



Savva Achileos, I Saw the Holy Light

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PROLOGUE

Many things have been told and have been written about the Holy LIGHT. However, no matter what has been recorded, the Holy LIGHT still remains an enigmatic phenomenon. This mysterious Light spontaneously and inexplicably pours forth every Holy Saturday from the Most Holy and Life-giving Tomb of the Resurrected Savior Christ.

During the spring of 1952 I was able by the grace of God to venerate for the first time the sanctified places of Jerusalem. Most importantly I wanted to be present at the magnificent services of the Holy Passion in order to see the Holy LIGHT.

Since then many years have passed. The Holy LIGHT and the unique service of that special day, always remained in my soul a mystery. No one was able to give me an explanation regarding this Divine LIGHT and to satisfy the unanswered questions which had anchored in my mind.

What is the Holy LIGHT? WHAT IS THE HOLY FIRES source?

What happens during the service of every Holy Saturday when the LIGHT is to appear and which at some point its brilliance bursts into aflame?

Who receives this Divine LIGHT and then imparts it to all who are in attendance?

These questions and many more remained without answers for me.

In 1980 during Easter week, I returned for the fourth time to the Holy Land with a group of faithful Pilgrims. We felt fortunate to visit again the memorable places which made us feel more warmly and intensely the presence of God.

One morning, when there were relatively few pilgrims about, {6} our group met the Holy Man, Fr. Mitrofanis, at the entrance of the Holy Sepulchre. We saw a most amiable spare figure in this Holy Geronda. His ascetic face was aglow. His sweet gentle smile rivaled that of angels. He was of medium height. His pure white hair bore witness to the toil and the asceticism of this pious old monk. True to his duty as a vigilant guard of the Holy Tomb, he served with much fervor, faith, and devotion.

After a few minutes of greeting and making acquaintance, Fr. Mitrofanis described shocking scenes of his troubled life. He recited in detail the hardships and the sufferings he endured in order to reach the Holy Land. With humility he mentioned the honored position which he held as guard of the Holy Sepulchre. He, too, was deeply perplexed with questions, regarding the Holy LIGHT.

As confirmation of this detailed narration he told us how he finally came to witness the spontaneous appearance of the LIGHT, the Mystery of the centuries, the event which every faithful Christian desires in awe to see.

These detailed historic events as told by Fr. Mitrofanis, we made every effort, by the grace of Christ, to present in a book. We make a plea to our devout readers, that through them, may God be merciful to the now deceased Geronda, to the author, and to the translators. However a more fervent plea to the Lord is that His mercy and blessings be bestowed upon the readers of this small volume and to all those who travel to the Holy Land.

Archimandrite Savvas Achilleos Agios Georgios - Korea 162 33 Byron

Athens, Greece.{7}

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1. THE FIRST YEARS OF MY LIFE.

Miltiadis Papaioannou was the given name of the 86 year old monk about whom this book is written. He was holy, guileless, humble, and quiet as befits the devoted and faithful follower of Jesus. He was truly an exemplary figure overflowing with godliness. For 57 whole years he remained standing during the greater part of day and night as a diligent guard of the Holy Sepulchre. This Holy place is where the heart of Orthodoxy resides and from which flows endless love and grace.

On the day of his monastic ordination, Miltiadis Papaioannou received, from the Patriarch of Jerusalem DAMIANOS I, the name of MITROFANIS Papaioannou. A meeting with the Holy Geronda was able to inspire in the visitor and pilgrim an unlimited trust. His clear and sparkling eyes calmed the soul of those who conversed with him. His youthful face, in spite of his old age, appeared as if it were illumined by the LIGHT and the heavenly grace of the sanctified environs.

In the presence of such a person, one literally was to hang from every word coming from this Holy man and unreservedly to submit to the truth of whatever he said. {8}

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2. THE MEETING WITH THE HOLY GERONDA.

It was morning during which we found time for a respite, to live in our hearts and minds the Holy Passions of Christ our Savior, the Cross, the Burial, and His Resurrection.

The Holy Geronda was waiting at the entrance of the Holy Sepulchre for the first few pilgrims, who were arriving early. As soon as Fr. Mitrofanis saw us from afar, he recognized that we were Orthodox Christians from Greece. People from all over the world came to worship at the Tomb of Christ. It was not easy for one to ascertain who every pilgrim was and from where he came, but Fr. Mitrofanis had no difficulty in realizing that we were fellow countrymen. He was waiting for us to approach him, and after greeting us, he began to talk.

"Do you come from the Motherland of Greece, the free and Christian country? Welcome. May your pilgrimage be a blessing to you, my children. May Christ grant that you come every year to worship at this most sacred place."

We thanked him, we kissed his hand. And the holy man, as if we were known to him for many years, began immediately to converse with us. Little by little the warm and cordial conversation changed into an account of the life of the old ascetic. He began telling us of shocking experiences which he had survived by the grace of the Resurrected Christ. {9}

With much eagerness we wanted to hear the continuation and the end. As we listened we often held our breath as he related unbelievable events. Sometimes our eyes filled with tears of sympathy. At other times, a shiver seized us as we heard harrowing tales of his misadventures. Often we interrupted him in anticipation to learn more.

"What happened then, holy Geronda?" And he, full of emotion as if he were in the midst of these events, was reliving his hardships and his agonies. With a skillful and artistic turnabout of his words, he returned to his youthful years. After a few moments of silence, with simplicity and charm, he began to tell us his life story.

"In 1921 I was exactly 21 years old. My family was from the village of POULANTZAKI in the beautiful and renowned district of Pontos in Asia Minor called KERASOUNTA. During the days of my youth there was a great persecution of the Christian Orthodox by the Turkish Moslems, when an unprecedented slaughter of the unprotected population was a daily occurrence. Women, children, and the elderly were killed indiscriminately. The rest, in order to save their lives, fled from place to place to hide. One thousand families from our area were massacred. They were added to the legion of martyrs of the faith. Another one thousand people were arrested, imprisoned, and made to suffer unimaginable tortures. Under the pressures of the horrible tribulations, {10} afflictions, and hardships, their lives ended. Thus, they, too, received a heavenly reward for their sufferings.

For those who lived, more trials and miseries awaited them. After their unfortunate arrest, they were transferred to a distant place in Kurdistan. I was among those surviving victims. My parents and my brothers did not live. They were killed and they died for their faith and love for their homeland. I was not able to be with them, to help, or even to hear their last words. It was a real hell.

Without bread and water and with pain, fear, and agony in our hearts, heaven knows how we endured for two months the terrible wayworn trek from Kerasounta to Kurdistan. During that time we were cruelly mistreated and persecuted. Upon reaching our destination, those who survived were fewer than those who had died.

[Black and white picture {11}](#)

It is imperative that the documented but seldom mentioned facts of the Turkish genocide, as ordered by Kemal Ataturk, of the Greek population in Asia Minor be publicized. How insanely ironic that such barbarous events as those perpetrated early in the 20th century should be repeated at the close of the century. The Western Powers, who supposedly regard themselves as Christian and highly civilized, used NATO and the UN to attack unceasingly and mercilessly the helpless Serbian population, simply because they are Christian Orthodox.

For those who lived, more misery and tribulations were in store for us. There was no food or water. Bodily rest was forbidden. The harrowing journey ended with unbearable forced labor such as the first Christians were compelled to do. The production of "gravel" had destroyed the little strength of the body that was left. Abandoned to the fury and harshness of the barbarians, we were living dead who could hardly move. We were ordered to break stones, at times during the burning heat of the sun, and at other times during bitter and severe cold.

Prisoners were dying under the pressures of the desperate circumstances.

A slight respite came my way when I was ordered to distribute the little bread allowed to each prisoner. It was prepared under primitive and filthy conditions with dough in which was kneaded all kinds of offensive materials and finally baked in a sooty and grimy oven. {12}

[Black and white picture](#)

Despite the awful hardships, I felt God's mercy and love in the depths of my soul. I was thankful that my life was spared because eventually a blessing presented itself.

I say this because in this distant region of Dieberkir where I was a prisoner, I learned by word-of-mouth that nearby was a small subjugated community of Greek Orthodox Christians. After much pleading, I was granted permission to visit it. There I found a small church and the village priest. With my few hours of freedom, I went to confession and then I received Holy Communion. I was overjoyed and I felt, in spite of the afflictions and dangers, that I was in Heaven. A mysterious sublime grace hovered over me and I was immersed in an ocean of spiritual bliss. At that moment, I made a promise to God - a heartfelt vow. {13}

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3. THE PROMISE OF MY LIFE

The Holy man remained silent for a few moments. When he raised his head, we saw a tear-filled face. Then what happened? Please tell us, Geronda? After a deep sigh, Fr. Mitrofanis continued, "When I left the Church that day enveloped in the invisible presence of Divine Grace, I raised my eyes to Heaven and said, my God, help me to survive the inflictions from my captors and to serve the Holy Land which You sanctified with Your presence on earth, where Your divine feet walked. Help me to become your servant, to minister to the holy ascetics who guard and protect your sacred places. After I am free from this barbarous and inhumane imprisonment, I want to serve, O Lord, humbly wherever I can be useful. Help me to reach there where your Grace is, and to perform even the lowest of tasks and whatever may be entrusted to me".

I said these words, Father Mitrofanis continued, and I felt inside me a great relief. An invisible hand caressed my face.

The heaviness, that was pressing on me because of my enforced confinement, left me and I felt, as if I were flying above the earth. My tired eyes filled with tears with the thoughts and feelings which seized me and did not help me to see where I was walking. I was seeing other Worlds in my mind - worlds spiritual, holy, glorious and {14} blessed. I was seeing not my slavery, the pain, the hunger, the lack of sleep and all of the other sufferings and hardships. I was seeing the Holy Lands, there where the Lord was born and was crucified.

However inside me in this blessed atmosphere of the mystical and invisible, another strange and ominous world emerged in me. It raised its threatening stature, by sowing seeds of desperation. It wanted persistently and revengefully to cut the wings of my soul. It sought to nail me down, to the earth of injustice. Before my eyes there arose the phantom of war, the dangers, the wild and inhumane slaughters, the indefinite future, the tomorrow with the unanswered questions. A battle strange and stubborn was created inside me. It struggled to strangle and to choke the heavenly feelings which delighted and thrilled my soul."

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4. THE FEARFUL WITCH.

With these thoughts which the holy man had, awful wretched memories overtook him. He felt, however, as we believed, a humble, but joyful relief because he had made a public confession to us. He told of his life in much detail. He relived all that his stormy life had endured. This recollection intensely impressed the stigmas of hardships and bitter memories on his personality. Again he lifted his face, looked at us and continued: {15} "As I was returning from the Church and being tested by the battle of my feelings, I saw from afar a woman, seemingly an apparition who was holding something in her hand. It was a piece of cloth. She had raised it so as to be seen by the people nearby and she waved it in the air sometimes to the left and sometimes to the right.

[Black and white picture](#)

As she waved it, she was shouting something in the Turkish language. Since she was yelling from a distance, it was impossible to distinguish what she was saying.

As I approached her, I gradually began to see the characteristics of her face. It was a face black and fearful. Her purple lips were swollen; her teeth, sparse and discolored.

Her eyes as red-hot coals and her whole gruesome appearance brought to mind the abyss of hell.

It really was a demon in the form of a woman. In her shouting she was boasting of her evil powers. "FALTZE (witch) FALTZE. I foretell the future I foretell the future " And in the restless movements of her body, the {16} sound of a bell which she held in her left hand, was heard.

In hearing that she could presage the future, I was tempted to use her to solve my quandaries. A question immediately arose in my mind. When will the war and the slaughter end? I wanted to know when Nothing else. This was an opportunity to shed a little light on the unknown and dark future of my life. I approached with fear, but with the determination to resolve my uncertainties. The fearful witch was a living delusion, claiming the ability to peer into the future. The wicked demon that was hiding inside her had influenced curious passers-by who in despair wanted answers to their life problems, too.

I felt a strange force pushing me in the direction of this frightening creature. It was as if I was pulled by an invisible hand toward her and trying to join us. I took a few steps forward. Just a little space separated me from her. With a tremulous voice, I asked:

"When will this war end? When? Answer me and ask me whatever price you want."

To my agonizing question, the wild face of the witch began to quiver and to twitch. A dark evil world, wilder than the first, pushed the witch into a rage. Her eyes appeared ready to pop out of their sockets. Her face changed color. From black it became purple. Between her spaced teeth her tongue began to utter strange and peculiar words about events and incidents. Only with the help of the evil spirit could she be cognizant of her utterances. {17}

Now she continued in Turkish:

"What a handsome young man you are! How handsome! Your face shines," she screeched. And in her cackling she was heard to speak to me in broken Greek. "You received Communion. You are a cantor." This unclean spirit did not have the power to come near me, because I had received the Body and the Blood of Christ and because I had chanted for the glory of the Lord. Yes, chanting was a balsam for my troubled soul. It chased away despair. It strengthened me during the hours of my suffering.

Then these questions arose in my mind:

What are the explanations regarding light and darkness? What is the relation between God and evil? Suddenly the witch attempted to approach me with frightful screams. However no demon had the power to face the grace, which surrounded me by the fact of Holy Communion, which I had received only a little while ago. God protected me.

I backed off a few steps; I tried to keep away from her unbearable foul breath as she came towards me. In my fear I was ready to flee, but I had to ask her one thing. "How do you know all this?" However, with her mutterings, groanings, and gnashing of teeth, my fearful question was lost as a small stone disappearing in foaming waves. I remember only that she turned to me and in desperation she replied in an agitated {18} voice, "You have no country here. Leave. Far away Leave. Far away A GREAT ONE is waiting for you Never abandon the chanting Never Never."

And in this persistent "never" her words faded away as the voice of a drowning person in a storm. Her leering gaze was seeing other worlds. Her mouth became deformed. It was filled with foam and she was shaking all over.

I was overcome. Her few words repeatedly were echoing in my ears.

"You have no country here. Leave. Far away Leave. Far away A GREAT ONE is waiting for you Never abandon the chanting Never Never"

"My God", I was saying to myself, "who told her to reveal to me these words? Help me, my God." I was so perturbed as I was returning to the camp, that I did not realize I had reached it. There, all the Christian prisoners were gathered. I walked skeptically and reached the bakery. My daily work began again.

With pain in my soul I distributed the bread of slavery to my fellow men."

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5. MY MIRACULOUS ESCAPE

"Since that day," the holy man continued, "a strange passion was born inside me. I wanted to escape, to leave, to live free. But frightening misgivings loomed to discourage me in my determination to flee.

How could I succeed with such a plan? First of all, I {19} was located in a most dangerous situation in isolated and unfamiliar territory. Even if I did succeed to escape, where would I go? From the little geography I knew, I surmised that after Kurdistan I should reach the border of Syria, then Lebanon, and vaguely I pictured Palestine in the distance. My greatest difficulty, however, was something else. What about a passport?. Somewhere along the way I would be arrested. Then what would I do? My thought was: I am a refugee and a prisoner now. I will still be a refugee and a prisoner after being arrested. I kept saying to myself, that it is better to be in any other hands except in the hands of the Turks. I will tell the truth. I will tell about my life, my pain, and my sufferings. God will enlighten those who will appear before me. I will tell them my destination. I will relate my desire and the promise of my life. God will disclose to them my innocence and through God's intervention they will help me. God, only God.

With mixed thoughts of fear, joy, and anticipation, I outlined in my mind a scheme for escape. With scrupulous care and every precaution I prepared a sack with a blanket, some bread, and some water. The rising of the sun would show me in which direction I should go. One night when I was certain that no one was awake, I made the sign of the cross, I prayed, and I slipped out into the darkness towards the exit of the camp. My escape was made with success.

No one, not even my dearly beloved fellow prisoners had the slightest notion of my plan. {20}

After my escape I began to prepare myself for the myriad unforeseen eventualities awaiting me. I realized I would have to pass through mountains and plains. I must hide whenever I see people.

I must travel continuously night and day without stopping. Only when my fatigued and tortured body reached its limits, I would lie down, no matter where, in order to regain strength and then to continue on my way.

The first hours were frightful indeed. I was running as a deer chased by hounds. I was afraid that maybe the infidel guards would discover my absence and order a search for me. All that night was an unforgettable and perilous venture. I seemed to hear voices, screams, mutterings, and all manner of sounds all around me. I was haunted by the thought that soldiers were trying to hunt me down in order to arrest and to persecute me. In my mind I could see my captors, after discovering my escape, lash into fury with vengeance. Then I saw myself on the run, fleeing panic-stricken, so as not to be captured and returned in chains to confinement and finally to be executed.

The sunrise with its sweet smile of the day met me near the Syrian border. Joy lessened my fatigue. The fact that I was young was in my favor. I was 23 years old when I dared to risk an escape under the most hazardous conditions. I disregarded dangers, pains, and exhaustion! I had, in spite of the hardships, much strength and! endurance. I was able to confront hunger and thirst and {21} I did not succumb to the rigors I had to endure.

After I took the required measures and the necessary precautions, I entered Syria. I passed the border without anyone seeing me. I advanced quite a bit, always on pathways in the mountains. Suddenly I discovered that I was nearing an inhabited district. It was the city of Halepi.

For a while I sat to rest and to recover from the ordeals of my flight. From a vantage point on the mountainside, the town was spread down below before me.

After regaining my strength I made my way towards the city slowly waiting for the sun to set so as not to give myself away to curious eyes. I was walking steadily in the streets just as any other person. I showed neither fear nor curiosity. I ate a little bread and I filled my small container with water from the first fountain I found. I began to orientate myself towards the exit of the city. Soon I was in the direction toward my goal - Jerusalem!

I climbed mountains, following paths, wherever they were. I waded through rivers. My journey continued day and night without pause. My steps hastened in anticipation of my destiny. There was no fear in me and no loss of courage to deter my efforts. I never felt loneliness. An invisible companion seemed to be guiding me. Never in my life had I ever imagined to find myself in such strange and dire difficulties. Finally I made it safely past fierce-looking border sentinels. I hurried on and before me appeared a great magnificent building. For a few minutes {22} I looked at it with apprehension until I realized that it was a hospital.

Now I felt safe because I was in no danger to be queried. This gave me a sense of security. Taking advantage of the quietness and the isolation, I sat to rest. My feet felt heavy and it was with great difficulty that I could move them. Taking out my one and only blanket, I spread it on the ground. Tired as I was from the long trek, I fell asleep for I don't know how long. The only thing I couldn't forget was my indescribable fatigue and exhaustion. But my plan always remained the same and my destination unchanged.

At last I woke up from a terribly heavy sleep which had rested me tremendously. I went through the city and reached its bustling port. What did I notice? People all about, ships at the docks, movement, sounds! I saw the Greek flag on some of the ships and I heard the Greek language. Greece had sent ships to Beirut to pick up her persecuted citizens who had miraculously escaped from the genocide in Turkey.

Our mother country was transporting them to their free homeland for survival and safety. Faintly I heard inside me a beckoning voice saying to me, "There's an opportunity. Don't miss it. Go to Greece now that you have the chance. No passport is required. What do you need of the Holy Land? The promise you've made, forget it. Here is a turning point in your life." {23}

I fought much with this temptation, to persist in my plans or to go to Greece? To fulfill my destiny, to keep my vow, or to forget my promise to God? No, No, I repeated. I will continue my journey and I will consider neither the toil nor the difficulties.

So I was on my way again, this time with apathy, and indifference to my movements. I begged for whatever was necessary to appease my hunger. Somehow I again oriented myself to proceed in the right direction toward the Holy Land.

I persisted in my efforts and I gave encouragement to myself with every thought about my goal. My greatest concern was the fact that I had no passport. No one, however, had asked me for any document up to this time. An invisible hand was protecting me constantly. I continued my journey the whole day and the whole night. Before dawn, there before me lay Sidon which was near the end of my destination. I had reached this coastal city after a difficult wayfaring of many days. I encountered mountains, plains, rivers, forests, and caves. I would lie down wherever I found shelter, in order to rest and to regain strength.

After going through Sidon, I reached the next large city, Tyre, also on the coast. As I approached it, the life of Christ on earth came to my mind, the places my Lord visited with His disciples. In Sidon and Tyre, idolatry had signed. In the region of these two cities, there was a Canaanite woman, an idolatress. She went to the {24} compassionate Teacher and asked Him with tears to heal her daughter who was possessed. After a brief conversation, the Lord discovered the trust of that woman, when He told her. "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done as you desire" (Matthew 15:21-28).

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6. THE UNEXPECTED MEETING

The memory of this beautiful Evangelical account seemed to dissipate my fatigue because I felt revived and strengthened to proceed. After a quick prayer I said to myself, "Only a little hardship and then, the end. Only a little courage, and then the fulfillment of my promise."

I continued to wend my way and soon entered Tyre, where again, with some begging, I obtained some food. After a little rest, I traveled on, always taking precautions, so as not to be detected and delayed.

A short distance from the city, where there was a steep uphill I climbed the mountains again because it was necessary to avoid roads and populated areas. My toil and my fatigue seemed to vanish as I chanted and prayed with every step. "If I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for thou art with me."

Suddenly at the turn of the path, unexpectedly I met a villager. There was no time to hide. It was not easy either to retreat or to avoid the meeting. An invisible hand brought me face to face with the stranger. {25}

My meeting with him was so sudden that without realizing it I stopped cold. I looked at him in the eyes with the expression of fear on my face. Inside me I felt the urge to flee, to turn back and to run, no matter in which direction. Something, however, held me and made me not to try anything to avoid this man.

He noticed my difficulty. He stopped and looked at me without saying anything. We both stood there, the one waiting for the other to see who would open his mouth first. I wanted to speak, but what could I say? In what language should I address even a greeting? If he asked me questions, how would I answer? For me, it was one of the most difficult moments since my escape. After I came to myself, I greeted him in the Turkish language. In the meantime, I tried to maintain some composure. While I was still perplexed about how I should react, I heard the villager greet me in Turkish also.

Fear conquered me, but at the same time, joy. With a confused feeling of relief I fell at his feet. I began to kiss them and to plead. "Please, don't give me away, don't betray me," I was telling him over and over

"Who are you?" the villager asked.

"I am a refugee from Turkey. The Turks massacred my parents, my brothers, and all my relatives. I was the only one to be spared. I was arrested with many others and we were held prisoners to be executed. Miraculously I escaped from the camp to save myself. I want to reach {26} the Holy Land, Jerusalem. That is my destination. When the villager heard my plea and learned of the hardships of my life, he began to cry. With a choking sobbing voice he told me of his own life.

"I am an Armenian. I lived like you and witnessed the most brutal slaughter the civilized world has ever known. I saw with my own eyes ferocity in its fullest madness. I too have suffered the persecutions of the Turks. Whatever you described to me, I know. Don't be afraid. I will help you in whatever way I can.

It is impossible to describe my happiness after this confession and the conversation with the villager. The exhaustion of so many days had vanished. I had the opportunity to converse in the language I knew. The most gracious Lord guided me to meet this kind person. All of the doubts and the questions I had, would be answered. I would now learn clearly and with certainty, in what direction I should go, what dangers might appear and how far was the distance that separated me from my goal. I told my Armenian friend about my dream and my plans.

He told me clearly, "If you had not met me you definite would have come across border guards. Your end would have been tragic because these sentinels are ready to shoot on sight without interrogations or investigations. Anything suspicious comes under immediate attack."

I looked upwards to heaven and thanked God. "Lord You guided my steps up to now. Please be with me until {27} the end. I beg for your protection. Please defend and direct me."

The old Armenian villager, then raised his hand and pointed toward a very high mountain and said: "You will climb there, my son. Then you will go down to the other side to reach Elma. It is a village where Latins and Kurds live. Try not to meet with police. God be with you."

I thanked him. I looked at the distant steep high mountain and I began to move on. Many hours passed;

hours of walking in order to reach and to climb the mountain. He advised me how to avoid the border guards. At the foot of the mountain was an endless plain, and at one point I distinguished the village of Elma. I definitely had to go through it in order to reach the city of Akris near Haifa.

I walked for three days and nights. The ascent and descent of the mountains completely ruined my shoes. Without any protection I was stepping on thorns, sharp stones, and splintery wood. However, nothing prevented me from running. My much abused feet had such toughness that I thought I was flying instead of walking. The toils and the hardships suddenly vanished as I was Linking that I was nearing my objective.

In the beautiful city of Akris there was a Greek Immunity.

The Armenian villager had assured me of this when met him. My stay there was going to offer a pleasing {28} change. I would find people with whom to speak and to relate my problems. This would restore my strength and courage. With these thoughts, every difficulty of my life seemed to disappear.

After the hardship and the uninterrupted journey of three days and nights I reached Akris. I was certain it was that city, since I heard from afar the toll of a church bell. My eyes filled with tears.

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7. THE POLICE PATROL ON MY WAY

I had not yet recovered from my excitement, when I saw across the deserted street a police patrol. Neither man nor beast was in sight. The difficulty in which I found myself was great. My blood froze. My knees began to buckle. I was caught up in perplexity and I did not know what to do.

Without giving heed to a gnawing fear, I took courage. I felt again an invisible hand giving me strength. I came to and regained my composure. With a natural movement I backed off a little and whispered a hasty prayer, "Protect me, my Lord, protect me in this critical situation."

My pace was steady and quiet, and my movement! natural. The bag I had on my shoulder and the staff I held made it seem as if I were a shepherd. I didn't make any suspicious movements. In this way I walked on and passed the patrol. Danger was out of the way before I realized it.

The change of my course guided me to another village {29} very small with few houses. It was on the outskirts of Akris. I didn't want to go through the village. I saw a deserted place and headed towards it. On the way there was a cave which obviously had been used by shepherds.

I stayed for the night. Every movement ceased and nothing was heard to indicate the presence of man or animal. My fatigue was so great that it took a while for me to fall asleep. I don't know for how long I slept, but when I opened my eyes, it was dawn, with the welcome sun rising.

My original plans were postponed. Since I was not about to visit Akris, my target now was Haifa.

I must have journeyed for about three hours through mountains with steep slopes, following worn pathways and narrow trails. With difficulty. I made it through the rough terrain. In the distance there was the city of Haifa. Finally I was in Palestine!

8. THE FIRST GREEK LETTERS

At this point, Fr. Mitrofanis, gave a deep sigh. His voice choked. Tears ran from his eyes and rolled down to two bony and pale cheeks. Without realizing it, those of us who listened in suspense and who were caught up in his sentiments, became at that moment participants in his offerings. His emotions became ours, and his tears filled our own eyes. A pain tightened our hearts and full of {30} anticipation to hear more, we asked him to continue.

"My joy, Father Mitrofanis continued, was immense. My gratitude to God was great. For what He gave, I would sacrifice myself for His love. I must fulfill my PROMISE, to serve Him with all my strength.

With God's help all had gone well and the light of my dreams had dawned. A few more days, I kept repeating, a few more days and I will reach the place for which I had longed. And repeating these words I hastened to reach the city. I felt welcomed by the sight of the first houses. The sea, with its calm waves, softly and quietly announced the triumphant words of my arrival. Everything seemed to be smiling at me. If only it was known that I was one who narrowly escaped execution just a few months ago! As an animal about to be trapped, I fled in order to escape from bloodthirsty infidels. I knew with great faith that I would find someone on my way who would speak Greek with me. As I hurried on, memories, thoughts, and dreams darted through my mind. All of a sudden, there in the city of Haifa, before me appeared a beautiful and impressive structure. With its fine and distinctive architecture it seemed to be one with earth, sea, and sky."

The closer I went to that building the more I admired it. In a little while I saw a marble sign with gold letters. From afar I could see that the sign was depicted in three languages- Greek, Arabic, and English - "HOTEL {31} JERUSALEM, THE HOLY SEPULCHRE". Only the name "Holy Sepulchre" was enough to shake me. A cold sweat chilled my whole body. Tears flowed from my eyes and wet my tired face. I became dizzy and my eyesight darkened. I couldn't see anything and I passed out. I don't know for how long I was in a faint. When I came to, I got up and again I saw the Greek letters of the sign. After I was certain that they were real and not a figment of my imagination, I began bowing and kneeling. I must have done this about forty times and then I got up.

I took a few steps forward in order to find the entrance to the hotel. Then I heard a conversation in Greek. Greek words Greek language A dream or a reality? My joy was so great that hardships, sufferings and fatigue were erased from my mind.

Where was my weariness? Where were my bloody feet? Where were my hunger and thirst? What about fear and sleepless nights? All melted away. I took a few steps. The torn and faded clothes of my incarceration, my shredded shoes, my sore feet, all proved the traces of my wretchedness. The first man I met I greeted him in Greek. These first words in my own language sounded like a sweetly ringing bell in my ears.

"Where do you come from, young man?" the gentleman asked me. "From very far," I answered and my eyes filled with tears. This person was the manager of the hotel. He welcomed me and I had no idea of his important position. {32}

"Tell me where do you come from?" he inquired again in a serious and imposing tone.

"From Turkey," I answered, "from the bloodshed of Asia Minor, where I was captured by the Turks and thrown into prison.

I was to be executed, but I made a desperate escape. After arduous and formidable wanderings I have reached this place where I hear the first Greek words. For month I traveled on foot and I want to continue so that I can reach the Holy Land. I made a great PROMISE and must fulfill it.

My new friend was moved. However, as the minutes of our conversation went by, my presence became known In a few moments I was no longer a stranger to the gentleman. Other Greeks, assistants and clerks of the hotel began to approach. Their interest became greater In a little while I found myself surrounded by a number of people who were asking to learn something with certainty from the mouth of someone who suffered am survived disastrous events in Asia Minor. News of the savagery toward the Greek population in Turkey was not only slow in reaching them, but also often distorted. No one knew exactly about the tragedy of the condition or about the cruelty of the persecutions; nor about the carnage of innocent women and children and generally of all of the Greek people who were totally helpless without weapons or allies. {33}

The martyrdom of early Christianity and that of this century are known only to a few. The news of these tragedies are kept in the background for political reasons. The persecutions, the fear, and the terror as endured by the Orthodox in the 20th century, not only equaled, but surpassed those as inflicted during the rule of the Ottoman Empire from 1453 to 1821.

"It was the 28th of October 1923," Fr. Mitrofanis continued, "an unforgettable date, the day of my arrival in the first place of freedom.

All of my countrymen began to surround me with much love and affection. They brought me new clothes to wear, and new shoes to put on my aching feet. I had a hot bath which cleansed and revived me. My new-found friends, set a bounteous table before me with deliciously cooked food, and finally I was given an immaculate bed to lay my tortured and ailing body to recover.

An ocean of love! After so many years, how could I ever forget such overwhelming kind treatment!

Fr. Mitrofanis looked up and said, In my prayers that night I asked God to reward with a special place in His heavenly kingdom those most gracious people who provided me with such loving care. After a pause, he continued, At sundown the bells of the church of Prophet Elias began to ring for Vespers. This church and the hotel, both belonged to the jurisdiction of the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre whose mission was to serve the {34}

Greek community in spiritual and worshipping aspects well as for various other needs.

Soon the congregation of Orthodox Christians had arrived and the Vesper Service began. I timidly approached the cantor's stand and I began to chant in a low voice.

When the Cantor heard me, he asked me to continue. I thanked him and did his bidding taking turns with him. After the service people came to meet me and to inquire of my perils. Even Bishop Keladion asked to see me.

The Bishop was an ascetic figure, highly gifted in discerning the hearts of those near him. He invariably judged rightly any person he saw. He was not mistake about my presence. He immediately surmised the religious zeal, which I had in spite of my young age. hh wanted to talk with me of the things he had heard.

I, afraid and full of respect for the clergy, when heard that the Bishop asked to see me, I began to tea reluctant. Many different thoughts passed through m mind. "How would I face the Bishop?" I was asking myself. What does the Bishop want of me? Maybe Go enlightened him, and he wants to help me to realize n burning desire to serve in the Holy Land."

Full of agony and embarrassment, I went with custodian. It was my first time in a Bishop's office. The door of the great, imposing and beautiful reception room opened. On the walls in ornate frames were portraits the Patriarchs who had served in the past. Behind the {35}

Bishop's desk, were icons of the Lord and of the Most Holy Virgin Mary Theotokos. The floor was covered with modest rugs. The chairs around the room with their Byzantine carvings were all symmetrically placed in the great hall. The atmosphere of the room created in the

visitor a sense of awe and reverence.

The Bishop beckoned me "Come, my son. Who are you? Beautiful and melodious is your voice, charming as that of the nightingale that praises God in hymns during the quiet spring night. I have learned that you are a refugee, who suffered many hardships and I was moved as I heard of your ordeals. I ask that you stay with me. My paternal affection and unlimited love will surround you always. You will be at my right hand."

At that moment, I did not know what to think of these unexpected words. I took a few steps forward and as I approached him, I lowered my head to the floor in adoration and upon arising I kissed his hand".

My son, such humility is not necessary." I answered him. "This is not something of the moment. From Childhood I was taught by my pious parents to show Respect to Bishops and Priests of our Holy Church."

The Bishop remained silent as he listened.

I could see that he was thinking of something in a profound way. He raised his eyes, looked at me, and said, My son, I appreciate your character and I take into consideration the things your parents have instilled in your {36} soul. I want you to stay with me. You will live comfortable here. You will chant and you will serve God, Whom you have loved."

I thought my ears were deceiving me. It was unbelievable what I was hearing. Here I am an illiterate young man, with no higher education, and with no special abilities. What does this Bishop want of me that he promises me so much? Instinctively I opened my mouth and with the proper respect I said to him, "Your Grace I thank you and I am moved by your paternal interest and your love. I, however, have to fulfill the promise of my life. The promise is one, to reach the Holy Land. I have gone through "fire and the sword," through danger and unimaginable sufferings, hungry and thirsty. I had gone without sleep and I have walked endlessly. But the Lord gave me strength and courage for my survival. It is a wondrous marvel how God brought me here. Many Psalms express for me the trials I endured. Now how can I not fulfill my PROMISE? Whatever I asked of God he denied me nothing. How can I renege on the PROMISE I have made in His Holy Name? I thank you but my decision remains constant and firm. I want to fulfill my objective even if it's my last moment on earth."

Before this steadfastness of my character and the finality of my resolve, the Bishop, full of emotion, did not want to pressure me any further. Our meeting, even for only a few minutes gave him the opportunity to see {37} many things. Immediately he understood my intent, and quickly he reached his conclusions. He looked at me in his fatherly manner and told me, "My son, I admire the determination in your noble decision. I appreciate your principles. I do not want to become an obstacle in your aim. Whether you serve Christ here, or in His Holy places, the exact same service you will offer to the Patriarchate. I will help you to reach your final intent."

9. JERUSALEM. THE CITY OF GOD.

With these words the Bishop ended the matter of his proposition. He withdrew his attempt to persuade me to remain in Haifa at the Metochion. After our conversation, preparations for my departure remained. It was November 1, of the year 1923, the day that was the beginning of the rest of my life, a life blessed with the richness of the grace of God. My train journey to the Holy City was uneventful but pleasant, as I basked in anticipation of my new existence. Finally in a few hours I was guided and I reached Jerusalem, the holiest of cities.

Truly, how can I relate the impressions of that first day? My thoughts and aspirations at last turned into an incredible reality.

Now every Biblical passage of the life of Christ would come more alive in my mind and more intensely for me.

It was astounding to think that my dreams and desires {38} were nearing actualization. My heart was overflowing! with joy in the knowledge that my PROMISE could be fulfilled.

We entered the walled part of the city at the gate of, David near where once stood the Royal Palace of David.

An Arab-speaking Orthodox Priest was there waiting to welcome us. The narrow streets accommodated pedestrians only. In order to get about one was obliged to walk the countless uphill and downhill stone streets to reach the Patriarchate.

It was about 2 o'clock in the afternoon when the bell of the Holy Church of the Resurrection began to ring and to be heard all over the City. Just as a tape grasps sound and preserves it for many years, in the same way I can still hear these joyful bells pealing with their sacred and imposing toll. Every time I hear them, I am reminded of my first days in Jerusalem.

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10. MY FIRST PILGRIMAGE

Fr. Mitrofanis paused for a few moments and lowered his head. He brought his crossed hands that were resting on his chest up and with them he covered his eyes. He remained thus for a while and then he continued.

"After the sounding of the bells, I saw movement on behalf of the whole personnel of the Patriarchate. There were staff-bearers with special uniform and minister {39} Following were novices in their monastic black robes and caps. Then when the bells rang again, eighteen bishops and priests began to come down towards the entrance of the Church of the Resurrection.

[Black and white photo](#)

Jerusalem and the Church of the Resurrection

I was speechless at the sight. With reverence and admiration I followed what seemed to be Heavenly Orders of Angels and Archangels lined up in order to glorify God. The whole priestly order formed an Angelic Procession here on earth for the vesper service.

Before I could realize it, I too found myself inside the Holy Church of the Resurrection. Impatiently, I was searching with my eyes right and left to find where the {40} Tomb of Christ was. Nearby stood a venerable monk, Fr. Artemios.

"Father," I asked. "Where is the Tomb of Christ?" "Here, my son," he answered. And with his right hand he pointed to a very small, but high chapel-like structure, built with magnificence and grandeur.

At the entrance of the chapel I saw that people reverently were going in to worship. Above the entrance of the Holy Sepulchre were sacred lamps lighted and burning with pure olive oil. I counted them. There were 34 lamps.

When Father Artemios saw me looking at them, he explained to me. "Here, my son, are people of different languages and nationalities with their own interpretations of Christianity. All have rights here and all are struggling to take from the Orthodox their authority over the Holy Shrines. Of the golden lighted lamps, 14 belong to the Orthodox, 13 belong to the Armenians and 7 to the Latins (Roman Catholics). Fr. Artemios then motioned for me to move on.

I approached with great awe. My knees were trembling I bent over and went inside the first sanctum of the Holy Sepulchre. There before me on top of a small table-like marble column was a piece of stone in a glass case. I asked a monk who was standing there if he would kindly tell me what it was. He answered, "Here is part of the stone slab that the Angel rolled from the Tomb. Only the portion was saved. The rest of it, piece by piece, was {41} taken by kings and princes, rulers and simple folk. This small part remained and was preserved through the ages as a holy relic. Now it is used as an altar during the Divine Liturgy."

I raised my eyes to examine closely the sacred surroundings. I saw more golden, lighted kantilia hanging, lined-up one next to the other. As I stood there looking at them, the monk continued. "Do you see these lamps in here? Five belong to the Orthodox which we have to light them every day. The other five belong to the Latins. The four belong to the Armenians and the one that hangs alone belongs to the Copts of Egypt."

After pausing in the first part of the chapel, I proceeded in wonderment to enter the inner sanctum where the Tomb was. Here the second entrance was very small compared to the first.

The height of the doorway being lower, made it impossible to enter in an upright position. Therefore a person had to bend forward to gain entrance.

Momentarily my eye caught an inscription over the lintel which read:

"Why do you seek the living among the dead? He has risen"

These were the words of the angel who addressed the Myrrh-bearing Women on Easter morning. I felt that the same angel appeared before me, that he showed me the place where the disciples had buried Christ. I proceeded {42} with bowed head, facing the hallowed Tomb. Trembling I fell on my knees and went near to worship. I could not hold back the tears falling on the Tomb of Christ.

"This," I said, "is the end of a long and agonizing journey. Here I was, not in imagination, but in reality. I knelt for a long time while tears of my gratitude flowed freely to thank HIM who brought me here."

[Black and white photo](#)

The Crucifixion

After my veneration with head bowed, I backed out and took leave with overwhelming awe. When I came out of the Tomb of Christ, I found Fr. Artemios waiting for me. At that moment my keen desire was to visit Golgotha where Christ was crucified. It was time for the vesper {43} service in the most sacred Church of the Resurrection. Crowds of people had gathered to attend. Father Artemios was watching me, and seeing my impatience, he took me by the hand to where Calvary was.

Immediately I found myself before a climb of very high steep steps. Without difficulty I ascended. When I reached the top there before me was depicted the Crucified Christ. As I was watching His Holy face falling to the right, my eyes fell on the grieved face of His Most Holy Mother and that of St. John. What I beheld, so stirred the core of my heart and soul that again my eyes filled with tears.

I felt so moved that I thought I was going to faint. It seemed beyond belief that I was actually here at the place of the sacrifice of the Lamb and Son of God. Here I tasted the sorrow and pain of the Most Holy Theotokos and the beloved disciple. Here I was experiencing the Divine Sacrifice for the salvation of humanity.

When I recovered from the overpowering emotions which had welled up in me, I went near to kneel and to Pray. A fragrance seemed to emanate from the Cross. One has to be extremely sensitive to the divinity of the Place to detect the sweet and delicate scent which is a sign of the glory of God. Here, the pilgrim at this awesome scene of Calvary, is transported to a heavenly world.

Having expressed my earnest devotions I humbly lowered volumes of gratitude to HIM who was crucified for my salvation. I took leave with reverence and deepest {44}

[Black and white photo](#)

The removal of Christ from the Cross

humility. The vesper service had just begun and I could hear t