

THE SYRIAN ARMENIAN RURAL COMMUNITY OF AYN EL-AROUS

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The Armenian community in Syria to date has not been studied thoroughly or adequately. More often than not, when we speak of that community, we think of Aleppo primarily. It is true that Aleppo has been the largest and most important Armenian concentration in Syria; nevertheless, members of this ethnic group have also lived in many other parts of the country. This essay attempts, for the first time, to construct Armenian life in one of those localities, namely, Ayn el-Arous, situated near the northern border of Syria with Turkey. Through research, interviews, and personal recollections, I have endeavored to put the scant pieces together in order to present a larger picture of this village that was inhabited predominantly by Armenians until the late 1950s. I have chosen to study this particular rural community for personal reasons, as well: I spent a few summers of my childhood there visiting my maternal grandparents, Krikor and Mariam Piloyan, who were among its earliest settlers.

In antiquity, Ayn el-Arous and the surrounding region were ruled by various empires, such as the Assyrian, Roman, Byzantine, Sassanid, Umayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman. The area remained under Ottoman rule until the end of WWI, when it was incorporated into the French mandate of Syria until independence in 1946. Administratively, Syria is divided into fourteen provinces and subdivided into sixty-one districts. Ayn el-Arous is administered by the Tell Abyad district in Raqqa province.¹

Ayn el-Arous is located 200 Km. north-east of the city of Aleppo, near the border with Turkey. The village gets its name from the karstic springs of Ayn el-Arous, which in Arabic means the “Bride’s Fountain” or “Bride’s Eye.”² Its climate is hot and dry with mild winters and a fair amount of rainfall.³ The abundant spring of Ayn el-Arous starts in the lowlands and flows into the village, allowing some vegetation to grow along its banks and forming a lake. The spring gets stronger as it leaves the village and continues 100 Km. south to the city of Raqqa.⁴

According to legend, the prophet Abraham spent time with his wife, Sarah, in Ayn el-Arous during summer, and died there.⁵ The lake itself is known for its pure water and high quality fish, but fishing was prohibited because the lake

itself was associated with Abraham's name and was therefore considered sacred. Near the lake lies a designated site called the *mazaar*, meaning Abraham's shrine. The place, which is always guarded, is visited by many pilgrims annually.⁶ This site has been damaged as a result of the recent war in Syria.⁷

THE ARMENIAN PRESENCE

The Armenian presence in Ayn el-Arous goes back to the late 19th century, that is, right after the empire-wide 1894-96 Hamidian massacres and the 1897-1901 famine years, during which thousands of Armenians lost their lives.⁸ By 1924 some of the genocide survivors had found refuge in Ayn el-Arous and Tell Abyad and settled there permanently, while others had continued further southwest, to Aleppo.⁹

Ayn el-Arous is situated 60 Km. south of Urfa. It originally belonged to a certain Ali Effendi of Severg, a wealthy and influential Kurd, who had bought the village from the Turkish government at a low price.¹⁰ The Balikh River, the second largest tributary of the Euphrates on Syrian soil, originates from the spring of Ayn el-Arous. It irrigates the lands along its banks, which form the heart of a rich agricultural region. The river also used to serve as an energy source for turning the grindstones of a number of mills. The rainfall in winter and hot dry weather in summer make this area an important grain producing zone. These lands were not cultivated before the arrival of the Armenian refugees.¹¹ The location of Ayn el-Arous, coupled with the economic opportunities it afforded, attracted Armenians from Urfa. For instance, in 1907-08, Mghtsi Kevork Hisayan went to Sigerro, a small area near Ayn el-Arous, to study the possibility of building a mill there.¹² Other millers and businessmen, such as Nerses Piloyan, Hovanness Shahinian, and the brothers Garabed and Hovhanness Imirzian, launched similar projects.¹³

Enthused by the Ottoman constitution of 1908, other Armenians from Urfa purchased large pieces of land in the plains of Harran, which include Ayn el-Arous. These acquisitions were made on an individual basis or through partnerships. The businessmen intended to establish exclusively Armenian villages in the area, and accordingly, they formed a special committee to pursue the plan¹⁴ Initially, in 1908, the Armenians succeeded in founding three villages, Sharagrag, Hishe Bendi, and Sulug, located 8-10 hours south of Urfa.¹⁵ Around 170 families from Urfa moved to these newly established villages and began cultivating the land to transform the settlements into an agricultural colony.¹⁶ The project lasted only two-three years. The Armenians were not aware that these lands were the grazing grounds for the animals of the surrounding tribes. Therefore, far from cooperating with the Armenians, the tribesmen brought their camels and sheep at night to destroy the crops. The Armenian landowners

were thus compelled to abandon the plan and return to Urfa having sustained great financial losses. After 1915, a few survivors who held the title deeds of these plots of land petitioned the French government for their return, but to no avail.¹⁷

Notwithstanding the above difficulties, the potential of the Ayn el-Arous spring as an energy source remained in the minds of experienced millers. In 1910, such millers and businessmen from Urfa, including Nerses Piloyan and Mgrditch Shahinian, went to Ayn el-Arous to explore the possibilities. The two men approached Ali Effendi, the owner of the sparsely populated village, with a project to build a mill near the lake. They convinced him that their project would yield much profit because there were no other mills in the immediate surroundings, and therefore farmers from nearby villages would use their mill instead of taking their wheat to much more distant locations. Ali Effendi found the project lucrative and approved the plan. The venture was costly, because it entailed recruiting skilled builders from Urfa, cutting and transporting the mill stones, and bringing in powdered limestone to substitute for cement, which was unavailable then. Working with partners thus became necessary. Ali Effendi, the brothers Garabed and Hovannes Imirzian, Nerses Piloyan, and Mgrditch Shahinian forged that partnership. It stipulated the following: After the completion of the mill 50 percent of the village and the mill would belong to Ali Effendi, 25 percent to the Imirzian brothers, and the remaining 25 percent half-half to Nerses Piloyan and Mgrditch Shahinian. The expenses and the profit had to be shared in the same proportions by all. The agreement was signed and certified by a notary public. The project reached its fruition within a year, costing the partnership 1,000 gold liras. In the meantime, Piloyan, one of the partners, died of malaria and his son, Krikor, took over.¹⁸

During the genocide, some survivors from Urfa, Garmouj, Kharpert, Adyaman, and other places managed to stay in Ayn el-Arous and Tell Abyad.¹⁹ Also, after the departure of French troops from Cilicia at the end of 1921 and beginning of 1922, another remnant group of Armenians from Urfa was deported from the Turkish regions bordering Syria with Arabs, Kurds, and Turks contributing to this forced exodus, by exploiting the situation and charging exorbitant amounts of money, ostensibly to show the Armenians safe escape routes.²⁰ A number of these Armenians recommenced their lives in Ayn el-Arous.

