration in Syria and Lebanon in 1924 revealed the following picture: Bitias had 752 inhabitants, of whom 266 Protestants (35%); Yoghun Oluk had 1,109 inhabitants, of whom 105 Protestants (9.5%); Kheder Beg had 937 inhabitants, of whom 9 Protestants (1%). Protestants did not exist in the remaining three villages of Haji Habibli, Vakef, and Kabusiye. In all, there were 380 Protestants (186 male, 194 female), who constituted 8% of the total 4,693 population of Musa Dagh.<sup>12</sup>

In fall 1924, Rev. Antreasian left Bitias to assume the ministry of the Protestant church of Kesab (Kessab/Kasab).<sup>13</sup> The reason for this transfer is not known. The Bitias church pulpit remained vacant for two years after his departure. Rev. Hagop Kumruian, a non-native pastor who was spending his twilight years in Bitias after retirement, filled the gap to some extent.<sup>14</sup> This situation lasted until July 7, 1926, when Hagop Giurlekian, a graduate of the School of Religion in Athens, Greece, arrived in the village together with his wife. He conducted two worship services on Sunday, July 11, one in the morning by way of “a lesson,” i.e., Bible study, and another in the afternoon as a sermon. But as Giurlekian soon realized, the recent Bitias-Haji Habibli bloody past had left a deep moral and spiritual scar in its wake. Prayer meetings were almost forgotten and the youth neglected. People seldom attended church; “like sheep without a shepherd, the flock was scattered.” Recovery needed sustained remedial intervention. Based on church records that contained the list of some 70-75 families, the pastor and his wife visited them one-by-one, as a result of which people began to return to the church’s fold gradually and pay their membership dues as well. On certain Sundays Giurlekian similarly preached at Yoghun Oluk, which did not have a pastor at the time.<sup>15</sup>

Within the course of one year Giurlekian officiated at the engagement of three couples, but could not oversee their weddings because he was not yet ordained; Rev. Kumruian performed that task and also led the interment of a church member, and attended the funeral of Nareg Aprahamian, a prominent figure and a deputy to the Sanjak of Iskenderun/Alexandretta legislature from

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<sup>11</sup> ABCFM Archives, ABC: 16.9.5, vol. 27, #44, Table of Statistics for the Year Ending December 31, 1923, Central Turkey Mission, organized in 1847, prepared by J.C. Martin in 1923.

<sup>12</sup> *Husaper* (Hope-Bearer) (Cairo, Egypt), September 16, 1924.

<sup>13</sup> Khrlopian, p. 342.

<sup>14</sup> Rev. Yeghia S. Kasuni, *Lusashavigh. Badmutiun Hay Avedaranagan Sharjman 1846-1946* (Illuminated Path: History of the Armenian Evangelical Movement 1846-1946) Publication of the Armenian Missionary Association of America/Shnorhokian Printing at the American Press, Beirut, 1947, p. 513.

<sup>15</sup> Rev. Hagop Giurlekian, letter to the author, April 19, 1977.

Kheder Beg, delivering a spiritual and nationalistic message on the occasion. Generally speaking, Giurlekian cultivated good relations with the Apostolic community. For instance, he befriended Fr. Khachadur Kermanigian, the priest of Bitias, and Sarkis Kendirjian, a pious man who eventually became a priest himself, assuming the name of Father Vahan. In 1927, Giurlekian received instructions from his headquarters in Aleppo to raise funds for the victims of a devastating earthquake that had jolted Soviet Armenia. Although he and Fr. Kermanigian agreed to launch the campaign together, soon after the latter informed Giurlekian that his community had decided not to participate. In any case, the Armenian Protestant church of Bitias was able to collect 3 Ottoman gold liras for the cause.<sup>16</sup>

Giurlekian's tenure at Bitias came to an unfortunate end as he and the church elders could not see eye-to-eye. The Aleppo Station Committee thought "it will best serve the general interests, if Mr. Hagop Gurlekian does not remain in Beytias. Therefore he has been asked to leave there about the first of September and move to Aleppo..."<sup>17</sup> The Giurlekians and their newborn son departed Musa Dagħ on September 8, 1927, that is, after only fourteen months of service.<sup>18</sup> The Station Committee at the same time searched for a replacement, but to no avail.<sup>19</sup>

A final note concerning Giurlekian's salary and those of former colleagues is in order, because the financial issue plagued the Protestant churches of Musa Dagħ for most of the interwar years. In this regard, the Aleppo Station Committee wrote to the Bitias Protestant Church Committee the following:

It is necessary to speak of the payments due from the church to Mr. Gurlekian and to previous pastors. These, of course, should be met without delay, as outstanding debts of this kind reflect on the good name of the church. It must not be forgotten at any time that the work in Beytias is the work of the local church and congregation. The problems are yours first, and then ours. And the expenses are yours, not ours.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Armenian Evangelical Church of Bitias, Musa Dagħ (AECB/MD) Archives, Anjar, Lebanon, File *Sdatsvadz Namagner 1927-1938* (Incoming Correspondence 1927-1938), John E. Merrill, by order of the Station Committee of the Aleppo Station, to the Church Committee of the Evangelical Church, Beytias, August 26, 1927. The Aleppo Station Committee was a mixed body of representatives of the American Board Mission and the Armenian Evangelical Church in Syria and Lebanon. The role and influence of the American Board Mission gradually decreased and that of the Armenian Evangelical Church increased during the 1920s-1930s, and eventually the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in the Near East, formed in 1924, became the sole governing agency of the Armenian evangelicals in the region.

<sup>18</sup> Rev. Giurlekian, letter to the author, April 19, 1977.

<sup>19</sup> AECB/MD Archives, File *Sdatsvadz Namagner 1927-1938*, Merrill to Beytias Evangelical Church Committee, August 26, 1927.

The Station Committee helps you in carrying the expenses. But the Committee looks forward to the day when all the expenses will be paid by you locally, and the Committee will not be obliged to contribute anything. Great efforts should be put forth by you to attain this goal as soon as possible.<sup>20</sup>

The church remained without a pastor for a year. During this time, and actually since the end of World War I, spiritual life was not given the same attention as it was in the prewar era. A report faulted the new generation for being “very ignorant of the church’s profession of faith and past,” as well as for its dereliction of “religious responsibilities.” Indifference was causing great harm, so that “special booklets must be published’ to educate the youth about their church and religion.”<sup>21</sup>

In summer 1928, Mihran M. Keoroghluian (Koeroghlian), then a twenty-six-year-old sophomore at Aleppo College—formerly Central Turkey College a.k.a. Aintab College—preparing to enter the School of Religion in Athens, was advised by his mentors to spend a year at a designated community school beforehand to gain practical experience. Bitias was the assigned location. Although his duty was to teach at the local Protestant school, an opportunity arose to also preach.<sup>22</sup> He explained in his autobiography:

Shortly after the school season started and the summer residents [i.e., vacationers] began to leave, an unexpected situation emerged which caused great concern to the church leaders. As the pulpit of the church had been vacant, it was filled by Hovhannes Haidostian ...who had come to the village from Aleppo with his family to spend the summer. Since no other candidate was available to fill the pulpit after Mr. Haidostian left, they asked me if I would be willing to add preaching to my teaching responsibilities.

