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Foreword

The Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh became one of the first precursors of the USSR's demise. The weakening central power was evidently unable to cope with the economic challenges, while "perestroika" and "glasnost" were swiftly and dramatically undermining the nation's system of governance. The authorities proved ineffective in proposing anything innovative, appealing, and capable of mobilizing society. The country, anchored in absolute centralization and held together by a uniform ideology, was rapidly losing its bearings. But despite all of this, the threat to the Soviet Union's integrity became real and even inevitable only when cracks appeared along its most vulnerable fault line — the ethnic divide.

During these turbulent times, I found myself at the epicenter of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict, emerging as one of the key figures. Whenever protest rallies, strikes, states of emergency, martial law, armed militias, ethnic clashes, confrontations with the military, or war took place in the Soviet Union, they first happened in or around Karabakh. Ensuing events revealed that we didn't have a choice in Nagorno-Karabakh: we were desperately defending our right to live on the land of our ancestors. As a Communist Party official, I quickly became one of the leaders of the Karabakh Movement. I was in charge of its political component and led the creation of the underground armed resistance — the foundation of the future NKR Defense Army. The summer of 1992 was a particularly tragic period — Azerbaijani armed forces occupied half of Karabakh. In this perilous situation, I suggested an emergency crisis management model suitable for responding to the threat of losing Karabakh. I assumed responsibility, creating and leading the highest governing body of the Republic vested with extraordinary authority — the

State Defense Committee. Its success was spectacular! In less than two years, we not only regained full control of Karabakh, we also managed to create a reliable security buffer around it.

Immediately after the war, I was elected as the first president of Nagorno-Karabakh. However, due to unforeseen events, I became prime minister and, later, president of Armenia during a critical period of its development. Conflict with the then-sitting president, which led to his resignation, the snap elections, the shocking terrorist act in the parliament... These were exceptionally challenging years, both for overcoming crises and for carrying out constructive work and successful reforms, that significantly changed the face of Armenia. Armenia's gross domestic product (GDP) multiplied five-fold during my presidency. I had the honor of serving as prime minister and president of two countries — one recognized and the other unrecognized — during the most volatile period of their establishment. So there is, indeed, a lot to tell...

Initially, I had no intention of writing a book, despite realizing that my biography was unique and might be of interest to others. I simply didn't think I could bring myself to tell my life story. I didn't have the habit of keeping a diary, I didn't like to immerse myself in memories, and I didn't flip through old photo albums. Simply put, I wasn't stuck in the past. I was always busy, always looking ahead, and planning for the future. Immediately after my term ended, many tried to convince me to start writing memoirs, but I didn't see the need. I seriously contemplated it for the first time after two meetings abroad, where I was invited as a guest speaker. The audience's keen interest in the events I described pleasantly surprised and inspired me. Many asked me why I hadn't written a book, saying they would read it. But my final decision came during AFK Sistema's strategic session in Altai, Russia, where I met Mark Rozin* . After he interviewed me in my capacity as an independent member of Sistema's Board of Directors, Mark spoke about the importance of a book and insisted that I write one. At that point, I finally agreed.

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* Rozin, Mark — Managing partner at ECOPSY Consulting.

Once I started working on the book, I admit I seriously regretted the decision. But it was too late to back down, as I'd never left anything unfinished in my life. Revisiting the past, especially the Karabakh period, turned out to be a difficult task. It seemed like a great deal had been hopelessly forgotten. I had to reread all my old interviews, watch surviving video materials, and talk to many participants of the events during those years. Amazingly, vivid memories from long ago began to resurface — even the faces of people I'd almost forgotten, their names, and the emotions associated with them. Throughout my life, I had trained myself to control my emotions. Writing this book, I learned to set them free. It also became a mechanism for liberating the images buried in the depths of my memory.

My aim for the book was not merely to describe historical events in which I participated, but to make it engaging. I wanted to depict the intricate tapestry of history and the thread we wove into it — to explore why we made certain decisions, what concerned us, what obstacles we faced, and what elements both facilitated our journey and served as our inspiration. For the first time, I wanted to reveal the behind-the-scenes details of the most dramatic chapters of our recent history.

At first, I thought of writing about everything that transpired during those captivating years, as well as naming everyone we traversed the arduous journey with, both in Karabakh and Armenia. But the multitude of facts disrupted the flow of the book, making it heavy, academic, and hard to read. As a result, I decided to focus strictly on the most significant events that I personally participated in.

I am grateful to all my colleagues, associates, and friends. I apologize to all those whose names are not mentioned in this book.

PART I

PEACEFUL LIFE

CHAPTER 1

CHILDHOOD

I was born and raised in Stepanakert — a small town at the center of Nagorno-Karabakh, or Artsakh, as our people call it. I remember a cozy, green, and pristine town tucked away in the mountains when I think of my childhood.

They say that a person forgets much of what happened to him within two years, except for the very best and very worst events. The only childhood tragedy that I remember is the death of our dog Julbars, who was hit by a car. All other childhood memories are enveloped in a fairytale-like warmth, a collection of many bright and happy images.

I remember very well the first time I swam on my own. I was about six years old. My brother and I were at a small lake not too far away from home. I waded in the water a little and then, accidentally, went in too deep, where my feet couldn't reach the bottom. I suddenly felt the water raise me up and hold me as I made hand movements to stay afloat — doggy paddle, of course — but I swam! During the same summer, I learned how to ride a bicycle. It came easy to me, naturally: with a single try, I was off, racing along the dusty road with the other boys. This ability to keep my balance and my passion for speed have stayed with me throughout my life.

I still remember our first family road trip to the Black Sea in our *Moskvitch** car in great detail. We camped overnight in tents right on the beach. The sea, of course, left the strongest impression. Unlike our

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* Soviet car brand named after the Russian term for a resident of Moscow.

mountain creeks, it was so warm that our parents couldn't lure us out of the water. It was there that I learned how to snorkel pretty well, too.

Children spent most of their time in the streets back then. In the summer, we woke up early, raced to the river, and spent entire days there swimming, fishing, and playing. No one remembers most of our games nowadays; they are long forgotten. I loved to hike and often took a tent to the mountains with my brother or friends. I explored our famous canyon in Shushi far and wide. I knew all the trails and secluded places, climbed in all the caves, and could easily spend the night in the mountains, without a tent even.

In the winter, we entertained ourselves primarily with ice skating and skiing. Oh, how we loved when it snowed! Of course, no one had mountain skis back then, so we would take wide soldier's skis, install homemade heel holders, climb to the highest hill and zoom down the slope.

It snowed a lot, and the snow stayed. In those days, they didn't spray salt to melt the ice, so all the streets would practically turn into ice rinks. City buses had to use tire chains to keep from skidding on the ice. As the buses sputtered slowly up the hills to the upper part of town, we, on our ice skates, would cling to their backs to hitch a ride, then rush back down once they had reached the top. Our ice skates, *snegourkey** as we called them, were very different from those of today: nothing more than two steel blades tied to the soles of our snow boots with shoelaces.

Our family lived in a stone house that my grandfather built back in his day. I remember how we would apply a coat of red lead paint to the roof every summer to keep it from rusting. The house was rebuilt several times: initially, there was only one room, but over time two more rooms as well as a veranda and a basement were added. I can still clearly see the old photographs of my grandfather, grandmother, and great-grandfather hanging on the walls. To me, as a child, the house seemed enormous. Many years later, I was surprised to see how small it was in reality. The house survived the war, but it was demolished later;

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* After 'Snegurochka,' a character in Russian folklore; the name itself translates to 'Snow Maiden' or 'Snow Girl'.

I discovered a construction site there not long ago. The orchard that my grandfather started had disappeared too.

That orchard was my father's pride and joy. A prominent agronomist, he loved his profession. Three immense mulberry trees hugged our house, and we, as children, climbed them all the time and ate their sweet, ripe mulberries. The grownups made mulberry molasses. And vodka, of course. To this day, if I do have vodka, it tends to be mulberry vodka.

There were six of us living together: my parents, my grandmother, my brother Valera, me, and our sister Ivetta — my stepsister from my father's first marriage — who was a college student. After finishing her studies, she continued to work in Armenia, but later moved to Moscow where she got married.

Valera and I shared a room. Being only two years apart, we used to fight a lot as kids — over unimportant stuff, of course. As the younger brother, I was feisty and didn't want to give in on anything. And then, suddenly, Valera grew up and became big and strong; he matured, and at that point, our relationship had transformed. The fights stopped, and a friendship that would span our entire lives began.

We also had family secrets. One of them — my father's story — I found out only as an adult.

My grandfather lived in Baku. When the Turks entered Baku in 1918, and the Armenian pogroms began, my eight-year-old father was separated from his parents. In a crowd of escapees, he ended up on a ferry across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia. Despite the chaos of a revolution, civil war, absence of government, and civil unrest everywhere, my grandparents and their daughters survived and finally reached Karabakh. My father, wandering around for a long time as a homeless child, somehow ended up in Tashkent. He got lucky — he and many other homeless children were taken in by a wealthy Armenian. The children worked for him, and in exchange, he fed them, even sent them to school, effectively saving them.

My grandmother didn't lose hope of finding her child all those years. Order was gradually restored in the country, and the regular mail service began working again. My grandmother's brother, who had gained an

influential position in the local police force — he headed its anti-banditry division — was able to find my father, who had been lost six years earlier, and return him to Stepanakert. My father was already 14 years old at that time. My grandmother was ashamed that she had lost her child and forbade my father to talk about it. And we didn't know. We did, however, notice things here and there. For instance, my father's close friend from Tashkent visited us every year. "Who is this friend of yours? Why do you have a friend in Tashkent?" we asked, but our father never answered. Later, we found out that they worked together for that rich Armenian in Tashkent.

Another secret was about my grandfather.

I never met him; he died before I was born. Once, I came across a man in our ancestral village who said he knew my grandfather — "Reverend Sarkis" — very well. I asked him why he was calling my grandfather "Reverend." "Well, of course," he said, "your grandfather was the last priest in our region!" As it turned out, when my grandfather — a literate man — came back to Karabakh after fleeing the Baku pogroms, he was offered the opportunity to become a priest. Being literate was not common then. My grandfather agreed and served until the late 1920s, before the last church was shut down. Even though my father grew up a devoted communist, his application to join the Communist Party was denied for a long time based on his family history. My father took it to heart, and even after many years, he didn't feel comfortable talking about it with us.

My paternal grandmother had a stern demeanor — I never saw her smile. A priest's widow, she didn't believe in God. My brother and I sometimes teased her, "Grandma, they told us at school that God exists!" She would wave her hands at us and ask us not to talk nonsense. She never punished us, but we always listened to her, most likely sensing her inner strength and toughness. Our grandmother had three children: her eldest son — my father — and two daughters. The husband of one of her daughters died in World War II, and she lived with her son in Baku. My grandmother's younger daughter lived with her family in Stepanakert, not too far away from us. The younger daughter died early

and unexpectedly while I was away serving in the army. Precisely a year after her daughter's death, my grandmother made a suicide attempt by taking too many sleeping pills. When she came to at the hospital, she explained, "I shouldn't have lived longer than my daughter."

In our family, the adults never fought and never raised their voices. My mom lived peacefully with her mother-in-law. Perhaps they sorted things out between them when the children couldn't see them? I don't think so; we lived in a happy home. My mom kept our household together. Strong-willed, strict to a degree, and practical, she defined our household order, kept track of our family expenses, and took care of our upbringing. She was responsible for everything that had to do with our education. I remember that my older brother had difficulty waking up early in the morning. I would be up before the alarm clock, but Valera had to be dragged out of his bed. Mother would wake him up, and he would mumble, half asleep, "Mom, please, one more minute… one more second…" And here she might raise her voice a bit.

The primary source of conflict between my mother and me was the music classes. Her distant nephew played the violin, and my mother's dream was that I would learn to play a musical instrument. When I was in the first grade, she sent me to music school, but I was embarrassed to carry the violin and hated it with a passion. When I walked with it outside, my ears burnt and I wanted the ground to swallow me up. I suffered for the first two years but found a solution during the third year. I would leave the house to go to music school, but instead, I hid the violin in the boxwood bushes nearby and played soccer with my friends. After the game, I would retrieve the violin and return home as if nothing had happened. I skipped music school like this for two months before my music teacher called my parents. My secret was out, and I got into very serious trouble. My mom wanted me to go back to music school, but I refused. Emphatically. By that time, I had already learned to resist. Finally, mom yielded but went after my brother. She made Valera take piano classes. He quit. Then she talked him into taking up the clarinet — same outcome. Mom persisted, but we defied her, and none of us became musicians.

Nonetheless, the head of our household was our father. He would come home late from work and frequently went on business trips. My father was passionate about agriculture and was responsible for the agriculture of our entire region. The successful development of viticulture in Karabakh was mainly due to his efforts. Moreover, he served as the deputy chairman of the regional executive committee for many years, even managing to carry out scientific work in the midst of his hectic schedule. After getting his Ph.D., he stayed in our town. This was quite unusual at the time — after receiving an academic degree, people would typically move to the capital cities: either Baku or Yerevan. But my father was convinced that he was needed here, in Nagorno-Karabakh. In these mountains, he, an agronomist, created the orchard-town and built the communist system, the ideals of which he sincerely believed in all his life.

Due to his busy work schedule, my father couldn't spend a lot of time with me, but he did his best to teach me what, in his opinion, every man must be able to do. I remember how he taught me to drive a car. We had an old Moskvitch sedan — I believe it was the 403 model with round edges. I was barely 13 back then and rather short. My dad sat me behind the wheel and asked me, "Can you reach the pedals?" — "I can" — "Can you see the road?" — "I can" — "Then, drive." And I drove.

He also taught me how to fire a gun – a 16-gauge single-barrel shotgun. We began by shooting at homemade targets we drew on plywood or cardboard, then we went hunting in the mountains. I was so proud of myself when I shot my first chukar partridge. Soon enough, my father allowed me to use the gun alone and then gave it to me for good. No kid in my neighborhood had their own gun yet. So we all would go hunting together in the mountains with that single gun.

I went to a Russian school, and I did well. Whether I liked the subject or not, I couldn't imagine entering the classroom unprepared. I couldn't imagine a bigger embarrassment than to stand by the chalkboard not knowing what to say. In general, I was quick and disciplined: as soon as I came home, I did all my homework, and then I was free. Math and physics were easy; I liked geography and literature. Languages,

including Russian, were much more challenging for me. My essays were good, but I made too many spelling mistakes. The only two subjects that I really wasn't attracted to were the Armenian and English language classes. Ironically, fate would make me learn them as an adult. When I became Armenia's prime minister, I truly regretted that I skipped Armenian classes in school! I would never have guessed that I would need them so much: our Karabakh dialect is very different and hard to understand in Armenia.

The courtyard was essentially the center of our universe. The private home we lived in was next to an apartment complex, and all the neighbors — adults, children, and the elderly — gathered in its spacious courtyard every evening. They all knew each other well and spent their spare time together like a large extended family. There was a gazebo in the courtyard's center, where adults battled over chess and backgammon, poking fun at each other while we ran around. Once in a while, one of the players would say something particularly witty, and the gazebo would explode in loud laughter that bounced off the buildings and reached every far corner of the courtyard. And since everyone made fun of everyone else, the light-hearted laughter never stopped. In short, the atmosphere in the courtyard was amicable and cheerful.

Our courtyard was seen as upscale. The chief of police, the head of the People's Oversight Committee, and several officials of the region's Communist Party Committee lived in the big apartment building. In general, our neighborhood was cultured — people read books, and played sports. Kids played soccer, basketball, and — what was particularly popular at the time — handball at the school's nearby sports field. Naturally, we would argue, quarrel, and fight during the game on rare occasions, but it didn't ruin our friendship. Sometimes, we played soccer with kids from rougher neighborhoods down the street. Some games were friendly, some not so much. However, there were no serious fights; we mostly waved our fists in the air from the abundance of energy and excitement.

As with everyone in my generation, my childhood was carefree and happy. I might be biased, but I am convinced that there was something

special about Karabakh. All around — in Azerbaijan, in Armenia, and in the entire Caucasus — corruption flourished, and crime lords had authority. But Karabakh remained an oasis of law and order. The word "bribery" was considered the most terrible insult, and people sincerely believed that they were building a communist society. Apparently, the ideals of equality and fraternity for all were in line with the traditional values of many generations of Karabakh people, and the dream of an ideal society took root in our land. Residents of Nagorno-Karabakh — upstanding Soviet citizens — sincerely believed in their bright future.

And that's how we lived — calmly and simply, thinking that nothing could disturb our quiet and isolated land, generations succeeding generations.

CHAPTER 2

MOSCOW STUDENT

In my last year of high school, I knew exactly what my next step would be: I would go to Moscow and apply to a technical university. I didn't look beyond that — the rest of my life seemed like a clean page that any story could be written on. I set my mind on a technical university because I liked science far greater than the humanities. I chose Moscow because the only university in Stepanakert was the Pedagogical Institute, and I never considered it an option. When Stepanakert high school graduates wanted to get a good college education, they would go to Yerevan or Moscow. It was impossible to study in a foreign country: borders were closed. In the Soviet Union, Moscow provided the best education, which meant that my path led to Moscow.

I aced my high school final exams, packed my suitcase, and departed for Moscow. My sister greeted me there — she lived in Reutov with her husband. I stayed with them while I took the college entrance exams. When I went to the Moscow Power Engineering Institute to submit my application the next day, I noticed that all the light poles nearby were full of tutoring ads. As it turned out, Moscow college applicants were far better prepared than us back home — we didn't even know what a tutor was. We thought that simply doing well in school would get you into college. I still had some time before the entrance exams, and I had some catching up to do. I found a tutor, scheduled classes, and dove into it. I remember my first two weeks in Moscow as a nightmare of round-the-clock studying.

Contrary to my fears, I did pretty well on the exams and was admitted to the university's Department of Power Engineering. I called my

father. Mobile phones didn't exist yet, so I had to go to the post office, place an order, indicate the call duration, and sit and wait for the connection to make the long-distance phone call. My father was happy that I got accepted. Despite his usual emotional restraint, I could sense that he was proud that his son would go to college in the capital.

Now I had time to take a breath and look around. When I was in the seventh or eighth grade, I had visited Moscow, but it was a really short trip, and I didn't remember much of it. This time, however, for a young fellow from a small mountain town, Moscow's scale and atmosphere, its vast palatial underground metro, and its entirely different crowd were awe-inspiring. I didn't feel lost; instead, I was happy and proud. I spent the summer days walking around, absorbing the spirit of the capital.

My classes started in the fall. They turned out to be easier than I expected but not too exciting either. Perhaps the reason was that a fascinating and well-educated person, a walking encyclopedia — Kim Grigorian, my brother-in-law — came into my life. I had never met a man of such erudition before, and I haven't, perhaps, ever since then. Kim was also from Stepanakert. He had graduated from Moscow's Textile Institute and headed an engineering design bureau at some large factory. I stayed at a dorm in Lefortovo but spent all my weekends at my sister and Kim's tiny apartment in Reutov. My informal education began there.

We spent evenings in the kitchen. Kim talked about unusual things. I grew up in a family where the fairness and effectiveness of the Soviet system were never questioned. As an ordinary Soviet boy, the son of a communist, I believed that I lived in the best country in the world. But now, day after day, evening after evening, Kim showed me the reality. I learned about Stalin's repressions and the millions of people who died of starvation during the collectivization. I learned about Red commanders arrested right before World War II and Stalin's secret pact with Hitler to divide Europe.

Kim wasn't an active dissident; he was just a clear thinker who relentlessly criticized the system. Few in the Soviet Union back then understood the horrific realities of Stalin's regime or how stagnant Brezhnev's rule was. Kim found a grateful listener in me and unleashed all these truths

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