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AGAINST STALIN UNDER STALIN: STUDENT ANTI-SOVIET ORGANIZATION “ILDIRIM”

In the early 1940s, freethinking, a desire for independence and a fight against dictatorship revived among Azerbaijani youth. It was during this period that the student organization “İldirim” (“Lightning”) was found-

*Burda əcdadımın qədəm izi var
Burda hər addımda min qəm izi var
Burda Turan izi, Əcəm izi var
Tapdama, tapdama, amandır, yağı
Canımtək sevirəm ana torpağı*

Haji Zeynalov and Kamil Rzayev, Baku, 1947



*[Here are the footprints of my ancestors,
Here are the traces of a thousand sorrows in every step,
Here are the traces of Turan, the traces of my forefathers,
Don't tread, don't tread it!
I love my motherland like my own soul!]*

H. Z.

ed, bringing together eight young men, including my father, Haji Habib oğlu Zeynalov. What was this organization like and what do we know about it? There were eight of them, all students from different universities in Baku, like-minded people who refused to accept the injustice, oppression and negative developments taking place in the country. Their names were: Gulhuseyn Abdullayev, Musa Abdullayev, Azer Alasgarov, Kamal Aliyev, Aydin Vahidov, Haji Zeynalov, Ismikhhan Rahimov, and Kamil Rzayev.

Haji Habib oğlu Zeynalov was born in Lankaran in April 1923. In the late 1920s, the Zeynalovs moved to Baku and settled in the Old City. In 1932, Haji entered first grade at secondary school No. 132. Already during his school years, he showed an interest in literature and poetry. In high school, he attended a literature club and wrote poetry. It was during this period that the teenager's personality was formed, becoming critical of many aspects of Soviet rule and indignant at the arrests and repressions taking place in the country, particularly

Members of the "Ildirim" organization

among educators and cultural figures. Bitterness and irritation first arose when a literature teacher demanded that he open his textbook to a specific page, cross out the name and cover up the photograph of Huseyn Javid. Next time it was Mikayil Mushvig, B. Talibli, T. Shahbazi and other writers and poets repressed in the 1930s. His teenage mind couldn't comprehend why an idol, a favorite writer or a poet whose poems he knew by heart and considered a role model should be declared an enemy of the people. Why? For what reason? These questions troubled his boyish mind, forcing him to reflect on the processes unfolding in the country, effectively shaping his political views. By high school, he was writing poetry imbued with pain and indignation.

With the outbreak of World War II, Mammadagha and Karim Zeynalovs, Haji's brothers, went to the front, but their military service was short-lived. In 1942, the family received news of the death of Mammadagha Zeynalov and in 1943 of Karim. The death of his brothers

shocked Haji. Now he remained the only son for his parents and a brother for his sister. In 1943, Haji Zeynalov entered the Persian department of the Oriental Faculty of Baku State University. As a fourth-year student, he began working at the Main Directorate for Literature and Publishing of the Azerbaijan SSR as a censor. He worked there from March to August 1948, and from mid-August to October 3 (the day of his arrest), 1948, he was the executive secretary of the journal "Reports of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR" (1). All this testifies to the talent and abilities of the young man, who was appointed to rather responsible positions as a student.

In mid-1943, Haji joined a secret student organization, which he learned about from friends, students of the Philological Department Gulhuseyn Abdullayev and the Department of Foreign Languages smikhan Rahimov (2, p. 314). The organization's goal was to combat injustice in society and the party's ethnic policy, to advocate the use of the Azerbaijani language in



Haji Zeynalov, Lankaran, 1955



government agencies, with the ultimate goal of creating an independent Azerbaijan. They met frequently, including at Haji's apartment in the Old City. Gulhuseyn once said, "Why did the Armenians and Georgians retain their own alphabet, while the Azerbaijani one was replaced by Cyrillic script? Wasn't there a single brave man who could oppose this?" (2, p. 315) The students discussed the status of the Azerbaijani language in the republic. "In all institutions, Russian is used for writing certificates or statements. In all government institutions, the majority of employees are Russian or representatives of other nationalities. Azerbaijanis constitute a minority" (2, p. 314). Young people were looking for like-minded individuals, and their main goal at that time was to involve as many students as possible in organizing and disseminating national ideas among young people. However, under conditions of total surveillance and denunciations, as well as the work of the NKVD, such efforts were doomed to failure from the very get-go.

During this period, Haji Zeynalov performed his poems at literary gatherings of the Writers' Union and even published them in newspapers (newspaper

"Socialist Subtropics", 1944) (1). An article in newspaper "Communist" on October 26, 1944 (3) noted that at a literary evening of the Azerbaijan Writers' Union dedicated to young writers, the Chairman of the Presidium of the Writers' Union of the Azerbaijan SSR spoke and listed the names of young, talented and promising poets, among them Haji Zeynalzada and Gulhuseyn Abdullayev.

My father would tell me that they were too young and fearless, but they understood what all this could mean for them. They had an idea, faith and a desire to fight against terror and violence. Each of the three pledged to recruit new members to the organization, and by the end of 1946, there were eight of them. The organization was named "Ildirim", an oath was adopted, a charter and program were drafted, and membership dues were collected. The idea was to write proclamations and leaflets and distribute them among students. At literary evenings often held at the university, they read their own poems alongside the works of Azerbaijani poets and occasionally included poems by H. Javid, A. Ildirim, A. Javad, and others who had already been repressed. For that time, this was a very bold and risky move.

It was 1948. During this period, state security agencies, which were already suspicious of the existence of the organization, identified them. Ismikhan Rahimov was the first to be arrested. On October 3, 1948, Haji Zeynalov was arrested too (4, p. 384). I remember his story about that terrible night when a "black raven" came for him and NKVD officers searched their apartment. "I was young and didn't bother to think about the blow I had dealt to my parents. After all, they had already lost two sons in the Great Patriotic War, and now it was me. They took me away in the middle of the night, at 3.30. My mother was crying. She was saying goodbye to her youngest, her last support. I suddenly took out the notice we had hidden about my brother's death (my father and I had told her that he had gone missing, and she believed that he would return). Before leaving, I rushed to her and kissed her. Forgive me, Mom." It was a farewell to his parents, who died without ever seeing their son again.

After a long investigation, in March 1949, on the eve of the spring holiday of Novruz, members of "Ildirim" were sentenced. I. Rahimov, G. Abdullayev and H. Zeynalov received 25 years of imprisonment, the rest were sentenced to 10 years (2, p. 322). The hearing was closed, but people gathered on Polukhin Street (now M. Mukhtarov) in front of the prosecutor's office. There were parents of the convicted, university students they

had studied together with, and, by chance, his future wife Zarifa Sultanova, who lived nearby and heard about the high-profile trial. At that time, they did not know each other, although they studied in the same neighborhood: he in school No. 132 and she in No. 134. It was later, upon his return from prison, that they met and got married. She recalled, “When they were taken out of the prosecutor’s office, everyone started screaming. Loud crying and shouting of students could be heard. They came out with their hands tied to each other and led into an open-top truck. When the truck moved, they raised their hands and someone shouted: “We will return! Long live Azerbaijan!” This is how they were seen off on their last journey, as it were. But they returned. Haji Zeynalov returned in the spring of 1955 and was rehabilitated in July 1956. Before us is a certificate from the USSR Ministry of Justice dated April 26, 1955. It cites a resolution of the Supreme Court of the Azerbaijan SSR “on amnesty, with the removal of a criminal record”, as well as a certificate dated August 21, 1956 signed by the deputy chairman of the Supreme Court of the Azerbaijan SSR M. Aliyev, which testifies to the full rehabilitation of Haji Zeynalov (1).

The fates of each of the organization’s members unfolded differently, but they all achieved a certain status in society. Haji Zeynalov returned to the Academy of Sciences, where he worked until the last day of his life. However, finding a job was very difficult, and the stigma of being a political prisoner still remained a stain on his biography. Only in 1956, after receiving full rehabilitation, was he appointed head of the editorial department of the Academy of Sciences Publishing House. From 1959 to 1989, he permanently headed one of the leading departments at the academy—the Editorial and Publishing Council (RISO) of the Academy of Sciences of the Azerbaijan SSR.

For many years, he said nothing about his past, about the years spent in Siberia and the camps. When I began to question him about the organization, its name and goals, he declined, changing the subject. But gradually, especially in the late 1980s, with the rise of the national liberation movement in the republic, he began to recount individual episodes from his camp life. For example, about how he worked in the logging camp, how it was unbearably cold and difficult, and how he sometimes managed to hide between logs in the warehouse and was covered by other prisoners, since he had managed to earn authority among them; how they were occasionally transferred from one camp

Certificate issued to Haji Zeynalov by the USSR Ministry of Justice

СССР
МИНИСТЕРСТВО
ЮСТИЦИИ

Форма «А»
ВИДОМ НА ЖИТЕЛЬСТВО НЕ СЛУЖИТ
ВЕРИ УТЕРЕ НЕ ВОЗВРАЩАЕТСЯ

№ 26
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Имя
фамилия
26. IV 1928 г.

СПРАВКА

Выдана гражданину Зейналову
Гаджи Гаджи оглы
1928 года рождения, уроженец г. Ленкорань
Азерб. ССР

гражданство СССР национальность азербайджанец
осужденно всудом Аз ССР

22. марта 1948 г. по ст.ст. 21-04, 21-79 Аз ССР
к лишению свободы на 10 лет, с поражением в правах на 5 лет.
причина: в прошлом судимый.

в том, что он отбывал наказание в местах заключения по
делу № 1195-55 в по постановлению всуда Аз ССР
от 19/10/55 г. Срок отбывания 20 лет. и
по указу от 24/10/55 г. «Об амнистии» со
срочными судимыми судимости сняты

Освобожден 26. IV 1955 г. и следует в добровольному
месту жительства г. Ленкорань
(город, район, область)
Аз ССР

по ст. Ленкорань Азерб. ССР жд. доп.

Заставщик лагеря (ИТК) Бойко
Комп. Комп.
Почтовый отдел Комп.
(6.10.55)

to another, about brief encounters with fellow countrymen at transit points. Or how he befriended the camp nurse, Isaac Abramovich, who secretly brought him ampoules of glucose (when political prisoners were placed in solitary confinement for 10 days during holidays), which were given to him by the Turkish prison doctor, Kermencoglu. About how he told the guards, “It’s not me who is a prisoner, but you. I can curse Stalin, that scoundrel who turned the country into a camp. But you can’t. So who is the prisoner, you or me?” He also spoke about a night spent in a cell in 1948 with a politician and member of the ADP, Muhammad Biriya, who “was secretly brought to Baku from Iran in March 1947” (5, p. 773) and sentenced “on November 27, 1948 ... to 10 years and sent to a labor camp” (6, p. 311), about a meeting with the former secretary of the Central Executive Committee of the Azerbaijan SSR, Musa Shamsaddinsky.

There were many German prisoners of war in the camp. Naturally, they didn’t receive any parcels and their treatment wasn’t the best. Haji felt sorry for them and often, after receiving a parcel from his parents

Haji Zeynalov and his wife Zarifa, Baku, 1956



containing dried fruit, nuts and, of course, raisins, he would treat them to gifts from the Motherland, earning himself the nickname of “Kishmish” [Raisin] among prisoners. Despite the harsh conditions of the far north and of camp life in general, he never lost his humanity, kindness and all the true human traits that he carried throughout his life.

I was particularly impressed by one story my father told me. On November 23, 1948, while in his NKVD cell in Baku, he heard the overture from Uzeyir Hajibayov’s opera “Koroghlu” from afar. My father assumed it was Uzeyir Bey’s funeral procession. When he was brought in for interrogation that evening, he immediately asked, “Was Uzeyir Hajibayov buried today?” The astonished investigators were perplexed as to how the prisoner had learned this. “The wind blew it to me”, Haji replied. The investigators spent a long time trying to figure out who had given him this information.

Eight letters from the family dating back to 1954-1955 preserved certain information about changes in the country’s political life and the final years of H. Zeynalov’s life in the camp. His address was: Mordovian ASSR, Potma station, Yavas settlement, P.O. Box 385/8. All the letters from 1954 were written in Russian, and from 1955 onward in Azerbaijani.

In a letter to his mother dated October 31, 1954, he wrote, “Good afternoon, dear Mama! Here is the moment – reading newspapers in my native language and eating apples and pears, I mentally feel next to you and recall many episodes from my past life. These episodes are filled only with your image... Mama, dear, I spent the best days of my youth with you... Mama, you may ask why I am recalling the past today and disturbing you

with this memory? No, Mama, you should not worry, your soul is strong, invincible, you are the mother of two soldiers who gave their lives against fascism. You raised them. You fed them. In my opinion, you have already become used to suffering... Don’t worry about me, we’ll see each other soon!” (1). He did not know that his mother and father had already passed away, and his sister continued to send parcels, write letters on behalf of their parents, forging their father’s signature. The letter, along with concern for his mother, reveals a certain optimism and faith in a speedy release from prison. The changes taking place in the country gave hope for a change in his imprisonment.

Of particular interest is a four-page letter dated March 6, 1955. This is likely his last letter from the camp. On April 26, Zeynalov would already be released. But for now, he writes a letter to his mother in his native Azerbaijani language. Here, he apologizes to his mother for the suffering he caused her; he apologizes, describing his failed journey as a “pilgrimage”, and promises to return. He then expresses surprise at his mother’s cautiousness in writing about the release of Kamil Rzayev, a member of their organization, and urges her to be fearless. “Kamil’s return is legal and is the call of the time!” (1). Once again, we see Haji’s revolutionary spirit. From prison, he urges his mother to be strong. “Should you fear anything at all? If one of your sons died fighting against fascism and your second son was removed from you forever. In the face of such a tragic fate, is it time for you to fear anything?” (6) He then asks his mother not to send him a parcel because of the spring festival and apologizes for addressing only her, forgetting to mention his father. And then he adds, “It’s good that I haven’t forgotten my name here yet.”

We learn from the letters that during this period, prisoners were granted the right to subscribe to and read local and foreign newspapers, listen to the radio, write letters in their native language, and receive parcels and money transfers. “Thank you for the parcel received on February 12. It’s just a pity there weren’t any local newspapers in it. I even read the foreign press here; our government hasn’t yet deprived me of this right. I also listen to the radio... If I don’t keep up with what’s happening in the world and in the country, can I really be called a modern, intelligent and educated person? I not only read or listen to the news, I even study and analyze it. Despite this, I lack material about Azerbaijan. I can only learn about it from national newspapers” (1). In conclusion, Haji writes, “I’m going to write a small ‘reminder’ to Baku so they’ll hurry up. I’ve become very impatient lately” (1).

Haji Zeynalov with his daughter Mahfuza (author of the article). Moscow, 1988

As is known, following Stalin's death and the decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of March 27, 1953 "On Amnesty", almost half of the camp prisoners (approximately 1,200,000 out of 2,500,000 people) whose sentences were less than five years were released within the next three months. The expected but unfulfilled release of "political" prisoners led to a wave of work stoppages, unrest and uprisings that began in the summer of 1953 and reached their peak in May-June 1954. These events paved the way precipitated for the creation of commissions to review the cases of "political" prisoners (7). Discontent among political prisoners led to a certain easing of the regime in the camps, for example, a relaxation of censorship, an increase in postal money orders, correspondence in national languages, etc.

In the late 1980s, when Gorbachev's "perestroika and glasnost" began and the national movement in Azerbaijan revived, Haji Zeynalov prepared to write his memoirs. Notes have survived to this day, in which he briefly and meticulously answers questions he had intended to explore in detail. He hoped to leave behind his memoirs, but didn't have the chance; his heart stopped beating on the afternoon of October 24, 1989.

Every family and every community has its own chronicle of tragic dates, its own fate. We have mentioned

only one link in the overall chain of political terror that unfolded in Azerbaijan in the 1940s. This link was the student organization "Ildirim", a member of which was a man who carried a passionate love for his homeland throughout his life – orientalist, journalist, publisher and poet Haji Habib oglu Zeynalov. ✨

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