HAYASTAN AND CHARENTZ

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Two things sent me to Hayastan in the Spring of 1935 when I was twenty-six years old: a writer's restlessness, and a son's need to see his father's birthplace.

I took off, however, for a much simpler reason: I could afford to do so. By writing, by the sweat of my brow, I had at last earned both money enough to pay my way and the right to move about as I might see fit.

I had always found too many things wrong in the world, and too much of man's nature mean, and too much of his life meaningless, not to be restless.

And I had always been unimpressed by anybody I had ever met, although I had found many people amusing or kindly. The kindly man was generally a weak man, though, and the amusing man was almost invariably clever, or crooked, or both.

In a way I suppose it was just as well that my father was dead, for it is not unlikely that I would have found fault with him, too; but since he was dead, I dwelt in thought on his good qualities, and paid no attention to his bad ones; his inability to prosper in the world, to get along among commonplace men on their own terms, to take the world with a grain of salt, and to make a joke of it.

In my boyhood and early manhood my father was simply a good man, dead at the age of thirty-seven.

Nobody ever had a critical word to say of him, so that I myself in asking questions about his life and work tried to provoke criticism. In this I was unsuccessful. The worst that anybody was willing to say of my father was that he was too good for this world. I accepted this theory with simultaneous admiration and disbelief, but I made up my mind to go back where he had come from as soon as possible.

My chance came at last after my first book had been published.

I took a train from San Francisco to New York, and a ship from New York to Europe.

I was not unaware that in reaching Soviet Armenia I would not be reaching my father's Armenia, or his city, Bitlis. It was enough at that time to reach the general vicinity of my father's birthplace, and to be in a nation named Armenia, inhabited by Armenians.

On my way south from Kiev to Kharkhov to Rostov to Ordzonekidze to Tiflis to Erivan a great expectancy filled my heart, as well as a great sorrow, as if I were on my way to the place where all of my family, and my father, had tried very hard and had failed; his failure driving him to America at last, where, if anything, he became more homeless than ever.

As the train moved south, more and more Armenians came abroad. Just seeing and hearing them gave me great pleasure, but the greatest pleasure of all was in sitting with a family, or with three or four young men, with more arriving to join the talk and laughter.

Only one Armenian on the train was a political man. He was a very old and famous economic philosopher who had taught at various universities and had written books, but even this quiet-spoken man was

not zealous about the political theories he had studied. He was a man of culture, wit, and an air of worldliness which seemed to suggest that while it was expedient for him to investigate economic theories, it would be a mistake to believe that he cared more for one order of them than for another. He neither criticised nor praised the economic and political systems of Russia or of America.

I had to wait for a boy of eleven in the lobby of the New Erivan Hotel to point out to me the terrible flaws of the American economic and political system. I have frequently wondered about this boy. By now it is not unlikely that he is one of the great men of Soviet Armenia, or perhaps even of Soviet Russia. I did not find him at all offensive, although as a general rule excessively bright boys tend to annoy and irritate me. As a joke I asked him if he could play the violin and was delighted when he told me he had no time for such frivolity. My laughter did not move him to so much as a smile. He simply remarked that Americans were forever laughing because of the contradictory nature of their economic and political system, and their own ignorance of proper procedure. I finally told him quite warmly to go away.

Several hours after I reached Erivan I took a chauffeur-driven car to Etchmiadzin where I met an old man who carried an old musket. He said he was the guard of the ruins of the nearby church called, I believe, Zvartnotz Vank. We walked among the ruins and came to an apricot tree which the old man shook, whereupon half a dozen small apricots fell to the grass beneath the tree. We picked these up and ate them, and he remarked that the apricots were small this year. Last year, he said, they were small, too, but not as small as they were this year. When we came to the open plains beyond the ruins I said suddenly, "Where is Bitlis?"

The old man looked at me, and I saw laughter come into his eyes.

"Your family is from Bitlis? Is that it?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

To the right was Ararat. The old man turned a little to the left and looked far out on the golden grass of the rolling plains. He stiffened his right arm at his side, then lifted it slowly as if it were a mechanical device designed specifically for the purpose of indicating the way to Bitlis. Now, he leveled his vision along the length of his arm, as if his arm were a rifle.

