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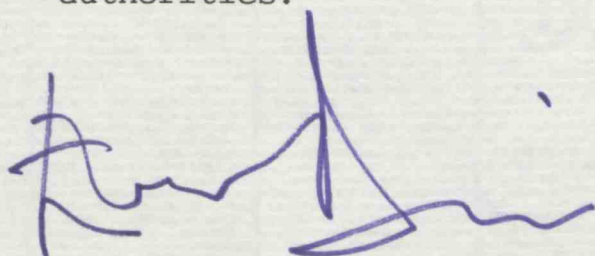
CJA

5th April 1989

Dear Charles,

I have been looking after Shaginyan since he arrived. He is an excellent individual and a good playwright, and it would be utterly wrong if he did not get political asylum.

It might be worth your having a word with the appropriate authorities.



DAVID HART

Charles Powell Esq

SPECTRUM

Why I left Gorbachov's Russia

Aleksandr Shaginyan was a flourishing playwright in Moscow, with money, a car and a flat. But still he asked for asylum in the West. Here he describes the problems which face the defector

In broad daylight, three policemen lead a man in a long raincoat out of Broadcasting House in Portland Place. Shielding him from all sides, they quickly seat him in a police van. As the van tears through the streets of London, the sergeant sitting next to the driver turns around and says to the man in the long raincoat: "You're in good hands. Don't be afraid."

The scene smacks of the familiar frames of a thriller. I wouldn't mind watching it myself. But the point is that it was me — Aleksandr Shaginyan, playwright by profession — who was the protagonist.

Let us rewind the film to nine days earlier, when on November 12, 1988, an Aeroflot plane landed at Heathrow carrying a group of writers on a visit from the Soviet Union.

They put us up in a modest hotel in Russell Square. Next morning a bus pulled up, the group leader counted heads to make sure we were all there, and our trip around beautiful England began. In my thoughts, though, I was in Yerevan, where I had been researching material for a new play. Instead of the calm, smiling Englishmen, I saw the tragic faces of Armenian refugees from Sumgait, who had just lived through the nightmare of the pogrom.

I am no narrow-minded nationalist. I grew up in Russia and lived all my life in Moscow. But the pogrom that day in Sumgait could only have happened with the direct connivance of the Soviet Government. The Nagorno-Karabakh problem and the Sumgait pogrom must be to someone's advantage. Party functionaries and the head of state are, after all, just as in Stalin's times, deeply indifferent to the grief of ordinary people, and Gorbachov's declarations of a new policy aren't worth a brass farthing.

Like many of my colleagues in the Writers' Union, I sincerely believed in the democratic

changes promised by Gorbachov. More than that, we joined the party. But the bloodshed in Sumgait put everything into its old perspective: it was the final impulse compelling me to leave.

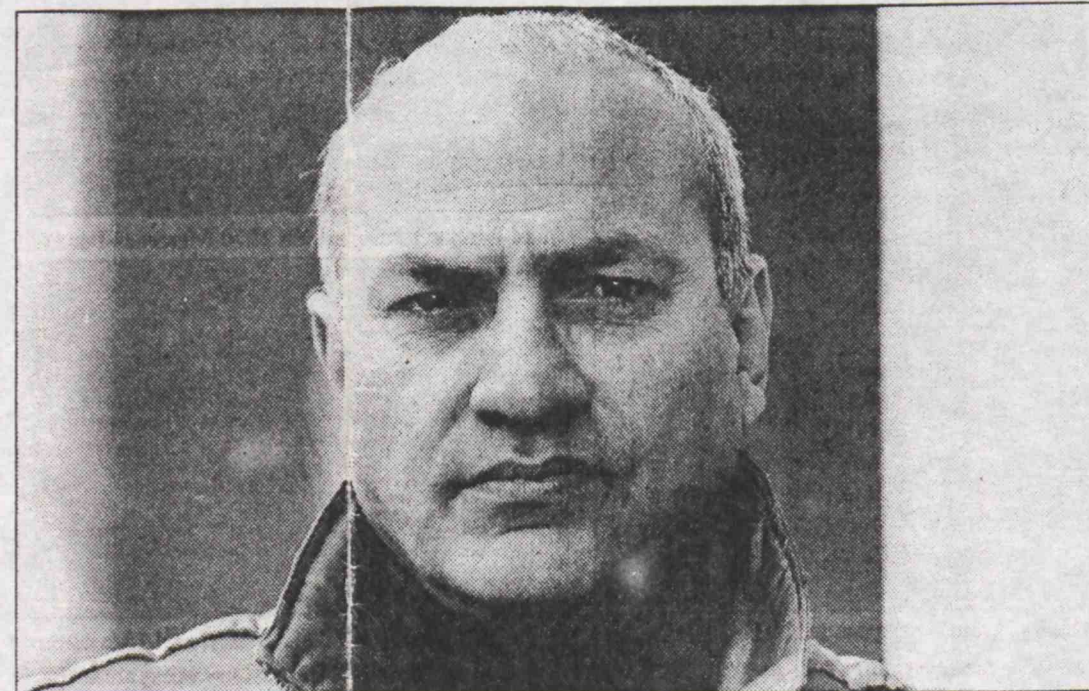
Judging by Soviet standards, I lived quite decently: my plays were widely staged in the capital, I had a large flat, a country house which I had inherited, the latest model car, enough money in my bank account. But there comes a time in every man's life when he wonders how he will look God in the eye.

The week in England flew by. The decisive Friday, November 18, arrived. On the following Sunday morning we were due to return and I decided it was time to ask for asylum (if I had done so when we first arrived all my colleagues would have suffered. If one of us breaks the rules, we are all punished).

The technical problems of my undertaking lay in the fact that I could not speak English. The most sensible thing would be to find someone who could speak both English and Russian and approach the authorities with his assistance. But where would one find such a person? Most probably in the BBC Russian Service.

Then came a stroke of luck. A visit to the British-USSR Friendship Society was part of the compulsory programme. That evening, in the presence of our leader (a KGB general, acting also as the secretary for organizational matters of the Writers' Union), one of those present said that he had been in Moscow recently, seen a performance of my play and would like to translate it into English. We politely exchanged addresses. The general remarked profoundly that it was precisely such contacts which should strengthen Anglo-Soviet friendship.

The next day, I told the general that the translator had phoned and asked to meet me. This was a lie. The general frowned; he didn't



GRAHAM WOOD

Waiting for the next act: Russian playwright Aleksandr Shaginyan in London, hoping to be allowed to stay

'Declarations of a new policy aren't worth a brass farthing'

want to take the risk. Soon all the sheep would be back in their pen. "Is this absolutely necessary?" he asked suspiciously. I reminded the general of the spirit of *perestroika* and got permission.

The morning of Friday, November 18 arrived. The day when I would have to leave behind me 50 years of my life. I could not get rid of the feeling of the irrationality of what was taking place. It was as if it was someone else, very like me, who was hailing the taxi, explaining in sign language where to go and soon arriving at Broadcasting House.

I walked around the block several times, stood on the corner, had a smoke . . . the thin London drizzle started and I said to myself: if you hesitate now, you will go back and spend the rest of your life cursing yourself for cowardice. Or, more probably, you will either commit suicide or drink yourself to death in despair. There is no alternative . . .

Two security men, with white gloves under their shoulder-straps, smiled politely. Not understanding a word I said, they sent me to the reception desk. The nice

woman receptionist also listened to me patiently, tried unsuccessfully to question me in French, German, Italian and Spanish, and finally telephoned for someone who could communicate in Russian. Half an hour later, there appeared a young man who said in Russian that his name was Nick.

The receptionist led us to an empty room on the first floor, where I told Nick about my request for political asylum. I have already mentioned what followed — the police escort, the van and there we were, Nick and myself at the local police-station, which looked just like its counterparts anywhere in the world.

We talked as we waited for the arrival of the immigration official. Nick was struck most by the fact that I, deciding to take such a desperate step, had not learnt any English. I explained to him that had the woman with whom I had been living seen any teach-yourself-English books on my desk, she would have realized what was what and was quite capable of taking this information you know

where. Not from personal spite or loyalty to the Soviet Union, but out of feminine egoism — she was a woman being abandoned.

Time went slowly. No official appeared. I started panicking. Soon our group would return from the excursion to Windsor Castle and I realized I should have brought from the hotel a bag of manuscripts I had brought across the Soviet border at such risk to myself. These were plays written over the last few years. That is, what I had to say and what I wanted to bring to a Western audience.

Nick and I hailed a taxi and I set off with the driver to Russell Square. At the hotel I dashed up to my room, grabbed the bag, returned the key to the doorman and headed back for the taxi. Now I was not afraid of anything.

Back at the police station, an immigration official started the questions:

"Name, date of birth, citizenship, nationality, profession?"

— Aleksandr Vartanovich Shaginyan, born 1939, USSR, Armenian, member of the Writers' Union.

"Parents?"

— Father, engineer. Mother, teacher. Both deceased.

"Marital status?"

— I was married and divorced 10 years ago. (If the polite official had been interested in the reason for the divorce, as his Moscow colleague surely would have been in a similar situation, I would have explained thus: my wife left me because I refused to have children. I didn't want yet another slave to be brought into the world . . .)

"What were the reasons governing your decision to seek political asylum?"

— Political, I said firmly. This could, after all, be said with a clear conscience by every second citizen of the Soviet Union — the land of internal emigrants.

"Why did you decide to stay in Great Britain in particular?"

— Your country has traditionally welcomed political emigrants. I trust in her magnanimity.

Our conversation continued for another 40 minutes. Then the official collected his pieces of paper and left. I was sure I would get a positive answer. How could they send me back, knowing what would await me?

The official returned and, trying not to catch my eye, told me that the immigration service had decided that I was not to be offered political asylum. There was a long pause. Now all those present tried not to look one another in the eye.

How can I describe my state at that moment? Inside myself I was lying prostrate. The structure I had been building up in my thoughts for many years suddenly collapsed. I was under its debris and it was difficult to breathe.

"I'm sorry," the official said. "I was just doing my duty." He nodded and left.

The film had come to an end: it was time to leave the cinema. Nick accompanied me in silence almost as far as the hotel. Looking at me as if at a living corpse, he sympathetically shook my hand and I staggered off to return to my hotel to lay my chest against the machine-gun embrasure.

Thanks to my Armenian luck, our group had been delayed. I quickly went up to my room, put the bag containing the criminal manuscripts back in its place and went down to the bar.

The bus brought them back about half an hour later. The general did not stop to listen to my

explanations and walked past me sullenly.

Back in my room, I lay down on my bed. The telephone rang. "Here we go," I thought. "Now the general will summon me to his room and demand an explanation . . ."

I was mistaken. Nick had not abandoned me. He had put me in contact with a journalist who turned out to be more informed about legal procedures connected with the right of political asylum. He said that if I had not changed my mind, we could challenge the decision. "No," I said, "I haven't." And it seemed as if I had surfaced again.

I had scarcely had time to replace the receiver when the group's female interpreter arrived — this was the second "eye of Big Brother" after the general.

From that moment, she did not leave me for a second; she even expressed a desire to stay the night. For the first time in my life I resisted an attractive woman: I was afraid of scratching myself in the dark on the rigid wings of her KGB major's shoulder-straps.

On the next day, the last of our stay in England, the whole group was taken to Westminster Abbey and afterwards to a restaurant. Then the general announced a free period, and everyone dashed off to the shops. I ran through the pre-Christmas crowds to the hotel and feverishly collected my things. A car was waiting for me round the corner.

Months have passed since. My case was taken up by a well-known lawyer. As a result of his energy, I was invited to the Home Office, after which I was given official permission to remain on British soil while the question of political asylum was considered.

All of us, from birth to the day we die, belong to someone. In principle, it is only death that liberates us from the fetters of our children, our families, the State. I am now in a curious position: my parents are dead, I have no wife or children, I am not a subject of any country. I have no property, either — and, of course, no money. Perhaps this is freedom? But why, then, do I catch myself thinking more and more that I wouldn't mind acquiring a family, building a house, having children, getting citizenship — fettering myself again?

● Translated by the Samizdat Press Agency.