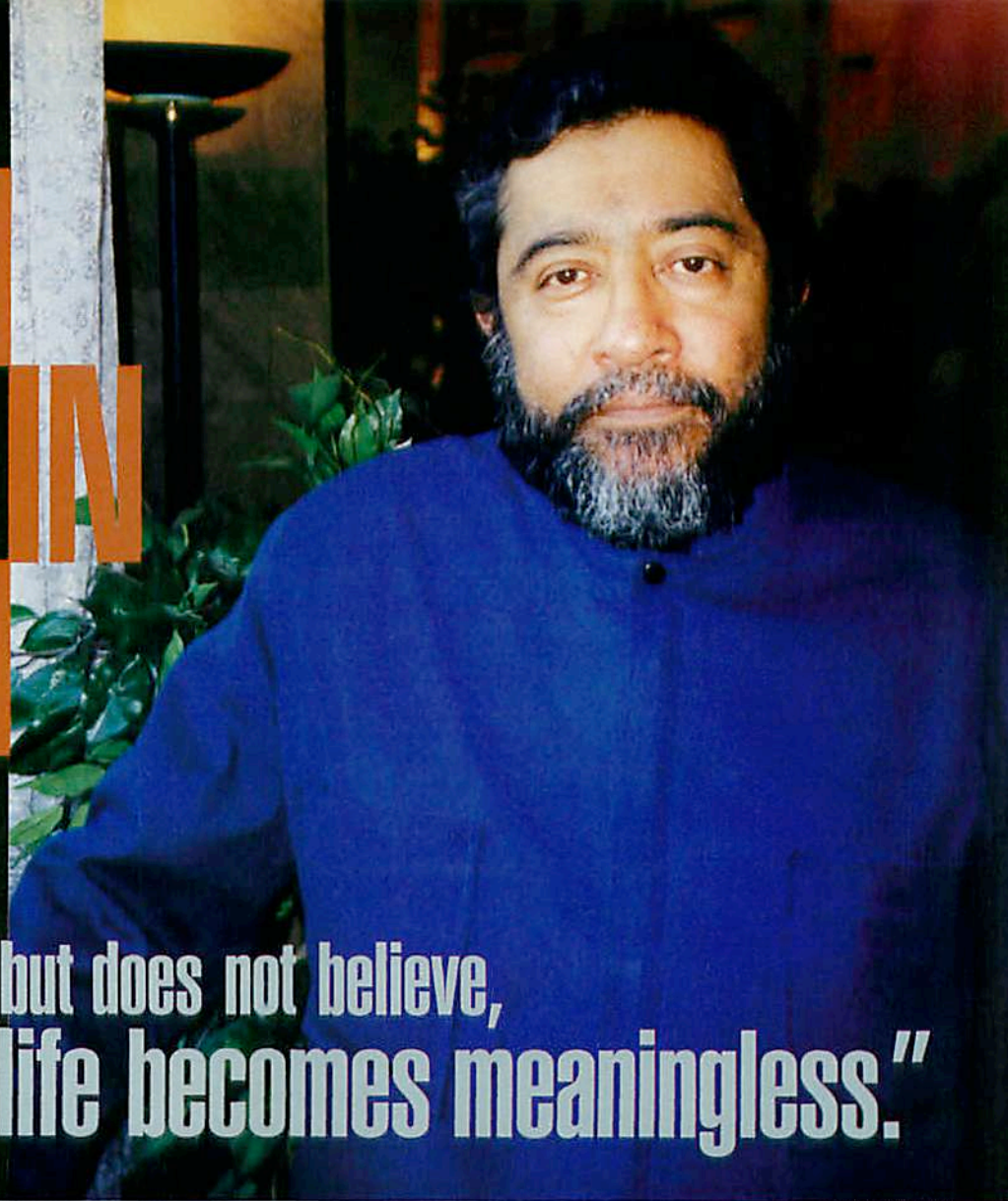


SEVEN YEARS IN PRISON



**"If one suffers, but does not believe,
life becomes meaningless."**

HRATCH TCHILINGIRIAN

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Father Manuel Yergatian, a 33-year-old priest and citizen of Turkey was arrested in October 1980 while preparing to leave Istanbul en route to Jerusalem.

He was charged with anti-Turkish activities in the years when various acts of political violence against Turks by Armenians were reported. His whereabouts were not known and no one was able to contact him. Archbishop Shnork Kalustian, Patriarch of Istanbul, was called to testify before the military court. The Turkish press reported on the trial of the "priest who is Turkey's enemy." The US State Department turned down a request to intervene in the case. Amnesty International did investigate the arrest. After his conviction, Yergatian served nearly seven years in Turkish prisons. Since his release, he has remained silent about his ordeal. At AIM's request, Fr. Yergatian, 46, describes for the first time and in great detail, what happened when

he was arrested and convicted on charges of inciting terrorism.

Yergatian Speaks

I was born in Istanbul in 1954. I received my primary education at the St. Hovanes School in Gedikpasha. In 1968, I went to Jerusalem and studied at the Armenian Seminary for 10 years. Upon graduation, I was ordained a deacon and returned to Istanbul for military service in 1973. After completing two years of military service, on August 25, 1976, I was ordained a celibate priest by Archbishop Shnork Kalustian, the Armenian Patriarch of Turkey.

I continued private studies with Patriarch Kalustian and through correspondence with a university in Oxford. After serving in Istanbul for two years, in 1978 I returned to Jerusalem and became the dean of the seminary there. At the same time, I studied art restoration at the

Hebrew University.

This is how my almost seven year – six years and eight months to be exact – imprisonment started.

The Arrest

When they arrested me at the airport, they took me to a room for questioning. They opened my luggage, asked a few questions and then asked me to leave the room. When I was brought back, they pointed to certain maps, books and documents, and asked about them. I explained those maps and documents had not been in my luggage. They insisted they were found in my suitcase. That's when I realized something was going on.

In fact, I only saw those "documents" up close when the judge showed them to me in the court. One of them was a Soviet Armenian newspaper, *Hayreniki Dsayn* [Voice of the Homeland]. There were other papers published

in Armenia, there were some publications related to the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA). It was a big set up.

During the questioning, they repeatedly asked about the ASALA leadership, how they operate and who the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) leaders were. I kept telling them I have no connection with either ASALA or ARF or any other organization. They insisted that I knew but was not telling them.

It was obvious that they weren't sure how to proceed, but they had to find a way to punish me. In those days, the military government wanted to show that they are fighting against terrorism and punishing the culprits.

From the airport they took me to Samandag, the central headquarters of Turkish intelligence services located in a deserted area away from Istanbul, where if they killed you no one would ever know. There, they locked me up in a little bathroom. And that's where they started the torture.

They beat you until you say yes to whatever they say. The beating does not stop until you "confess." I stayed there about 30 or 31 days and I was beaten - heavily beaten - every day. Those people had no conscience.

After years in Jerusalem, my knowledge of Turkish had diminished. I mixed Armenian, Arabic, Hebrew and English words in my responses. My Turkish was not fluent. They couldn't understand this. They thought I was hiding things from them and beat me even more.

After the month-long interrogation, I signed some papers. They blindfolded me and brought me back to Istanbul.

There were seven others arrested in connection with my case. They were also beaten up.

For about 15 days, we stayed at a place called Selimiye, the central military prison in Uskudar. Subsequently, we were brought before a judge who asked us a few questions. Then he announced my arrest. The other seven were released but were called to give testimony. They were not allowed to leave the country.

Remember, all this was happening in the years of the military regime.

The state prosecutor charged me with turning the Jerusalem Seminary students into terrorists. As the dean of the seminary, they said I was involved with terroristic propaganda. I was also accused of naming my dogs (in Jerusalem) Aratirk. That was absolute nonsense, as everyone knew that I had named them Tiger and Joyce. The court knew that this was absolute fabrication as the then-Patriarch of Jerusalem had even sent the official registration and medical records of my dogs to the Turkish court.

We should also remember that in those

days the ASALA was quite active in its anti-Turkish campaigns. Indeed, the presiding judge declared from the bench that during my arrest and subsequent trial the activities of ASALA had increased. They wanted to connect me with terrorism. And ASALA's operations did not help my case. The court thought that because I was in Turkish custody, ASALA had intensified its activities. The truth is that I had nothing to do with any organization, let alone with terrorists.

My whole arrest and trial was a set-up because they wanted to find a victim. They wanted to show that they are doing something against terrorism. But the truth remains that they could not find an iota of evidence to back their accusations.

Life in Prison

My prison life was more horrible than the beatings during the initial interrogation period. Imagine you are in one cell with 80-100 people you do not know. Fortunately, they were all leftists. The other prisoners did not hurt me, but there was tremendous psychological torture in the prison.

They didn't allow you to go to the toilet, they delayed bringing you daily food, they wouldn't take you to a doctor, they wouldn't give you medicine if you're sick, they would turn off the lights if you were reading a book, if you stood up they told you to sit down. They employed different kinds of psychological pressure. Other guards would take you out and knock you unconscious, just for their amusement.

The beatings were so frequent that one day, to my amazement, all my cellmates - all 80 of them - formed a human shield around me to protect me. They told the guards "you have to crush us to get this man, that enough is enough. I'll never forget that incident. It was a miracle of God that on that day I was not beaten. The following day, the prison chief came and my cellmates told him to his face about my beatings. The chief had no idea. Indeed, he told my cellmates that he had come to transfer me to another place where I would be protected from other prisoners. But my cellmates told him that it was his own guards who were beating me. The chief was so upset he transferred the old guards and brought in new ones. I believe this was in response to pressure on the Turkish government on my behalf.

There was great interest in my case in Europe. While in prison, I received many letters from Catholic and Protestant churches and organizations. I used to correspond with them regularly. In fact, I got so many letters that two of my cellmates filled two large albums with the stamps from the envelopes.

Many people tried to help me. I cannot for-

get the efforts of the late Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Yeghishhe Derterian, who tried to gain my release through diplomatic channels. The government of the Netherlands was helpful as well. Then, there was a priest from the Benedictine monastery in Jerusalem who went to Germany especially for my case and met with then-Chancellor Helmut Kohl. Subsequently, during a meeting with Turkish President Turgut Ozal, Kohl presented a petition to the Turkish state to release 44 prisoners. I was the 45th person on the list. My name had been added at the end with a pencil. Ozal agreed to release the 44, but hesitated about the 45th. But later, they agreed to include me. My impression is that they did not want to treat me as a special case and therefore I was released when a general amnesty was declared, not only for the 45 people on Kohl's list, but for thousands of other prisoners.

I served for three years in Istanbul prisons. Later they took me to Chanakale, up the Dardanelles, which was a comparatively more comfortable place. During those later years, there was no torture.

I used to pass my time in prison by painting. But at the beginning, during the years of constant beating, I couldn't even read a book. Those first three years were completely wasted. After the transfer to Chanakale, and in view of the pressure from Europe, the prison guards paid more attention to me. They put me in a cell with only 20 inmates, they brought me brushes and paint. The cells were cleaner and most of the inmates were leftists, most of them knew me since we were transferred from the same prison. They were very nice people.

I painted from early morning until late at night. Everyday, the judge and the chief of the prison had to see me. If I was sick, they would get me medical attention. This was not because I was a nice guy, but because of pressure from Europe on my behalf.

Unfortunately, I did not have an Armenian Bible with me. They wouldn't allow it. I had an English Bible and used to spend my time reading it and painting. But I left all my paintings there. I didn't want to be reminded of my time in prison. I used to paint beautiful places and abstract themes. I also painted postcards for the inmates.

One of the things that bothered me a lot was the silence of the Armenian Patriarchate in Istanbul. Throughout my imprisonment, I did not hear anything from the Patriarchate. As a priest, I would have expected some interest in my condition. In fact, since I did not have any money to send a cable, the prison chief himself sent word to the Patriarchate several times to arrange for a pastoral visit, for someone to come and talk with

me during the allowed visitation times, to give me some moral support. But no one came.

Towards the end of my time, I wrote an angry letter to the Patriarch. It was only then that Father Hovan and Sister Hripsime visited me. And the only other person who visited me was Diramayr Mutafyan, the mother of the current Patriarch, Archbishop Mesrob. She loved me and was like a mother to me. Since no one else was willing to come see me, she insisted that she visit. The prison was more than a two-hour drive from Istanbul. I am immensely grateful to these people.

On the day of my release from prison – May 17, 1986 – it was Bishop Mesrob (now Patriarch) who came to greet me. He was waiting at the gate with a few other community members. We embraced and went to the Patriarchate.

Freedom

My normal life started again. Of course, it was difficult to adjust. It was tough to deal with freedom again.

When I was freed from prison, there were no teeth left in my mouth – because of the beatings. My heartbeat had increased and several arteries were contracted. In fact, years later when I had heart surgery in Holland, the doctors told me that I had already had two heart attacks caused by the tortures. They said it's possible not to realize that one is having a heart attack. The left side of my heart was dead and, miraculously, I lived in prison for six years with only half of my heart functioning. This was only a miracle of God.

When I went to prison, St. James was with me. I said a prayer on that first day of torture. I prayed to St. James and said that I have served you as a seminarian and as a priest. If I am guilty, take my life, if I am innocent, then let me live. And God was with me. Throughout the torture and beatings, I sensed a certain power. I used to curse the police and the guards and laugh. I had never cursed in my life before. They would beat me and I would laugh.

After my release, I served for two years in the Istanbul Patriarchate. And it was another miracle of God, that in 1990 I accompanied Patriarch Karekin Kazanjian to Holy Ejmiatsin for the Blessing of the Holy Muron. This was my first trip outside Turkey after prison. When we returned, I was appointed pastor of the Armenian community in the Netherlands.

Fortunately, the Turkish government had

issued a general amnesty during the time of Turgut Ozal and I was able to leave the country without any problem. Indeed, it was a miracle that I was able to obtain a passport. In 1993, my passport expired and I applied to the Turkish Embassy in Holland to renew it. I was told the passport was just an exit permit and not officially recorded in state records. I realized that the passport agency officer had kindly arranged for me to leave the country.

The night before my operation, I said my prayers and read my book of prayers. During the procedure, I felt that my soul was walking around the operating room. A very bright, white light hit my face. In the light, I heard a voice speaking neither Armenian nor English, nor Turkish nor any language that I had heard, but I was able to understand it. The voice said, you will be better and started to touch my heart. I felt very comfortable. Afterward, the light turned into darkness.

When I opened my eyes after the operation, I could not walk or eat. But within a week I started to learn to walk again. I was like a child again. I realized that God is with me again.

God has always been beside me so that I can serve Him. Even though I still have medical complications, every morning when I open my eyes, I thank God because it is God who allowed me to live.

Even though the doctors have told me to retire and work as little as possible, celebrating the liturgy and serving the community gives me strength and vigor to go on in life.

Reflections

While the memory of those days is fading away, it comes back to me whenever I see a film or have a conversation. But I smile because those days are gone.

Many people ask me about those days, but I try to avoid the subject. It is a very personal experience. It is better not to discuss it, especially when people start their questions with 'Who betrayed you?' Whatever happened, happened. If there were people who betrayed me, then their fate is in God's hands. I do not denounce anyone. But it is clear to me that someone in the community had a hand in my arrest and conviction. My interrogators knew every detail, every step of my life. The only thing that I'm not sure about is whether this person was from Istanbul or Jerusalem.

Still, life is based on faith. I know, from my experience, that when a person is suffering severely, he calls upon God to accompany him. In our comfortable, daily life we forget God. But man has to remember the word of God.

The soul needs the hope of faith to live. Deeds without faith are meaningless. If one suffers, but does not believe, life becomes meaningless. I believe that Christ will save us and that's what gives me hope in my life. One has to be ready to answer for all his deeds in this life.



Yergatian pictured in the Turkish daily Hürriyet on October 3, 1983.

I was actually convicted for 14 years and 8 months, to be followed by four and a half years in a labor camp near Erzerum. But because of the general amnesty, I only served six years and eight months. Thousands of others were released as well.

Parish Priest

Since 1990, I have been serving as a pastor in Holland. We have a very nice community (about 10,000) of Armenians from Turkey, Iran, Iraq and more recently from Armenia. We have church services every Sunday in Amsterdam and a visiting priest from France conducts services in Almelo, about two hours away.

My father died while I was in prison. I had lost my mother a long time ago. I have a sister, who lives here in the same town and helps me a lot. I also have a brother who lives in France.

In 1997, I underwent open-heart surgery and I am alive today only because God intervened. I opened my eyes two months after the operation, which the doctors told me lasted for over 20 hours. When I woke up, I had lost my memory. I did not know where I was.