



Melcom and Varsenik Gasparian.

Photo courtesy of Shakeh (Jackie) Gasparian.

Gasparian, Melcom (1908–1998)

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Melcom Hagopian Gasparian worked as a Seventh-day Adventist teacher and pastor in Iran (formerly Persia) for almost a lifetime. He was born on July 25, 1909, in Van, Turkey,¹ 50-60 km from the border of modern Iran.

Background

Gasparian's family was part of the Armenian minority, and as a young boy he experienced the horrors of the genocide between 1915 and 1917. All ethnic Armenian Christians living in the Ottoman Empire during this time were either killed in mass shootings or deported to foreign countries. His father was executed, and his baby sister lost her life as a result of the hardships they had to endure in order to survive the atrocities of the enemy.

Gasparian and his mother were among the groups of surviving Christian women and children who were forced from their home villages and deported to neighboring countries. They walked for days, experiencing hunger and abuse. They passed through ravaged villages (mainly Armenian and Assyrian), witnessed the massacres of young and old men, and encountered mutilated bodies (often by wolves) laying along the wayside. These bodies were prevented from burial by the Turkish soldiers or the Kurdish militia.

When they met the Russian army, Gasparian and his mother were directed toward Salmast, Iran, where they were able to stay for a year. However, the Turks pursued the refugees and surrounded Salmast, forcing them to flee toward Urumia further south. They tried to find safety while the battles raged around them and the massacres continued.

In August 1917 they were once again forced to flee. Along the way they met some English guards who ordered them to board a train going to a hot desert in Baqubah (), Iraq where tent cities had been erected for the Armenian and Assyrian refugees. Later they were transferred to another camp, Nahr el Omar, that was closer to the Iranian border. Gasparian and his mother, along with the other refugees, stayed in Iraq for three and a half years. In 1920 those who wanted to were allowed to relocate to Iran. Arrangements were subsequently made for them to settle in Hamadan.²

Gasparian was a smart boy and eager to learn. His mother sacrificed everything in order to give him a good education. He was able to attend school for one year in Salmast and during the three years they lived in the tent cities in Iraq. After some reluctance he and the other refugee children were accepted in the Armenian national school in Hamadan.

By 1922 Gasparian and his mother had moved on to Tabriz, the main city in northern Iran. However, the Armenian school there was full and an attempt to enroll him in the Catholic school failed. Mrs. Gasparian had heard through an Assyrian lady that a new school had opened in Tabriz, where they kept Saturday holy and taught other strange things. With some reluctance they went to this "Jewish" school and was met by Florence Oster, the wife of Adventist pioneer F. F. Oster. Mrs. Oster informed them that they had no space for new students. But Gasparian's mother persisted, saying "Madam, my child is an orphan. The Turks killed his father. He is very smart and has a desire to learn." "OK then," replied Mrs. Oster. "He can go to the class and you come this evening for the 'meeting.'"

F. F. Oster conducted evangelistic meetings in the evenings. His first baptisms in Tabriz were on May 26, 1923, and a church was subsequently organized. Gasparian and his mother were among those that joined the church. After primary school he continued his secondary education in the Azerbaijan Armenian Diocesan School, where he was able to get Sabbaths off due to F. F. Oster's intervention.

He excelled in his classes and won the hearts of his teachers. At his graduation in 1929 a donation from a will was given to him with the following testimony: "To Melcom Hagopian Gasparin of the graduating students who not only has the best grades in all the subjects but throughout his life in the school has been an exemplary student, not only in behavior but also in studiousness and his exhibited progress." (The History of Azerbaijan Armenian Diocesan School, p. 177).³

Ministry

The following year Gasparian was asked to teach the religion classes for the fifth and sixth grades at the Tabriz Adventist School.⁴ On July 25, 1932, he married Miss Varsenik Mnatsagaian, and a month later they were transferred to Arak, where he taught religion in the school and managed the church work.⁵ After two years they were asked to go to Tehran and work for the church there. It was in 1935 that Gasparian was awarded his first missionary license.⁶

As a supporting son to his mother, he had until then been exempted from the military. But now the time came for him to enroll for four months of service. The three-star captain convinced Gasparian to teach him English in the evenings, which in turn made it easy for him to convince the captain to allow him Sabbaths off.

The health of his mother gradually deteriorated, and she passed away in 1937.⁷ In 1938 the Gasparians were transferred to Hamadan, where they stayed for seven years. They returned to Tehran, then spent one year in New Julfa and returned to Tehran again, when they needed him to teach Armenian in the school.⁸

In 1948 Gasparian received his first ministerial license.⁹ He was assigned to work with the youth in Isfahan, where his special approach and enthusiasm were much appreciated.¹⁰ Dr. Hargreaves ran a successful clinic there and had generated some interest in the Julfa-Isfahan area.

In 1949 Elder and Mrs. D. V. Kubrock conducted an evangelistic series in Isfahan. Gasparian, who was the local pastor, served as their interpreter and assisted them in a two months' follow-up effort. At the same time, he led out in the Harvest Ingathering Campaign, which went "with a real swing" and more than doubled the amount collected from the previous year.¹¹

Being fluent in English, Armenian, Turkish, and possibly other local dialects, Gasparian was often called upon to assist the church leaders as they traveled around the country. Toward the end of World War II, he accompanied Field President Charles C. Crider to the Tabriz area to solve some issues and later accompanied him to Shiraz and Persepolis. When in the summer of 1958 Dr. Siegfried Horn from Andrews University requested a guide to

accompany him and Kenneth Oster, (son of F. F. Oster) to study the ancient sites of Southern Iran, Melcom and Varsenik Gasparian were invited to go along. Again in 1967 he was asked to take a group of 32 Indian professors and teachers from Adventist schools on a Bible-lands trip.¹²

In 1953 Gasparian was voted by the Middle East Division to serve on the Iran Mission committee.¹³ Early 1954 he was asked, together with Y. O. Sagaloo, to take the long trip by train from Tehran to Abadan in the southwestern part of Iran to organize the isolated believers into a Sabbath School.

Upon their return on February 9 they reported, "we have 22 baptized believers living in Abadan and three others in nearby Ahwaz, ...in addition there are 49 potential church members making up the rest of the individuals in the families represented." Two weeks later the mission committee voted to transfer Gasparian and his wife to Abadan. They left around the 21st of March, the date of the beginning of the Persian New Year.¹⁴ Upon arrival he rented a church building where he held meetings once a week. He also conducted cottage meetings in the members' homes.¹⁵

In the summer of 1956 Gasparian had the privilege to attend the Ministerial Institute in Beirut, Lebanon, together with five others from the Iran Mission.¹⁶ For the 1956--1957 school year, he and Varsenik moved back to Tehran to take up the positions of matron (Varsenik) and Bible teacher (Melcom) for the Iran Training School.¹⁷ Gasparian is pictured in 1958 as part of the Iran Training School Board of Trustees.¹⁸

In November 1959¹⁹ he planned an evangelistic series in the Armenian Church together with Elder R. C. Skinner, and in the summer of 1960 conducted an evangelistic series of his own, resulting in six baptisms.²⁰ In 1961 he and his wife were transferred to Tabriz,²¹ where he conducted efforts with pastor H. K. Salakians that led to ten baptisms. He writes: "Some of the candidates were from Rezayeh. They were of various backgrounds.... Three were Armenians, two Assyrians, two Russians, and three Iranians."²²

In May-June 1962 he assisted Pastor-Evangelist Hovic Sarrafian in Rezayeh with his evangelistic efforts.^{23, 24} He also translated for Sarrafian from Armenian into Turkish at the Tabriz Armenian Church.²⁵ The meetings were well attended from the very beginning, and a number of people were baptized at the end.²⁶ In the summer a successful Vacation Bible School was conducted in Tabriz with 128 children in attendance.²⁷ It was in the spring of 1963 that Gasparian was ordained to the gospel ministry at a ceremony in Tehran,^{28 29} where he had moved back to serve the Armenian church group.

Gasparian participated at the Middle East Division Biennial Council in Beirut, Lebanon, in November 1964, as the appointed representative from the Iran Mission.³⁰ On January 2, 1965, he presented a history of the church at the dedication ceremony of the new Armenian church building in Tehran.³¹ This was the period in the Adventist history of Iran when the membership was highest,³² with the largest concentration in the capital, Tehran, where the Training School (aka Adventist Academy) was and where later the Nourafian Elementary School was built.

It was also at this time that Gasparian and his wife had the idea to adopt a baby girl. This was realized in October 1965 when one-month old Shakeh came to live with them.³³

At the Middle East Division Quadrennial Session and Ministerial Council in Beirut, Lebanon, 1967, Gasparian was listed as one of the sixteen delegates from the Iran Section.³⁴

Later Life and Contribution

Melcom Gasparian served as an ordained minister until his retirement around 1973.³⁵ After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the missionaries, who had led the work in Iran for almost 60 years, had to leave the country. Some of the pastors and many of the members also gradually left. In 1981 Gasparian was called out of his retirement to keep the mission going as the Iran Field president.³⁶

The hospital in Arak and the clinic in Isfahan were both in the past. The academy and the elementary school in Tehran had been nationalized, and no church departments were functioning. Only the Bible Correspondence School was left. Gasparian was only in office for about a year. In 1980 he took his 15-year-old daughter, Shakeh, to the United States, and he and Mrs. Gasparian followed in 1982.³⁷ In the late 1980s he began the Armenian section of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Glendale, California. On October 16, 1998, Melcom Gasparian passed away.³⁸

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NOTES

1. Shakeh (Jackie) Gasparian, daughter of Melcom Gasparian, email message to Sven Jensen, November 17, 2021.
2. Shakeh Gasparian to Sven Jensen, by e-mail November 17, 2021, unpublished autobiography of Melcom Gasparian entitled "Memories of My Dreadful Life," in the possession of his daughter, Shakeh (Jackie), who lives in Glendale, California, U.S.A, 30.
3. *Ibid.*, 26-44.
4. *Ibid.*, 45.
5. *Ibid.*, 50.
6. "East Persian Mission," Central European Division, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1935), 94.
7. "Memories of My Dreadful Life," 51-56.
8. *Ibid.*, 57-60, 65, 68-69.
9. "Iran Mission Field," Middle East Union Mission, Unattached Union Territories, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1949, 232.
10. Mrs. C.C. Crider, "News Notes from Iran," *Middle East Messenger*, January-February 1948, 15.
11. "News Notes from Iran," *Middle East Messenger*, August-September 1949, 6.
12. "Memories of My Dreadful Life," 61-68, 69-75, 76-77.
13. *Middle East Division Committee Minutes*, December 10, 1953, Committee Action 923, 292, General Conference Archives, accessed March-April, 2021, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/MED/MED19531201.pdf>.
14. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, April 1, 1954, 8.
15. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, July 1, 1954, 8.
16. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, October 1, 1956, 8.

17. "Iran Training School," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1957 and 1958, 222 and 225.
18. *Middle East Messenger*, April 1958, 5.
19. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, October 1, 1959, 9.
20. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, October 1, 1960, 8.
21. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, April 1, 1961, 7.
22. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, October 1, 1961, 7.
23. "Here and There," *Middle East Messenger*, July 1, 1962, 7.
24. Rezeyah (Urmia) was the area close to the Turkish border where the SDA work in Iran began. See article on Iran in this Encyclopedia, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=9DZ2&highlight=Iran>.
25. Wikipedia Contributors, "Languages of Iran," *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, accessed January 18, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_Iran. Turkish was widely spoken in this northwestern corner of Iran, and the different Turkic dialects are still the second most common languages (18 percent) in Iran after Farsi (53 percent).
26. Kenneth Harding, "Evangelism Adds Fifty in Iran," *Middle East Messenger*, January 1963, 4.
27. C. V. Brauer, "Iran Camp Meeting," *Middle East Messenger*, September 1963, 10.
28. *Middle East Messenger*, vol 12, no. 2, May-June 1963, 8. Melcom and his wife are pictured (front row) in the 2nd picture from the top.
29. "Iran Section," Middle East Union, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1964, 164.
30. *Middle East Division Committee Minutes*, November 11, 1964, 1183, General Conference Archives, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/MED/MED19641101.pdf>.
31. "New Armenian Teheran Church Building Inspired by Layman," *Middle East Messenger*, January-February 1965, 2.
32. "Iran Section," Middle East Union, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1962-1966.
33. "Memories of My Dreadful Life, 75.
34. *Middle East Division Committee Minutes*, March 22, 1967, p. 1419, General Conference Archives, accessed January 22, 2022, <https://documents.adventistarchives.org/Minutes/MED/MED19641101.pdf>.

35. "Middle East Union," *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1973-1974, 97. Receiving Honorary Ministerial Credentials by the Middle East Union.
 36. "Iran Field," Middle East Union, Afro-Mideast Division, *Seventh-day Adventist Yearbook*, 1982, 332.
 37. Shakeh (Jackie) Gasparian to Sven Jensen.
 38. Ibid.
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