By the 1930s, a small Armenian community, consisting of about ninety families, had been formed at Ayn el-Arous. Among them were the following families from Urfa: Mgrditch Markarian, Krikor Piloyan, Hagop Ourishgian, Taniel Saghatelian, Mgrditch Shahinian, Sarkis Yanbekian, Hovagim Shamlan, Krikor Iskenderian, Avedis Yanbekian, Sahag Sahagian, Hagop Kevonian, Aroush Yesayan, Kapriel Laterovian, Krikor Kelekian, Krikor Sevan, Aghajan

Sulavian, Mghtsi Mghtsi-Boghosian, Aroush Simikian, Joseph Kalayjian, and Yotneghparians. The following came from other places: Karekin Derderian from Kharpert, Hagop Madarian from Garmouj, Kevork Matossian from Tokat.²¹

There was a small shopping center near the lake entirely run by Armenians. For example, Kevork Matossian, Joseph Kalayjian and Aghajan Sulavian had grocery stores that catered to the villagers and other farmers who came to have their wheat milled. Sarkis Yanbegian, the former *hayrig* (i.e., caretaker) of the Urfa orphanage, who was also the mayor of Ayn el-Arous, ran a butcher's shop. Last but not least, barber Kevork practiced his profession in his private space.²²

RELATIONS WITH BEDOUIN TRIBES

During the genocide and subsequently, some Kurdish and Arab tribes in southern Turkey and northern Syria treated Armenian deportees with great cruelty. Others, however, were helpful. For example, Sheikh Hashem ibn Muhammad and Sheikh Mejhem ibn Muhammad, the chieftains of the Aneze tribe that controlled huge chunks of territory around Urfa and in northern Syria, saved Armenians, protected them, and allowed them to purchase land for farming purposes.²³ Hovhannes Tashjian's (*Usta Khacherents*) story attests to this fact. He wrote:

When the situation got worse for the Armenians of Urfa, my father arranged for me and my brothers to leave town for a while and take refuge with Arab tribal chieftain Hachem. My father, being his good friend, trusted him. In this regard he had written a letter also which we delivered to Hachem personally....When we gave him the letter and he read it, he turned to us and said, 'from now on you are my sons; you can live among my tribesmen wherever you wish.' After we came out of the sheikh's tent we dispersed and each went to the tents of the Arabs he knew.²⁴

Another example of Sheikh Hachem's benevolence was when he rented out parts of his land to League of Nations commissioner Karen Jeppe for her to establish agricultural colonies for Armenians rescued from captivity.²⁵

Ibrahim Pasha, the chieftain of a Kurdish clan and known as Cheol Padishah (king of the wilderness), had a special relationship with the Armenians based on mutual trust and business deals. His business executive was an Armenian known as Janig Agha, and Garmujtsi Miro was the manager of his mills and bakeries.²⁶ In the same vein, Krikor Sevian of Ayn el-Arous had spent all his life among Bedouins and therefore was well versed in the tribal customs and traditions. He became very helpful in saving many Armenians during the genocide.²⁷



*Priest of Ras el-Ain visiting Ain el Arous.
Boy with musical instrument is
Kevork Piloyan c. 1947*



Krikor Piloyan and family c. 1940



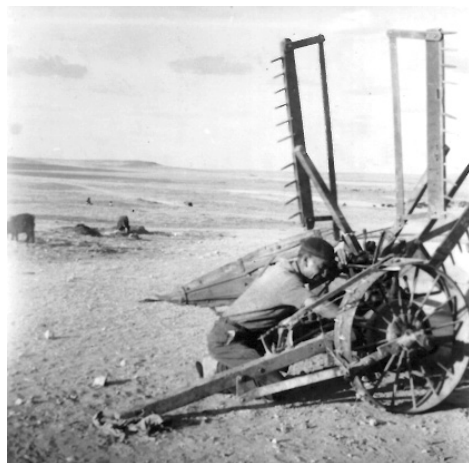
*Krikor Piloyan family and relatives
c. 1946*



*Kelliguians, Piloyans, Karagulleyan,
Badaghasian at Ain el-Arous, c. 1947*



*Armenians at Ain el-Arous cereal
market during WWII (1942-43)*



*Hovhanness Shahinian working on
horse-driven harvesting machine c. 1940*

FARMING AND ANIMAL HUSBANDRY

Agriculture is one of the main economic activities that drives the Syrian economy for domestic consumption and for export. As stated above, the fertile soil along the Balikh River, including Ayn el-Arous and its environs, had not been cultivated prior to the arrival of the Armenian refugees. The Armenians, having limited options for work, engaged primarily in agriculture. For example, in 1934, of the twenty-eight Armenians from Ayn el-Arous who wanted to repatriate to Soviet Armenia, eighteen were agriculturists (64 percent). The rest were as follows: 2 bakers, 2 millers, 1 gardener, 1 porter, 1 water carrier, 1 cart driver, 1 grocer, 1 shoemaker.²⁸

Krikor Piloyan owned the arable lands of Jdeida, 4Km. west of Ayn el-Arous; Filisteen, 1Km. to the south; and Luqta, 7Km. to the south.²⁹ The Saghatelian family owned the lands of Swena, Gunzurieh, Guthrana, and three others.³⁰ The Yesayan family owned lands in Herepche, Hamradahal, and Ayn Isa.³¹ Others, like the Sanossians, Kilejians, Matossians, and Shahinians were also proprietors, but information about the specific locations of their possessions is lacking. They and their heirs produced wheat, barley, cotton, and sugar canes.³²

Agriculturists in Ayn el-Arous employed mainly primitive methods of land cultivation until the late 1930s. The crops relied on rainfall, which meant that during drought years the yield would be significantly lower, thus causing financial hardship to the farmers.³³ In the same vein, social occasions, such as weddings, engagements, christening, etc. depended on the harvest yield.

During the mid-1940s and early-1950s, major changes occurred in the field of agriculture in Syria. Mechanized cultivation was introduced to the agriculture industry and consequently improved production and yielded significant profits. Furthermore, minimal interference by the government in the agricultural sector made the business attractive. Tribal leaders thus became interested in agriculture, and so did entrepreneurs who invested in land development and irrigation. The expansion of cultivated areas was primarily the result of the labor of wealthy urban merchants, generally from the Syrian religious minorities, including the Armenians.³⁴

Armenians of Ayn el-Arous thus contributed to the modernization of the agriculture industry in Syria and invested heavily in purchasing new machinery. Such equipment included John Deere combine harvesters, Massey Harris tractors, Caterpillar bulldozers, and International trucks.³⁵ The combine harvester reaped, gathered, and stored grain into bags in a much faster and more efficient way, maximizing output. The crops were then loaded on trucks and transported to storage facilities. These were usually located behind the houses.³⁶

Not all Armenian villagers could afford to purchase this expensive harvesting machinery. Therefore, they had to ask for assistance from other sources, such as the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU). The AGBU at the time had redirected its efforts from refugee and orphan care to the development of Armenian communities and was hence considered a possible resource to draw upon. In 1951, for example, the Ayn el-Arous AGBU chapter wrote a letter to the AGBU Central Board with a request to purchase brand new or used agricultural equipment for them. It was explained that such an acquisition would improve their agricultural output and that the investment would be mutually beneficial because the AGBU members were willing to split the profit with the organization.³⁷ We do not know if the AGBU obliged.

In addition to advanced machinery, good irrigation systems installed in the fields ensured the sustainability of and increase in agricultural output. Besides, diversification of crops became possible, which in turn provided some degree of economic security to the farmers. Hagop Saghatelian, better known as Hagop Agha, one of the prominent farmers of Ayn el-Arous, ventured into such projects with great success. For his achievements, he received the “Hero of Cotton Harvest” award from the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture several times.³⁸

The period of Syria’s union with Egypt (1958-61) was marked by economic changes, especially in agriculture, that impacted the Ayn el-Arous community. Agrarian reform laws which favored sharecroppers and farm laborers were introduced and provided them with greater economic and legal security. It reduced the share of the crops kept by landlords, protected tenants against arbitrary evictions, and allowed the formation of agricultural unions. In the 1960s, however, agricultural output stagnated because of these changes. As a result, many of the Armenian families left the agriculture business and moved to Aleppo, looking for different career opportunities. The Armenian population of Ayn el-Arous, thus, decreased significantly.³⁹

Animal husbandry was another important aspect of rural life that the Armenian families were engaged in. The pasture lands on the peripheries of the village made raising livestock possible. Keeping sheep, goats, cows, chickens, and horses was quite common. Local peasants took care of the animals. Each family hired its own crew for help on the farmlands as well as for domestic chores. Landlords provided the workers with living quarters next to their own houses. For example, a certain Mousa and his family were hired by Krikor Piloyan.⁴⁰ They tended the cows, sheep, goats, horses, chickens, and dog. Mousa took the animals to graze in the pastures and returned in the afternoon, while his wife took care of the Piloyan household chores. The case was similar with Soofie and Nabo, the two local peasant helpers of the Yesayan family. These Arab/Kurdish helpers remained loyal and grateful to their host families.⁴¹

Before the advent of electricity in Ayn el-Arous in the early 1960s, the villagers did not have the convenience of piped water. For domestic consumption, water was carried in tin gallons from the spring to the houses by the peasant women. Mousa's wife, Fatima, was responsible for maintaining the Piloyan household water supply. She was to help with the cleaning of the house, milking the cows and the goats, churning butter, and making bread. Her duties also included securing the fuel supply. For this, she prepared animal dung mixed with straw and crop residues.⁴²

Another helper, A'bo, was a young Kurdish boy when he went to work for the Piloyan family. He grew up in the family and became very attached to them. He learned the Urfa Armenian dialect and spoke it fluently. He addressed Mrs. Piloyan as "kurug," which meant sister in the Urfa dialect. A'bo kept his ties with the family even after he left the Piloyans. He visited them in Aleppo on occasions, and cherished the days that he had spent with them with utmost gratitude.⁴³

A word about clothing must be said. The local farmhands, like Mousa, wore loose, flowing clothing that covered the skin to prevent heat stroke and sunburn, while keeping the person cool at the same time. The *keffieh*, headgear which is a large square cloth folded in half to form a triangle, was placed on the head and fastened by a round cord called an *agal*. The head piece protected the head from the sun and shaded the face; at the same time, it covered the nose and the mouth during dust storms. Mousa's wife dressed in traditional Bedouin clothing that was suitable for the climate. She wore a *galabeya*, which was a flowing, loose dress with deep armholes and wide sleeves. Headgear covered her hair and protected her face from the harsh weather and dust. As for Armenian landlords, like the Piloyans, they wore typical Arab attire. Krikor, for one, wore the white *galabeya*. A bright, colorful, six-inch-wide belt that also served as a purse was wrapped around his waist. However, the Armenian women in the village wore western style attire.

LIFE IN AYN EL-AROUS

A typical house in Ayn el-Arous consisted of four rooms: a living-room, two bedrooms, and a corner used as kitchen and laundry room. The living-room also served as a dining-room, where a round, portable, metal-top table that rested on folding legs was set up. Similarly, the living room was converted to a bedroom as needed. Bedding was stored in a special wall opening that served as a modern-day closet. At night, the bedding was brought out and spread over the couches and/or the floor. The floors were made of compacted mud covered with Bedouin-made *kilims*. The walls were built of thick mud bricks which were reinforced with straw and rocks. The roof rested on logs 12-15 cm. in diameter laid across the room half a meter apart to support the roof, which was also

made of mud. The exterior and interior walls alike were painted with lime. A privy was situated outside the house proper. As for the streets of the village, they were not paved, nor did they have names. However, the quarters were unofficially known by the names of their predominant families.

The population of the village grew significantly during summer as families with children who had gone to Aleppo for the school year returned to Ayn el-Arous. Because summer marked the peak of agricultural labor, the men occupied themselves with harvesting, a very demanding engagement which kept them away from home for days at a time. Upon their return home, the effect of the scorching sun and the lack of facilities for hygienic needs were obvious from their appearance. The long beards, burned faces, and exhaustion made their once familiar faces unrecognizable. Their condition required immediate attention. Water was warmed for bathing, food was served, and a few hours were devoted to resting. In the evening, the family conversation revolved around work. Although not very interesting, the discussion of the topic was important because the shared information was a forecast of the financial status of the family.

As I also remember, a typical summer day in Ayn el-Arous started early with sunrise and the rooster's crowing. The aroma of freshly made coffee awakened us all. Mariam, my grandmother, boiled the Armenian coffee for the adults to enjoy, but she did not forget us children either. She prepared her signature drink, *gatov sourj*, especially for us. It was a simple but delicious drink, boiled milk and a dash of coffee mixed with it.

Soon the bread making ritual began. To prepare *lavash* bread, unleavened dough was thinly rolled out to about 18 inches in diameter and then baked on a hot disc of sheet iron. A variation of this kind of bread was the *shakarov hats*. For it the dough had to be rolled out the same way, except this time churned butter was spread all over it, and sprinkled with two tablespoons of sugar and a dash of cinnamon. Then the sides were folded in, and it sizzled on the hot disc. This, along with homemade cheese, butter, jam, and hot milk comprised the usual breakfast menu. On a larger scale, a supply of *toneer* bread, called *baksimat*, was made and stored for a week. The dough was cut into individual round pieces each with a hole at the center similar to the familiar modern doughnut. Fire was lit in the *toneer*, a round, jar-shaped clay structure in the ground, and then the dough was slapped against the hot interior walls to bake.

There were a few gardens in Ayn el-Arous that were irrigated by mill water. The owners of these gardens were Armenians who hired local *fellahin* to take care of them. They, along with their families, had designated living quarters near the gardens. One of those gardens belonged to Krikor Piloyan, whose youngest son, Kevork, reminisced:

Early morning during summer, my father, Krikor Piloyan, went to his garden near the mill at the riverside. He brought home freshly picked tomatoes, eggplants, onions, cucumbers, squash, parsley and other vegetables. On his way he stopped at the butcher's shop and the adjacent grocery store to buy meat, spices and other ingredients for the day's cooking. Upon his return home he woke everybody up announcing his arrival.⁴⁴



Asdghig Der-Ghazarian and the Piloyan sisters canoeing in the Balikh River, late 1930s

Watching the business transactions between peddlers and villagers was an interesting experience for me. The itinerant Bedouin peddlers mounted their merchandise on camels and visited the village periodically to barter such items as carpets, grapes, dates and the like in exchange for rice, wheat, grain, and vegetables. The peddler women's dresses were colorful, with Bedouin jewelry worn around their necks. Their open sandals revealed their anklets (*khalkhal*), which were something unusual to me. In particular I was amazed by the sight of the camels slowly making their descent to the ground. The hind legs were bent at a 45-degree angle first, followed by the front legs making a similar movement, until the animal sat on the ground.

Preparing for winter was customary among the villagers. The women preserved vegetables, fruit, and other items. Different vegetables, such as eggplants and squashes, had to be hollowed out and hung on long strings in the open air or inside the house to dry. Tomato paste was prepared by boiling the tomatoes in brine, mashing them in flat containers, and exposing them to the sun until the water evaporated gradually and the mixture thickened to paste.

Another interesting experience was *shaariye* making. The angel hair type of pasta was made in large quantities, dried and stored for later use. The women and young girls of the neighborhood gathered at one of the houses to participate in this time-consuming, labor-intensive chore. The lady of the house hosted the activity, oversaw the process, and controlled the product's quality. After coffee was served, a big white sheet was spread on the floor and 10-12 people sat around it. The dough, prepared hours ahead of time, was brought in a big container, divided into equal portions and distributed to the

participating women. First, the dough was cut into small pieces; then each piece was placed between the palms of both hands and rolled to the specified thinness; finally it was cut into inch-long pieces and thrown on the spread cloth. This working/social hour usually lasted the whole afternoon and was enjoyed by all. Singing, telling jokes, engaging in interesting conversations, and match-making were the norm. At the end of the day everyone took her share of the *shaariye* and went home.⁴⁵

Washing wheat was another customary activity that every village household was involved in. The wheat had to be sifted and washed to get rid of impurities. To do this, the women took the wheat to the river to wash it. Then the wheat was drained and spread over a flat surface exposed to the sun to dry. In the evening, the wheat was collected and covered. This process was repeated for several days until the wheat was completely dry. It was then taken to the mill to be ground into bulgur and flour.⁴⁶

Leisure activities were limited for adults and children alike. House visits were common among the families. Conversations revolved around children and social issues. Playing cards and discussing business particularly interested men. Literate people spent time reading novels. Story telling was a much anticipated and enjoyable pastime. Ani Markarian Shemsian, who lived in Ayn el-Arous until the age of nine, reminisced: "I anxiously waited for the afternoon each day. We gathered around my mother, Nvart, and sat on the carpet as she began reading stories to us. We were mesmerized by them."⁴⁷ Taking a nap after lunch was mandatory to avoid the temptation of going outside in the scorching heat. Children resented it, but they had no choice.

The wheat storage place served as a playground for children, who jumped over the full piled up bags one by one. In the backyard, they played hopscotch. The boys also played with marbles. Making stuffed dolls from scratch interested the girls, as they would design, cut out and sew the doll, embroider all features on the face of the doll and then stuff the body with wool. Tailoring different dresses for the doll was part of this process. Kids also jumped rope and slid on the harvesters. The day would wind down for adults and children alike at sunset. This was the case especially when electric power was not yet available in the village and the houses were lit by kerosene lamps.⁴⁸

One of the community events during summer was a picnic at Hammam Ali (Ali's bath), which was situated at a distance of 1 Km. from Ayn el-Arous. The mineral waters of Hammam Ali attracted many people, who hoped to be healed of their ailments by immersing themselves in the water. As Janette Yesayan stated, "We went there during the summer to picnic. It was a fun time for all of us. We took food with us, we played the guitar and tambourine, we sang, and we danced. Those were good days. We had a great life."⁴⁹

Autumn was not as busy as summer, but still required some labor. The soil had to be tilled in preparation for the ensuing planting season, quality seeds had to be secured and stored, and the machinery had to be overhauled for optimum use the following season. Life during winter was quiet as the village was emptied of most of its Armenian inhabitants. The families travelled to Aleppo for the educational needs of their children, since elementary schools did not yet exist locally, or for junior and high school. Those peasants who stayed behind took care of the livestock and the farms. The animals were kept inside the barns and fed stored fodder.⁵⁰

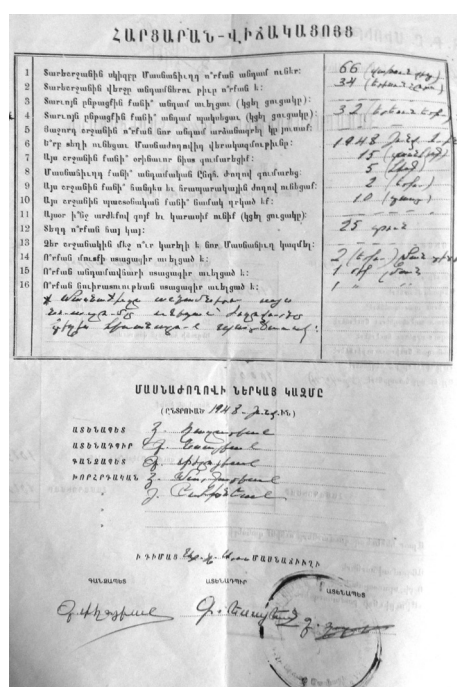
The village of Ayn el-Arous did not have a health facility or a resident doctor during its early years. Simple health problems, mostly eye infections caused by dusty winds, and other intestinal problems, were treated by Loussan Matossian, one of the village folks, who filled the role of a medicine woman. She applied home remedies and, in some cases, medicines obtained from various sources.⁵¹ Periodically, visiting doctors from nearby towns treated other health conditions. People with serious ailments went to Aleppo to be treated.⁵²

VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS

The formation of various voluntary associations was in response to the needs of the Armenians who had suffered tremendous losses during the genocide. Taking care of the multitude of orphans and Armenian women reclaimed from captivity, as well as their reintegration into society, were primary agenda items for these associations. The associations, which were charitable in nature and focused mainly on youth and sports; were primarily based in the city of Aleppo. However, they extended their reach to other Armenian communities across Syria by opening chapters there.

AGBU

The AGBU, founded in 1906 in Cairo, was a philanthropic organization. It was formed to address the most pressing problem for the Armenians at the turn of the century - their state of insecurity and miserable socioeconomic condition, especially in the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire⁵³ and Cilicia. During World War I, AGBU humanitarian programs focused on



providing aid to genocide survivors and recovering captive Armenian women and children.⁵⁴ Their strategy was premised on the idea that bringing the scattered Armenians back together in a safe environment would create the basis for national rebirth. Similarly, the AGBU directed its efforts towards meeting the material needs of the refugees brought on by the evacuation of the Armenians from Cilicia and Smyrna and their resettlement in Syria, Lebanon, and Greece.⁵⁵

In the 1930s, the AGBU readjusted its strategies and extended its support to community development and education. Ayn el-Arous was one of the Armenian communities supported. As a result of the expansion efforts, a new AGBU chapter was formed in Ayn el-Arous in January, 1934. Its founding executive board comprised Aroush Yesayan, president; Hagop Ghazarian, secretary; Hagop Ourishigian, treasurer; Mgrditch Markarian and Toros Balabanian, advisors. The executive board was approved by the AGBU Regional Board in Cairo, upon which the chapter assumed official status. Accordingly, it received the organization's by-laws, stationery, membership application forms, receipt booklets, and seal,⁵⁶ with the chapter number, 61 on it. The chapter regularly submitted its reports to the Cairo Regional Board indicating the status of its membership, members' names, the number of general membership and executive board meetings held, the amount of correspondence, and the total number of Armenians in the village.⁵⁷ To be kept abreast of general AGBU activities, the local chapter also requested periodicals and books such as the *Arev* (Sun), *Husharar* (Prompter), and *Vosgemadian* (jubilee Golden Book).⁵⁸

By 1941, the Ayn el-Arous chapter had expanded by the formation of the AGBU Women's Auxiliary. The following were its founding members: Yeranouhi Yesayan, president; Zarouhi Degirmenjian, secretary; Haji Topjian, treasurer; Vartouhi Sahagian, Ovsanna Tufenkjian, Khatoun Degirmenjian, Rebecca Markarian, Ovsanna Nazarian, Zarouhi Khacherian, Marie Nalchanian, Zmrroukht Khashmanian, Yester Ghazarian, Markrid Shahinian, and Ovsanna Basmajian, Aznive Piloyan, Arshaluys Piloyan, Armine Piloyan, Araxie Piloyan, Aznive Shahinian, and Armenouhi Basmajian, members at large.⁵⁹

Ayn el-Arous – AGBU relations were not only confined to chapter activity. In 1934 some families from the village expressed great interest in relocating to Soviet Armenia. They applied to the AGBU Regional Board in Cairo, requesting assistance.⁶⁰ The latter asked for information regarding the name, age, birthplace, and occupation of each and every supplicant who wished to submit an application to the Soviet Armenian representative responsible for repatriation. However, the Board remained noncommittal and advised them to continue their normal lives, because there was no guarantee that the repatriation would take place within a year, if at all.⁶¹

Syrian Armenian Relief Cross

The Syrian Armenian Relief Cross (SARC) was established in 1929 in Aleppo in order to meet the health needs of the Armenian refugees, collect orphans, and support education. By 1936, thirty-one chapters had been established across Syria (including Lebanon) with a total of 2,078 members. One of the new chapters, established sometime during 1935-36, was that of Ayn el-Arous, with a total of forty-nine members. The chapter was able to raise 2,021 Syrian piasters that same year.⁶²

The SARC chapter, along with the Central Committee in Aleppo, dealt with the health issues that were prevalent in the refugee communities at that time. Many individuals contracted malaria, a mosquito borne infectious disease with symptoms of fever, feeling tired, vomiting, and headaches. Eye ailments and various intestinal diseases, too, presented serious problems. The Aleppo chapter of SARC sent visiting doctors and medicine such as quinine to the affected communities. Another SARC mission was to pay special attention to education by supporting schools in the villages and needy areas. The Central Committee instructed its chapters to allocate the maximum percentage of their budget possible to education.⁶³

Armenian Youth Association

The Armenian Youth Association (AYA) was given this name in 1930. It was previously the Near East Leagues, centers that had been founded across Syria and Lebanon so that Near East Relief (NER) could stay in touch and with orphans even after they had reached adulthood. In 1931, Bishop Papken Gulesserian (future coadjutor Catholicos of Cilicia) was the representative of the Catholicosate in the NER. As such, he became the head of the network of Near East Leagues, and renamed it the Armenian Youth Association (*AYA/Hay Yeridasartats Engeragtsutiun*).⁶⁴

The AYA had many chapters in Syria and Lebanon. In 1941, alongside the already established chapters of the AGBU and SARC, a new chapter of the AYA was established in Ayn el-Arous through the initiative of Bedros Kelliguian and Hovhannes Shahinian.⁶⁵ The newly formed AYA chapter became very active, organizing athletic and cultural events. The chapter had a football team and its own field. The team practiced regularly and participated in inter-chapter games.⁶⁶ AYA activities also included lectures on social, cultural, and moral issues, as well as dramas performed by its theatrical troupe. To give an example, the AYA staged two comedies, *Tiv Hink Khelakare* (The Number Five Madman) and the *Shadakhos Sapriche* (The Talkative Barber). Many attended the event, including Arab dignitaries. The function was a success, as evidenced by the audience's loud applause, congratulatory remarks and commendations. The MC of the evening, Bedros Kelliguian, thanked those present for their

moral support. He highlighted the mission of the AYA, and thanked the AGBU for its continuous backing. The proceeds of the event went towards meeting the needs of the AGBU school.⁶⁷ Additional information is lacking about the AYA chapter of Ayn el-Arous.

Armenian General Athletic Association

The Hay Marmnagrtagan Enthanour Miyoutioun (Armenian General Athletic Association/HO.MEN.ET.MEN) was founded in Constantinople in 1918 to address the athletic needs of the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire, especially those of orphans. The organization had its football, basketball, tennis, and scouts teams. By the end of that same year, twenty-five chapters had already been founded in Constantinople, and in 1919 they staged their inaugural Olympic Games.⁶⁸

During the decade of 1935-45, new chapters of HO.MEN.ET.MEN were founded primarily in the Armenian communities of northern Syria. It was not until June 7, 1947 that the Ayn el-Arous chapter came into being, having a certain Mr. Boyajian as its founding chair. Initially, the chapter had twenty members, nine of whom were already in the Tell Abyad scouts team. The chapter had its own field and club, which facilitated its athletic activities. Membership fees and outright donations sustained the chapter. By the end of 1948, members and supporters had raised 191 Syrian liras. The association's expenses being 168 liras, a positive balance of 23 liras was left in its coffers. The chapter began enthusiastically, and remained active to the end. It also participated in the inter-chapter and Olympic Games, held in Aleppo annually around Easter. Unfortunately, this did not last long. In 1950, the chapter could not participate in the inter-chapter games, because it lacked the necessary number of players and could not borrow players from other chapters to complete the football team. A reporter, Sarkis Pakhdigian (future bishop Nerses Pakhdigian), wrote: "A weak team of 7-8 members, facing difficult conditions, are barely able to play."⁶⁹ The chapter ceased to exist in 1957, after only nine years, because of the lack of members. The Tell Abyad chapter wrote to the regional Board in Aleppo: "There are no Armenians left in Ayn el-Arous; therefore, no chapter is left."⁷⁰

CHURCH AND SCHOOLS

The establishment of churches and schools has been on every Armenian agenda, and the Armenian community of Ayn el-Arous was no exception. The church there was established sometime between the second half of the 1920s and the 1930s.⁷¹ The community did not have a resident priest to celebrate Holy Mass on Sundays. On special occasions, a visiting clergyman from Arab Punar, Raqqa or Aleppo conducted the religious services. Those special occasions

included the celebrations of the Vartanank Battle that took place in 451; the Holy Mother of God holiday in mid-August and the Holy Cross holiday in mid-September, both celebrated with the traditional blessed food of *herisa*; the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide on April 24; and Easter, when the traditional cookie of *kulunja* (made of dough with special spices) was baked, and egg tapping took place.⁷²

The earliest leaders of the AGBU were convinced that education was necessary for the socioeconomic and intellectual development of the Armenian people, as well as for maintaining Armenian identity in the Diaspora. They accordingly invested heavily in the establishment of schools, including that of Ayn el-Arous in 1933, named Noubarian Elementary School.⁷³ The school operated on the church grounds.⁷⁴ The teachers and the principal were appointed by the Cairo AGBU Regional Board. For instance, Bedros Kelligian was assigned principal in 1939 (at the age of nineteen!)⁷⁵ The curriculum included Armenian, Armenian history, religion, Arabic, French, Mathematics, and Science. The students participated in community functions by singing songs and reciting poems.⁷⁶

Like all Armenian day schools in Syria, that of Ayn el-Arous faced financial difficulties. In 1934, the school had forty-eight students. Income from their tuition was 26 Ottoman liras, and from two cultural programs 3 liras, for a total of 29 liras. On the other hand, expenses included the following: 5 liras, deficit carried over from 1933; 25 liras, male teacher's salary; 15 liras, female teacher's salary; 4 liras, for desks; 5 liras for charcoal, wood, and stove; 3 liras for school cleaning, water, and sundries, for a total of 57 liras. Therefore, there was a deficit of 28 liras (nearly 50 percent of the budget), which the school board hoped the AGBU Cairo Regional Board would cover.⁷⁷

Cooperation among the various Armenian organizations that had brought the genocide survivors together to create a basis for national rebirth began to decline in the 1930s. Fierce political rivalries sometimes had divisive outcomes. The main issue involved peoples' views and positions vis-à-vis Soviet Armenia. Should they support the Soviet Armenian regime? Or, should they oppose the regime and create a free and independent Armenia?⁷⁸ These contradictory opinions permeated Armenian society in Ayn el-Arous, as well. Community members from the latter camp wanted to open their own school, independent of the existing AGBU-subsidized Noubarian school. The AGBU naturally discouraged this separation, given the small size of the community. Despite this opposition, a second school was established in Ayn el-Arous in 1935-36 under the auspices of the Aleppo Prelacy with support from the Armenian Revolutionary Federation and its affiliate, SARC.⁷⁹ The Armenian schools that were opened during the first years of the French mandate in Syria did not have official governmental recognition. They operated under the ownership of

individuals, organizations, or compatriotic societies. However, in order to benefit from government subsidies, it became necessary to obtain permits.⁸⁰ The new school at Ayn el-Arous got its permit under the name of author Antranig Dzarougian.⁸¹ To conclude, the Armenian community of Ayn el-Arous was able to sustain two elementary schools until they ceased to operate because of too few students.

CONCLUSION

The formation of the Syrian Armenian rural community of Ayn el-Arous dates back to the late 19th century with the arrival of Armenian refugees, predominantly from Urfa. They transformed the available but neglected arable land into productive agricultural fields. Notwithstanding its small size, this community maintained its own church, schools, and voluntary association, which played a significant role in the lives of its members. Today the demographics of the village have shifted, rendering the Armenians a tiny minority. Only the descendants of some of the founders continue to live there: Vartkes Matossian, Antranig Kilejian, Krikor Piloyan, Mgrditch Shahinian, Shahe Sanossian, and Ara Sanossian. The fortunes of Ayn el-Arous, with its ebb and flow, certainly applies to all other Armenian communities in Syria. Each of these communities requires a separate study (or studies) for a better understanding of the larger picture of this important diasporic collectivity.

ENDNOTES

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tell-Abyad>, retrieved May 31, 2017.

² Ibid., Ain-al-Arous, retrieved May 31, 2017.

³ Ibid., Geography of Syria, retrieved August 11, 2017.

⁴ Ibid., Balikh-River, retrieved May 31, 2017.

⁵ Hagop Hisayian, *Yetesia* (Ourfa), Beirut, Aramatz Press, 1962, pp. 44-45.

⁶ Aram Sahagian, *Tiutsaznagan Ourfan yev Ir Hayortinere* (Heroic Ourfa and Its Armenian Sons), 2nd ed., vol. 1, Aleppo, Armenian Youth Association of Urfa/Cilicia Press, 2011, p. 682.

⁷ [Hhttps://en.alalam.ir/news/1479507/Syria-terrorists-bulldoze-prophet-Abraham-shrine](https://en.alalam.ir/news/1479507/Syria-terrorists-bulldoze-prophet-Abraham-shrine), retrieved September 20, 2017.

⁸ *The Armenian General Benevolent Union: One Hundred Years of History, vol. I: 1906-1940*, Raymond H. Kévorkian and Vahé Tachjian (eds.), Cairo-Paris-New York, AGBU Central Board of Directors, 2006, p. 14.

⁹ Ibid., p. 141; Felix Pakhchinian, *Hort Hayutian Arunere* (The Gushing Streams of Armenians), Yerevan – Aleppo, Cilicia Press, 2011, pp. 21-22.

¹⁰ Bedros Der Bedrossian (Ourfatsi), *Autobiography & Recollections*, Tamar Der-Ohannessian, trans., Dr. Vahan Janjigian, ed., Philadelphia, PA, N.p., 2005, p. 187.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hisayian, p. 53.

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- ¹³ Der Bedrossian, p. 187.
- ¹⁴ Sahagian, p. 683.
- ¹⁵ Der Bedrossian, p. 14.
- ¹⁶ Sahagian, pp. 683-84.
- ¹⁷ Der Bedrossian, p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 189-90.
- ¹⁹ Sahagian, p. 682.
- ²⁰ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1245.
- ²¹ Interview with Jeanette Yesayan, July 23, 2015, Yerevan, Armenia.
- ²² Ibid., June 15, 2017.
- ²³ Sahagian, vol. 1, pp. 689-90.
- ²⁴ Ibid., pp. 1160-161.
- ²⁵ Vahram L. Shemmassian, "The League of Nations and the Reclamation of Armenian Genocide Survivors," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, New Brunswick, USA, and London, UK, Transaction Publishers, 2003, p. 101.
- ²⁶ Sahagian, vol. 1, pp. 690-2.
- ²⁷ Ibid., vol. 2, p. 1333.
- ²⁸ Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) Archives, Cairo, Egypt, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to Cairo AGBU Regional Board, December 4, 1934. See Appendix 4 for the names of those breadwinners. I thank Dr. Antranik Dakessian for providing me with the AGBU documents.
- ²⁹ Telephone interview with Krikor Piloyan, July 27, 2017, Granada Hills, CA - Aleppo, Syria.
- ³⁰ Telephone interview with Saghatel Saghatelian, July 14, 2017, Granada Hills, CA – San Francisco, CA.
- ³¹ Interview with Yesayan, July 23, 2015.
- ³² Ibid., July 23, 2015; telephone interview with Piloyan.
- ³³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agriculture_in_Syria, retrieved August 13, 2017.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Interview with Arsene Baran, September 2, 2017, Granada Hills, CA.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, May 1, 1951.
- ³⁸ Pakhchinian, p. 101.
- ³⁹ Wikipedia, Agriculture in Syria.
- ⁴⁰ Interview with Kevork Piloyan, May 23, 2017, Los Angeles, CA.
- ⁴¹ Interview with Yesayan.
- ⁴² Interview with Nora Kelliguian Bezdikian, July 11, 2017, Glendale, CA.
- ⁴³ Telephone interview with Sona Kelliguian Khanjian, September 13, 2017, Granada Hills, CA – Paramus, NJ.
- ⁴⁴ Interview with Kevork Piloyan.
- ⁴⁵ Interview with Kelliguian Bezdikian.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid.

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- ⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Ani Markarian Shemsian, July 25, 2017, Granada Hills, CA – Fountain Valley, CA.
- ⁴⁸ Interview with Ani Yesayan Rastgelenian, June 15, 2017, Yerevan, Armenia.
- ⁴⁹ Interview with Yesayan, June 15, 2017.
- ⁵⁰ Interview with Kevork Piloyan.
- ⁵¹ Interview with Yesayan, June 15, 2017.
- ⁵² AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, July 3, 1943.
- ⁵³ Kévorkian and Tachjian, p. 17.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 43, 114, 116-17, 123, 131.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-37.
- ⁵⁶ AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, February 21, 1934.
- ⁵⁷ See, for example, *ibid.*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous 1934 Report: Questionnaire/Report Card, 1 December 1933-30 November 1934, submission date January 10, 1935; AGBU Ayn el-Arous 1941 Report: Questionnaire/Report Card, 1 December 1940-30 November 1941, submission date February 15, 1942; AGBU Ayn el-Arous 1951 Report: Questionnaire/Report Card, 1 January 1951-31 December 1951, submission date April 10, 1952.
- ⁵⁸ AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, May 24, 1944.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, September 27, 1941.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Hagop Ghazarian and Friends to the AGBU Cairo (Regional) Board, March 14, 1934. For the roster of families interested in repatriation to Soviet Armenia, see Appendix.
- ⁶¹ AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Cairo Regional Board to Hagop Ghazarian, March 23, 1934.
- ⁶² *Deghegagir Suriahay Oknutian Khachi Getronagan Varchutian yev Masnadjigheru, 30 Abril 1935-30 Abril 1936, yev Hashvegshir ou Kim. Badkm. Joghovi Voroshoumner* (Report of the Syrian Armenian Relief Cross Central Committee and Chapters, 30 April 1935 – 30 April 1936, and Accounts and Resolutions of the 3rd Delegates' Meeting), Aleppo, A. Der-Sahagian Printing, 1936, pp. 8-9, 30-31.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-16, 33-37.
- ⁶⁴ Kévorkian and Tachjian, vol. 2, pp. 313-14.
- ⁶⁵ AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, June 6, 1941.
- ⁶⁶ *Keghart Souriahay Darekirk* (Keghart Syrian Armenian Yearbook), 4th year Hayg Barigian, Robert Jebejian, and Louisa Khabayan-Jebejian (eds.), AGBU Bibliography Committee, Aleppo, 1991, pp. 175, 178-79.
- ⁶⁷ AGBU Archives, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, June 6, 1941.
- ⁶⁸ Puzant Torigian, *Badmutiun Hay Marmnagrtagan Enthanur Miutian, vol. I, Esgizpen Minchev 1938 Tvagan* (History of the Armenian General Athletic Association, from the Beginning to 1938), Beirut, Armenian Catholicosate of Cilicia Press, 1995, pp. 37-40.
- ⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, vol. II, (1940-1974), p. 219.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Pakhchinian, pp. 21-22.

⁷² Interview with Angel Melkonian, September 14, 2017, Glendale, CA; telephone interview with Loucine Balabanian Tedjirian, September 21, 2017, Granada Hills, CA - Burbank, CA; interview with Yesayan, June 15, 2017.

⁷³ The school name “Noubarian” is mentioned in Hagop Cholakian, *Utsunamiag Halebi Azkayin Sahagian Varjarani 1927-2007* (Eightieth Year Anniversary of the National Sahagian School of Aleppo 1927-2007), Aleppo, Board of Trustees of National Sahagian School/Arevelk Press, 2007, p. 44.

⁷⁴ Interview with Balabanian Tedjirian.

⁷⁵ Barigian, Jebejian, and Khabayan-Jebejian, p. 175.

⁷⁶ Interview with Hermine Chouldjian, September 24, 2015, North Hollywood, CA.

⁷⁷ AGBU Archives, Cairo, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to AGBU Cairo Regional Board, April 27, 1934.

⁷⁸ Kévorkian and Tachjian, vol. 2, pp. 343, 346-47.

⁷⁹ AGBU Archives, Cairo, File *Ayn el-Arous*, AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter to the AGBU Cairo Regional Board, August 8, 1936, June 24, 1937; idem, AGBU Cairo Regional Board to AGBU Ayn el-Arous Chapter, October 6, 1938; *Deghegaker Suriahay Oknutian Khachi Shrchanayin Varchutian 4 Hunvar 1939-30 Abril 1940* (Report of the Syrian Armenian Relief Cross Regional Committee 4 January 1939-30 April 1940), Aleppo, Der-Sahagian Press, 1940, p. 7; *Deghegaker Siuriahay Oknutian Khachi Getronagan Varchutian yev Masnadjugheru*, pp. 30-31; Pakhchinian, pp. 21-22.

⁸⁰ Cholakian, pp. 7-18.

⁸¹ Pakhchinian, p. 35.

Սուրիոյ Այն Արուս Գիւղի Հայօճախը (Ամփոփում)

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Հրատարկութիւններու, արխիւային նիւթերու, հարցազրոյցներու, յուշերու, անձնական յիշողութիւններու միջոցով հաւաքուած նիւթի հիմամբ հեղինակը կը վերականգնէ մինչեւ 1950ականներու աւարտը մեծամասնութեամբ հայաբնակ Այն Արուս գիւղին կեանքին պատումը:

Հեղինակը կը ներկայացնէ հայոց այդ գիւղ հաստատուելուն նախաեղեռնեան հանգրուանը, ապա՝ եղեռնէն ետք հոն հաստատուած հայ գաղթականութեան կեանքի պայմանները, կենցաղը, առօրեան, տան եւ առտոնին աշխատանքային բաժանումը, այդ աշխատանքներուն ընթացքին տեղաբնիկ օգնականներուն առնչումը, անասնաբուծութիւնը, երկրագործութիւնը եւ հաւաքական աշխատանքներուն, մարանն ու հանդերձանքը, արհեստները, արաբ քոչուոր ցեղերու հետ յարաբերութիւնները, դպրոցական ու եկեղեցական կեանքը, մշակութային թէ մարզական միութիւններուն գործունէութիւնը, հանգստութեան ժամանցները, ասանդական տօնակատարութիւնները եւ.: