

A Self-Criticism

by
Monte Melkonian

translated with a preface by
Seta Melkonian

edited by
Gregory Topalian



Gomidas Institute
London

PHOTO CREDITS

We thank the following for the photographs in this book:

Khajag Hagopian, pp. 7, 11 and cover picture

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For further details please contact:

Gomidas Institute

42 Blythe Rd.

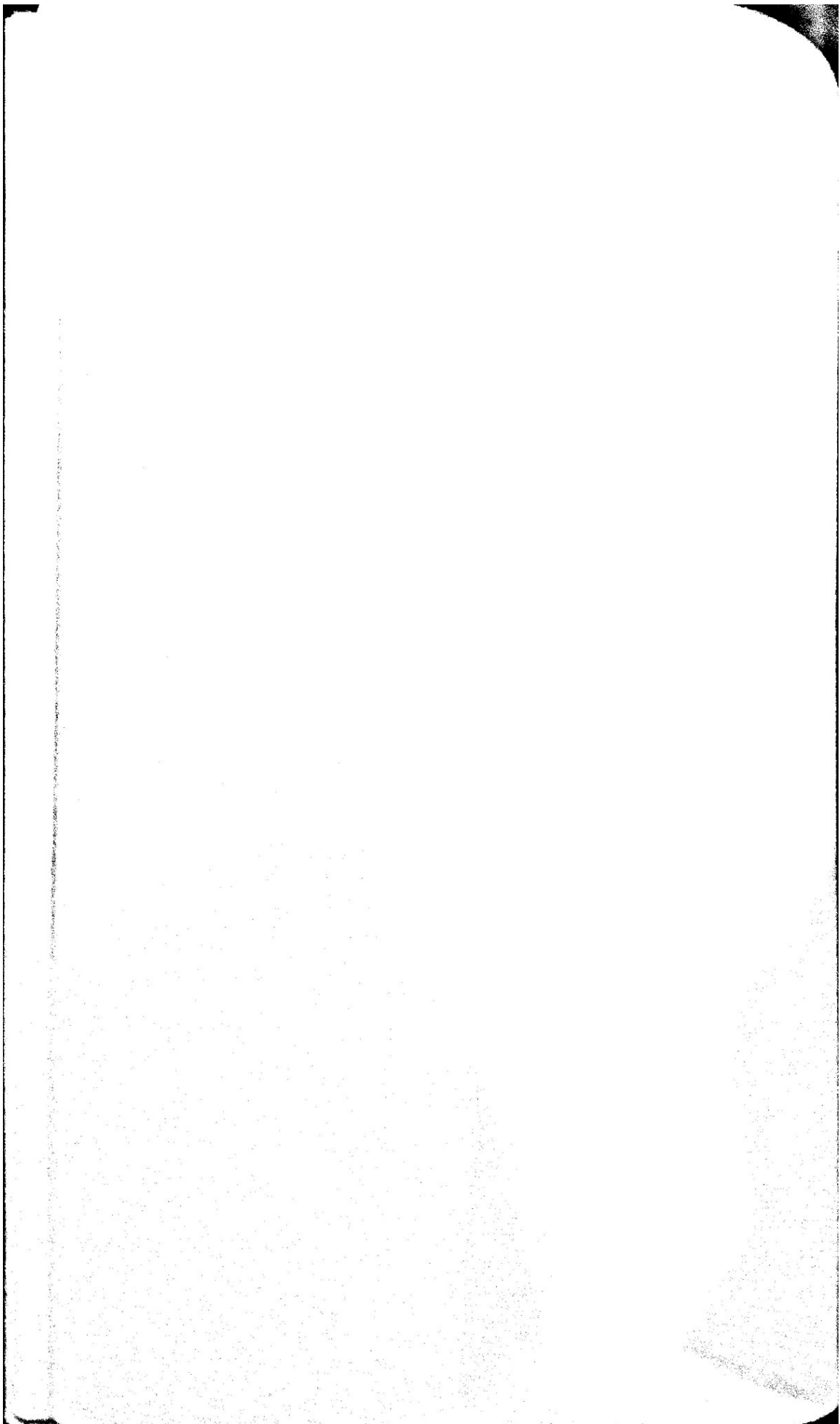
London, W14 0HA

England

Email: info@gomidas.org

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Some security measures he mentions in the self criticism made his work more difficult, and drew the task of writing out to several months. After correcting and typing the text that appears below, Monte copied it and sent it to his closest comrades. Unfortunately, he never had the chance to discuss it with as many comrades as he would have wanted because of the geographical distance.

A Self-Criticism was originally written in Armenian and it is being published for the first time ever. In preparing this text for publication, I have tried to limit changes to the text to correction of spelling and the odd grammatical correction. Once or twice I have taken the liberty to divide up an especially complicated sentence. Concerned as I was to convey to the reader Monte's level of proficiency with Armenian, I have not attempted to polish the prose style or make any other substantive changes to the text.

Loyal to his principles, Monte has bequeathed us a work which, besides being interesting as informal history, puts in focus a human soul that can stand higher than any prejudice. With the most sober sense of responsibility, he was always ready to give an account to his nation, his people. As during the whole period of his activity, in this writing also he presents an account without waiting for an invitation, without any pretension, by this becoming an exceptional person in this field also.

Undeniably *A Self-Criticism* proves itself as an invaluable work in at least three aspects.

From first glance, this work has an analytical documentary value where Monte Melkonian presents his own activity until 1990 through his personal and self critical prism. He thoroughly explains each phase, discusses and analyzes each error, failure or accomplishment in detail. Typical to his character and nature, the text is written in a very simple and clear manner with objective methodology. However, the simplicity and the clarity purposefully give way to ambiguous phrases and murky expressions, which are the result of security concerns and the author's sense of responsibility toward others. Nonetheless, in our opinion, more than the documentation, the value of this work is in the moral significance that it presents. In essence, it demonstrates the moral character of an individual, who not only found the meaning of life in the search for his own people's freedom, but in the altruistic struggle for justice in general. Furthermore, to protect the struggle and develop a clear path for it, he believed in mandatory critical discussions;

in ridding the organization from undesirable influences, in rigorous accountability, he himself always being the first to set an example.

Monte appears in this writing with this accountability. An accountability that sometimes simply amazes the reader for the St. Gregory of Nareg style sighs of self torment reaching self criticism. He expects more from himself than anyone else. In that perseverance is probably hidden the secret of the outstanding accomplishments and victories of the soldier or leader Monte Melkonian, or Commander Avo in Nagorno Karabagh. As in this writing, as well as over there, everyday accountability, perseverance, selflessness, insight, understanding, honesty, compassion, empathy and the devotion he expected from others is present, but first and foremost he demanded from his own self and he did set the first example.

The significance of this book should be found in its self critical form also. As Monte himself mentions at the beginning of the work, both in Armenian and the Diaspora social life, writing a self criticism and publishing it is an extremely rare, not to say exceptional practice. In that sense also this writing can be educational for our social/political activists and organizations, who are generally accustomed to hiding their wrongdoings, presenting themselves as faultless and justified in criticizing only others.

Self improvement efforts as a result of accountability and self criticism can be considered disrespectful only for arrogant and ill-mannered people and organizations. In reality, accountability and self criticism are fundamental for the development and success of any selfless deed. One of the brightest figures in the recent phase of our peoples' freedom struggle, Monte Melkonian proved this by his own example.

People who were lucky enough to be close to Monte Melkonian know, that this person, who was so demanding toward himself and others was also extraordinarily simple, friendly, sociable, popular, modest, a charming and cheerful man who loved life, nature and sun. Monte Melkonian was a lover of life and struggle, who sacrificed his life for the struggle. The best way to express our respect to this remarkable man would be to continue our lives and struggle in constant self critique and self improvement.

Seta Melkonian

Chicago, Illinois, March 1994 -

Beirut, Lebanon, May 2009

Editor's Introduction to English Edition

My role in the much anticipated release of Monte Melkonian's famous *A Self-Criticism* has been minimal in that I have edited the English translation only. Monte's widow, Seta Melkonian and I have been in contact for over a decade, beginning as a result of my asking her questions about the motivations of her husband's role in protecting his homeland. Our correspondence has been wide ranging and fascinating and it was during one such conversation that I brought up Monte's self criticism which I had seen referred to in the excellent *My Brother's Road* by Markar Melkonian. I asked Seta if an English translation existed. She replied in the affirmative and kindly sent me a copy, and having read this fascinating and historically important document I then asked if the Gomidas Institute might publish it for a wider readership. Seta kindly agreed and sent footnotes and photographs to accompany the text.

Therefore, what you are about to read are Monte's words as translated into English from his own Armenian. The only changes made have been in substituting alternative translated words from Armenian into English more suitable to understanding the points Monte was trying to make. Seta has looked over my changes and made corrections where I had either assumed something incorrectly, or where she felt clarification was needed with regards to what Monte was trying to express.

The importance of this document is multifaceted.

Monte's text was written in such a way as not to divulge the identities of certain players in his story, but that aside, what we have here is a rich and fiercely honest document explaining his motivations and what he considered were his mistakes throughout his life and struggle in the build up to his eventual arrival in Armenia. Unfortunately, we will never hear from him about the years 1990 to 1993 when his role was decisive in protecting his people from a conspiracy of forces in the region of Artsakh (Nagorno Karabagh) that threatened Armenia's future so soon after her independence had been ceded (something Monte believed to be catastrophic to Armenia's future).

For those actions, Monte Melkonian is revered in Armenia as a hero; he is the 'Che Guevara' of the Armenian people. This may confuse some in the West who might have heard him described as a 'terrorist'. However, that term has been used to demean everyone from the aforementioned Che to Nelson Mandela.* The maxim "One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" could never be truer in Monte's case. At the same time, Western states that continue to perpetrate barbarities against pretty much defenceless people are rarely considered terrorist. It's a moot point, because what we have here is one man driven to right an injustice that for far too long politicians have simply used as a cynical means to exert political pressure.

The recognition of the Ottoman authored Armenian Genocide of 1915 has consistently been used as a bargaining tool by The United States of America and Great Britain to persuade Turkey to bend to their will. It has also been used by Turkey to counter threaten those same countries with reprisals should the Genocide ever be officially recognised. And so the memory of over one million Armenian victims is sullied, and the survivors branded liars for as long as this denial continues. Norman Finkelstein suggests that "the only true mainstream Holocaust denier is Bernard Lewis", because those that deny the Jewish Holocaust are generally cranks who no-one takes seriously, yet Bernard Lewis is an otherwise respected historian denying the genocide of the Armenians, a crime for which he was successfully charged in France.† The Armenian Genocide has had to face denial alone. The United States and Great Britain, and perhaps even more shamefully, Israel, are quick to raise their voices in righteous indignation at any questioning of the Holocaust, yet those same states, are strangely quiet, non-committal, and thereby as guilty of denial as the Turkish State when it

* British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once labelled Nelson Mandela a terrorist, and he spoke about this on his release. "I was called a terrorist yesterday, but when I came out of jail, many people embraced me, including my enemies, and that is what I normally tell other people who say those who are struggling for liberation in their country are terrorists. I tell them that I was also a terrorist yesterday, but, today, I am admired by the very people who said I was one". Monte Melkonian's path was similar.

† Norman G. Finkelstein, *The Holocaust Industry* (Verso 2000) p. 69.

comes to the Armenian Genocide. Monte Melkonian was determined to raise awareness of the murder of his people and the failure of the world to recognise the crime; quite possibly the modern world's greatest injustice, and within this document Monte explains some motivation for his actions, and provides plenty of self analysis.

A Self-Criticism is evidence that Monte was far from being a 'terrorist'. Here was an idealist seeking justice and as is self evident in this document, he was very aware of his naivety in chasing his goals. He had huge regrets over some of his actions, especially when it involved the loss of innocent life, and he reflects on some such incidents within these pages.

What Monte has written in *A Self-Criticism* is brutally honest and it pulls no punches. He is not afraid to criticise and chastise; and his fellow Armenians were not absolved from his ire as a result of either wrongdoings or inertia.

Yet on every page one is made consciously aware of the great deal of responsibility he felt towards his people and his homeland. Monte's later role in Artsakh (Nagorno Karabagh) was crucial to the success of Armenian forces in protecting their people living in that enclave, but what is often forgotten is how his moral approach to the arena of war was revolutionary in the region. Previously, Armenian forces had been brutal with captured soldiers and sometimes civilians, as were their Azeri counterparts. Monte changed the mindset of his forces by treating captives with compassion and ensuring the rules of war were honoured in the tradition of the Geneva Convention. He was not driven by hate, but by justice. This is notable in some existing video footage where on capturing an Azeri village a woman gets down on her knees to beg for mercy. Monte explodes with anger but it is not directed at the woman's nationality, but at the demeaning manner in which she dropped to her knees. He demanded the greatest moral standards of all of those he came into contact with. Monte rarely drank and did not smoke and he was avowedly single minded in his pursuit of justice for the Armenian nation. He therefore expected the same of his compatriots.

A Self-Criticism illustrates how Monte Melkonian developed from an all American kid to a revolutionary hero. It is a fascinating document that details Monte's life from his early childhood through his troubled times as a member of ASALA, his imprisonment, and ultimately his release. It would seem that from a very early age, Monte was infected by a consciousness that

wanted to right the wrongs done to the Armenian people at the beginning of the century.