The request gratified me at first very much, but on second thought, the responsibility of preaching a sermon every Sunday scared me. However, as I thought and prayed for guidance, I came to realize that a great opportunity and privilege was knocking on my door. I was going to begin my ministry with practical experience, even before stepping in the door of the school where ministers are prepared. I accepted the proposal and extended my thanks for the favor.<sup>23</sup>

Keoroghluian during one of his travels to the nearby city of Antioch visited Rev. William Lytle, a resident missionary of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland and Scotland and an acquaintance, and borrowed homiletic books to prepare the sermons. Another issue was the use of Turkish as the language of

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Nor Avedaper* (New Herald) (Aleppo, Syria), First Year, no. 9, March 24, 1928, p. 69.

<sup>22</sup> Rev. Mihran Moses Koeroghlian, *A Latter-Day Odyssey: The Autobiography of the Man Who Would Not Give Up*, Dorrance & Company, Inc., Bryn Mawr, PA, 1986, pp. 175-7; Kasuni, p. 513; *Nor Avedaper*, 2: 8 (April 21, 1929), p. 334.

<sup>23</sup> Koeroghlian, p. 178.

worship (unlike in the Port Said refugee camp). In addition to their distinct dialect, as well as some knowledge of standard Western Armenian, the natives spoke Turkish with “purity and perfection” having learned it from the pulpit, where its practice persisted. The Apostolic Armenians resented this fact, and suggested that should the preacher use Armenian, they would attend his sermons and fill the church to capacity. “It sounded beautiful and reasonable to me,—wrote Keoroghluian—but I wanted to know how a native son of the village would feel about it; so I took it up with one of the pundits of the [Protestant] church. Far from being impressed, he said, ‘Beware, teacher, you may lose even what you already have’.”<sup>24</sup> Armenian and Turkish continued to remain the mediums of service.

In observing the congregation, Keoroghluian offered the following assessment. On the positive side, it augured a promising future for having manifested “a good mode of conduct, intellectual capacity, educational merit, and strong measure of industriousness and character.” Two reasons, however, prevented the church from growing: poverty and the lack of spirituality. Some outside help as well as internal sacrifice were therefore needed for a more active Christian life. In conclusion, with all its attributes and attractive geographical setting, Bitias could be considered “the light and hope of Musa Dagħ.”<sup>25</sup>

Rev. Antreasian returned to Bitias in 1929 and led the church for six years and three months, only to regain his post at Kesab on October 4, 1935.<sup>26</sup> Not much is known about this second round of his pastorate. All we are told is that he succeeded in his efforts at reorganizing the church with “wisdom” and that he delivered “pithy sermons.”<sup>27</sup> He also visited Yoghun Oluk periodically to assist preacher Garabed Tilkian through counseling and inculcation, and to admit new church members, baptize children, and officiate at communions.<sup>28</sup> At his departure for Kesab, the Bitias church owed Rev. Antreasian arrears of 57 gold liras, which amount was to be paid by late 1937 with a substantial reduction.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 178-79.

<sup>25</sup> M.M. Keoroghluian, “Bitiasdan Khaberler” (News from Bitias), *Nor Avedaper*, 2: 10 (May 26, 1929), p. 367.

<sup>26</sup> Hagop Cholakian, private papers, Yerevan, Armenia, Rev. Antreasian to J.E. Merrill, October 8, 1935.

<sup>27</sup> Khrlopian, p. 343; Kasuni, p. 513.

<sup>28</sup> *Nor Avedaper*, 7: 5 (April 18, 1934), p. 97.

<sup>29</sup> Cholakian, private papers, Rev. Antreasian to Merrill, October 8, 1935, plus miscellaneous correspondence in 1936 and 1937; AECB/MD Archives, File *Sdatsvadz Namagner 1927-1938*, S. Aghbabian and H. Chakmakjian to the Bitias Armenian

Pastor Aram Hadidian from 1932-35 simultaneously served the Armenian Protestant churches of the Ekizoluk and Korkune villages in the Kesab district to the south of Musa Dagh. He was sent there by the Aleppo Station in Syria to reconcile the two congregations, which were at odds with each other for many years. As he succeeded in restoring harmony, the two communities prepared to appeal for his ordination. The Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon (UAECSL), however, after lengthy discussions during its annual meeting of 1935 held in Beirut, resolved to dispatch Hadidian to Bitias on a one-year loan for him to save that church from closure, a situation created by Rev. Antreasian's departure. Hadidian arrived in Bitias in October 1935 with some trepidation about his chances of success.<sup>30</sup>

"Oh, what a pitiful scene and situation; one could forget the first Sunday's morning worship service, barely ten elderly people, and that from a church that had (74) families," wrote Hadidian, wondering: "Where is the congregation?" The cause of absence was attributed to married couples and others attending lectures on Armenian History taking place in a nearby hotel at the same time as the worship services. But thanks to the tireless efforts of Hadidian and his wife, Gaida, whereby they frequently reciprocated family visits and met with individuals, the New Year service was deemed "quite encouraging and hopeful." A spiritual awakening had begun. People now engaged in soul-searching, got involved, sought the return of those who had stayed away, and contemplated church revival. Although, generally speaking, the Aleppo Station paid most of a pastor's salary in needy places, in this case the local church had difficulty even contributing its minor share. Nevertheless, given the prevalent upbeat mood, members began to pay their dues towards achieving solvency.<sup>31</sup> After a period of steady progress, the congregation wanted Hadidian to be their ordained pastor and stay permanently. The UAECSL gave its blessing.<sup>32</sup> Preparations for the auspicious event took a long time, because the church was devoid of pews and even a pulpit, all of which had to be ordered. Accordingly, the same carpenter that had built the benches of the Emmanuel Armenian Evangelical Church lower hall in Aleppo was commissioned to make them, and

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Evangelical Church Board, February 1, 1937, March 30, 1937, April 19, 1937, October 5, 1937, Nov 7, 1937.

<sup>30</sup> Rev. Aram Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979; Near East School of Theology (NEST) Archives, notebook titled "Siuria ve Lipananda (Evvelje Giligiada Olan) Hay Avedaranagan Kiliselerin Ittihadenen Senevi Ijtimalarenen Kuyudate 1924-1937" (The Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon [Formerly Being in Cilicia] 1924-1937), p. 249.

<sup>31</sup> Rev. Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979.

<sup>32</sup> NEST Archives, "Siuria ve Lipananda," minutes of the 1936 annual meeting held in Aleppo, p. 263.



the finished products were delivered to Bitias via truck. For its part, the Aleppo Station donated an organ. Sunday, August 2, 1936 was set as the ordination date.<sup>33</sup>

The UAECSL tasked the Aleppo Station with making the necessary arrangements for the event. Accordingly, six Protestant ministers participated in the ceremonies: Reverends Siragan Aghbabian, Yeghia Kasuni (Kassouny), Hagop Chakmakjian, Sisag Manugian, Aharon Shirajian, and Abdul Karim Kowmy, pastor of Arab Evangelicals in Aleppo. A public examination of Hadidian's affirmation of faith took place on Saturday, August 1 at the Bitias church in the presence of Armenian, Turkish, and European guests, as well as members of the congregation. After an invocation by Rev. Aghbabian, and a hymn, the candidate gave an oral testimony about his life and the circumstances that had led to his conversion as a born-again Christian. He then answered questions about his grasp of religion, theology, the Bible, the pastoral vocation, and the Church's purpose and role. The event, which lasted for about two hours, ended with Rev. Manugian's benediction.<sup>34</sup>

On the following day, Sunday, August 2, a large crowd estimated at 1000 people gathered from 3:00-6:30 p.m. in the shade of a gigantic *sosi* (plane) tree on the church-school premises to witness the ordination ceremony. Among the distinguished guests were Bishop Khat Achabahan, Vicar General (*Gatoghigosagan Pokhanort*) of the Armenian Apostolic churches in the Sanjak of Iskenderun; Hrach Papazian, deputy to the Aleppo legislature; Movses Der Kalusdian, deputy to the Iskenderun legislature; Serop Sherbetjian, governor of Musa Dagħ, as well as Apostolic priests and notables from the other villages of Musa Dagħ, Turks, and Europeans. Rev. Kasuni said the prayer of ordination; Rev. Shirajian exhorted the church community to support their pastor unconditionally; Rev. Manugian exhorted Hadidian to remain faithful to his mission; and Rev. Aghbabian delivered the key sermon on "Church Calling." Bishop Achabahan was also invited to share his thoughts.<sup>35</sup> He advised Hadidian to have a "1- full recognition of vocation, 2- grasp of duty, 3- genuine spirit of dedication."<sup>36</sup> A choir consisting of local and Aleppo talents rendered spiritual songs intermittently under the direction of Levon Levonian, an accomplished musician-conductor and the principal of the *Usumnasirats*

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<sup>33</sup> Rev. Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979. Deacon Movses Jambazian donated the pulpit and Board member Kevork Melidonian donated the platform bench. The general benches were donated either by individuals or parties of two and three.

<sup>34</sup> Rev. Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979; Bitiastsi, "Tzernatrutiun me Bitiasi mech" (An Ordination in Bitias), *Hayasdani Gochnag* (Clarion of Armenia), XXXVI:45 (November 7, 1936), pp. 1070-71; *Aztag* (Factor) (Beirut, Lebanon), August 20, 1936.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Aztag*, August 20, 1936.

Armenian School in Aleppo. Last but not least, the clergy placed their right hands of fellowship on Hadidian's head beseeching God's blessing with a prayer. The ceremony ended with Rev. Hadidian saying the benediction for the first time as an ordained minister.<sup>37</sup>

Besides the Sunday morning and afternoon services, Mrs. Gaida Hadidian led prayer meetings for women on Wednesday afternoons, while Rev. Hadidian himself conducted general services on Thursday evenings. He, in a casual manner, sat or stood behind a table placed on the ground floor, that is, below the pulpit. The congregation partook in the service with prayers, "a few inspiring words," and selection of preferred hymns. These worships became very "popular and enjoyable" among the children present.<sup>38</sup> Alberta Magzarian, then a little girl, described their enthusiasm: "Our [children's] group started preparing for Thurs[day] night a couple of days before and, of course, we were the first to arrive at church and occupy the first two central pews. We worked together, helped each other memorizing verses from the Book of Proverbs and tried to guarantee that we were not going to recite identical verses. Such a mishap, we considered, the greatest disaster for the group."<sup>39</sup>

Sunday school for children of all ages, held in a single room, took place at the same time that adults attended morning church service. Magzarian detailed: "The procedure seldom varied – We sang some hymns, recited the Lord's Prayer, and tried to learn some proverbs. The teacher read a Bible story and elaborated on it. Some older students who carried their Bibles with them followed the reading seriously. We ended with a 'collection', some students dropped a few piasters on the plate, the teacher blessed their gifts and after a final hymn, we were dismissed."<sup>40</sup>

Rev. Hadidian got involved in various aspects of church and community life, not just locally but district wise. Because Pastor Tilkian of the Yoghun Oluk Protestant church was not yet ordained as minister, Rev. Hadidian was called upon to perform wedding services there. For instance, in 1937 alone he was invited to officiate at four weddings, those of Manuel Kbburian and Rosa Khacher Hajian on April 9; Hovhannes Khacher Hajian and Nvart Abajian on June 11; Hovhannes Der Hovhannesian and Vartuhi Filian on September 2 (in Bitias, the bride's birthplace); and Yervant Nkrurian and Azaduhi Muradian on

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Rev. Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979; Bitiastsi, "Tzernatrutium me Bitiasi mech," p. 1071.

<sup>38</sup> Alberta Magzarian, letter to the author, April 21, 2009.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

September 15.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, the Bitias Protestant church trustees (together with Rev. Hadidian) received an invitation to participate with their “moral part” and “exhortations” in the ground breaking ceremony for the erection of the interior columns of the Bitias Apostolic Church to be held on Saturday, August 21, 1937.<sup>42</sup>

The Aleppo Station Committee in late 1928 “decided on a more regular plan for touring [its outstations in the Jarablus, Iskenderun, Kesab, and Musa Dagh regions], which involves placing responsibility for part of this work on the pastors and preachers located in Aleppo.”<sup>43</sup> Although information regarding immediate action is lacking, in summer 1932 two groups from Aleppo embarked upon lengthy tours to two different regions in Syria. One of the groups, consisting of Puzant Kalfayan and Harutiun Meserlian, went to Jisr al-Sghughur, Kesab and its satellite hamlets, Antioch, and Bitias, Yoghun Oluk, and Kheder Beg in Musa Dagh.<sup>44</sup> They visited “churches, Sunday Schools, Christian Endeavor Societies, preaching, contacting young people, and organizing Daily Vacation Bible Schools. At the end of this tour, both of them decided to enter the ministry.”<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Rev. Garabed Harutiunian, from October 5 to 31 of the same year, visited the churches in Jarablus, Kesab, and Musa Dagh, and from November 8 to December 26 the four churches in the Iskenderun region. During his visits he baptized a total of 26 children, led 24 prayer meetings, delivered 19 sermons, officiated at one communion service, and visited 113 families.<sup>46</sup> At one time two members of a spiritual group at Aleppo College, Edward Tovmassian and Puzant Kalfayan, spent a month in Bitias, started a summer Bible school, and preached in neighboring communities on Sundays. Moreover, Tovmassian in summer 1939 delivered sermons in the various villages of Musa Dagh just before its secession to Turkey

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<sup>41</sup> AECB/MD Archives, File *Sdatsvadz Namagner 1927-1938*, see, respectively, Boghos Abajian and Khacher Hajian invitation to Rev. Aram Hadidian, April 9, 1937; Dikran Kuyumjian, Abajian, and Hajian invitation to Rev. Hadidian, June 10, 1937; Kuyumjian invitation to Rev. Hadidian, August 29, 1937; Preacher Garabed Tilkian, Kuyumjian, Abajian, and Hajian invitation to Rev. Hadidian, September 10, 1937.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, Fr. Vahan Kendirjian, Krikor B. Keshishian, Chairman of the Parish Council of Bitias Apostolic Church, and Bedros S. Andekian, Secretary, to the Chairman and members of the Religious Council of the Bitias Armenian Evangelical Church, August 20, 1937.

<sup>43</sup> *Aleppo News Bulletin*, no. 5 (December, 1928): n. p.

<sup>44</sup> Khrlopiian, p. 152.

<sup>45</sup> Irene Kalfayan, “Rev. Puzant H. Kalfayan,” *The Herald*, a monthly newsletter of the United Armenian Congregational Church (UACC), Los Angeles, CA, (January/February, 2012), p. 4. This source mentions that the visits took place in the summer.

<sup>46</sup> *Nor Avedaper*, 5:22-24 (December, 1932), p. 447.

as part of the Sanjak of Iskenderun.<sup>47</sup> At that time, Dikran Yeghia Kasuni, another young Protestant man, toured the area and conducted a survey in a bid to study the situation of the Armenian population.<sup>48</sup>

### THE YOGHUN OLUK CHURCH

The Armenian Protestant church of Yoghun Oluk emerged from World War I weakened. As mentioned earlier, during the first two years after repatriation in 1919 Rev. Antreasian led the Evangelical congregations of Bitias and Yoghun Oluk concurrently. In 1921, as he relocated to Bitias for a permanent stay, two preachers from outside worked in Yoghun Oluk for short periods: Asadur Berberian for three months, and Nazaret Darakjian for four months. Pastor Boghos Tutunjian succeeded them from 1922-1925.<sup>49</sup> Information is lacking about his tenure. After his departure, the church remained without a permanent steward for four years. But evidently not all was left unattended. A report sent to the Aleppo Station read: "We have no pastor, and our church is in a bad state. Nobody is looking after our young men. Yet we are not disheartened. The women are awake. There are meetings for women twice during the week and on Sunday, and there is a meeting for girls. There have been some conversions. We hope that you will not forget us...."<sup>50</sup>

Two other reports described the moral-spiritual situation in Musa Dagh in general, and in Bitias and Yoghun Oluk in particular, quite bleakly. The first, prepared by Rev. Harutiunian for the Armenian Evangelical Union of America, maintained that "there are no Mohammedans in these villages. They are all 'Christian.' Unfortunately, however, the mere name cannot save a people." He further noted that, as a result of the war, their morale had fallen drastically and addiction to alcohol was rampant among old and young alike. Discussing things spiritual was considered stupidity, and being irreligious was honorable. While the elderly were irrevocably lost to the Protestant cause, the youth inspired hope for the future despite their being under the spell of political parties. The Protestant public had "lost their spiritual and moral influence."<sup>51</sup> The second report corroborated these observations. Christianity in Musa Dagh was a sheer

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<sup>47</sup> Rev. Edward Tovmassian, letter to the author, March 2, 1977.

<sup>48</sup> Rev. Dikran Kasuni, letter to the author, March 5, 1977.

<sup>49</sup> Garabed Kundakjian, "Yoghun-Oluk Protestant Kilisenin Tarikhi" (History of the Yoghun Oluk Protestant Church), *Nor Avedaper*, 2: 16 (August 17, 1929), p. 460.

<sup>50</sup> *News Bulletin of the American Board Mission in Syria* (Aleppo), no. 3 (February, 1927): n. p.

<sup>51</sup> Garabed Harutiunian, "Surio Tashde—Avedaranchagan Bduyd Me" (The Syria Field: An Evangelistic Trip), *Yeramsia Lradu Hay Avedaranchagan Engeragtsutian Amerigayi* (Quarterly Newsletter of the Armenian Missionary Association of America), 5: 4 (May, 1927), p. 9.

garment. Sunday, like the rest of the week, was a day of play, fun, hunting, and work. Almost no one attended church to listen to the word of God; the nation was led without God and religion.<sup>52</sup>

Notwithstanding the prevalent temporal current, the Yoghun Oluk church was not without some leadership. One of its elders, Deacon and lay preacher Khacher Hajian (“Ttvints Khichiyr”), brought the faithful together on Sundays, read the Bible, and gave advice.<sup>53</sup> In the same vein, itinerant evangelists from Aleppo preached periodically. In 1928, for example, Hovhannes Shnorhokian visited not only Yoghun Oluk but also Kheder Beg, where he was able to gather substantial crowds for two nights despite the fact that only four Protestant families existed there. In general, he found the youth serious and helpful, although they were still largely influenced by the political parties and village notables.<sup>54</sup> And during 1928-29, Garabed Kundakjian conducted two Sunday services in Yoghun Oluk, one in the morning in Armenian and one in the evening in Turkish. After the second worship, those who desired could stay and read pertinent journals to learn more. He also organized a prayer meeting in mid-week. As for the youth, they held singing sessions at the pastor’s house Friday evenings, and the females attended spiritual fellowships twice a week. At this time, there were in Yoghun Oluk 108 Protestants and a church membership of 36 from both genders.<sup>55</sup>

The Yoghun Oluk church finally had a permanent pastor in the person of Garabed Tilkian, a native of Bitias. His tenure consisted of two periods: 1929-30 and 1933-38. In the interim, he matriculated at the School of Religion in Athens, then the Near East School of Theology in Beirut. Following tradition, he conducted two Sunday services, one in early morning and another in the afternoon, when Apostolic Armenians from both genders sometimes attended.<sup>56</sup> He also led monthly Bible studies in the villages of Haji Habibli and Kheder Beg in Musa Dagħ, as well as the town of Levshiye in Svedia valley to the south. Significantly, Armenian now replaced Turkish for the first time in all communications.<sup>57</sup>

There were only about 16 Protestant families left in Yoghun Oluk by 1930, the reason being the migration in search of jobs especially of the youth. For

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<sup>52</sup> “Musa Dagħe,” *Rahnuma* (True Path), 9:29 (September 17, 1927), pp. 457-8.

<sup>53</sup> Kundakjian, “Yoghun-Oluk Protestant Kilisenin Tarikhi,” p. 460; *Nor Avedaper*, 7:5 (April 18, 1934), p. 97.

<sup>54</sup> Hovhannes Shnorhokian, “Musa Dagħe Ermeni Kariyeler” (The Armenian Villages of Musa Dagħ), *Nor Avedaper*, 1: 1 (May 12, 1928), p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Kundakjian, “Yoghun-Oluk Protestant Kilisenin Tarikhi,” pp. 460-1.

<sup>56</sup> Rev. Garabed S. Tilkian, *Musa Dagħ Boy: Story of Survival and Service*, ABRIL Printing, Santa Monica, CA, 1992, pp. 78-9.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79; *Nor Avedaper*, 6: 15 (August 15, 1933), p. 294.

instance, of the 20 Protestant young men, 8 had left the village in late 1929-early 1930.<sup>58</sup> Another source put the number of Protestants in 1929 at 100, with Sunday school frequented by 60 children.<sup>59</sup> Church attendance was relatively high: an average of 40 persons in the mornings and 65-70 in the afternoons.<sup>60</sup> The congregation figures for 1935 were as follows: 26 families/86 individuals and 38 church members from both genders.<sup>61</sup> In 1938, the numbers were somewhat different: 100 Protestants, 34 members.<sup>62</sup>

The church building resembled a poor hall with no floor pavement or sufficient pews, compelling worshippers to sit on straw mats.<sup>63</sup> A team of three members, namely, Khacher Hajian, Dikran Kuyumjian, and Boghos Abajian, oversaw church affairs.<sup>64</sup> As for the various activities, Tilkian wrote in his autobiography:

Our youth were mostly teenagers. Mixing boys with girls was taboo at that time! Hence my group was all male. We met twice a week at the parsonage for talks and discussions on different subjects with the youngsters, followed by Bible study sessions, which were concluded with a short period of devotions. Our youth program included games and entertainment as well. [Protestant school teacher] Arousiag [Darakjian] and her daughter Satenig were leaders of our Sunday School. Moreover, they were involved in the teenage girls' religious and social activities.<sup>65</sup>

In addition to the above, Hovhannes Hajian, son of Deacon Khacher, led summer schools for boys and girls, teaching them songs and crafts besides Bible study.<sup>66</sup> Given that spiritual, educational, and cultural life in Yoghun Oluk in general was not considered too important because of people's fatigue caused by hard physical labor and the attendant lack of the right mood, the above church activities filled that gap to some extent.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Garabed Tilkian, "Yoghun-Oluk," *Nor Avedaper*, 3: 3 (February 21, 1930), p. 63; idem, "Yoghun-Oluk," *Nor Avedaper*, 3: 4 (February 28, 1930), pp. 62-63. According to Khrlopien, p. 346, some 52 persons from the small Yoghun Oluk Evangelical community had emigrated between 1920 and 1935.

<sup>59</sup> Rev. G.B. Adanalian, *Hushartsan Hay Avedaranagats yev Avedaranagan Yegeghetsvo* (Memorial Monument of Armenian Evangelicals and the Evangelical Church), Crown Printing Co., Fresno, CA, 1952, p. 355.

<sup>60</sup> Tilkian, "Yoghun-Oluk," *Nor Avedaper*, 3: 3 (February 21, 1930), p. 63; idem, "Yoghun-Oluk," *Nor Avedaper*, 3: 4 (February 28, 1930), p. 63.

<sup>61</sup> Khrlopien, p. 346.

<sup>62</sup> Adanalian, p. 356.

<sup>63</sup> Rev. Garabed Tilkian, letter to the author, February 24, 1977.

<sup>64</sup> Tilkian, *Musa Dagh Boy*, p. 78.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>66</sup> Virginia Matosian Apelian, *Musa Dagh Girl: Daughter of Armenian Genocide Survivors*, Xulon Press, Maitland, FL, 2011, p. 142.

<sup>67</sup> Rev. Tilkian, letter to the author, February 24, 1977.

Associations with the Apostolic community during Tilkian's incumbency were mutually cordial and strong. An inter-denominational committee (*Millet Heyeti*) represented the village to the government.<sup>68</sup> But perhaps more importantly, Tilkian averred:

Our relationships with the local Armenian Apostolic church and its leaders stretched far beyond mere courtesy. Periodically, I was invited by the priest [Madteos Giuzelian of Kabusiye serving Yoghun Oluk in the absence of a permanent priest] to preach in his church. During wedding and funeral services, I was there with the priest to comfort and bless the congregation with the gospel message. The same cordial cooperation continued throughout my pastorate of six years. It was a real pleasure to have served the Yoghoun-Olouk people at large.<sup>69</sup>

On the other hand, the Armenian Revolutionary Federation did not have a favorable opinion of the Protestant movement in general. Accordingly, a coexistence of mutual indifference prevailed in Yoghun Oluk. Notwithstanding this fact, the party invited Pastor Tilkian to its public events, where he was sometimes asked to speak.<sup>70</sup> Tilkian also detected an anti-Protestant disposition on the part of the Mandatory French government in Syria and Lebanon, without providing specifics.<sup>71</sup> Information is lacking about Protestant-Social Democrat Hnchagian Party relationships.

Tilkian stood firm on his principles and/or convictions when warranted. For instance, when the congregation took a survey to decide whether the Sunday morning service should take place at 9:00 a.m. or 11:00 a.m., he unhesitatingly sided with the overwhelming majority to have it early rather than near noon, which an influential elder and his wife insisted on. Having failed to impose their will, the couple began to criticize the church family including the pastor in no uncertain terms, but after a few weeks they admitted their mistake, apologized, and made amends.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, a strong advocate for social justice, Tilkian during a funeral castigated the unscrupulous wealthy relatives of a poor peddler who could have survived had they assisted him to be treated for an unspecified illness. A swift and dangerous reaction ensued. Tilkian wrote:

I was blacklisted as a communist sympathizer. I received a written note threatening my life, signed with a code name 'Black Hand.' The following Sunday, during worship service I accepted the 'Black Hand' challenge and in the presence of my congregation re-affirmed my theological standing not to compromise my biblical convictions in defending the rights of the oppressed and underprivileged poor, and that I would not tolerate anyone to dictate my sermons... The Reverend Sisag

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Tilkian, *Musa Dagh Boy*, p. 80; idem, "Yoghun-Oluk," p. 63.

<sup>70</sup> Rev. Tilkian, letter to the author, January 9, 1978.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Tilkian, *Musa Dagh Boy*, p. 81.

Manougian, minister to the Armenian Evangelical Union [of the Near East], intervened and wanted to transfer me to another church... I was not ready to leave my parish under threat. So, I stayed on at my job... With regard to the warning against my life, thank God, nothing happened.<sup>73</sup>

It is not known when exactly the above incident took place. What is known, however, is the fact that Tilkian left Yoghun Oluk sometime in fall 1938 to serve the churches of Ekizoluk and Korkune. The latter was asked to pay for his relocation expenses, whereas Ekizoluk was asked to pay a monthly salary of 5 Syrian liras.<sup>74</sup> The Yoghun Oluk church also owed Tilkian some arrears, for which a mode of payment had to be explored.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, a certain Krikor Geyidjikian, who had rendered services in the Kesab region, would be asked whether he could work in Yoghun Oluk.<sup>76</sup> Apparently he declined. During the January 4, 1939 meeting of the Aleppo Station Committee, the issue of sending a pastor to Yoghun Oluk came up again. This time, Rev. Keoroghluian would be approached with the same proposition.<sup>77</sup> In the end, the Yoghun Oluk church remained without a permanent pastor through the exodus of the Musa Dagh people from the Sanjak of Iskenderun in July 1939.

Last but not least, the Yoghun Oluk and Bitias churches both participated in the annual meetings of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon, which was formed in 1924. For example, at the first conclave, held that year in Aleppo, Rev. Antreasian and Movses Renjilian, a prominent elder, represented the Bitias church, and Boghos Tutunjian that of Yoghun Oluk. Rev. Antreasian was elected secretary. Three years later, in 1927 in Beirut, the Bitias delegate was pastor Hagop Giurlekian, whereas Yoghun Oluk had not designated anyone. Instead, Rev. Manugian gave a report on its behalf. At the 1929 gathering at Kesab, Bitias was absent with no report available, whereas the participant from Yoghun Oluk, Dikran Kuyumjian, presented the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>74</sup> Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East (AEUNE) Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, File *Mertsavor Arevelki Hay Avedaranagan Yegeghetsineru Miutian Getronagan Marmini Adenakrutiunner, 1938* (Minutes of the Central Body of the Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East, 1938), The Minutes of the Joint Station Committee Meeting October 27, 1938, signed by H. Apkarian, Secretary; Minutes of the Aleppo Station Committee Meeting of December 14, 1938, signed by H. Apkarian, Secretary.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., File *Mertsavor Arevelki Hay Avedaranagan Yegeghetsineru Miutian Getronagan Marmini Adenakrutiunner, 1939* (Minutes of the Central Body of the Armenian Evangelical Union of the Near East, 1939) Aleppo Station Committee Meeting March 3, 1939, signed by H. Apkarian, Secretary.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, File *Mertsavor Arevelki, 1938*, Minutes of Meeting of December 14, 1938.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., File *Mertsavor Arevelki, 1939*, Minutes of the Aleppo Station Committee Meeting Held on January 4, 1939, signed by H. Apkarian, Secretary.



state of his church on August 21. In subsequent years, when Rev. Antreasian, Rev. Aram Hadidian, and Pastor Garabed Tilkian ministered to their respective congregations, they attended the annual meetings alongside lay leaders such as Kevork Melidonian and Movses Jambazian in the case of Bitias.<sup>78</sup> In the same vein, despite their financial hardships and inability to compensate their clergy regularly and/or fully, the two churches also contributed to the Union's evangelical work, usually in the amount of 1-3½ Ottoman gold liras.<sup>79</sup> Such overall involvement kept the Musa Dagħ Protestant community connected to and abreast of what transpired within the wider Armenian Protestant Church in Syria and Lebanon, and vice-versa.

#### CHANITS CHRISTIAN ENDEAVOR SOCIETY

The Bitias church had a youth association prior to Rev. Giurlekian's arrival, but it had been dissolved without leaving any written trace behind.<sup>80</sup> As soon as Giurlekian took charge of the congregation, he wanted to form a Chanits Christian Endeavor Society. He not only had learned about this organization—originally founded in the United States in 1881—while a student at the School of Religion in Athens, but had also played a supervisory role in its meetings among Armenian refugees camped in the Dergouti and Kokkinia neighborhoods of the city.<sup>81</sup> In Bitias, he prepared two lists from church records, one for boys and one for girls, and on Sunday, July 25, 1926 announced his plan from the pulpit. On Monday evening, July 26, twelve boys and on Tuesday, July 27, more than twelve girls gathered at his house, where he explained the purpose of such an association and inaugurated it. He and his wife assumed the leadership of the boys' and girls' chapters, respectively. Naysayers in the congregation, including school teacher Rahel Bedoian, expressed skepticism regarding its chances of success. The Giurlekians pursued their objective undeterred and gradually won over the doubters. By

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<sup>78</sup> NEST Archives, "Siuria ve Lipananda," minutes of the annual meetings from 1924-1937; idem, "Siuria, Lipanan ve Meser Ermeni Injili Kiliselerin Ittihadenen Senevi Ijtimalarenen Kuyudate, 1938" (The Minutes of the Annual Meetings of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, 1938), minutes of the 1938 meeting, Aleppo; *Suria ve Lipanandaki Ermeni Injili Kilisalar Ittihadenen Senevi Ijtimae, Abril 8-13, 1931, Haleb* (The Annual Meeting of the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches in Syria and Lebanon: April 8-13, 1931, Aleppo), College Printing House, Aleppo, 1931, p. 3.

<sup>79</sup> See, for example, *Nor Avedaper*, 1: 2 (December 3, 1927), p. 14; 1:7 (February 25, 1928), p. 49; 2:9 (May 12, 1929), p. 344; 6:1 (January 21, 1933), p. 19.

<sup>80</sup> Interview with Anna Kendirjian, July 19, 1977, Anjar, Lebanon; Rev. Giurlekian, letter to the author, April 19, 1977, May 4, 1977.

<sup>81</sup> Rev. Giurlekian, letter to the author, undated (received June 4, 1977).

the end of 1926, the Chanits chapters had grown to 30-40 boys and a larger number of girls. The boys met twice weekly, one session led by Giurlekian and one by themselves. The girls also had their weekly meetings, each member taking turns in running them.<sup>82</sup> On occasion, the two groups commingled.<sup>83</sup> Although the Chanits did not have bylaws, Giurlekian furnished guidelines gleaned from a pertinent English-language brochure that he had brought with him.<sup>84</sup>

The Chanits ceased to function sometime after Giurlekian's departure, but the females' group was rejuvenated in 1929 upon Rev. Antreasian's return to Bitias.<sup>85</sup> The males' section must have revived soon after. During Rev. Hadidian's tenure, young married couples also joined the Chanits. As they gradually left the organization to look after their families, the church created a special "Association of Honorary Members" to keep their "love and interest" vis-à-vis the church alive. Similarly, a mixed *Badaniats* branch of youngsters and teenagers recruited from the regular school and Sunday school served as a "training ground" for Chanits.<sup>86</sup>

The Chanits meetings included readings from and elucidations about the Bible, prayers, singing, and contemplations about their future plans.<sup>87</sup> These exercises led to a spiritual awakening among the participants.<sup>88</sup> At one time in late 1926 or early 1927, the Chanits invited the members of the Church Lovers' Association of the Bitias Apostolic church to a social gathering, during which pastor Giurlekian, Fr. Kermanigian, and the Protestant school teacher spoke.<sup>89</sup> The Chanits members also supported the congregation with physical labor and donations. They partook in the completion of the parsonage, renovated the school, built and furnished a meeting venue for themselves, at one time raised 25 Ottoman gold liras to cover the church budget deficit, donated a bench and chairs, and bought a Lux lamp for the church. They similarly assisted some poor friends by volunteering to build their homes.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., April 19, 1977.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., May 4, 1977.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> *Nor Avedaper*, no. 2 (February 14, 1930), p. 47.

<sup>86</sup> Rev. Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979.

<sup>87</sup> Rev. Giurlekian, letter to the author, May 4, 1977.

<sup>88</sup> *Nor Avedaper*, no. 15 (June 23, 1928), p. 118.

<sup>89</sup> *News Bulletin of the American Board Mission in Syria*, no. 3 (February, 1927), n. p.

<sup>90</sup> E. Filian, "E. K. Chanits Engeragtsutiun Bitiasi Mech" (Young Christian Chanits Association in Bitias), *Nor Avedaper*, First Year, no. 15 (June 23, 1928), p. 118; Shnorhokian, "Musa Daghe Ermeni Kariyeleri," p. 95; Rev. Hadidian, letter to the author, May 26, 1979.

The theater constituted a major platform where Chanits members could hone their artistic talents. In 1926, they staged two dramas in the church under the direction of the pastor's wife and teacher, Rahel Giurlekian: *Genghis Khan* in Armenian and *Yenova* in Turkish. Her husband announced the event from the pulpit, inviting worshippers to attend, while the mixed cast of boys and girls sold handwritten tickets.<sup>91</sup> In the second half of the 1930s, the Chanits performed William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*, as well as playwright and poet Bedros Turian's *Sev Hoghere* (The Black Lands). "In this way—wrote Levon Shemmassian, one of the actors—we were informed that there was a Europe and [that] there were great men like Shakespeare...and many more like him in France, Germany, Italy, etc., we thus came into contact with Europe."<sup>92</sup> Emphasis was also placed on topics that conveyed moral messages. In 1937 or 1938, for example, the Chanits produced a play about gambling and its destructive ramifications. John Kerkejian reminisced:

I don't know the name of the play. I know the following individuals were in the play: your [the author's] father, Levon Shemmassian, Apraham Balabanian, my brother Movses ([nicknamed] Babazin) Kerkejian. I was your father's son in the play. The characters were sitting around the table and playing a card game, gambling. Your father lost everything. In frustration he took his son...and put him on the table as collateral. He put me on the table in a such [sic] force that it shook me up, and I still remember, feel it.<sup>93</sup>

Concomitant with the above Chanits cultural activities, the Bitias Protestants on Saturdays organized lectures in a spacious room situated by the church. Adults and teenagers alike listened to teacher Levon Babigian, in particular, talk about Greek mythology based on Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The Age of Pericles with its cultural advancement constituted another topic. Newspapers were also read, thereby spreading awareness about world and regional events. Lastly, Evangelical youths returning from summer jobs in Syria and Lebanon shared their experiences in those forums.<sup>94</sup>

The Bitias Chanits, in particular, remained within the purview of the general organization. To begin with, on August 22, 1931 a team of four young men representing the Chanits of Emmanuel Armenian Evangelical Church in Aleppo visited Musa Dagħ.<sup>95</sup> The Central Executive elected on September 20, 1937 by the Syria and Lebanon Chanits membership paid a visit to various chapters including that of Bitias. It also sent them questionnaires to get a better idea

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<sup>91</sup> Interview with Anna Kendirjian, July 19, 1977.

<sup>92</sup> Levon Shemmassian, letter to the author, undated (received January 20, 2013).

<sup>93</sup> John Kerkejian, email to the author, April 20, 2010.

<sup>94</sup> Shemmassian, letter to the author.

<sup>95</sup> Khrlopiian, p. 152. The members of the team were Manase Shnorhokian, Edward/Yetvart Tovmassian, Zaven Rubyan, and Piuzant Kalfayan.

about their activities.<sup>96</sup> The addressee in Bitias, teacher Babigian, was asked to fill out the survey, which included 13 questions, and mail it to Piuzant Kalfayan at the American Mission, Beirut by March 10, 1938. In an extant handwritten copy, only one question was answered, no. 4: “How many members did it [the Chanits] have in the first year [of its formation]?” The figures given were not clarified: 18 and 12, and 38 and 28, probably divided according to gender and referring to the first year (1926) and 1938.<sup>97</sup> During the Chanits plenary meeting in September 1937 the possibility of creating a scouts branch within the organization was explored. To that effect, the chapters in Damascus, Tel Abiad, Beirut, Iskenderun, Kesab, and Bitias obtained letters requesting their opinion.<sup>98</sup> It is not clear if scout troupes were formed at that time.

*Chanaser* (Endeavor), the official voice of the organization published in Beirut, from the outset covered Musa Dagħ in general and Bitias in particular. While presenting “certain scenes from the activities of a few yesteryears,” the first issue of the periodical reported: “The Christian Endeavor Chanits Society of Bitias has organized a few small drama and lecture evenings for the people.”<sup>99</sup> In turn, Dikran Kasuni shared his impressions of his itinerary in the Sanjak: “On the following evening (Nov. 17 [1937] Wednesday) I was in Bitias. The evening meeting in that brave mountainous village was pleasant. It was encouraging to see the youth with Chanits and listen to the teens’ precise and sweet singing. We are certain that that group will become an enthusiastic and useful Chanits by the efforts of Rev. A. Hadidian and Mr. L. Babigian.”<sup>100</sup> Statistical givens also appeared in *Chanaser*. Sometime in 1938, the Bitias Chanits’ active members were 20 boys and 4 girls, while the auxiliary members numbered 8 boys and 18 girls, respectively, for a total of 24 active and 26 auxiliary members.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> E.S. Tovmassian, “Enthanur Deghegaker Kordzatur Marmnin Vetsamsia Kordzuneutian” (General Report of the Six-Month Activity of the Executive Body), *Chanaser* (Endeavor) (Beirut), First Year, no. 3 (1938), p. 59.

<sup>97</sup> Vahram L. Shemmajian, private papers, Granada Hills, CA, “Hartsaran” (Questionnaire) sent by E.S. Tovmassian on behalf of the Chanits Executive to Levon Babigian in Bitias, undated.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., H.A. Chakmakjian to H. Fakjian, Damascus; B. Kamburian, Tel Abiad; V. Dostumian, Beirut; H. Sagherian, Iskenderun; P. Rubyan, Kesab; L. Babigian, Bitias, January 21, 1938, Aleppo.

<sup>99</sup> E.S. Tovmassian, “Kiuder Engeragtsutians Deghegakerneren” (Discoveries from the Societies’ Reports), *Chanaser*, First Year, no. 1 (1937), p. 12.

<sup>100</sup> “Chanitse Sharzhman Mech” (Chanits in Action), *Chanaser*, First Year, no. 2 (1938), p. 48.

<sup>101</sup> M. H. Marganian, “Chanitse Sharzhman Mech” (Chanits in Action), *Chanaser*, First Year, no. 4 (1938), p. 78.

A Chanits chapter existed in Yoghun Oluk as well. Although the exact date of its formation is not known, in 1928 it had 23 married and unmarried female members, who held nightly services and listened with yearning and great focus to messages delivered by preacher Hovhannes Shnorhokian.<sup>102</sup> A report for 1929 indicated 25 members, an insignificant increase.<sup>103</sup> The chapter must have ceased to exist for two years thereafter, because it was reported that a Chanits was (re)established in Yoghun Oluk in September 1931. It held its meetings on Sundays, assisted the church in various capacities, and kept close contact with its counterpart at the Emmanuel Armenian Evangelical Church in Aleppo through correspondence.<sup>104</sup> Further information is lacking about the Yoghun Oluk Chanits.

#### RELOCATION TO ANJAR, LEBANON

On January 10, 1938, Bishop Achabahian sent a letter to Rev. Nerses Sarian, the Protestant minister of Iskenderun then on a visit to Bitias, informing him of a pan-Armenian meeting to be held on January 16 in Iskenderun to discuss the escalating Sanjak crisis.<sup>105</sup> The agenda included three items:

1. The position of the Sanjak Armenians vis-à-vis the Turks, Arabs, and mandatory government [i.e., France].
2. The protection of our civic rights.
3. The issue of general agreement on the occasion of the [upcoming Sanjak] legislative election.<sup>106</sup>

The letter asked Rev. Sarian for the Musa Dagħ Protestant Church to designate a delegate to the meeting.<sup>107</sup> Information is lacking as to whether the church was able to send a representative. Be that as it may, the joint meeting of the Aleppo and Beirut Station Committees, held on May 28, 1939, raised the Sanjak issue. The minutes read: “The subject of our churches in the Hatay [Sanjak of Iskenderun] was considered and discussed at length. The opinion was expressed that in general we should provide for all of them and hope that all can stay where they are. The intention of Mr. [Dikran] Kherlopian [is] to leave [Kirik Khan], and [there is] the possibility that Mr. A[ram] Hadidian may also feel it necessary to go elsewhere ...”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Shnorhokian, “Musa Dagħe Ermeni Kariyeleri,” p. 95.

<sup>103</sup> Adanian, p. 355.

<sup>104</sup> *Nor Avedaper*, nos. 11-12 (July 26, 1932), p. 23.

<sup>105</sup> AECB/MD Archives, File *Sdatsvadz Namagner 1927-1938*, Bishop Khat Achabahian to Rev. Nerses Sarian, January 10, 1938.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> AEUNE Archives, File *Mertsavor Arevelki, 1939*, Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the Aleppo and Beirut Station Committees, May 26, 1939.

Despite the stated intention and desire, in less than two months the vast majority of Armenians, including 340 Protestant families, exited the Sanjak before its annexation to Turkey and found shelter primarily in Lebanon. In order to take care of its refugee flocks concentrated in Tyre (Sour) and environs, Chtaura, and Anjar (the new home of Musa Dagħ Armenians), the Union of Armenian Evangelical Churches of Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt constituted a “Pastors’ Custodianship.” On its behalf, Chairman Rev. Yenovk Geukgeuzian gave a report to the Union’s April 3-8, 1940 plenary meeting held in Beirut, according to which those groups had already begun to take steps “with new impetus and vigor” in order to revive their religious and educational life.<sup>109</sup>

In Anjar, the Protestant community received one parcel of land instead of two—one for the Bitias congregation and another for the Yoghun Oluk congregation—upon which they built a church, a parsonage, and a school. The first worship service took place on September 17, 1939 in a tent, that is, just two weeks after their arrival in the new settlement. The actual church building was inaugurated a year later, on September 22, 1940 in the presence of 300 worshippers and with the participation of six ministers including Rev. Hadidian, who had accompanied his parish from Bitias. In 1941-42, the Protestant community consisted of 103 families with a total of 423 persons. Of the latter, 79 were church members. The Chanits resumed its activities in 1940. The Sunday school was similarly revived and a Women’s Auxiliary constituted. The former Armenian Protestant community of Musa Dagħ thus entered a new era, which continues to this day.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> NEST Archives, *Siuria, Lipanan ve Meser Ermeni Injili Kiliselerin*, minutes of the April 3-8, 1940 meeting, Beirut. Although the original title of this file indicates the year 1938, the minutes therein go beyond that date.

<sup>110</sup> Vahram L. Shemmassian, “The Armenian Religious Communities in Anjar (1939-1944),” in Christine Babikian Assaf, Carla Eddé, Lévon Nordiguian, and Vahé Tachjian, eds., *Les Arméniens du Liban. Cent ans de présence*, Presses de l’Université Saint-Joseph, Beirut, 2017, pp. 139-42; idem, “The Settlement of Musa Dagħ Armenians in Anjar, Lebanon (1939-1941),” in Antranik Dakessian, ed., *Armenians of Lebanon (B.): Proceedings of the Conference (14-16 May 2014)*, Haigazian University Press, Beirut, 2017, pp. 146-7.

## ՄՈՒՍԱ ՏԱՂԻ ՀԱՅ ԱՆԵՏԱՐԱՆԱԿԱՆ ԵԿԵՂԵՑԻՆ, 1919-1939

(Ամփոփում)

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Մուսա Տաղի Հայ Անետարանական Եկեղեցին հիմնուած էր ԺԹ. երկրորդ դարակէսին: Պիթիասի հօտը զօրաւորագոյնն էր. անոր կը յաջորդէր Եողուն Օլուքի հօտը: Միւս գիւղերուն աւետարանականները արբանեակ-ենթախումբեր կը նկատուէին՝ իրենց թիփն փոքրութեան պատճառով: Համաշխարհային Ա. պատերազմը պարտադրեց հայ աւետարանական հօտին, Մուսա Տաղի ամբողջ բնակչութեան հետ, դիմադրութեան կամ տեղահանութեան միջեւ ընտրութիւն կատարել: Անոնք որոնք տեղահանութիւնը ընտրեցին, շուրջ կէսով բնաջնջուեցան, իսկ դիմադրողները փրկուեցան Միջերկրականի ֆրանսական նաւատորմին կողմէ եւ ապաստան գտան Փոր Սայիտի գաղթակայանը, Եգիպտոս: Վերապրողները 1919ին վերադարձան ծննդավայր եւ լծուեցան վերականգնումի աշխատանքներուն:

Յօդուածը նուիրուած է 1919-39 շրջանի Հայ Անետարանական Եկեղեցիին: Եկեղեցին դիմագրաւեց բազում դժուարութիւններ. ինչպէս՝ թիփ նուազում, աղքատութիւն եւ նիւթական պարտաւորութեանց թերացում, հոգեւոր կեանքի նահանջ, հովիւներու պարբերական բացակայութիւն եւն.: Միւս կողմէն, սակայն, եղան վերականգնումի յատկանշական իրադրոժումներ՝ կիրակնօրեայ դպրոցներու վերաբացում, Ջանիցի եւ կանանց Աստուածաշունչի խումբերու վերականգնում, յայտնուեցան նաեւ աշխուժ հոգեւոր հովիւներ: Հալէպի Հայ Աւետ. Եկեղեցին եւ ՄԱՀԱԵՄը (հիմն. 1924ին) յատուկ ուշադրութիւն դարձուց Մուսա Տաղին, ուր առաքեց այցելու խումբեր, մինչ Պիթիասի եւ Եողուն Օլուքի եկեղեցիները մասնակցեցան ՄԱՀԱԵՄի տարեկան ժողովներուն եւ նիւթապէս իրենց համեստ նպաստը բերին Սուրիա-Լիբանանի աւետարանական գործին:

Ալեքսանտրէթի սանճաքին կցումով 1939ին, Մուսա Տաղի հայութիւնը վերաբնակեցաւ Սուրիա եւ Լիբանան: Մուսատաղիք բնակեցան Լիբանանի Պէքայի հովիտին մէջ Անճար, ուր վերստեղծեցին իրենց հաւաքական կեանքը, իսկ Եկեղեցին շարունակեց իր հոգեւոր եւ կրթական առաքելութիւնը:

Ուսումնասիրութիւնը հիմնուած է արխիւային, նամակագրական, հարցազրոյցներու, մամուլի եւ այլ աղբիւրներու վրայ, որոնք առաջին անգամ կ'օգտագործուին:

