BOOK REVIEW

Haroutioun K. Atanassian, *Ադապազարէն Տէր Զօր* [From Adapazar to Der Zor]. Editor, author of the preface and references Mihran A. Minassian, Yerevan: AGMI, 2025, 568 pages.

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More than a century after the Armenian Genocide, despite decades of scholarly research and the diligent efforts of Armenian and foreign historians and genocide scholars, numerous unpublished memoirs, photographs, recorded testimonies, and archival documents related to the genocide remain scattered across various archives and repositories, still unknown to scholarship and awaiting thorough study and publication. One such overlooked source is the memoir *From Adapazar to Der Zor*, written by the educational and cultural activist, printing press owner, writer, translator, editor, and publisher Haroutioun K. Atanassian. Although the original manuscript remains missing, a copy of the memoir was discovered in the Kevork Mesrob Collection of the National Archives of Armenia (Collection No. 1388).[1]

Atanassian's account constitutes one of the earliest memoirs on the Armenian Genocide. He recorded his experiences while the memories were still fresh, starting from 1 January 1919, immediately after returning from exile, completing the manuscript in Constantinople. The memoir provides a detailed description of the harrowing journey of deportation, the conditions in the concentration camps of the Syrian desert, the unbearable daily existence of the deportees, and the tortures they endured. At the same time, Atanassian documents episodes and observations absent from many other contemporary sources, thereby shedding additional light on events that unfolded during the genocide. Through the lens of his own experiences, he vividly conveys the tragedy endured by the Western Armenians and enriches our understanding of the lived realities of genocide survivors.

Haroutioun K. Atanassian was born in the town of Adapazar, located in the autonomous province of Nicomedia, on 15 April 1884.[2] He graduated from the local Aramian community high school in 1899, during the directorship of the prominent educator Hagop Bazbazian. Through self-study, he later acquired considerable expertise in mathematics and also completed a specialized course in the subject.[3] At the age of sixteen, Atanassian worked as a carpenter for approximately three months. This practical skill later

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1 National Archives of Armenia (NAA), fond 1388, list 1, file 74 and 82, comprising 54 and 97 pages respectively.

2 Haroutioun K. Atanassian, *Գաղութահայ տարեգիրք* [Armenian Colony Almanac] (Bucharest, 2nd year, 1940), 141.

3 Ibid. See also *Պատմագիրք Ադապազար «Աստուածտրեալ» քաղաքին* [History of the God-Given Town of Adapazar], ed. Ardashes Biberian and Vartan Yeghisheian (Paris, 1960), 692-693.

proved valuable during his exile, when he was accepted as a carpenter at the boatyard in Beredjig.

Immediately after graduating from the Aramian School, he began teaching mathematics and science in local Armenian schools.[4] Atanassian also actively participated in the communal life of Adapazar and was known for his readiness to assist local initiatives. On 1 September 1911, the Adroushan Printing Union was founded in Adapazar, with Haroutioun Atanassian among its ten founding members. The Union aimed to establish a printing press and publish a newspaper titled *Putania* [Bithynia].[5] After the Union dissolved, Atanassian purchased the printing house and continued its publishing activities independently.

In 1915, Atanassian was arrested in Adapazar and deported to the Syrian desert, surviving the ordeal. During the armistice period, he served for several months as director of the Armenian orphanage in Nishan Tash (Constantinople). He subsequently became director of the Central Office for Orphans. Thereafter, he returned to his native Adapazar, where he founded a special school.

Following the occupation of Adapazar by the Greek army, Atanassian became director of the Aramian Community Central School. However, with the Greek retreat and the advance of the Kemalist forces, he fled to Greece[6] residing in the city of Efxeinoupoli by July 1921.[7]

Atanassian did not remain in Greece for long and was already in Romania by 16 January 1922.[8] He spent the remainder of his life there, residing in Bucharest, Constanța, and Froumoasa until his second arrest and exile. As in Adapazar, Constantinople, and Greece, he remained an active and devoted community figure, undertaking numerous communal responsibilities. Alongside his work as a teacher, Atanassian established a printing house, publishing house, and bookstore; authored and translated books; edited newspapers and periodicals; delivered lectures; and engaged in various cultural and educational activities. He published more than twenty-five books and booklets on subjects including mathematics, linguistics, health, literature, memoirs, and children's literature, while also editing and publishing nine newspapers and periodicals.

His life in Romania continued uninterrupted until 1944, when Soviet forces occupied

4 «Կեդր. Վարժարան հայոց, Ասաբազար» [Armenian Central School, Adapazar], *Jamanak* (Constantinople), 6th year, No. 1542, 9/22 August 1913, 4; *Armenian Colony Almanac*, 141; *History of the God-Given Town,* 206, 692-693.

5 Teotig, *Տիպ ու տառ* [Printing and Lettering] (Constantinople, 1912), 145; Arshag Alboyadjian, «Հայերը եւ տպագրութիւնը» [The Armenians and Printing], pt. 1, *Hairenik Monthly* (Boston) 10, no. 9 (117) (July 1932): 88.

6 *Նիւթեր Հ. Յ. Դաշնակցութեան պատմութեան համար* [Materials for the History of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation], ed. Yervant Pamboukian, vol. 12 (Beirut, 2016), 398; *Armenian Colony Almanac,* 141; *History of the "God-Given" town of Adapazar,* 692-693.

7 «Իզմիթի շրջանէն Էքսինօքօլիս գտնուող գաղթականներուն ցանկը» [The List of Refugees from the Izmit Region in Exinopolis], *Djagatamart* (Constantinople), new period, 11th year, no. 812 (2633) (20 July 1921): 4.

8 *Armenian Colony Almanac,* 141, and «Հարցացուցակ Հ. Յ. Դաշնակցութեան» [Armenian Revolutionary Federation Questionnaire], see ARF Archives, Watertown, Mass., Section 5, File 1221, document 5.

Romania and Bulgaria. Like many Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnak) members and sympathizers, Atanassian was arrested and deported to the Soviet Union. He belonged to the first group of Armenian intellectuals arrested in Romania on 28 December 1944, unofficially known as "Sirouni's group," after the prominent intellectual Hagop Sirouni (Hagop Djololian), with whom Atanassian shared exile and imprisonment.[9]

Following his arrest, Atanassian was transferred to Moscow, interrogated in the Lubyanka prison by the Soviet security services, and subsequently exiled to Siberia.[10] The details of his death remain unknown, but it is certain that after his arrest in Bucharest and deportation to Siberia, he never returned.

FROM ADAPAZAR TO DER ZOR

The "Preface" of Haroutioun Atanassian's memoir is dated 1 January 1919, and it appears that he completed the manuscript within a relatively short period, either before or during 1921, as the transcript used in this study was copied in that year. He wrote the memoir in Constantinople, where he resided during the early armistice period before returning to his native Adapazar.

Years before his deportation, Atanassian had already published several books in Constantinople and Adapazar and was therefore fully aware of the importance of the written word. He had carried a notebook during the deportation in which he recorded events on a daily basis. However, while in the Syrian desert, on the banks of the Euphrates, he was robbed: "…not only they took my money and clothes, but also my papers and notebooks… thus I lost the notebook containing my writings, in which I had made detailed notes, every day, of all the things that happened to me during my deportation until that day."[11]

In the Preface, Atanassian further explained his purpose: "I wanted to create a brief history of what I saw and tried, in this story, to present incidents accurately. I didn't want to embellish them with superfluous prose."[12]

Indeed, he remained faithful to this self-imposed principle throughout the memoir. The events are described in a restrained and factual manner, largely devoid of emotional language, condemnation, or rhetorical exaggeration. Even the death of his only son, Adroushan, during the deportation is recounted with striking brevity: "…[In Katma] the number of deaths gradually reached enormous proportions and large cemeteries were

9 Hagop Sirouni, *Ինքնակենսագրական նօթեր* [Autobiographical Notes], prepared for publication by Henrik Bakhchinyan (Yerevan: Sarkis Khachents and the Y. Charents Museum of Literature and Arts, 2006), 271-275.

10 Edvard Jeamgocian, *Un martir între martiri. Haroutiun C. Atanasian-Adruşan: Amintiri din Viaţa de Exil*, supliment *Ararat*, Bucureşti, nr. 6, Junie 2021, 17.

11 Haroutioun K. Atanassian, *Ադապազարէն Տէր Զօր* [From Adapazar to Der Zor], editor, author of the preface and references Mihran A. Minassian (Yerevan: AGMI, 2025), 346.

12 Ibid., 109.

created in various places around the tents. It was there that I laid my only son, Adroushan, to rest in the ground. He was one year old."[13] Nothing further is added.

When describing the death of his mother, Atanassian wrote: "It was at this point that my mother died. I presented myself to the German captain, asking for a day's grace, so that I could have her buried with the appropriate religious ceremony and leave the following day…"[14] Once again, the language is devoid of overt emotion or expressions of grief. The same restrained tone characterizes his descriptions of the deaths of other family members and loved ones. Atanassian repeatedly notes that the horrors witnessed during the deportations had become so commonplace that deportees confronted death with a kind of numbness and emotional detachment. He himself was no exception, and this sense of emotional exhaustion appears to have remained with him even after his return from exile, when he composed his memoir.

Although Atanassian was deported from Adapazar together with his family, he refers to them only briefly, usually limiting himself to recording their deaths. By contrast, his descriptions of the Syrian desert camps are exceptionally detailed. Unlike many memoirists who were children or adolescents in 1915, Atanassian was already over thirty years old, enabling him to observe events with particular attentiveness. Moreover, while in camps such as Meskene and elsewhere, he worked as a peddler and frequently moved between tents, becoming a direct witness to the daily realities of camp life and death. As he recalled: "I came to tents, many times, in which there were no signs of life. I would lift the entrance flap and see entire dead families…"[15] Such observations recur throughout the memoir.

Atanassian also worked as a cart driver in the desert, transporting deportees from one camp to another. This role exposed him directly to the countless unburied bodies scattered along the roads: "With my role as a coachman I travelled from Meskene to Rakka many times. During these journeys I always saw many unburied corpses, all of them completely naked. Many of them died from sicknesses and hunger; some had been killed by gendarmes and others by Arabs, after being robbed.[16]

Atanassian passed through or stayed in many of the concentration camps where Armenians were held and provided detailed information about them, including Karaman, Eregli, Tarsus, Bab, Meskene, Dipsi, Abu Harera, Ayid, Hamam, Rakka, Ziaret, Sabka, Der Zor, Marat, Suvar, Mergede, Sheddadiye, Aleppo, and Beredjig. Some of the information Atanassian provides is unique, particularly his descriptions of places such as Ayid and Akterin, about which only a limited number of testimonies survive.

If the Armenian Genocide may broadly be understood as unfolding in three stages – first, the persecution and massacres in the deportees' places of residence and surrounding regions; second, the deportation routes leading toward Aleppo and the Syrian deserts; and

13 Ibid., 196.

14 Ibid., 206.

15 Ibid., 220.

16 Ibid., 241.

third, the massacres and destruction carried out within the desert camps themselves – then Atanassian's memoir is especially valuable for its detailed depiction of the latter two stages.

Atanassian began his memoir on 18 July 1915, the day Ibrahim Khairi, the former director of the Constantinople prisons, arrived in Adapazar with the mission of collecting weapons from the local Armenian population. On the following day, approximately eighty prominent members of the Armenian community, including Atanassian, were ordered to gather in the St. Garabed Church. There, they were subjected to severe beatings. Atanassian recalled:

> The beating started. I was beaten by 12 men, led by Ibrahim Bey, without mercy. My feet were put into a *falakha*. Blows rained down from every direction. I couldn't even feel which part of me was being struck. It took three months for the marks of the staves used to beat me to disappear. All of my fellow notables were beaten in the same way.[17]

After fifteen days of imprisonment, Atanassian was released on 2 August 1915. The first caravan of Armenian deportees left Adapazar the following day, soon followed by others. Atanassian himself departed shortly thereafter. By the time he left, only around ten percent of the town's Armenian population remained. He was deported together with his mother, wife, newborn son, his brother's wife and her two-year-old child, and possibly the child's nanny.

After leaving Adapazar, the deportees stayed briefly in Bilecik, Eskishehir, and Afyonkarahisar before reaching Konya, where they remained for several days. They were then transferred to Karaman, where they stayed for a longer period. Atanassian recalls that the armed guards prohibited the deportees from drinking water or even attending to their most basic bodily needs.

Their next halt was Eregli, where they remained for some time. It was there that he encountered his brother, who was serving as a soldier. Atanassian managed to secure a one-day leave from the commander so that his brother could see his wife and mother. However, his brother did not return to the military encampment afterward; instead, he remained with the family and was deported alongside them. Haroutioun later wrote of his brother and the other soldiers: "These soldiers were, a few at a time, taken away on foot and put to the sword..."[18] This account helps explain his decision to facilitate his brother's escape.

The departure from the city of Eregli was accompanied by relentless beatings, which by then had become routine. As Atanassian remarked, the deportees had grown so accustomed to violence that "disrespect and expletives were nothing, with people accepting them as compliments."[19]

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17 Ibid., 120.

18 Ibid., 173.

19 Ibid., 159.

From Eregli, the Atanassian family traveled through Pozanti to Tarsus, where Atanassian managed to delay their deportation for over twenty days by repeatedly relocating the family's tent alongside those of newly arrived deportees. They were later sent to Osmaniye, where a bribed official promised them protection but ultimately failed to prevent their onward deportation. Atanassian describes the condition of the deportees in Osmaniye in particularly stark terms:

> Those days were dreadful for me. I thought that humanity hadn't seen – and couldn't possibly see – such an appalling level of wretchedness. I couldn't imagine such a level of inhumanity and barbarity. It seemed that man had no value whatsoever. The Armenians are being treated precisely as shepherds would treat wolves attacking their flock.[20]

From Osmaniye, the deportees continued by cart through Kanli Gechid and Hassan Beyli to Islahiye, where thousands of deported Armenians had been concentrated. According to Atanassian, more than 5,000 families were gathered there, while epidemics claimed dozens of lives daily. Their caravan alone consisted of approximately 300 carts, over a thousand draft animals, and numerous deportees traveling on foot, including four archpriests exiled from Sis who were transporting cultural treasures of the Mother Cathedral to Aleppo.

After an arduous journey, the deportees reached Katma, one of the largest Armenian concentration camps, where, according to Atanassian, nearly 15,000 tents had been erected. It was there that Atanassian lost his one-year-old son.[21]

Disease spread rapidly throughout the camp, and mortality reached catastrophic proportions, with "various places around the tents becoming large cemeteries."[22] Atanassian also noted that those wishing to remain temporarily in Katma had to bribe Ahmed Eyup Bey, the inspector of the Dispatch Administration in Aleppo. According to his testimony, among the more than one hundred thousand families who passed through the camp, very few avoided paying him some form of bribe.

He further described in detail how deportees were forced onward from the camp. Mounted gendarmes, led by a German captain, burned the tents and belongings of those unable to depart quickly enough.[23]

From Azaz, the Atanassian family continued on foot to Akterin after a grueling three-day journey. Conditions there were equally catastrophic:

> Sickness was so prevalent, the number of sick people was so large, that the area had become like an actual hospital. The number of deaths was

20 Ibid., 183.

21 Ibid., 196.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid., 205.

> enormous. The burial group, composed of more than 20 individuals, couldn't cope with burying people individually and were forced to dig mass graves, large enough to bury 20-30 bodies at a time, which they then covered with soil.[24]

Entire families perished in Akterin, where, according to Atanassian, five or six corpses were often removed from a single tent. He estimated that more than 20,000 Armenians were buried there, while over 1,000 children were left orphaned.

After leaving Akterin, the deportees walked for eight hours in heavy rain before reaching Bab. Describing the camp in bleak terms, Atanassian noted that scarcely a tent was without a sick person and that the majority of deportees suffered from severe hunger. He concluded his account of Bab with the following observation: "The officials' barbarity visited on those there, the hunger, sickness, rain and cold, united, reaping unbelievable numbers of lives. One of the largest Armenian cemeteries was created in Bab."[25]

The Atanassians remained there only briefly before being deported onward to Meskene. According to him, up to 15,000 families had previously been concentrated there, while daily deaths ranged from 250 to 300. More than sixty gravediggers were reportedly unable to keep pace with the burials. Reflecting on the scale of famine and suffering, Atanassian remarked that "poets, instead of describing hell, [should] present Meskene as such.[26] In his estimation, approximately 75,000 Armenians died in Meskene, making it one of the largest Armenian cemeteries of the genocide period.

During their stay in Meskene, Atanassian, his wife, and his sister-in-law all contracted typhus. Nevertheless, all three survived and continued what he metaphorically described as their journey to Golgotha.

After Meskene, the deportees were transferred to Dipsi. Although only four hours away, the journey took two days because sickness and starvation left many unable to walk. Atanassian recalled abandoned children along the roadside and "the stench of dead bodies that remained unburied" throughout the route.[27]

Through bribery, Atanassian secured permission to remain in Dipsi for fifteen days, but after the responsible official was transferred, the family was again ordered onward. When Atanassian resisted because his brother was dying of typhus, gendarmes dismantled the family tent, beat him severely, and forced them onto the road. Shortly after leaving Dipsi, his brother died in the desert; later, near Abu Harera, his two-year-old nephew also perished.

After brief stays in Abu Harera and Ayid – the only place where they experienced relative calm – the family was transferred to Hamam, where more than 2,000 Armenian deportee tents had been erected, before being deported onward to Rakka.

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24 Ibid., 210.

25 Ibid., 215.

26 Ibid., 216.

27 Ibid., 226.

According to Atanassian, Armenian deportees in Rakka were spared large-scale massacres largely due to the protection extended by local Arab inhabitants. Between 6,000 and 7,000 Armenian tents surrounded the town, while a smaller number of deportees had managed to settle within Rakka itself and establish relatively more stable conditions of life. Reflecting on this stark contrast, Atanassian wrote: "Here, in the town of Rakka, it was like heaven, while the encampment of tents looked like hell to us."[28] He further noted that the town had "taken on an Armenian atmosphere," as Armenian deportees outnumbered the local Arab and Circassian populations.

Yet beyond the relative safety of the town, conditions in the surrounding camps remained catastrophic. Atanassian recorded scenes of extreme famine, destitution, and even cannibalism-descriptions so horrifying that, as he himself suggested, they defied full recounting.

As in his descriptions of other deportation sites, Atanassian noted that one of the large Armenian cemeteries was located on the right bank of the Euphrates near Rakka.[29] Leaving the town with what he described as painful memories, the Atanassians continued to the nearby settlement of Ziaret, where another encampment of Armenian deportees had been established. There, they encountered countless half-dead deportees and unburied corpses, resulting, in Atanassian's words, in "another large Armenian cemetery."[30]

The Atanassians subsequently reached Sabka, where approximately 9,000 Armenian deportees were concentrated according to an official census cited by Atanassian. It was there that the governor of Der Zor, Salih Zeki Bey, ordered the deportees transferred onward to Der Zor. During the eight-day journey, the deportees passed unburied corpses and scattered human bones-evidence, as Atanassian observed, of earlier caravans destroyed by massacre, starvation, thirst, and exhaustion. From Der Zor, the Atanassians were deported to Marat.

Atanassian estimated that more than 80,000 Armenians had already passed along this route, while another 100,000 would later be driven toward Baghdad and Mosul, of whom fewer than 10,000 survived. After fifteen days in Marat, a caravan of approximately 20,000 deportees was transferred to Suvar. From there, around 12,000 were sent to Sheddadiye, while about 300 families-including the Atanassians, remained behind through bribery.

Five days later, two severely wounded Armenian survivors arrived in Suvar and recounted the fate of the deportees sent onward: the men had been killed first, followed by the women, leaving the "Markadeh deserts filled with Armenian corpses."[31] A second caravan of approximately 5,000 Armenians departing from Suvar was massacred shortly afterward.

The remaining Armenians, fully aware of the fate awaiting them, turned increasingly to collective prayer and religious rituals, while news continued to arrive of further massacres,

28 Ibid., 258.

29 Ibid., 265.

30 Ibid., 266.

31 Ibid., 315.

including the destruction of additional deportation caravans. Of the approximately 23,000 Armenians once concentrated in the Der Zor region, only about 300 families remained alive, among them the Atanassians. Despite paying substantial bribes, these survivors were eventually expelled and forced onward. As Atanassian wrote, they moved "like condemned people walking to the scaffold, expecting death at every moment."[32]

Along the route, the deportees encountered countless mutilated corpses scattered across the valleys. After four days of marching through what Atanassian described as landscapes filled with "thousands of naked dead bodies," the group reached Margadeh, where despair became overwhelming. During the night of 25 September/8 October 1916, several Armenian men escaped through the Chechen guards' cordon. Encouraged by his wife and sister-in-law, Atanassian fled with his friend toward Rakka. Of the approximately 125 men who escaped, he estimated that only twenty-five ultimately survived.

After wandering for four days without water, Atanassian finally reached the Euphrates, where he was attacked, wounded, and robbed by two Arabs who took his money, clothing, documents, and notebooks. After partially recovering and receiving brief assistance from several Bedouin Arabs, who provided him with cloth to cover himself, Atanassian resumed his journey and, after seven days crossing the desert, reached Rakka for the second time. There he survived through various jobs, including work on a bathhouse construction project commissioned by local authorities.

When famine halted the project, Atanassian continued to Meskene and then Aleppo, where he worked on the construction of a factory near Muslimiye. During this period, he regularly stayed at the Armenian Apostolic church in Aleppo. Following a police raid on the church, he was arrested with other Armenian exiles but avoided deportation to Der Zor by joining the Ottoman army as a skilled laborer. He was subsequently sent to the boatyard at Biredjig, directed by Djemil Köhne Bahri, where many Armenians survived through wartime labor instead of being deported further into the desert. Later, owing to his knowledge of French, Atanassian was transferred from manual labor to clerical work in the German administration attached to the boatyard.

By February 1918, Atanassian had returned to Aleppo, where traces of his life become fragmentary until his reappearance in Constantinople during the armistice period. Of the seven members of the Atanassian family deported from Adapazar, only Haroutioun Atanassian survived the Syrian desert and ultimately reached Constantinople.

From Adapazar to Der Zor stands as a significant firsthand testimony that deepens our understanding of the Armenian Genocide, not only as a historical event but as a lived experience of systematic destruction and survival. Its evidentiary value lies both in the precision of its observations and in the sobriety of its narration, making it an important source for reconstructing the experiences of deportees and further enriching the documentary foundations of Armenian Genocide historiography.

32 Ibid., 319.