In *A Self-Criticism*, Monte alludes to his enlightenment beginning when he was twelve years old. He does not detail this further but in *My Brother's Road*, Markar Melkonian writes of a trip his family took to their ancestral home of Marsovan (now Merzifon), and how their father's anger exploded when approached by a beggar asking for money, the reason being that Armenians had begged for mercy sixty years previously and been denied, and for all Monte's father knew, this woman could well have benefitted from the plunder and murder of Armenians living there at that time.*

Monte's time with ASALA is recounted in *A Self-Criticism* with frank honesty and it is an utterly gripping account of the dangers Monte faced during that period. His own life was under constant threat as a result of the unstable leadership of the organisation, and Monte quickly realised that he had to act first in order to prevent some of the actions that were proving detrimental to the Armenian cause. However, self preservation was only a secondary consideration, as at one point in *A Self-Criticism* he seriously contemplates a neutralisation act that would almost certainly have seen him killed also. His final consideration was this:

"But then I was convinced (and I am still convinced) that I would be able to serve my struggle and my nation more by living and continuing to work rather than carrying out an important but suicidal work. Perhaps in this particular case I was wrong. History will tell..."

History has told, and the Armenian people are eternally grateful that he chose to live to continue his crucial work in his homeland.

Monte had a passion for action and his frustration during his period of enforced inactivity (whilst under virtual house arrest with ASALA and imprisonment in France) is transparent. He writes with emotion, "all my heart", and suggests that he hopes to counter balance his mistakes with his future activities. This, he undoubtedly achieved during his time in Armenia.

This is the first time that *Self-Criticism* has been published in Armenian or English and it illustrates the two driving passions for Monte; recognition of the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Government from the beginning of 1915, and the second was establishing an Armenia safe

* Markar Melkonian, *My Brother's Road* (I. B. Taurus 2005) p. 17.

from the final stage of that genocide, the obliteration of the current Armenian Republic itself.

Due to Monte's modesty he claims that the quality of his writing is "not high", but *A Self-Criticism* is a remarkable and important document in that Monte Melkonian, the man and the fighter, writes with incredible modesty and candidness. It is unlikely that Monte would have wanted the adulation that surrounds him amongst Armenians today, but *A Self-Criticism* is a reminder of the passions that drove him, alongside the careful consideration of any mistakes he made. Monte Melkonian was devoted to his people and their land. It can only be hoped that those with the future of Armenia in their hands today are as scrupulous in their considerations before making any decision that might well be catastrophic to the future of the country, and demeaning to the memory of this great man.

Perhaps the saddest line in the whole text is where he suggests that this document would not be his last self criticism. It was, but one can be sure that even those actions for which he is idolised would have gone through a process of rigorous reflection by this most remarkable of men. Who knows what he might have achieved had his life not been so cruelly curtailed? At least through reading *A Self-Criticism* we can still learn something from his example.

However, it is apt that I should leave the last words of this introduction to Monte.

In a letter he wrote to Seta on the 5th October 1988 Monte summed up his desire to produce a self criticism and this extract from that letter sums up perfectly the relationship that he and Seta had, and also his constant awareness of the need to be accountable to his people. It is a beautifully written passage summing up the passions and moral fortitude that made Monte Melkonian such a remarkable man.

"...I want to understand what's going on. I don't want to have incorrect ideas about this movement and about large numbers of our compatriots. You know very well, that this subject is something I wish to dedicate my life to, so you must understand how I'm anxious to get a clear idea of things. Somehow the movement in Artzakh and Soviet Armenia must continue, but it must regain the clarity it had and the *political maturity* it had in the beginning. It must truly become a solid

vanguard force and not let emotional outbursts and frustration quickly veer them into reactionary counterproductive tangents. Our people and our *homeland* are at stake: no one has the right to abuse those.

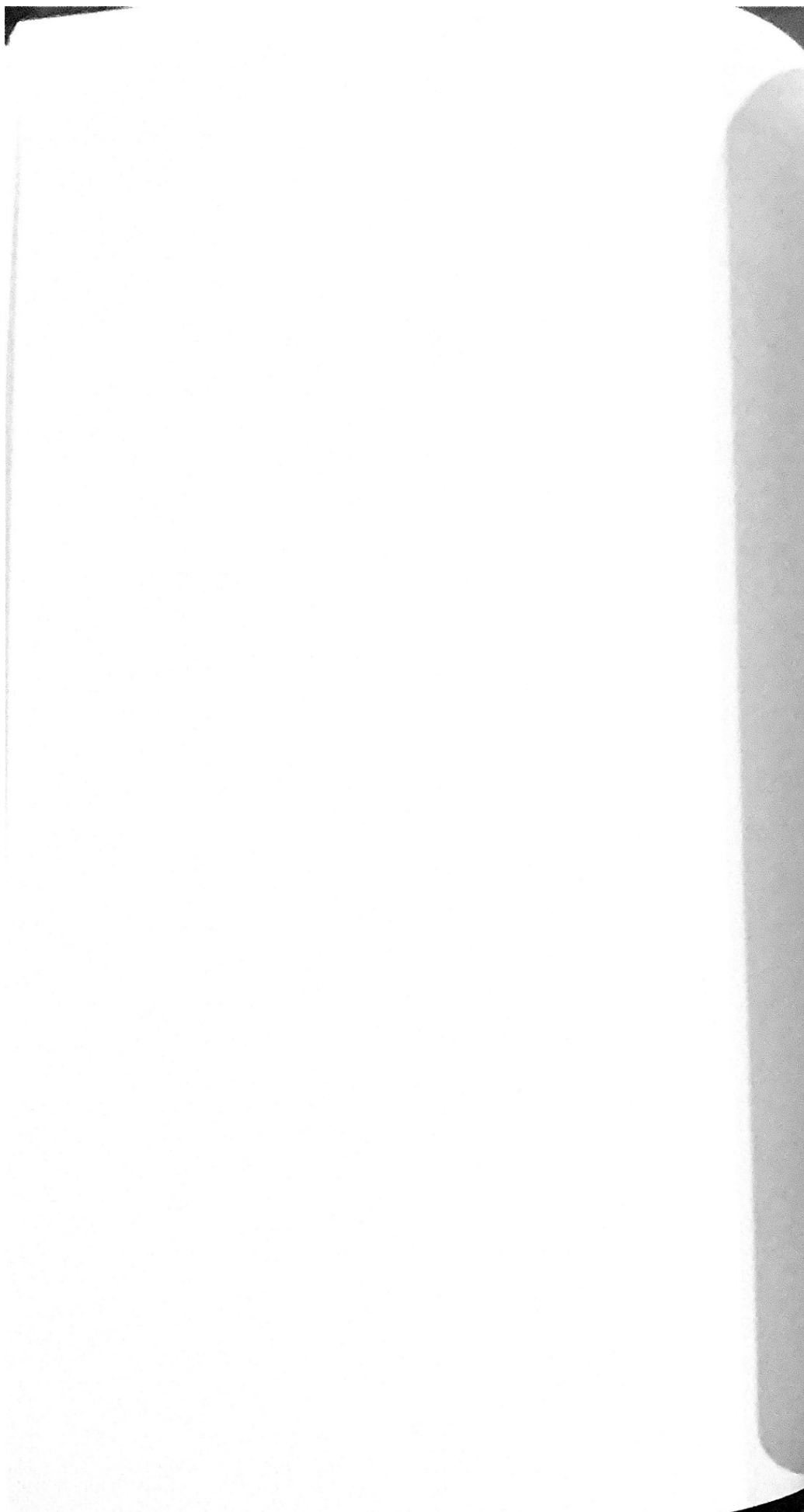
My dear Seta, you know I really don't feel right writing such things. Not yet, at least. Before criticizing other people I would like to do a profound self-criticism of myself and my own errors. When we're together I will do this with you. I, too, have made many mistakes- both big and small- and I prefer to first explain and correct my own mistakes before talking about those of others. It is only after such self-criticism that one can honestly talk about the errors of others. We will help each other correct our errors. This will make us strong - extremely strong. It will also allow us to live and work with an open, comfortable mind. It will simply make us better people."

Gregory Topalian
Manchester (UK) April 2010

A Self-Criticism

by

Monte Melkonian



SELF-CRITICISM¹

Several years ago I began writing a rather detailed self criticism.² Of course, because of its detail, I was going to present it only to very close comrades in the struggle. That writing however, never took its final shape and was never distributed because of the difficult conditions of my life and problems with distribution. Despite that, I did at least succeed in conducting my self criticism orally, in the presence of some friends. Nevertheless, I've never been satisfied with these presentations. Also, I regret that all this time has passed without presenting my self criticism to our people, or at least to the people who are interested. It's been on my mind for a long time, and I'd written part of it and presented it to some comrades; however, I've been late in presenting it to a wider audience.

Self criticism is a necessary process for everyone in his or her life. Everyone makes mistakes. Furthermore, nearly everyone does right things (except for some every *exceptional* individuals who seem only to know how to make mistakes). For a person to progress and do mostly good works, it is necessary first of all to know the rights and wrongs of the past and to distinguish between them. It is necessary to examine and discuss them; and what's more, it is necessary to do this mental work extremely objectively and logically. Without a severe and honest self criticism, no one can improve and become stronger. And because each day of our life exposes us to new right and wrong things (challenges?), the process of self criticism should be never-ending.

1 To remain faithful to the author's style, and with the aim of preserving the standard of his perception of Armenian, only very few and the most necessary changes have been made during editing.

Bearing in mind the safety of certain participants in events, we will gloss over particular explanations and proofs, resulting in our footnotes being incomplete. We apologise to the reader for this.

2 The detailed autobiography that Monte refers to was written between the summer of 1983 and spring 1986, and for safety reasons was destroyed by the author himself.

For popular activists, and revolutionaries in particular, this reality should receive even more emphasis and be given more importance. One of the main principles of socialism is self criticism. Unfortunately, this principle is often "forgotten," or considered inopportune "due to more important considerations," or undertaken in an incomplete or dishonest way. It is especially unfortunate that for Armenian circles; real, severe, self criticisms are very, very, very rare. Lately, in Soviet Armenia, certain elements have started this process,³ but in the Diaspora it is still an almost unseen practice. I personally long ago wanted to confide this self criticism to the general public, especially patriots, because during the past twelve years nearly *all* my work has been directly or indirectly connected with the struggle of our nation. I've worked and lived for this collective struggle, so therefore my self criticism should also be delivered to the public.

The purpose of my self criticism is:

(a) To know my wrong and right works, to differentiate between them, and in this way to correct the direction of my future activities, and to establish a base for it. In other words, my first and most important purpose is to take the responsibility for the works that I've done, in front of my people and friends. The vast majority of these works have been done in their name and in the name of our struggle so certainly, I am responsible to them.

(b) In addition to this primary reason, I have a second reason. Taking this first step, I hope that my self criticism will encourage other comrades to write their self criticisms too. This process will only strengthen us and make our future work healthier. Of course, this self criticism will be a briefer and abridged version of a detailed self criticism. Certain details (which I've already critiqued orally to comrades anyway) can serve only the enemies of our national struggle. Here, however, I will critique and explain in general terms, so that the reader can gain a balanced and rather complete idea of my activities and thoughts from all sides.

Ultimately, this will not be my last self criticism. Every day I reflect on my work, and my aim from now on is always to present my criticism and self criticism.

³ The reference concerns certain expressions of self-criticism that are the result of the Gorbachev openness and reconstruction.

Events of My Early Life

I was born a third-generation American-Armenian, not far from Fresno [California].⁴ Although my parents' background was poor, during my childhood we already were in the American middle class—that is petty-bourgeoisie. Our family and social atmosphere was very good and healthy. My parents gave me a very balanced moral upbringing; I was physically healthy, and I had a good education. At a young age, I started working at little tasks. At the same age, due also to travelling to foreign countries with my family, my point of view and my desire to study grew. In particular, I learned how necessary it is to take the initiative in order to accomplish any sort of task, as well as essential principles of life and the human condition.

The Beginning of My Political Activities

After becoming partly acquainted with several people's situations and causes, at nineteen years of age I started dealing with subjects concerning the Armenian people.⁵ From the age of twelve, I had wanted to deal with the struggle of our people;⁶ however, because of my distance from Armenian community life (which is the case of American-Armenians in general), and because of the lack of a general political/historical education, I was not able to take any sort of practical steps until the age of nineteen.⁷ My university education taught me a lot about Armenian history and the history of other peoples of the region, enabling me to better formulate my thoughts about our struggle. With this only basic understanding, I began discussing and arguing with other progressive Armenians. The Armenian Student Association was formed in my last year at the university. The formation of

4 Monte Melkonian was born on 25 November 1957 in the small town of Visalia, about 40 miles from Fresno.

5 Monte Melkonian studied at University of California at Berkeley from September 1976 until March 1978, graduating from the Department of the History and Archaeology of Ancient Asian Peoples.

6 During the 16 months of 1970-71 the Melkonian family travelled through 41 European, Middle Eastern and African countries, among which was Turkey (including western Armenia) and the Soviet Union.

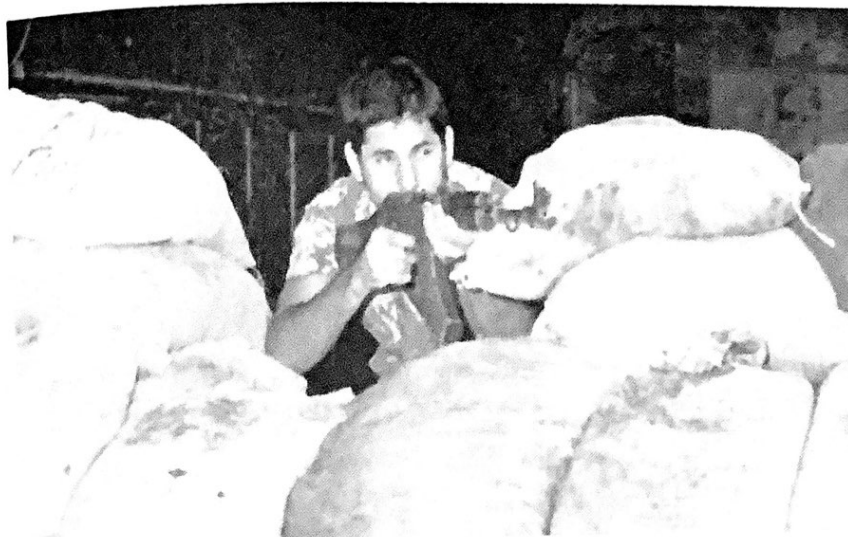
7 Until his university years, Monte Melkonian studied the history of all the minorities living in the region, especially that of the Kurds.

this association gave me a better opportunity to contact more in Armenian circles; to carry on active work, and to get acquainted with other people's struggles by way of their student associations.⁸ Although I was very serious and frank during this period, looking back I can say that I was very inexperienced, impatient, and to a certain extent, adventurous. The newly born Student Association, despite all its limitations, did considerable and significant work, and I think my activity in that was positive. But its activity and political capabilities were limited; therefore, outside that, I tried to form a group which would have a definite progressive character (I even wanted it to be revolutionary). In this respect, I failed terribly. Not wanting to accept this failure, and to "encourage" others (some people didn't have the psychology of taking the initiative, or perhaps were afraid); I even lied about the formation and members of this group. I think during my activities in the USA, this was the most condemnable part. I couldn't understand why people were afraid to participate like me in the most avant-garde (and in general most dangerous) undertakings. I still couldn't understand that people's financial interests and everyday comfort weighed much more heavily in their estimation and their lives than an idealistic cause or the struggle of their nation. I also couldn't understand the consequences and the role of assimilation. My family settled in the USA a very long time ago (my mother's family was the first Armenians to settle in California) [the Seropian family was among the first Armenians to settle in Fresno County. —ed.]⁹

I didn't know any Armenian, I had few Armenian friends during childhood and youth, and so if there was such a thing as an assimilated

8 During his final year in Berkeley (1978), participating in the re-creation of the Armenian Students Union, Monte Melkonian and a few friends prepared an exhibition dedicated to Armenian history on the occasion of April 24. One of the displays was dedicated to the Great Catastrophe [the Armenian genocide]. Upon the Turkish Consulate's protest, that display was removed without the permission or knowledge of the exhibitors. Melkonian spiritedly participated in the organization of the protest by the students and, graduating just at that time (March 1978) went to Lebanon. The protests continued after his departure, resulting in the dismissal of the Turkish consul of San Francisco.

9 Monte Melkonian's grandfather on his mother's side settled in Fresno from Marsovan in 1883, and his father's side came from Harput in 1913 Monte's parents were both born in the United States of America.



Fall 1978. Monte behind the barricades in Bourdj Hammoud, Lebanon.

person, it was I, and I couldn't understand that maybe others would feel more comfortable or would want more to be an American than an Armenian. My strong subjective position, which was more compelling force than my objective interests, was an *exceptional* aspect, which I didn't recognize as such, and I thought this was a general reality and not something extraordinary. I do not consider my strong attachment to my subjective beliefs wrong. What was condemnable, however, was my inability to understand that for others the deciding factor typically was objective, and "attachment" to Armenians and our struggle was only secondary and very limited. I couldn't realistically evaluate the political, ideological, and practical borders of my circle.

However, in another sense I was realistic. I knew that the only way to achieve the rights of the Armenian nation is armed struggle in Turkey. For me, everything was so simple and logical, that it was even mathematical.

Diasporan Armenians live outside Armenia because the genocide took place, and they were obliged to leave the country. Today, they can't go back because the Turkish government has a colonial, exploitative, chauvinist and genuinely fascist nature. Therefore, our nation should carry out an armed struggle over there, in order to achieve any tangible rights. And every Armenian patriot, including me of course, should go and participate in that struggle.

Yes, it was that simple for me. But also I was realistic enough to realize that before that, an armed propaganda process was needed. And to

personally participate in that, I had to gain more experience in the atmosphere of armed struggle, become more politicized, get closely acquainted with the Diaspora's communities that have important strategic positions (Lebanon, Iran, etc.), and eventually learn Armenian (as well as Turkish and Kurdish, which I'm still learning).

My Departure for Lebanon

When I took my last exam at the university (I was twenty years old, March 1978) I had already decided to leave the USA for a region close to my motherland. Firstly, I wanted to spend some time in Lebanon and Iran;¹⁰ to participate in the struggles of the communities over there, and in that way to benefit their struggles (against the Phalangists and the Shah) and familiarize myself with the situation, to make connections with good friends, and to learn Armenian.¹¹ After being in Lebanon for seven weeks and in Iran for two and one half months,¹² I decided not to continue my education (I had had the aim of getting a Ph.D. in Urartuan archaeology),¹³ but to return to Lebanon where, at least at that time, the struggle was the most active and help was needed most. During the first more than five months, I was very enthusiastic; however, politically, it was a process of maturity, and I had some very deeply felt convictions but at the same time I entertained some adventurous desires. I was naive enough to believe that some traditional leaders [leaders of traditional parties] would not prohibit (or that they might even help) pro-Armenian and positive plans (examples: to found a kolkhoz for foreign Armenian youth in Anjar and to increase the means of self defence in Bourdj Hammoud, etc.), which, in the final

10 Due to Lebanon and Iran being geographically closer to Armenia, Melkonian considered these two countries to have the most important tactical significance.

11 Until he went to Lebanon (when he was 20 years old), Monte Melkonian couldn't speak Armenian. At that age, and without attending any special courses, he learnt the language there, as the reader can see on the photograph plate of the original text of *A Self-Criticism*.

12 He has in mind the regions nearest to the fatherland, in other words Lebanon and Iran.

13 Monte Melkonian had been accepted as a student at Oxford University's Archaeology Department to continue his education. But thinking that fighting for the fatherland was of primary importance, he didn't take his place up.

analysis, they knew would not remain under their control.¹⁴ During that period, I also met all sorts of people, and I couldn't differentiate between the honest ones and the liars. This was especially the case in Lebanon, where many, many people had the habit of telling tall tales (and it was strange how many others accepted those tall tales, knowing that they were wholly or in part lies).

When I returned from Iran to Lebanon, a new process was about to open. During this process (which lasted a long time), my naiveté and adventurism slowly gave way to more clear-sightedness, political maturity and, finally, the beginning of more serious activity.

September 1978 to June 1979 was a period of ten months that was a time of great turmoil for Lebanese Armenians in general, and Armenians in Bourdj Hammoud in particular. At the end of September the shelling got stronger, and from October 1st to the 8th it became so intense that the region had great losses. During that same period the first battle between Armenian guards and the Phalangists took place. Rebuilding hadn't finished, when again, from May 9th to the 11th of 1979, battles took place against Phalangists. All these incidents and the atmosphere that was created caused a change of situation and political ideas. Although the general orientation of my personal political views was corrected long before these incidents, these experiences advanced my political education. The Armenian community in general started to see clearly that the Phalangists

14 As will be shown in this and subsequent pages, there was great tension between the Christian right-wing Phalange party that was the real government of east Beirut and the Armenian inhabitants of the same parts of the city, because of the former's monopolistic aims and their armed presence in the areas densely populated by Armenians. The real government in the overwhelmingly Armenian-inhabited Bourdj Hammoud was in the hands of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (Dashnaksoutiun). Here, as in other areas with large Armenian populations, was a defensive system, participated in by the Armenian youth, without political distinction. As Melkonian recalls in his work, the severe tension with the phalangists in October 1978, May 1979 and September 1979 resulted in severe pitched battles. Apart from the last occasion, (in September 1979) when he was outside Lebanon, Monte Melkonian spiritedly participated in the fighting in defence of the Armenian areas of Bourdj Hammoud, carrying out his armed guard duties without fail.

are really enemies of the community and our nation's liberation struggle. In this atmosphere, progressive ideas could spread quickly, and healthier discussions took place, and the more far-sighted individuals started to find each other and be organized group by group. I was acquainted with or directly participated in different groups. This way, I had the chance to make plans for activities with others, and to get into more serious discussions with them. At the same time, whilst teaching in an Armenian school¹⁵ I was trying to cultivate the political views of my students, preparing them for more mature discussions.

In addition, I participated also in other projects, including a theatre group¹⁶ and a short documentary film,¹⁷ the purpose of which was also propaganda.

At this time, although I worked very sincerely and enthusiastically in nearly all aspects, and although generally my political views were already mature enough compared to the prevalent political views of Lebanese Armenians (and Diasporan Armenians in general), I should say that I wasn't farsighted enough, and I needed much more experience and education. That is, it was a very important period of maturation for me.

During the following months which were filled with severe experiences, the process of maturation continued, however by that time I was confronted with serious contradictions and dangers.

I spent July 1979 in the USA. There, I learned that few people had a correct understanding of what was happening in Lebanon. Therefore, at every opportunity I started explaining what I saw and knew to my friends and other Armenians. Although my knowledge was still relatively incomplete, in general it gave an accurate picture of reality, especially about the battles in Naba'a¹⁸ (where the ARF regional leaders commanded the attack against Arab and Armenian progressive forces) but my explanations were worrying some ARF people in San Francisco (I spoke in their centre

¹⁵ Monte Melkonian was a teacher in the Beirut Armenian Protestant Torosian School in 1979-80.

¹⁶ In 1979 Monte Melkonian took part in the Bourdj Hammoud 78 play, staged by Zohrab Yakoubian.

¹⁷ In 1979 Monte Melkonian and his brother Markar prepared a documentary film titled "Lebanon".



Fall 1978. Members of the Armenian militia at Airplane Building in Bourdj Hammoud, Lebanon. Monte squatting on the far left.

one night). For me it was a principle that, like anyone else, I should have the right to freely explain what I knew. Until now, I am very much attached to that principle. But at that time, my talk was to be the first step to throw me into serious problems upon my return to Lebanon. On the other hand, my explanations reached a very small number of people, and had next to no effect (that is, it didn't change anyone's point of view, nor did it result in any assistance).

In the beginning of August I went back to Iran. The anti-Shah revolution had already succeeded; nevertheless, the reactionary, oppressive extremist Islamic forces did not yet have total control and a politically very free and progressive atmosphere had sway. Influenced by this, the Armenian community was also very active politically. Therefore, this time it was much easier to talk with progressive Armenian friends and gather and cultivate

¹⁸ This refers to the first stage of the Lebanese civil war in the summer of 1976, when the Nabaa area next to the Armenian area of Bourdj Hammoud was at that time under the actual control of the Lebanese left-wing and Palestinian forces and was unrestrainedly attacked by the Christian right-wing Phalange forces with ARF participation. Otherwise the Armenian political parties had adopted, in relation to different sides in the civil war, a policy of so-called positive neutrality.

plans. Unfortunately, I still didn't have enough political and organizational experience to be able to help them in an effective way. In any case, we did positive work; such as our participation in the work that the friends of *Land and Culture* had undertaken in Haftvan, and our attempt to show an active solidarity with the Kurdistan resistance, etc. Also, I was able to see other Armenian regions, which I hadn't seen in 1978. In addition, our general discussions and organizational attempts in different circles were positive. When, on September 11th to 13th 1979, Armenian-Phalangist conflicts once again took place in Bourdj Hammoud, I helped Armenian patriots to organize solidarity demonstrations for Lebanese Armenians. Although at the beginning, the preparations for the demonstrations had the admiration and even the participation of the ARF in Tehran, one day before the demonstrations, when ARF leaders in Lebanon contacted leaders in Tehran, they began to do everything to obstruct the demonstration. Knowing the guards in Bourdj Hammoud and the situation in Lebanon, I knew that they needed moral and political backing. I also knew that the mobilization of Iranian Armenians in this struggle would complement the process of their politicization; therefore, my role in this demonstration was explicit, and this was going to negatively effect my plans to live in Bourdj Hammoud.

Two days after the battle, I arrived in Bourdj Hammoud. The period from this date (16th September 1979) until my departure from Bourdj Hammoud (25th May 1980), was once again to be a very critical one. I continued my teaching, guard duty, and propaganda as before, and most of my time passed in this way. I also wrote a couple of articles and kept in touch with friends abroad. Since my childhood I was convinced of the necessity of armed struggle, and as early as 1975 when Armenian armed actions had begun, I thought "It's late, but at last it's started..." So, until 1980, these activities excited me a lot. Like many other Armenian patriots, I was so happy that "At least something is being done" and as a result, I wasn't as seriously looking at it as was needed; I wasn't discussing and criticizing these actions and their authors. It was already clear to everyone that the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA), instead of giving any serious consideration to its propaganda, was trying to hide its being a very small group, pretending that the victims of the battle of Bourdj Hammoud were its "members," and ASALA took credit for imaginary operations or the operations of others. It was impossible for any alert person not to notice the

cynical and disrespectful approach of ASALA to the patriotic feelings of our nation. In my case, in a sense this irresponsible emotional approach was worse, because I already had some intimation that ASALA lied a lot in its communiqués and pamphlets (examples: the lists and authors of operations, see: *A Critique of Armenian Armed Action from the early 1970s through to 1980*). But in a way, I wanted to convince myself that there were real Armenian revolutionaries behind these actions. Anyway, at the end of 1979 and beginning of 1980, when they started to write on the walls and distribute some pamphlets, I became more enthusiastic and unfortunately more blind. During my arguments with some Armenian patriots, I defended ASALA without the least amount of criticism of the mistakes that were evident.¹⁹ Other than the ASALA subject, in general the political discussions that I used to have with others were aimed in the right direction and had a positive influence on some people. I also worked to create a more mature way of thinking, and progressive ideas in my students.

During these months my personal safety became a more and more serious problem. My talks in the USA and the story of the demonstration in Iran were known to ARF leaders. Other than the rank and file party members and supporters, nearly all the party members started to be cautious and directly hostile towards me. This treatment had its violent and even dangerous aspects. For example, on February 12th 1980 they threatened reprisals if I visited Anjar²⁰ again, and on February 18 of that year, in my absence they broke down the door of my apartment, mixed up all my things and stole a large amount of my papers. Furthermore, on at least four occasions they prepared plans for my assassination. Because of this last development, I was obliged to leave Bourdj Hammoud on May 25, 1980. Only a couple of days before that, in West Beirut, I had already agreed to become a full "member" of ASALA and to dedicate my whole time to its

19 According to Monte Melkonian, ASALA deliberately wanted to kill innocent people, to satisfy the sickly complications of its sole leader, to create a lot of noise and to gain attention.

20 Anjar, 60km from Beirut, is an Armenian village near the Syrian border. In 1939, when the people of Musa Dagh were forced to evacuate their ancestral lands, they were brought there with French assistance. The only political party there is the ARF.

work. So, on the aforementioned day I left for West Beirut, where I began activities in ASALA.

I have drawn here only a sketchy picture of my life in Bourdj Hammoud. In reality, the years April 1978 to May 1979 were a very important period for my general experience and political activity. It was a period of maturation. Although during this period I was a "member" of several groups, my work was disorganized. Especially at the beginning, in the enthusiasm of my work there were some adventurous desires. My being inexperienced affected my personal security, and it is perhaps surprising that I stayed alive. All this, plus a lack of realism, some naiveté, and irresponsible points of view (in particular about ASALA and other subjects) were my main faults. But in general, despite its negative sides, this process was positive. This is well understood, both in a personal and a more general way. In a personal sense, I certainly needed a process of maturation and progress. I wouldn't have the experience needed to be more discerning and balanced in my future activity; I wouldn't have been closely acquainted with the situations regarding the Lebanese and Iranian communities (i.e., the two most important places of our struggle). Also, I wouldn't have met the progressive patriots of those communities. I cannot stress enough how important it was going to be for me and my work to be closely acquainted with these communities and the people I met there. Also, it was during this period that I learned Armenian and some other important languages, although I could have found other ways of learning Armenian. I guess everyone naturally and inevitably has his or her process of progress. Usually, this process lasts a lifetime, but has its turning points. The period mentioned was a turning point in my life, but it wasn't the only one. Here I should mention that in Lebanon and Iran some devoted and patriotic Armenian families, who didn't know me at the beginning at all, opened the doors of their houses to me and accepted me as one of the members of their families. They helped me in all ways not only to live there, but also to get acquainted with the communities and to participate in their lives. Without the help of these families I probably wouldn't have had the means to stay there, nor to have the same process of progress.

Broadly speaking, there were also positive factors. Because I was neither Lebanese Armenian nor Iranian Armenian, and accordingly was not raised in those countries, I didn't have their mentality and their same experience.

Also, I didn't know the languages they spoke, including Armenian, at least in the beginning. For these reasons, it was true that my activities in these communities would be more difficult in general, and in many ways more limited than of the local Armenian progressives. Even before I left the USA, some Armenian progressives and patriots had told me that "my place" was in the USA, and that's where I could be most productive—as an American Armenian. It's true that as a US-born Armenian, it would have been more convenient for me to work among the Armenians there than the Armenians born in foreign countries. I had grown up in the same conditions; I had more or less the same mentality (if not the same political ideas), I understood the situation well, etc. But the notion that an Armenian patriot (wherever he/she is born) can serve our main struggle (in Turkey), while staying away from the region close to our homeland, is very, very wrong. And because of this, my decision to leave the USA for Lebanon and Iran in 1978, I consider to be right. I also confirm that in the future, all Diasporan Armenians who want to directly participate in our national struggle should move towards our historic motherland. After all, I've never forgotten the American-Armenian community, and I think my activity in Lebanon, Iran and other places have, to a certain extent, been helpful for the progressive current and therefore positive for the struggle of our people, and this general influence (as minimal and modest as it has been) has left its mark on all the communities. This way, I think, by leaving the USA I've served progressive forces there more than I would have if I had stayed there.

Here I should admit that my activities from April 1978 to May 1980 have had only the slightest influence anywhere. The main reason for this was my being disorganized (that is, I worked as an individual), but of course my mistakes mentioned above also contributed. Other than that, it was a little difficult to gain the confidence of some Armenians in Iran and especially in Lebanon. These kinds of Armenians were either ignorant or they weren't that patriotic. That is, those who wanted to emigrate to the USA by all means considered me an idiot, and the others, not believing that my step could possibly have been taken for genuinely patriotic reasons, suspected that I was a spy. These kinds of people were not few. This way, my being a US citizen was an obstacle to my work among some strata, but these people were not the most honest or advanced. I can say that I had some positive (though not big) influence amongst more honest and clear-sighted people.

In particular, I was able to become acquainted with very important vanguard people and prepare the ground for our future work.

To conclude, April 1978 to May 1980 was a period of maturity and progress (education) for me. Throughout that period, I've made a lot of mistakes and carried out disorganized work, but after all, I think the results were more positive rather than negative. In any case, the results were limited, with the exception of my personal edification. Without this period I wouldn't have been prepared to work as well in the future.

NOTE: The question of the relations between Monte Melkonian and the ARF was and remains comparatively delicate and is not a simple one. It is difficult to give those complicated relations a definitive assessment. If they, or rather the attitude demonstrated by the ARF towards Melkonian at different times had to be summed up in one sentence, it could without doubt be that Monte Melkonian on the one hand was subjected to anathema and persecution by the ARF – persecution that at times had reached the point of real threats to his life – but on the other, he, at one decisive moment had, in the full sense of the word, succeeded in remaining alive thanks to the responsible attitude the ARF showed. When analyzing these relations, the ARF's contradictory attitudes towards Melkonian must be considered to be constituent parts of the whole. It's impossible to ignore one part and use the other for profit.

Simplifying the relationship question, it must first be established that for Monte Melkonian, the question of the ARF, as such, never existed. Going to Lebanon in April 1978 and living in Armenian-populated Bourdj Hammoud, he had the opportunity to integrate with the local situation, make observations and gradually form his own views. Monte fixed his position and his estimate of the ARF by his ideals and political convictions, his analysis of the ARF's activities on the ground and other similar facts. Based on those facts, he disagreed with the positions taken up by the ARF on a number of questions of principle and action (which is considered to be the most basic right within a community that is populist and an apologist for the doctrine of plurality of thought) and, with the right of a free man, presented and defended his personal views when necessary. But Monte never raised his dissident thoughts to the point of opposing the ARF for their own sake. Melkonian never sought to be opposed to the ARF, but simply tried to speak and act in accordance with his convictions.

But if, for Monte Melkonian, the ARF question didn't exist, the question of Monte gradually began to exist for the ARF. The indifferent and even indulgent attitude of the early days first changed to sensitivity then to

suspicion, the spreading of calumnies and false accusations and or conscious exploitation, surpassing open intolerance and persecution, to reach steps that threatened his life. The thing was that the Armenian Revolutionary Federation, during the time of the Lebanese civil war, had established itself as the absolute authority in every sphere in Bourdj Hammoud, the keep of the fortress of the Diaspora. As to the reasoning that that party has to justify its complete authority, that is its business. But the reality remains that the ARF in Bourdj Hammoud only wanted to have docile, obedient operatives and demanded complete submission to its decisions; it found even the smallest social-political activity intolerable and approached, with extreme suspicion and total intolerance, any national-political ideal that differed from its ideology and views and anyone who subscribed to them. It was under these circumstances that, for the ARF, Monte's question was born. Thanks to his particular character and the warmth of his communicative skills, Monte Melkonian became a popular figure in Bourdj Hammoud amazingly quickly thanks to his responsible participation and audacity in the work of self-defence, and with his open-mindedness, principled stance towards freedom of speech and movement, he gradually began to be noticed as a unique, active young Armenian. These two things (his sense of responsibility, open-minded conduct and popularity) began to into a serious concern for the ARF, and he was first subjected to light then serious persecution. Monte Melkonian became a heretic and was persecuted as such.

Melkonian swiftly recalls the different expressions of this persecution in this work, (informer and the spreading of calumnies that he was an agent and or exploiter, searching his house and taking his property, prevention of freedom of movement, various threats etc), culminating in steps that threatened his life. The ARF's intolerance had reached such a level that it had decided at all costs to rid itself of the annoyance called Monte Melkonian. Probably the ARF preferred to scare him so much that he would leave Lebanon and if that failed... Indeed, the persecution gradually became took on a more dangerous nature. Thus, someone opened fire behind him and a bullet passed by his temple. A young ARF fighting commander ordered a party member of lower rank, who was friends with Monte, to persuade the latter to go with him to a pre-determined place, then not get involved in what was to follow. The lower-ranking young party member didn't carry out the order. In April and May 1980 it was whispered that the ARF had issued his death sentence. On the 24 May 1980 more detailed news was received about some sort of a meeting (which included the young commander) in which,

according to the information received, a death sentence was issued against Monte. As to whether these pieces of news resembled the truth or not, they were deliberately spread so as to create an atmosphere of terror and force Monte to leave the region for ever... In any event, faced with this extremely tense and dangerous situation, there was nothing Monte Melkonian could do but to escape from Bourdj Hammoud and seek safety elsewhere. As Melkonian himself affirms in this work, he had already established a link with ASALA in May, and had accepted giving all his time to working for it. Therefore after the dangerous news of May 24 and harmful developments that preceded it, it remained for Melkonian to find refuge in the ASALA centre.

It is necessary and important to stress two points here. First, it can be definitely said that Monte's persecution by the ARF and his expulsion from that party indirectly assisted him in approaching ASALA. Secondly (and more importantly), Monte's decision to devote all his time to ASALA ABSOLUTELY did not mean that he was going to settle in that organisation's centre. This point is of the greatest importance, because it is as a result of settling in it that, as Melkonian explains in the following pages of this work, he became something like a prisoner and experienced difficulties in facing, in an appropriate way, the ills that he noticed inside the organization. Instead of which, despite giving all his time, if he was able to retain his freedom of movement and activity (which without doubt he would have been able to maintain, if he hadn't been persecuted by the ARF and forced to escape from Bourdj Hammoud) he assuredly would have been able to face future negative developments more easily.

After all this however, as was said at the beginning of this note, it is not possible to give a definitive assessment of the relations between Monte Melkonian and the ARF. The pointers given by Monte Melkonian and the contents of this note, although in accord with the truth, don't represent the complete picture and so remain incomplete. The other truth is that a few years after these events, Monte Melkonian was facing certain death, but he was saved this time by the ARF. (See note No. 47.)

ASALA Period

When I left Bourdj Hammoud on May 25, 1980 to devote all my time to ASALA, a completely new stage was about to start. I was very happy; although I would be away from the community, at least I would be able to be a part of an organized structure, work with other revolutionary comrades, share responsibilities, and eventually build something. I never expected that in reality ASALA would be only a small group, the "members" of which were never politicized, except for one or two people (neither were they militarily prepared), and that the "leader" was a dictator with a serious psychological imbalance.²¹ Neither did I know that this group did not have any political line. (For more explanations see: *ASALA: The Reality* and *A Critique of Armenian Armed Action from the 1970s to 1983*). Instead of increasing action, the result of my work was going to be limited in all ways, entering under the command of this sick dictator.

But again, the important portion of the fault of my entering in this situation was mine. My enthusiasm that at least "something was being done" in the field of armed propaganda created a psychological wall in me, which rendered me incapable of objectively and seriously considering suspicions and doubts as they arose. I quickly realized that ASALA filled its pamphlets and communiqués with lies. I knew enough to notice that ASALA, instead of doing everything it could to clarify the problems confronting our nation's struggle, which should be a priority of any revolutionary force, was striving to create *confusion* (exactly a Hitler-ite tactic). Also, it seemed strange to me that they hadn't published any political outline, and there was an absence of serious political content in their announcements. Other than that, during 1979 I had met the unbalanced dictator of ASALA prior to joining the group, and we had a nine-month acquaintanceship. Although until May 25, 1980 I didn't know that he was the "leader". At least after finding out I should have been able to assess ASALA on the basis of his intellectual abilities and political consciousness. In other words, it was my responsibility to put all the things I had found out, side by side, and in that way to form a clear idea about ASALA and on this

²¹ Writing of the executive or sole leader he has the person known to the outside world by the names Hagop Hagopian, Mihran Mihranian and other aliases, and within the organization the well known person named Mouhadjed.

basis to determine my relationship to it. Something else also played a role in securing my faith in ASALA at the time I joined. When I joined, I say that the people there had already been my old and sometimes very close friends. But even this did not have to engender an unrealistic image, if only I had a genuinely objective approach.

When I started working as an ASALA member, I entered open mindedly, and I was ready to do everything to build something. It was not that important to me how many people were members of ASALA or what logistic power it had. The important thing was what we were going to build afterwards. I was basically looking to the future. This approach was unbalanced in my case, because in any case I should have had severely discussed and criticized the "organization" and its past, to which I had the aim to serve with my life. In general, this kind of "good" and naive approach is wrong and irresponsible, but in this case it was worse, because this was a very peculiar case where there was a seriously unbalanced dictator who would cleverly and cynically take advantage of every little occasion to advance his personal position, his power and his crooked (distorted) plans. Therefore being this "good" meant a lack of a serious approach, and consequently it was an important mistake.

During the first two weeks I had enough experience to be more cautious and critical.²² I have explained how there was only one "leader" and how everything revolved around him and remained in his hand. Also this "leader" used to say absolutely unacceptable and disgraceful things openly. For example, he would preach how clever and advantageous it is to lie in propaganda and even to deceive the "members," so that they will do "what's necessary". Several times he has openly said that his purpose is not to liberate Armenia but only "make noise" (*tsayn hanel*). All this, plus a lot of similar talk, the picture of the skull and crossbones on the door, the plastic skeleton hanging from the pictures of the martyred boys, as well as his un-revolutionary way of speaking and anti-revolutionary procedures should have been enough to awaken even the dullest intellect to the real nature of

²² Several members of leader Hagopian's family lived near the place in Bourdj Hammoud where Monte Melkonian resided. Due to this Melkonian had got to know Hagopian. But until May 1980 he had no idea that he was the ASALA leader, or even a member of it.

ASALA. But I wanted to have a "positive" approach, and to build correctly by doing the right thing and not work against this or that. In addition, I was deceived about many things because I did not yet have enough evidence to prove that they were lies. And all the "members" (with whom I often was acquainted long before and therefore trusted) were adopting the dictator's lies and spreading them as reality. This atmosphere also was not useful. And above all of this, I had a kind of respect towards the dictator and all the 'members', because I thought that they, after all, were the people who undertook all those operations. I still did not know, until 1980, how few those operations were, and who participated in them, and also who did nothing.

Of course I was astonished and more often very uncomfortable seeing this whole thing, but I thought I would be able to change something toward the good, and I felt I should have patience, I should be tolerant, until I learned enough to be able to play a balancing role. But my mistake goes much further than this "positive patience." Despite all these bad signs, I still accepted the dictator as an important revolutionary friend. I 'respected' him and I conceded his right to continue to play a major role (although I wanted and tried to make other people also have influence and participate in making decisions). And when I would resist or argue against his point of view, he would get mad and show that in no way were we to tilt away from the direction that he wanted, and with this aspect again I would "tolerate" like an idiot.

It was under these circumstances that I passed the first few weeks. I was very enthusiastic and I wanted very much to make a stronger, more active and broader organization. In this mental and psychological situation, quarrels, small or large, were inevitable. Neither I nor the other good friends knew that the dictator was sufficiently unbalanced to start planning a conspiracy against those who argued with him, and even prepare plans to assassinate us. Because of this lack of information I was much more fearless to defend my positions, sometimes even with sharp arguments and even shouting. But in the end the problem would always be there without any changes having taken place.

At this point in time, the influx of politicized, patriotic new 'members' counter-balanced the dictator in ASALA. This was the patriotic side.



March 1982. From left to right: unidentified ASALA guard; Monte Melkonian; Alec Yenikomshian and Spanish journalist Jose Antonio Gurriaran who had been seriously injured by an ASALA bombing in 1980. Monte translating during an interview at a safe house in West Beirut.

However, I should clarify that this counter balance was in no way an organized current or a consciously united group that was specially working to be a counter balance, but it was the normal result of the influence of a new, frank and politicized number of patriots. And each of these patriots was still naive enough not to see nor understand the main danger of the aims of the dictator. Meanwhile, the dictator did not lose time separating the patriotic 'members' one by one, at the same time taking advantage of their work and presenting himself as the main source and the propulsive force of all the operations. Also he used to prepare the un-politicized 'members' as entirely faithful people, whom he would use to secure and broaden his personal rule. He understood that the politicized elements would increase his power if they stayed under his control, but would be dangerous if they escaped his control. Until finding a way to control each of them, he was ready to tease the honest patriots a little from the outset.

I did not understand this then, and it did not pass through my mind that it might turn out to be like this. Also I had not classified in my mind the fact that there was all manner of people in ASALA: the idiot dictator, people

who had a traditional party mentality, position seekers, adventurers, sincere but not politicized patriots, politicized patriots, entirely self-sacrificing people, and revolutionaries. It would have been very important to analyze the level of all and depending on that, better adjust my expectations. It took time until I could differentiate these things, and that lost time was precious.

From the first week there were a lot of things that bothered me and raised doubts in me, but with my positive approach, I continued to work like an idiot and a slave. Working like this would have been very good if I was in a healthy organization, but in this case much of the work would go in vain and others would be exploited and would strengthen the dictator. As much time passed I began to understand the hypocrisies, lies, and the serious inferiority complex of the dictator, but the strange thing was that I continued working with all my strength, even whilst being subjected to serious dangers. During the first three or four months I had already seen very disgusting things. It was a huge mistake that I continued my enthusiastic "positive" work without analysing what I'd seen and taking definitive action. Until this time I had understood that any open resistance or carelessness might cause my death. I was already like a captive since the dictator had confiscated my passport. I did not have the right to have money, I did not have the right to go out of the room without 'permission' and the room was in a building that was under the supervision of the guards of the dictator's collegial organizations. Even having correspondence with my family was forbidden without the 'permission' of the dictator, or without him reading it. Therefore I knew that under these conditions it would be easy to become a 'jackass martyr' without having changed anything in any way. I started being very careful. For as long as years, I avoided any critical talk with close friends and did not reveal that I had begun to be disgusted by certain things. Still, I had not determined what to do. I still thought that the dictator could play a role in the general work, if only others could limit his activity. It was not clear to me at all that he ought to be entirely neutralized. I was a 'newcomer' in ASALA, and he was the 'founder'. How could I take a step like that against him? Above all, I was still deceived into believing that the dictator's special connections with other organizations were indispensable for the Armenian revolutionary movement. That is, I still believed that his absence from the scene would bring more loss than

benefit to the larger movement. I was simply a victim of his clever lies; where he always exaggerated his role, his personal value, and so on.

There was another consideration during this period. Within a couple of months ASALA had become more active and therefore started having more influence on our nation. This was especially the case with reference to Lebanon and Iran. These were precisely the communities in which I had stayed and worked with the progressive patriots. Even when I had no connection with ASALA, many people thought I was a 'member'. After disappearing from Bourdj-Hammoud, then, more people believed that I was in ASALA. However, I as a person, or my activities in these communities, had very limited influence except for on some close friends, vanguard people and very honest and self sacrificing patriots by whom I was trusted. Therefore, guessing that I was an ASALA 'member', friends who were ready for this kind of struggle started feeling closer to ASALA and maybe that contributed to their insufficiently critical approach towards it, and the unclear and false faces. This way, my influence was another aspect for at least some people to trust ASALA and show admiration towards it. In Lebanon a lot of my old friends joined this 'organization', and in Iran the ASALA sympathizers' Marxist group was eventually connected with ASALA through me.

I should stress, that my influence was only one aspect, one contributing factor for other friends joining. Other people also had their influence; the armed actions played their role, and also the lies (although in the long term they were in fact only temporary and very negative) were a means of exercising influence. My influence to convince others or to bring them closer to ASALA had its limits and it did not have the same power to everyone, but it played a role, large or small, and I assume entire responsibility for it. At the end of the day, every individual is chiefly responsible for her or his deeds; nevertheless, it is natural that individuals are influenced by their circle of acquaintances and especially by trusted friends. I inadvertently betrayed this trust, because I was not sufficiently self-disciplined. That is, I should have put my enthusiasm and hopes aside and been more objective and clear-sighted, and I should have had a critical approach towards the things that were going on around me. If I had done that, I would have understood the reality very early and thus I would have been able to think about solutions sooner. I simply could not see, nor did I

want to believe, that there was that much deception and that the 'prime authority' was psychologically ill. In this way I inadvertently permitted him to exploit my efforts and my influence on some friends for his purposes instead of for my principles. Additionally, I did not speak enough with even the closest friends about the mistakes that were already obvious to me. It is true that there was such an atmosphere and we were often so 'busy' that there was not much chance to discuss matters, but I did not take enough advantage of the chances that there were. I could have opened up, at least to close friends, and maybe this way it would have been possible to sooner cultivate a conscious and serious approach among important comrades. Of course this would not have been easy without adding more security dangers with regard to the dictator's humiliating and grave conspiracies against the people who opposed him, but it had to be seriously attempted. With a passive approach, we only strengthened the dictator in our being exploited thus giving him the opportunity to secure and reinforce his own position.

Here I should explain that this part of my self criticism, although it is the most important, cannot be explained without creating serious security problems for other friends and for myself. In principle, it's exactly this period that I must explain in most detail and as a result of that make severe self criticism. But it would be an irresponsible step at present, when many friends still could be victims of our enemies. I already have explained this part in detail to some close and important comrades. I will still orally explain to many others the first chance I get. In reality this is the period when I made the biggest mistake of my life. This was the period when I registered the most grave mistakes. Here, I will give only a small and brief picture as well as conclusions about this extremely complicated and important period, although I want with all my heart to put forward the entire story.

Let me say briefly that because of my emotion and enthusiasm, my clear-sightedness suffered. I was tolerant in an extremely irresponsible way and I permitted myself to be used in this way, thereby strengthening the enemies of our nation. After living with the dictator for more than eight months, I understood that practical and final steps had to be taken to stop his activity. Despite having come to a correct and inevitable conclusion, I did not take one step. I had different reasons, but no one can justify my doing nothing. I had the wrong opinion that he was needed at least a little longer, until

some security problems were resolved. Other than that, I saw that my doubts about one particular problem were not right and the atmosphere was ameliorated somewhat by the presence of others. This created the false hope that everything would proceed well. This way I lied to myself and assumed a passive attitude towards this most important duty. I did not change this attitude until the end of June 1981, when other comrades came to this unavoidable conclusion too. That is, despite already having understood somewhat what had to be done, I nevertheless remained undecided until someone else confidentially explained to me the same thing. I had let a few months pass again without taking so much as one step, and during those months the dictator was strengthening his position and inflicting considerable damage on our struggle. I did not know and could not imagine what he could do, but I knew that he was unbalanced and dangerous. During my period of passivity he secretly ordered a bomb attack against the Armenian church in Paris (one dead). He sent Mardiros Jamgochian for an operation when he knew that he would probably be caught. He was preparing explosives against innocents in the name of *June 9* and so on. Also, other Armenian youths were still joining ASALA, directly or indirectly through my efforts. Therefore; by being passive in the exact problem of neutralizing the dictator, and on the other hand continuing further operations, I abdicated my duties to contain the destructive deeds to warrant the security of my friends, and not to allow my comrades to be deceived by the clever lies and brutal plans of the dictator. Each of these was a huge mistake. If I took active steps many lives might have been saved; at least one friend would not have gone to prison, and great political and organizational damage might have been averted.

In any case, after June 1981, despite my more categorical position, what needed to happen still did not happen. There were two major reasons for the failure. The first was that we had almost no chance of doing anything; and secondly, we saddled ourselves with unrealistic restrictions. Detailed explanations are needed about this, but let me only say here that we wanted to solve the problem of the dictator with a minimum of anguish. Our point of explication was that he was the only problem, so a solution should concern only him and no one else. We also wanted to put ASALA on a firm foundation after this 'solution' so that it could turn into a genuine revolutionary organization. After all we saw this solution only as the

beginning of the correct work and not as an aim in itself. Until this point, I think all our thoughts were right enough, but they became unrealistic because we did not understand that it was inevitable for the whole of ASALA (including us) to pay a price for the mistakes that the dictator had made for years. We were thinking that if the 'solution' remained secret, that price would not have to be paid. That is, not much anguish would be created in ASALA and it would be relatively easy to start our activities in the right direction. But the condition of this secret solution almost entirely was contradictory to our other conditions, that the solution should concern only the dictator. The real situation was going to prove that either we also had to take similar steps against some people around the dictator, or our step was going to be obvious. I also could not understand this reality at the outset. I (we) did not want this step to affect anyone else other than the major problem. At the same time I did not use my brain to understand that there simply could not be a secret solution. On the one hand I was absolutely convinced of what exactly presented a danger to our struggle and to lives of innocents, and on the other I was not able to discuss in the right way, the practicalities of how to neutralize this danger a day sooner. This was a big mistake and a big error.

After a few months passed, we started understanding that perhaps our conditions were a little too restrictive and we had to widen our step even if it was going to affect someone else. That is, we preferred to remain secret and rather than limiting the step to only the dictator, that way become obvious. Again I slowly, slowly became convinced of this plan. Also I think that from the outset our hunch about who had to be affected other than the dictator was incorrect. It was an extremely serious matter and we should have surmised who stood in line as the most obedient lackeys. In this respect also I was not as cautious as I should have been. (There was only one friend who was thinking clearly enough and was far-sighted enough to see these things). I still wanted very much to act, but I could see that I always found myself in the wrong conditions. Meanwhile, political, organizational and human losses mounted. Mardo²³ was sent by the dictator under such condition that his arrest would be probable; the brutal explosions of

23 Mardiros Jamgochian was born in 1958. On 9 June 1981 he killed the Turkish Consul General's secretary and was sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment.

*June 9*²⁴ had been carried out as well as *September France* and *Orly*.²⁵ The dictator had ordered the executions of some 'members' and an agreement had been signed with Italy, just to break it later. As time passed, our relations with other revolutionary organizations were getting worse. Faced with this situation, it was necessary to solve this problem for sure. Each day that I (we) delayed, was another opportunity for the dictator to ruin the struggle that had been built up over the course of years of sacrifice by devoted comrades. More than ever, we had to take a step soon. Therefore, I had to be prepared to adopt bitter and sad, but realistic conditions. Even we had to make calm, cold mathematical accounts.

Despite the fact I had to do everything to solve the problem throughout this period, I was continuing the same enthusiastic work to strengthen the 'positive' and constructive side of ASALA, when in June 1981 we decided to solve the problem, at the same time naively deciding always to continue the good work so that after the solution, the positive foundations would have been laid. I was absolutely convinced of this decision. At first I thought it would be possible to build a good thing, even if the dictator temporarily continued his activities and influence. I was thinking that we would have good results, which would counteract the bad operations of the dictator and would smooth the transition of the responsibilities after the 'solution'. Subsequent events proved that this was a naive, unrealizable and stupid idea. As long as the dictator ruled ASALA absolutely, whatever I would do as a "member" would serve the dictator exclusively. It is interesting that my laudatory activities and the activities of others only encouraged the dictator

24 After Mardiros Jamgochian's arrest, many bombs were exploded in various public places in Switzerland that killed one innocent citizen, injured many others and caused damage of great monetary value, all in the name of demanding his release. Those acts were committed in the name of the 'June 9th Group'.

25 The 'September France' and 'Orly' organizations were created like the 'June 9th Group'. Bombs were set off in public places (restaurants, cinemas, stores, the streets etc) and, outside France, against French interests (travel agencies, airlines, banks). All of these were in the name of attempting to force the release of ASALA fighters arrested in France. 'September France' wanted to free the four fighters who had been arrested after they captured the Turkish embassy in Paris on September 24, 1981. The 'Orly' group wanted to have Monte Melkonian, who had been arrested in November 1981 in Orly airport, freed.

to continue even his most extremely crooked, brutal activities. The laudatory operations created enthusiasm among patriots inside ASALA and outside, and they became a curtain to deceive people. The good works concealed the bad works. The works justified the existence of ASALA, and in that situation it effectively justified the dictator's rule. That is, the dictator continued to rule on everything and yet present himself as the source of all the good works. Thus, whatever we would do to strengthen the 'good side', in reality we were only strengthening our enemy and therefore also his cynical works. In a way, I was giving him more means (moral, propaganda and practical) to ruin our struggle, and to do exactly what I did not want. Also, because I was working very hard, my old and new friends who trusted me, were deceived more easily. That is, trusting me, they were thinking that because I was involved in those operations they were more or less good things. Therefore, in some way, I was betraying the trust of my friends, always thinking that "soon I will solve" the problem, and we'll put everything on the right path. Meanwhile, some friends were going to make extremely big sacrifices and some were even going to die in the destructive plans of the dictator. The activities of these friends of course were not only dependent on my trust, but to some extent, I should accept my responsibility and my fault. I consider these faults unforgivable, and I cannot find a way to explain or justify my feelings to the families of the victims of my mistakes. Moreover, in front of all Armenian patriots I feel myself responsible for damaging our struggle, because I was not able to be clear sighted and understand that the conditions put were not realistic and especially we were not able to "solve" the problem.

On the other hand, without diminishing my responsibility in any way, it is right that from June 1981 to May 1982 other conditions limited my and other comrades' abilities to do anything. In July 1981 the Israeli army attacked south Lebanon; in August very many people came,²⁶ in September I was staying outside of Beirut,²⁷ in October the dictator was outside of Lebanon, and in November I had already been arrested for the first time in

²⁶ ASALA members and active sympathizers from various countries gathered in Lebanon in August 1981 when a General Assembly was held.

²⁷ The ASALA camp was located far from Beirut, where Monte Melkonian remained for a long time. Hagopian generally stayed in Beirut.

France.²⁸ When I returned to Lebanon, more than ever I became something like a prisoner in ASALA. The dictator was availing himself of the excuse that I was already known, and the police were searching for me.²⁹ So for 'security' I had to stay in the 'office' and never move without his permission. But despite all of this, I think that I had to be ready to pay a dearer price to take the necessary measures.

In May 1982, I eventually was ready to pay that higher cost. Again I was late to come to the conclusion needed. Until then, the dictator succeeded to teach and train his blindest and least principled follower the means of how to lie and deceive the 'members', to ignore human life, and to advance his control. Thus, his position and freedom to do anything got stronger and meanwhile I was less and less able to take steps to oppose him. Also, the same faithful people were not innocent anymore, but conscious and willing to serve the anti-popular and counter-revolutionary works of the dictator. This meant that waiting longer would only cause more significant losses to our struggle and to lives of innocent people, and to finish the problem, the 'solution' should go beyond the dictator. This was correct, especially in the case of one loyal 'jackal',³⁰ but again, one more time I had difficulty seeing further. In any case, at the end of that month, I made an attempt to solve the problem even if the solution was going to concern one more person other than the 'jackals' of the dictator. On the other hand, the reality that I tried something like this (it failed only because of a very small error) raises the question of how I understood the sacrifices of myself and others.³¹ But considering how important it was to achieve a quick solution (after which

28 Monte Melkonian was arrested in Orly airport in Paris in November 1981 for carrying a false passport in the name of Dimitriu Georgiu.

29 After he was released and as soon as he had arrived in Lebanon, Monte Melkonian was forced by Hagop Hagopian to have an interview with the press, during which Hagopian revealed Dimitriu Georgiu's real identity. Until that time the French police, not being able to find any evidence about Georgiu, hadn't been able to identify him.

30 The word chakhhal in Turkish literally means jackal. It means, metaphorically, a docile, compliant operative.

31 If the attempt, which Melkonian refers to here, were to have succeeded, it would almost certainly have cost an innocent person his life; but it was never explained that it would also cost Melkonian his life or seriously injure him.

our most experienced and cautious comrades should have been able to continue the organizational political and military reconstruction of our activities), then it would be clear that this long term step would only be helpful for the efforts to build our organization, for the patriotic struggle of our nation, and for the defence of the lives of innocents. Therefore, although it's a little sad to respond to this I learned that very proper conditions can be created, when in practice the most principled approach can also be the calmest and most mathematical approach. If the problem had been solved at that time, the lives of innocent victims of the *Ankara Airport*,³² *Istanbul Bazaar*³³ and *Orly Airport*³⁴ attacks, as well as the numerous Armenian patriots in Iran and Iraq, would not have been lost.³⁵

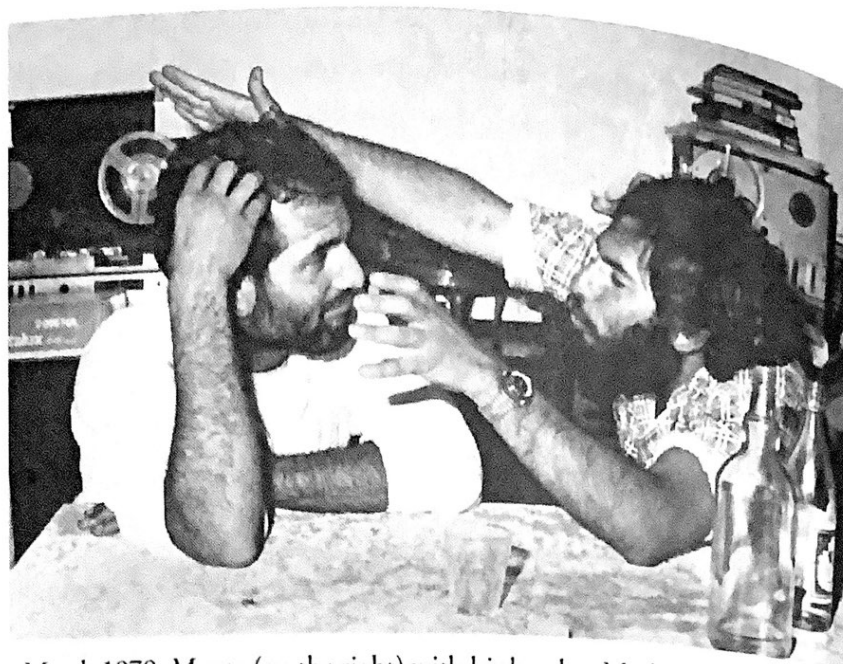
But after this failure, I came to a more correct conclusion, a conclusion to which I should have arrived at the very first time when I understood that the problem had to be solved. That is, I understood that I personally had to come face-to-face with the dictator and 'solve' the problem (in front of everyone, if necessary). Only this way was it possible to immediately stop the harmful works and open a way for new constructive processes. And why was it certain that I had to do it? Because, first of all, I was one of the very few people who understood that there had to be a 'solution' and secondly, because among these friends, only I was there with a family living in the

32 Zohrab Sarkisian and Levon Ekmekdjian carried out an armed attack on Ankara's Essenboga airport on 7 August 1982, resulting in the deaths of 10 people and injuring 46. Zohrab Sarkisian committed suicide; Levon Ekmekdjian was arrested and later hanged.

33 On 16 June 1983 Mgo Madarian carried out a suicide attack using a machine gun and grenades in the Istanbul market. This resulted in the deaths of two civilians and 27 others wounded.

34 On the 15 July 1983 a bag containing a bomb was put in front of the Turkish Airlines check-in desk at Orly airport, with the object of its being loaded on to a passenger aircraft and blowing it up. The bomb exploded prematurely in the waiting hall, killing eight civilians and injuring 61 others.

35 In reality, according to the list appearing in the book there were approximately 30 compatriots who were either directly shot in Lebanon and Iran, abducted and then shot, or had attempts made on their lives by ASALA on Hagop Hagopian's direct orders in the period 1985-1987. An important number of them were leaders and rank-and-file members of the ARF.



March 1979, Monte (on the right) with his brother Markar Melkonian in Bourdj Hammoud.

USA that would remain safe enough from revenge by any of the dictator's jackals. Also, if I 'solved' the problem alone, the other good and conscious comrades would have been able to pretend that they knew nothing, convincing everyone that I was a CIA agent (my being an American-Armenian would make this easy). This way, they were going to be able to take the lead of the movement in a most wise and non-disturbing way, that way expediting corrections and constructive works. After my failure in May, I eventually came to this correct conclusion. Before that, my aim to continuously serve our struggle my whole life had been an obstacle to understanding that I had to sacrifice my role in our struggle to carry out this extremely important work.

But very, very, very, unfortunately, after this conclusion, against our will, the conditions were to rapidly change disturbing the accomplishment of any 'solution'. I did not immediately carry any definite solution, because I thought we would at least have a few weeks to prepare everything so that I could at least stay alive. That is, I explained to the friends that we only had to prepare a way of escape for me, and then I would immediately do what was needed. I knew that after taking this step maybe I would never be able to get close to any Armenian. Indeed, because I would be searched by regular imperialist countries' police and by some Armenians, I knew that

maybe I would not be able to keep in touch with my family. That is, I was going to be searched as a 'terrorist' revolutionary on one side, and as a 'traitor' and 'agent' on the other side. In these conditions I was going to simply escape and go far, far away, to a place where there would not be a single Armenian and there I would continue my life as a simple foreigner. It is true that somewhere in my mind I was thinking that maybe after few years passed new conditions would be created which would make possible my return to the other friends and our struggle, and I knew that despite the fact my friends would pretend at the outset that I was a "traitor", later they would try to convince everyone that in reality I did the right thing, but at the same time I knew that it was more probable that by taking that step I would be obliged to stay far from Armenians my whole life (assuming, that is, that I survived with my life).

I came to this conclusion during the last days of May 1982, and the Israeli army started its attack on Lebanon only one week later. This attack turned Lebanon upside down, as well as us and our plans. Our conditions were entirely changed once more. There was a new obligatory, military atmosphere (situation) where the conditions did not allow some friends to see each other; the dictator's movements were changed, and the means of escape became very difficult. Once again, and more so this time, my delay to come to the right conclusion was going to cost a lot at the end of the day. That summer the dictator commanded the execution of Nshan³⁶ and Sarkis,³⁷ and other anti-Armenian assassinations which caused casualties. He himself killed anonymous innocent Arab citizens who were unfortunate enough to be passing by on the street. The massacre of Ankara airport had also occurred which was extremely damaging politically, in a human sense, and by the fact that it took Zohrab's and Levon's lives. The comrades in Canada and USA went to prison. Pierre³⁸ was martyred in France, etc. etc.

36 Nshan Dadourian, a blind, patriotic young man, who was abducted by ASALA in March 1982, accused of being a co-worker of an individual that Hagopian had personal questions with. He was shot dead on Hagopian's orders during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in July 1982.

37 Sarkis Kiulkhandjian, an ASALA member, alias Khoumeni, was shot in August 1982 on H. Hagopian's order. The latter hated him

Also that summer, beside Khachig H.,³⁹ the dictator secured Vicken⁴⁰ and Varoujan⁴¹ as his blind, loyal followers. Other than that, because of the weak political and organizational nature of ASALA the movement in Iran started to be dispersed (destroyed) and disappeared in an extremely rapid way. The progressive and revolutionary elements of the Diaspora (who in reality were the only "hope" for the struggle of the Diaspora) were facing an abyss. And my inability to think more quickly and to work had a big role in this process of destruction.

Here some clarifications are needed. First I should qualify myself: The main drawback of all the wrong operations and the process of the destruction of the movement was that those who directly made those illogical, inhumane, and counter-revolutionary plans, resulted in bringing forward the dictator and then the 'jackals'. Also everyone, who consciously or unconsciously worked beside them, backed or justified them, has an important fault. (Some people defend the mistakes of the past and continue the harmful lies and way of working of the dictator until now). As devoted, sincere and pure hearted as they were, again it is impossible not to accept that even friends like Zohrab and Levon (and later Mgo) had responsibilities for what they did. Saying this I do not have an intention to obscure their sacrifice or to darken their memory. No, that is impossible because by sacrificing their lives, they proved how attached they were to our struggle. If in the Diaspora the number of friends who had the same *practical* attachment amounted to 1% of those who speak of it, we would have had a huge influence. Here I only want to certify an objective matter (transaction); every person, in whatever condition he or she finds himself or

38 Pierre Giulumian, an ASALA fighter who on more than one occasion participated in acts against Turkish targets. Hagopian had ordered him to bomb crowded public places in Paris. He was killed when the detonator of a bomb he was preparing exploded in his hands.

39 Khachig Havarian, alias Abu Mahmoud, was Hagop Hagopian's faithful servant and right-hand man. He was killed during an internal eruption in July 1983.

40 Vicken Ayvazian, alias Jean Loulou, was Hagop Hagopian's faithful servant and right-hand man. He was killed during an internal eruption in July 1983.

41 Varoujan Garbidjian (Garabedian) was sentenced to life imprisonment for being responsible for the Orly airport bomb in July 1983.

herself, at least to a certain extent carries the responsibility of the works he or she has done. And above all these, my mistake adds up because whatever the conditions were; if I had been ready to be more realistic, think more quickly, and if I had devoted as much as the other comrades (that is to finalise the 'solution' even if I was sure that I would lose my life) I could have stopped all of the mistakes and harmful plans. Yes, if I sacrificed my life, the lives of others would have been saved as well as an important part of the movement and the process of its progress. But then I was convinced (and I am still convinced) that I would be able to serve my struggle and my nation more by living and continuing to work rather than carrying out an important but suicidal work. Perhaps in this particular case I was wrong. History will tell...

From approximately the beginning of Spring 1982, I (we) little by little understood that our decision in June 1981 to continue the 'positive' operations until the 'solution' was possible was wrong, and in many ways we were working against ourselves that way. From then on we started to take some small measures to slow the works and especially stop the bad works. We were working in such a way so that our efforts wouldn't be obvious; therefore, in general often they were not as obvious as they should have been. Therefore I still had faults in other works in the sense that I was not trying directly and more obviously to make them understand that their works were wrong. At least I had started to resist in indirect ways.

After the Israeli invasion beginning from September 1982, an absolutely new situation was created. Because of the increase in the numbers of 'jackals' the problem was more difficult and complicated and the geographical distance and position of the new 'centre' made extremely difficult even the face to face 'solution' that I wanted. Above this, the dictator used to travel for long periods and stay in distant countries. And I was forced to live isolated under the supervision of the 'jackals' and did not have any right to come out of the house.⁴²

42 After September 1982, Monte Melkonian was under house arrest on Hagop Hagopian's orders, under the immediate supervision of Khachig Havarian, Viken Ayvazian and other compliant operatives, far from the camp, in a neighbouring country.

This was a time of rapid decline for ASALA. The connections with all the serious non-Armenian revolutionary movements were broken, and instead strong connections were established with the most isolated movements.⁴³ The Armenian progressive movements of the Diaspora,⁴⁴ which until then generally were backing ASALA, started to object to the harmful and brutal tactics of the dictator. This way, instead of gaining popularity, ASALA was isolating itself from our nation. At the same time because of the abundant presence of the 'jackals', the dictator was free to accomplish his extremely harmful and counter-revolutionary plans more than ever.

In the face of these circumstances, and because of my inability to do anything about them, I started to feel psychological and physical effects. Despite the fact that I have a rather stable character, (only thanks to my nature was I able to continue my bluffing for two years in front of the dictator, this way at least securing my life and not raising doubts) in December 1982 the limit passed, and for the first time in my life I started moaning in my sleep. Not until the next day did my roommates inform me that I had been moaning, and that the moaning had lasted one hour. When I found out about this I became very worried that someone had understood something about my real ideas. Fortunately, however, they told me that it was not obvious what exactly I was saying, and in general I was moaning in English. In any case, this incident showed me that my psychological and physical health also had their limits and that if the problem was not solved I would simply one way or another become a victim without finishing my work.

However, after this small outburst I was sent to a mountainous region in Lebanon where I stayed for two months alone with only a few other comrades. Because of the snow and other reasons this meant that one more time I wouldn't be able to do anything, but at least it was an opportunity to rest a little bit. However, it was then that I was able to convince two other friends about the necessity of the 'solution'. This way our power became strengthened but we still had a lot of work before executing anything. At

⁴³ With the extreme and suspect Palestinian organisation led by Abu Nidal for example.

⁴⁴ During this time the Popular Movements of France, Great Britain, Canada and the United States cut their links with ASALA, not being in agreement with Hagopian's policies.

least we were able to prepare a rather serious plan, but we knew that even if it were successful it would take a few weeks or months and until then who knows what could have happened.

During this same period, seeing that it was not possible to do any good or constructive work, and we virtually did not have any influence on what was going on, we started in indirect and indistinct ways to resist against all the 'bad' plans as much as we could. By that time, our aim was to stop and defeat the harmful works from reaching their maximum. Also we were trying in indirect ways to make the minds of unconscious and new "members" work, and open their eyes so that they would not fall into these wrong works. In this sense we had some success, but in fact we were not able to register an effect on everyone. On June 16 1983, Mgo, deceived by the clever and emotional discussion of the dictator, carried out the disaster of the Istanbul bazaar, losing his life in the process. One month later, Varoujan Garbijan (one of the 'jackals') carried out the brutal Orly massacre by the command of the dictator. These two counter-revolutionary outrages (not to speak of the explosion in Paris on Feb. 1983, and so on) considerably harmed our struggle. Once more I had failed to quickly "solve" the problem so that these kinds of actions would finally cease. Despite the limitations of my situation, I tried to resist and defeat these kinds of operations, yet I am at fault for not having done more. I and every Armenian patriot had the duty to stop these kinds of operations and to save the revolutionary current of the Diaspora. And I had failed for years.

Despite facing these incidents, we had to keep our clear-sightedness (not that we were clear-sighted before that, especially considering our incorrect and unrealistic efforts to 'solve' the problem) and calmness, but one person did not wait. Because of his impatience, uncalculated steps were taken. First, he started to ignore our security measures. Then he started to put very short-sighted plans into motion and tried to convince others to get involved in these plans. And my next huge mistake would be related to this. This individual informed me about his plan, according to which the problem of the 'jackals' was going to be solved first, and then (according to his plan) the problem of the dictator could be solved more easily. I understood that it was a very, very dangerous plan and that it had very little possibility of succeeding in its final aim. At the same time, I knew that that person was already impatient (impatience which was pushed not only by the worries

about the benefits of our struggle, but he had his personal reasons too) and that he absolutely would ignore my opinion and even could act against me if I openly and negatively said "no". I knew that if I lost my influence on this person he could do more dangerous, crazy, and finally extremely fatal things, the results of which would be the final failure of our 'solution' and the death of all of us. I knew, too, that it would be a huge blow to the progressive and revolutionary movements of the Diaspora. For this reason, when a mediator came (Aram Vartanian)⁴⁵ to inform me about the plan, I didn't want to say an absolute "no." But I said that the plan could proceed only if it were entirely safe, well prepared, and well concealed. This was a big mistake. The impatient person took this answer as an absolute "yes" and concluded from that that he should convince the mediator more to carry out the plan. But in reality I had a little hope that by placing conditions on them they would see that the plan would not work and I would maintain the "stability" of the situation. But I was very wrong on this point. Now I understand that I should have sat with the mediator and laboriously explained why the plan was dangerous; why it was not smart, what our main aim was, what our priorities were, and so on. I should have convinced him to go and persuade the other impatient person too or somehow to put a stop to his plan. Here I should add that because for years I had failed to carry out a solution, some people, especially this impatient person, started to take my opinions lightly. They were thinking: "If he knew what to do, why hasn't he done anything by now?" My fault was all the greater, not merely because of my inaction, but also because I should have realized that this sort of talk amounted more to an excuse for impetuous actions than a criticism of me.

In any case, the result was that Vicken and Khatchig (the two main 'jackals' who had committed numerous crimes against our people and our struggle) were killed openly without preparing any decent security plan and at such a time when it was impossible to approach the dictator. So, the news spread fast enough that the only salvation was escape. Personally, I especially tried (I and those people who were against the dictator) to cultivate an

⁴⁵ Aram Vartanian, a Jordanian Armenian youth, refusing to serve in a foreign army, had come to join the Armenian army and to fight for his fatherland. He was shot dead by Hagop Hagopian in August 1983, after being subjected to one month of torture for being against Hagopian and on Monte Melkonian's side.

escape plan, but inter-Palestinian battles and our entirely unprepared situation made it very difficult. Our friends were all dispersed, some finding personal means to escape whilst others remained stranded. Tavit and I, a little miraculously, and with the help of many others, were able to reach safety;⁴⁶ however, Karlen and Aram⁴⁷ (two of our most precious comrades) were caught by the dictator and executed after one month of torture.

These two events revealed to the public the two contradictory currents inside ASALA (one genuinely patriotic and the other dictatorial and anti-people). Starting from then, I (and other comrades) was able to present my principles, real ideas and explain the reality. My bluffing silence came to an end. With this also, my responsibility for the subsequent lies, delusion and

⁴⁶ Just as in the case of many delicate questions that are to be found in this work, so connected with his safe emergence from the tumultuous events of July 1983, and starting from the awareness of the responsibility he demonstrated towards various individuals and groups for their safety, the author shows understandable caution and keeps the truth hidden. After nearly three decades since the events recalled however, and especially as certain realities have stopped being secrets for many people, it may be considered that the time has come in this regard to openly talk about them. Thus, after the internal feuding that took place within ASALA in July 1983, Monte Melkonian lost his link with his remaining friends. After spending several extremely dangerous days wandering about without any sort of refuge, he succeeded in contacting the ARF and asking the party for a safe place to stay. The ARF agreed and for a time provided Monte with one as well as vital supplies. By a strange twist of fate, Monte Melkonian, who in May 1980, escaping from the ARF, had found protection with ASALA, three years later, giving ASALA the slip, found refuge with the ARF. In the fateful days of July 1983 he owed his survival to the friendly attitude shown towards him by the ARF. Despite the fact of his being severely persecuted in the past by the ARF and the political differences he had with that party, Monte Melkonian always felt grateful for the tremendous help given him during those days.

⁴⁷ Karlen Ananian, from the Iranian ASALA sympathiser movement. With the thought of attempting to settle the disputes in the movement through the mother organization, he went to Lebanon overland, walking part of the way. He soon became aware of the ASALA reality. Despite the fact that he never participated in the internal fighting of July 1983, he was arrested by Hagopian as a Monte Melkonian supporter and, after being tortured for a month, was shot dead with Aram Vartanian by Hagopian.

dissembling ended too. Here it should be confirmed in a short, concise and brief way, how serious and heavy my fault and responsibility were in the harmful works coming before that.

During the first eight months of my entry into ASALA I had a very weak and naive attitude, and I continuously yielded fundamental political, organizational, and even human principles. Beside my compromises I was working like a slave to strengthen the 'positive' side, without foreseeing that the dictator would exploit this 'positive' side to strengthen more his personal rule and to make his lies and cheating more convincing. In so doing I contributed to empowering the dictator and consequently to the harmful activities. Moreover, once I finally understood that a 'solution' was needed, again I failed in my duty by putting unrealistic conditions on myself and not adopting the appropriate approach. I continued this unrealistic and wrong approach for two years and I always failed. If at the end I was able to at least obstruct some bad operations (for a very long time I was continuing to work with all my strength to build the "positive" side) in this way I would be erecting a curtain of deception to conceal the brutal operations of the dictator. Also my presence (especially the "announcements" prepared and enforced by the dictator) was used as a means of cheating not only the communities generally, but also my closest friends. Despite being cautious to all of this, I retained my silence, thinking that I would be able to 'solve' the problem with the unrealistic conditions that I'd accepted. And during all these months and years the harmful works were getting worse; more people were being deceived, many of our best and most precious friends were dying, others were being imprisoned, innocents were being killed and injured, senseless inter-Armenian wrangles were increasing, the progressive and revolutionary movements of the Diaspora were sustaining big political losses, our connections with foreign revolutionary movements were being annihilated, and generally the already rare revolutionary potential of the Diaspora was being wasted and was assimilating senselessly, being neutralized and edging toward the abyss. I know very well that this was not only my fault, that in the first place the dictator was to blame and that there were many others who were at fault too (some of them much more than me); nevertheless, I still consider my fault inexcusable and unacceptable. It is true that I was against all these things, but I failed in practice to bring my point of view to a tangible result in relation to the 'solutions'. For a

revolutionary person this is one of the worst mistakes. Here I do not want to speak about those who in a cynical way agreed with the dictator and consciously helped him; neither about those who after knowing about what the dictator was, escaped from everything, from all the duties, or continued to accept "some parts" of him. I won't speak about those who until today continue with the dictator's lies, cheating, dissembling tactics and responsible "politics." No. This is another subject, one that in its turn will be clarified and about which we will find solutions... this is my self-criticism, not others'. I can only conclude that against my "good" intentions; by my failures I betrayed our struggle, our nation, our homeland and many of my closest comrades. ASALA turned into something much worse and more poisonous than a mafia because mafias operate in the name of money, but ASALA pursued its brutal, anti-Armenian and counter-revolutionary aims in the name of the Armenian people, Armenia and our struggle. Although it happened against my will, I became the whore of the dictator in this work.

Therefore, there is a very heavy fault on my shoulders. I am guilty, and if guilty people should be punished then there won't be severe enough punishment for me. I am even sincerely ready for a death penalty, but on the condition that the person punishing me, the person executing me, should be someone who has tried as much as I to solve problems, to struggle, and has made less mistakes than I have done.

* * *

After the announcement of the split a new path was opened in front of me. Moreover, already on principle I was entirely free to speak and work as I wanted. Very unfortunately, the unprepared escape following those incorrect and impatient events forced me to live in extremely secret conditions. At precisely that time when finally I was free from the rule of the dictator, my living conditions demanded such a severe security that practically not only was I not free to move but I nearly could not keep in touch with anyone, even with my closest friends. But after the unforeseen and impetuous steps, it was already a big accomplishment to so much as have stayed alive. At any rate, I started to do what I could in my new conditions, basically I was writing. The important parts of my writings were about the realities of the past, about the mistakes and their discussions

(criticism), although I started to write new things too the purpose and aim of which was to create new activities and a new movement. I had been so late to write these things or to expose them to the public that I therefore had to write in conditions where the means of communication were not safe and only later was I going to be sure that there was no need to write about certain things in given conditions. Also, I should say that my presence presented a serious danger to the people helping me and it was going to be a big sacrifice for them. Above this, I made important mistakes in my behaviour. I can only thank these people and apologize. I will try to counter balance my mistakes by my future activities.

From the end of 1984 until the date I was arrested (28 November, 1985)⁴⁸ I had the most favourable conditions for free activities since May 1980 when I joined ASALA. It was an opportunity for me to put the head stone of a new structure and to give form to the work of different elements. In reality my obligations were numerous and multifarious. Still the 'solution' of the dictator had the highest priority. Other than that there were a lot of other works that I had to arrange and try to do one by one, without having one operation oppose the other. At the beginning I saw some success, but later the process started to slow. This slowness had its different reasons, most of them outside of my control. But in one very important and elementary way, I made a mistake. When I went to France, I had the wrong idea that its possible, even necessary that all the progressive movements of the Diaspora groups and individuals should unite in one organization with one political outline, an outline which of course for me had to be revolutionary. Again, I was stupid, as if I had not learned anything from my experience of those years and from the situation of the Diaspora. I had a very naive and idealistic approach which did not correspond with the reality. It was interesting for me that the other friends were generally surprised that I was suggesting all of us continue our activities in the structure of one organization. It was as if they knew that something like that could not happen, and they did not expect such a proposal from me. And I was trying to change this right opinion by arguing that the Diasporan progressive

⁴⁸ Monte Melkonian was arrested for the second time in Paris on 28 November 1985, accused of having a false passport, having explosive materials and working with criminals.

forces were already few and we must unite in one organization and only in that way would we be able to be stronger. As if I had forgotten that the different conditions of the Diaspora makes impossible such an idealistic thing (for better explanation see *Organizational Questions for the Diaspora: Long Term Organizational Perspectives for the Armenian Revolutionary Vanguard*⁴⁹ and other writings about this subject.) And pushing forward this point of view could only create problems and it did create problems. Instead of pushing forward the politics of creating and gathering around a revolutionary power, I allowed just the opposite to happen: that is the revolutionary vanguard power would be one of its arms, thereby subjecting it to a non-revolutionary outline and to the decisions of non-revolutionary elements who are far from the main field of our struggle. This way, instead of agreeing to help each other we had serious quarrels and conflict. The final result was that more than ever the trust between different elements decreased. If I established my organizational approach on the situation in Turkey and our struggle, I would never have suggested the unification of all the elements into one organization. And this despite our numerical weakness, because it was simply something that was impossible. Elements that are in different conditions, and elements that have different (often very different) political approaches cannot be in one organization, especially in such an organization which will carry on our armed national struggle. Therefore, instead of carrying through this unrealistic suggestion, I had to realize the particulars of each element ("structure") and find a way so that each of them can keep its freedom in a wider and general front (see provisional draft of the political line of APLM). The main purpose and the priority of this front had to be the creation and backing of the armed patriotic struggle, and the role of each element had to be decided, depending upon its situation etc. Therefore, there also I made an important mistake which was going to have its negative influence on the unity of different elements. Without diminishing my faults, I should add that others also bear significant blame for these bad results when taking into consideration their faults and their inadequate political approaches and their attitude towards organizational matters.

⁴⁹ *The Right to Struggle: Selected Writings of Monte Melkonian on the Armenian National Question*, p. 123



December 1990. Monte and Seta in front of Sayat Nova's statue on Lenin (now Mashdots) Prospect in Yerevan, Armenia.

After this I was able to do very little during my free time. There still was readiness for co-operation, but the means needed were not being taken advantage of. But this problem existed long before the arguments, people were giving priority to these local benefits (often only short-term benefits) instead of benefits for the creation of a vanguard power for armed struggle. I only made this muddy approach muddier with my point of view of creating one organization. Therefore, until my arrest I was doing what I could to carry on with different plans, but I did not see any important result. I gave my testimony for Levon,⁵⁰ but later this was going to be qualified worthless too, and at the same time by taking that step my being in France was going to be obvious. Other than that I was able to

finish a few writings. Therefore, generally I did not take sufficient advantage of my time.

There were several reasons for my arrest. First, by giving my testimony the French police found out about my being in the country.⁵¹ This happened at a time when (as I already wrote) I had access to very insufficient resources. I found myself therefore, in a vulnerable position. Beyond this, I made a big mistake by carelessly using the telephone. It was this that provided the final opportunity for the police. Therefore, my arrest was the result of different

⁵⁰ Levon Minasian, an active member of the Armenian National Movement in France, one of the founders of the radio station in Marseilles. He was arrested in 1984, concerning which Monte Melkonian gave evidence.

⁵¹ On 28 October 1985 Monte Melkonian gave evidence for Levon Minasian to the latter's lawyer, the result of which was revealing his being in France. On 28 November 1985 Monte Melkonian was arrested by the French secret service.

reasons but the fatal and last mistake was mine. Here also I deserve very severe criticism, because the 'solution' for the dictator and many other operations were dependent on me and the smallest security weakness cannot be justified in any way. My arrest could only have a big negative influence on the whole movement, and in fact this is what happened.

From 28 November, 1985 until 5 February 1989, I was imprisoned by the French authorities. In reality, my conditions in the prison were bad enough. Not only the food, dirtiness, poor medical attention and general health conditions, they were bad (especially in Fresnes) but also the government added many, many kinds of pressures. At certain times (altogether approximately two months) I was kept in a total isolation cell, I was subjected to an extremely severe letter censorship⁵² and then to an arbitrary prohibition measure, except one person all the non-familial visitor were prohibited and even it was forbidden to that one person for five months.⁵³ Every day my cell was being searched and often during these searches they would throw my things (even the sheets) on the floor. Sometimes they'd take my papers; often they would search my body in the lowest and most brutal ways, receiving papers became prohibited despite the fact that according to the French law I had the absolute right to receive them, some prison guards used special cynical measures against me, my medical needs were being ignored, the directors of the prison made the most meaningless disguise to imprison me in cold, dirty (often without a toilet) waiting cells for long hours, as if they wanted me 'present' if they needed to speak with me. In the same way, they made every kind of pretext to disturb my hours in the yard. The police (DST), ignoring French laws, stole many of my things and they are today illegally keeping them until now. They set my judicial dossier in all ways against me even using lies and false 'facts'; they postponed my trial as much as they could, they conducted a fictive trial with a sentence decided ahead of time, they used my imprisonment as a disguise to question numerous Armenians and generally to spread horror in the

52 Monte Melkonian was forbidden to write or receive letters in Armenian. Armenian books etc were also forbidden.

53 During his years of imprisonment, the only visitor permitted to visit Monte Melkonian was Valerie-Asdghig Kouyoumdjian, a member of the Armenian Political Prisoners' Defence Committee.

Armenian community. They gave me an extremely heavy sentence comparable to my "fault", and even after this sentence was finished they kept me imprisoned more than three and a half months longer than the finishing date (and around one and a half years more than the freedom needed) etc.⁵⁴ Despite all these, I think, considering the conditions that I did not take bad advantage of this difficult period. I wrote different writings which I think have been helpful to put the organizational questions of the Diaspora on more clear-sighted foundations; to correct the mistakes that I'd made, to put the works of the Diaspora on a more correct theoretical basis, as well as to cultivate a more healthy approach. Of course I know that until now the influence of my writings has remained very limited, but I could not do much more in prison. Also, I used to read in prison and I got acquainted with numerous nations' revolutionaries. That way, I educated and participated in important exchanges of ideas. I used to do sparks every day for hours, that way staying very healthy but because of the weak light my eyes got weak. Other than that, the experience of prison in itself was an important experience. Also, it strengthens my opposition to the false 'democracy' and 'human rights' of France. I participated in certain prisoner movements, and at any opportunity I tried to carry on political-analytic discussions with fellow prisoners. And finally, while in prison I did my best to keep in touch and correspond with Armenian progressive patriots. But it seems it was possible to do more in all these fields.

My address to the court could have been much better too. Since the verdict was decided in advance of the trial I could not have said anything that would have lightened my sentence, and in reality that wasn't my aim. But my trial had only as much worth as it was going to serve the progress and propaganda of our struggle. In this sense the speech I had prepared was a little weak and I should have nearly ignored my dossier and spoke only about our struggle. Also, I could have responded to the questions of the judge (whose extreme stupidity and idiocy astonished me) in a stronger

⁵⁴ Monte Melkonian was sentenced to six years incarceration, of which two were suspended. As he was a foreign national and was forbidden to enter France during his lifetime, according to French law he had to serve half his time, in other words two years with three months remission for each year. If this law had been obeyed, Monte Melkonian would have been held in prison for 18 months.

political way, citing the hostile attitude of the French government towards our struggle and our nation as well as its imperialistic and colonial attitude towards various other nations, along with its oppression of its own nation. I had many opportunities to do better.

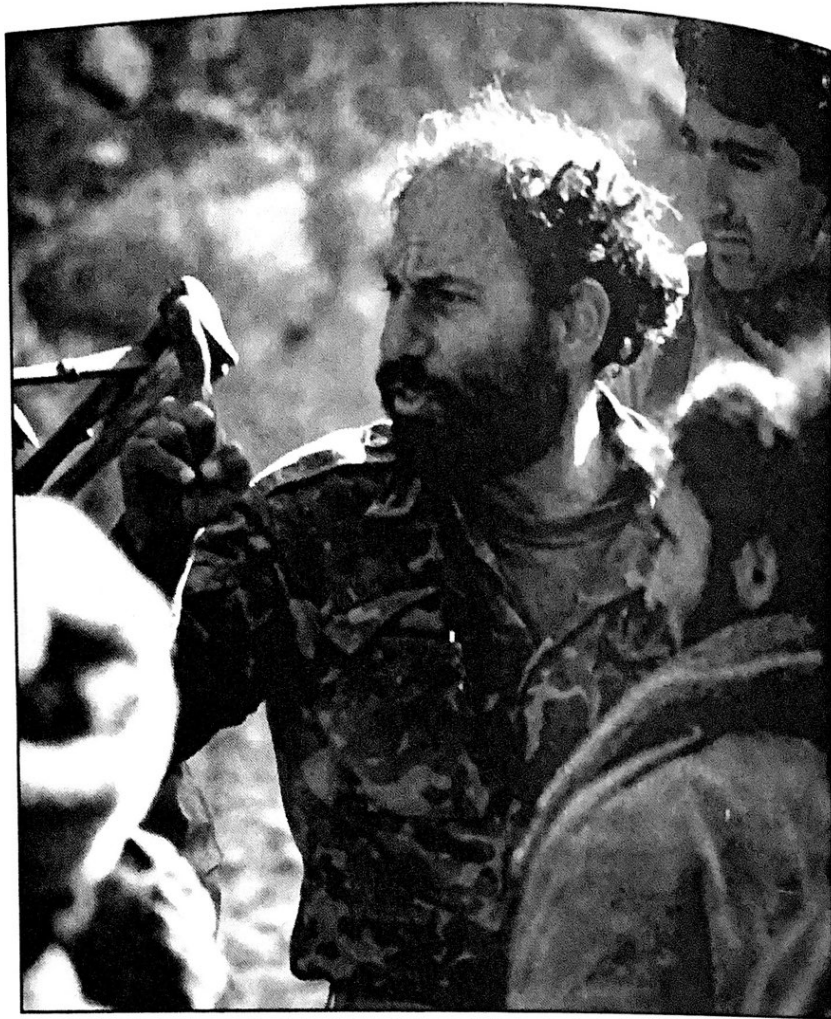
After my release from prison, again my living and working conditions have been difficult.⁵⁵ After being out for nearly one year, I can say that there has been very little progress and this much is not enough at all. Once again I feel that I could have done more. But I know that under the conditions I found myself I could not gain any great result. I have tried so much and I'll still try especially with the new progress of Artsakh and Soviet Armenia. More than ever there is the need of a serious revolutionary power in the Diaspora. I will try to learn from my mistakes from now on, and move forward.

Meanwhile, I hope, that my self-criticism (which remained very brief and general and the quality of which is not very high) will encourage all our comrades to open a process of self criticism, because without making our past clear and looking at it with critical eyes and without explaining it to the nation in a very modest way, it will be very difficult to make any step forward.

Monte Melkonian
22 March, 1990
Budapest, Hungary⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Monte Melkonian was freed on 5 February 1989 and sent to South Yemen.

⁵⁶ After living in Eastern Europe in very expensive circumstances for 21 months, Monte Melkonian arrived in Yerevan on 6 October 1990.



Monte Melkonian in Kelbajar, April 1993



Monte Melkonian, 1991

Monte Melkonian was an Armenian born in Visalia, California. He became a famous military commander in the Nagorno-Karabagh war in the 1990s, and is revered in his homeland where he was killed in action in 1993. In the 1970s and 1980s he was involved defending Armenian positions in the Lebanese Civil War and became a member of ASALA (the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia). As a member of the latter organisation, he took part in the assassinations of several Turkish diplomats and was arrested for possession of falsified papers and carrying an illegal handgun. He was sent to prison in France for six years. On his release from prison in 1989 he travelled to Armenia to participate in the struggle against Azerjaiban over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabagh.

A Self-Criticism focuses on Melkonian's secretive participation in armed struggle between 1975-1990. Sometimes falling into ideological jargon, his comments are forthright and give invaluable insights into one of the most secretive and deadly "terrorist" organisations of the 1970s. Melkonian's own integrity comes to the fore in these accounts and *A Self-Criticism* allows us to unravel some of the myths and realities surrounding what became known as the Armenian armed struggle of the 1970s. The number of operatives was smaller than one might have expected, and the rank-and-file much more ideologically driven and dedicated to broader struggles against western world imperialism. Melkonian exposes ASALA as a highly rigid organisation, even a dysfunctional one.

One does not have to endorse or oppose Melkonian's words but there is value in listening to his views. His self-criticism is the sort of key text that history is made up of and, as such, it is bound to lead to much debate and controversy. In the end, Melkonian will be best known for his victories in the field of battle in Nagorno-Karabagh, but his earlier life is just as interesting and worthy of attention.

Cover photo: Monte Melkonian, Bourdj Hamoud, Lebanon, 1978



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