"Bitlis," he said. "Straight ahead is Bitlis. If you walk six days and six nights you will reach Bitlis. Walk, then."

I burst into laughter, for he had performed for my amusement as well as for his own, and he himself chuckled softly.

One frequently hears of somebody or other that he is a character out of a book. I will not say such a thing of the old man, however. He was a man out of the earth and life of Armenia, an unschooled peasant whose whole life had been difficult, but the first thing he did was to shake the apricot tree in order to share with me, a stranger, the little that he had.

I stayed in Erivan six or seven days, and then it was time to continue my travels: to Tiflis, to Batoum, by ship to Sevastopol on the Black Sea, and from there by train to Moscow.

A day or two after my arrival in Moscow I was taken by a young woman guide of the Intourist to pay my respects to Charentz who occupied a suite of rooms with a balcony at the best hotel in town. My own hotel, the New Moscow, was a little west of Red Square, past St. Basil's and the Moscow River. East of Red Square, in the heart of town, was the hotel where Charentz was living at that time. The guide took me up in the elevator to the third or fourth floor and together we

walked down a corridor and stopped at an open door. From somewhere inside Charentz appeared quickly, smiling, and he and I shook hands and spoke in Armenian. He then spoke in Russian to the young woman, and she went off, saying in English that she would leave us alone and return in an hour or so.

It was late afternoon of a day in June in 1935, and ever since Charentz has been in my thoughts. I have wanted to write about him, but I have not done so for several reasons. First, because my writing might be misunderstood and thereby bring him embarrassment, anxiety, personal difficulty, or even misfortune. I could not have such a possibility on my conscience. I could only pray from year to year that, wherever he happened to be, his fate and fortune might not be too much for him. I felt deeply grateful that I had met him at all, and while he himself never urged me not to write about him, or about Soviet Armenia or Soviet Russia, I felt that it was personal courage and pride which prohibited him from doing so, and I sensed that his straightforward, warm, and gallant manner toward me was the consequence of an implicit trust in my discretion. Second, I did not write about him because he is a poet whose poetry I do not know, since he writes in Armenian which I do not read. And finally, because I saw him only three or four times.

A few things, however, I believe I may say about Charentz. To begin with, I am afraid I was unable not to notice instantly that he was a very small man in stature and a very ugly one in appearance. I am sure Charentz must have noticed my awareness of his size and appearance, but if he did, he did not permit me to notice his awareness of my awareness. In surely less than half a minute he was no longer a small man. His size was entirely irrelevant. And instead of being an ugly man, he was one of the handsomest. His voice had warmth, and his eyes were direct, swift and intelligent. Charentz was not a small body with a large rather grotesque head and a huge hooked nose. He was a living personality, whose place of residence, the body, was by accident what it was. I found it impossible not to feel proud to be in his presence, and he in turn made me feel he was proud to have me in his presence. But I do not mean that our conversation was routine in its cordiality, or that all we did was compliment one another. Quite the contrary. Having met as countrymen and fellow-writers such routine courtesy was soon put aside, and we spoke as if we had always been friends but simply had not met before.

In short, I liked Charentz straight off, but more important than this was the feeling I had that he was a truly great man. Human greatness is a rather difficult thing to account for, and more often than not one is mistaken in one's hunches about somebody one has met. Charentz seemed great to me, I think, because he was made of a mixture of astonishing virtues and amusing flaws. On the one hand, his independence of spirit was balanced by a humorous worldliness, his acute intelligence by a curiosity that frequently made him seem naive, his profoundly gentle manners by a kind of mocking mischievousness which might easily be mistaken for rudeness. But he was never rude, he was witty, and the purpose of his wit was to keep himself from the terrible condition of pomposity. He was swift, and there was a quality in him of both passion and violence —— the violence of a creative man whose passion for truth has been tricked and troubled by unavoidable forces. These forces seemed to have compelled a wise but nevertheless uncomfortable moral expediency. Now, I had found a number of eminent Armenians whom I had met in Armenia and Russia quite guarded in their conversations with me. I might, for instance, ask what seemed to me a most innocent question about the life of Armenians in a certain town, and I might hear a reply full of caution, indefiniteness, and even suspicion. This was a new experience for me, but I was able soon enough to understand the necessity for such caution. Charentz, however, simply could not be bothered about such caution. He said precisely what he wanted to say at any given point of a conversation, and his speech was full of that order of contradiction which is the mark of the spirit which is still free and still eager not to forfeit its freedom. At the same time, however, he might suddenly say something preposterous and unacceptable, but whenever this happened I noticed that he chuckled or said something under his breath, as if to himself. I did not find his Armenian nor his speed of speech difficult to follow, for he spoke with great simplicity. Nor did he find my Armenian at all confusing to him. As a matter of fact, I never found it necessary to repeat any remark, or to put it another way.

Charentz said, "You write in English, but you are an Armenian writer just the same." I agreed and remarked that while I did not know his writing, it seemed to me that although he wrote in Armenian, he was essentially a world writer. Charentz said, "Perhaps, or let us hope so, although it would be quite enough to be an Armenian writer." Now, there is no need to expect that I have remembered the precise words that Charentz and I exchanged almost twenty years ago, for I haven't. The greater part of the meaning of what we said I have not forgotten and will not ever forget, but the actual words have long since lost their precise context. For instance, Charentz informed me that he had repudiated his earliest writing, and I told him that it didn't matter that he had done so because the writing had its own life and he himself could no more end that life than I could. Charentz looked at me and smiled quickly. "Yes," he said, "that is quite true."

Now, when he said that he had repudiated his earliest writing I got the feeling that he expected me to believe him, but when I remarked that *I didn't* believe him, I got the feeling that he was quite glad that I hadn't. And that is an example of how all of our conversations moved along. The better part of the value of the conversations was not so much in what was actually said as in the true meaning of what was said, based upon the reason behind the remark, and upon that which was simultaneously communicated without the use of words, by a pause, a glance, an inflexion.

I found Charentz bursting with energy and ideas, with intensity and health, but a moment later I was not at all surprised to find that he was also quite profoundly troubled in spirit and ill in body. He asked suddenly to be excused a moment while he administered medical treatment to himself. There was no explanation or awkwardness on his part. I stepped out on the balcony and watched the people in the streets a moment or two. He came out on the balcony and we continued our conversation as if there had been no interruption. But after that I had to wonder about his life —— his *whole* life, from childhood to boyhood to early manhood —— and I knew it had been laden over from the beginning with pain, sorrow, frustration, anger, bitterness, hatred, and all of the other things which will kill one man and carry another to greatness. His laughter on the balcony was heartier than ever, but in it now I heard great and almost unbearable sorrow and anguish.

In Erivan I had met many young and old Armenians, and I had felt that they were all members of my family, including even those I disliked. But it was not until

I had reached Moscow that I came upon an Armenian who seemed to me both the most challenging of all as a person, and by all odds the most evolved, civilized, worthwhile, intelligent, troubled, unhappy, and yet somehow right as the symbol of the indestructible spirit of Armenian life and culture —— anywhere in the world. I wished Charentz could come to America for a visit, or even to live. He smiled at the idea and shook his head almost imperceptibly. "I am here," he said "You are there. Someone else is somewhere else. So let it be."

I thought of Charentz as a brother, and I still do. I have met many writers in many countries, but I have met none who impressed me more than Charentz, and I still do not know his writing, and very little about his life. This slight memoir of him is entirely without politics. I liked him. I admired him. I was proud to be a countryman of his, and a fellow-writer. I am devoted to his memory.

OH WORLD

Oh world,
So green, so flaming
So kindly cruel
How can I wound myself
Deep enough with your
Shape sweetness
To feel the throb
Long after I am of you
part and particle
Of homely earth,
Black, passionless and cool
One with the wiseman
One with the fool

DIANA DER HOVANESSIAN