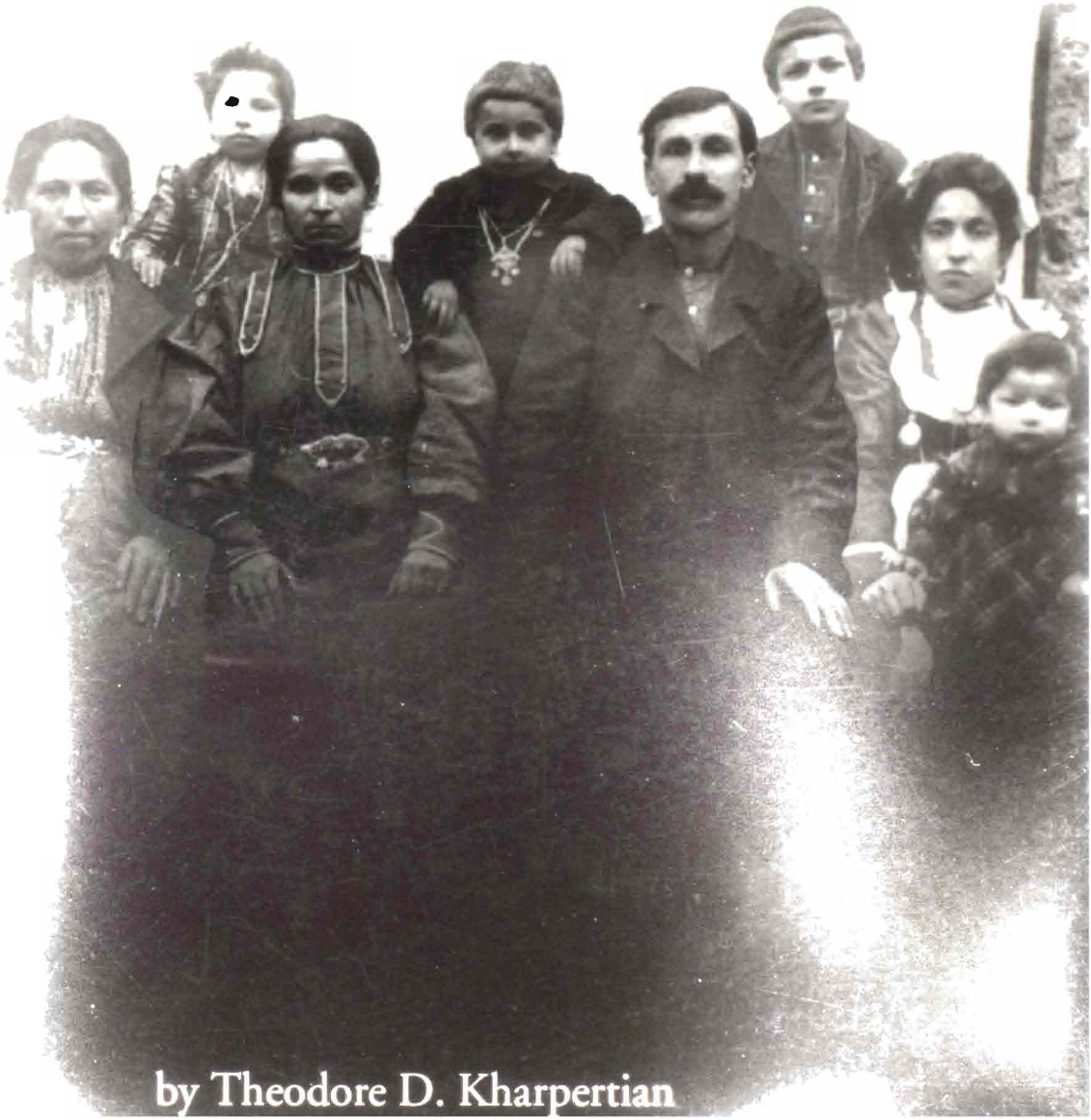
HAGOP

An Armenian Genocide Survivor's Journey to Freedom



by Theodore D. Kharpertian

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Preface

A friend, when she learned that I was writing a book about my father, asked how the subject felt about this act of, as she termed it, "filial piety." I responded that, naturally enough, he was pleased, but I cannot say with certainty that this book indeed constitutes such an act on my part so much as it represents for me an internal drive to come to terms with my legacy as an Armenian-American and as the son of a survivor, the sole survivor in his immediate family, of the first genocide of the twentieth century, that of over one million Armenians by the Turks of the Ottoman Empire in 1915.

The text is based principally on a series of sporadic interviews I conducted with my father at first between August 1994 and April 1995 and, as the project began to take shape, more systematically and intensively in May 1996. Not surprisingly, he found the memories at times painful, even agonizing; at other times, he recalled them fondly. In the end, however, the experience benefited us both. There was for him a kind of catharsis as he shared with me the remarkable trajectory of his life, and, correspondingly, there occurred for me a kind of rite of passage, an assumption of the burdens of my heritage and history as an adult Armenian-American.

For years, my mother had been advising me to write my father's story, one by which she herself had been transfixed when they first met. Regretting that, as a refugee, he had in his life never been provided with the power of a public forum to share his remarkable experiences of the Genocide and its aftermath, she felt my professional status as a scholar of language and literature and, not incidentally, my biological status as his son qualified me best for the task. In 1994, I heeded her advice, and the project commenced.

In all, the interviews amounted to many hours of oral material. Subsequently, I transcribed the content of the interviews in paraphrase as notes from which I developed the text. In addition, I integrated, as appropriate in the later chapters in particular, material from my own experience. Admittedly, there is no question here of "objectivity"; "subjectivity" prevails. It is not in the nature of a memoir to be any different.

My father speaks, among other languages such as French, an excellent and cultivated form of Armenian; but my competence in the language of my ancestors is scant. Fortunately, he was gracious and accommodating enough to be interviewed and to respond primarily in English. For translations of Armenian when it became necessary to communicate in his native tongue, I thank my mother, Mary Kharpertian. For the time to write the manuscript, I am indebted to Hudson County Community College, which granted me sabbatical leave for the Spring 1997 semester. For their interest and willingness to shepherd the manuscript through the process of publication, I would like to thank the National Association for Armenian Studies and Research and, in particular, Marc A. Mamigonian. And finally, for the willingness to discuss the experience, impact, and meaning of the Genocide in his life, I thank my father, Hagop Kharpertian. I consider it an honor to have contributed, however belatedly, my own voice as witness.

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Introduction

About thirty years ago, sometime in the mid 1960s, I asked my father what it had been like in the "old country." He was then in his late fifties, I was in my teens, and America was, in retrospect, on the verge of significant social upheaval. We had never spoken of his past, one that I knew was rife with sorrow, but prompted by no other conscious impulses than curiosity and love, I was looking forward to a comforting reminiscence as we sat together in the kitchen of our home. Soon after he had begun to recall the beauty of the land, however, he uttered the Armenian word for mother – "*mayrig*" – and started to cry. Suddenly aware of the depth of his grief, I arose and, wordlessly commiserating, touched his shoulder. Leaving the room where we had spoken, I felt utterly helpless.

About fifteen years later, I asked another question, this time about changing our name. It was June 1979, and I had just returned from graduate school. It had become one of the more resonant lessons of my studies in language and literature that while names mattered – indeed, they were matter – even more critical was the act of naming, for it conferred some special significance, perhaps even power, on both namer and named. More to the point, I had been born with a surname that was somewhat different from the one I had then, and both names were in turn entirely different from my father's birth name. He had been compelled in the course of his life to surrender his patronymic, and I wanted our rightful name back. He listened to my importunities, considered them silently for a moment, and answered finally, "Wait until I die." In respect, I dropped the subject.

About six months later, in no particular context, he spontaneously offered, "Let's do it." Needless to say, I asked what he meant. "Let's change our name," he replied.

And so began a kind of odyssey of recovery: a name, an identity, a past.

In the summer of 1994, when I was forty-five and my father a robust eighty-seven, I felt compelled to ask again the "old country" question of thirty years earlier. I may have done so from a sense of narrowing possibility or for no other reason than a need to set the record straight. I cannot be sure, but over the next two years, he and I grew closer as we finally spoke at length about the unspeakable – the horror of Genocide and its aftermath.

What follows, then, is the story of my father, Hagop Kharpertian. Although I am by profession a scholar, this book is not a scholarly treatise proving conclusively the occurrence of the 1915 Genocide of the Armenians by the Turks. Instead, it takes the Genocide, witnessed by and attested to both by numerous, reliable outsiders and by the survivors themselves, as its unassailable premise. If it is, as a result, personal and subjective, it is also necessarily in some small part my story or, rather, the story of a coming to terms with the past and its legacy: the doubt and sorrow, the fear and anger, and, most of all, the resolve and determination to make sense of, to give a shape and meaning to, events of nearly a century ago that to this day mark the lives of Armenians everywhere.

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Malatia: Heaven and Earth in Ashes Burning

In the final decade of the nineteenth century, in a small country church, a priest was assassinated. The year was 1895; the town was Malatia, Turkey. The assassins, agents of the Ottoman government, were Moslem Turks, acting on official orders. The priest, a man of God, had been murdered in order to silence a community leader; murdered because he was Armenian.

Nor was he alone. In the mid 1890s, hundreds of thousands of other Armenians would be slaughtered. By 1923, the massacres would claim well over a million victims – the new century's first genocide.

Although Turkey had designated Armenians as *"gavurs,"* infidels whom they oppressed but tolerated, they were also, paradoxically, considered the empire's faithful community or *"millet,"* a trusted minority. Indeed, Armenians had created an important and vital culture in Asia Minor over more than two millennia and in the Ottoman Empire itself for more centuries.

What had happened? What had transformed Armenians in the eyes of the Ottomans from loyal citizens to hated – and expendable – enemies of the state?

The situation of the Christian Armenian minority in the Ottoman Empire of the late nineteenth century was in fact problematic and precarious. Alienated by religion from the Turkish Islamic majority and from the empire's conservative Islamic sultan, Abdul-Hamid II, the Armenians were also in the vulnerable position of possessing a significant degree of economic and cultural power without

corresponding political power. Although many lived and worked as neighbors of the Turks on the farms and in the villages of Anatolia, others, particularly in cities like Constantinople, had become commercially and, in a real sense, culturally successful in trade with Europe. Still others sympathized with Russian encroachments into the empire, trusting Russian professions of support for the Armenians as persecuted Christians in a Moslem land. In 1894-96, Abdul-Hamid, increasingly concerned about the "Armenian Question," ordered the massacre of some three hundred thousand Armenians. Among the victims was Father – in Armenian his title was *"Der Hayr"* – Karian, the Malatia priest assassinated in 1895 and the maternal grandfather of the subject of this book, my father, Hagop Kharpertian.

Hagop was born on January 4, 1907, in Malatia. His ancestors came originally from Kharpert (the name is a compound of two Armenian words, *"khar"* and *"pert,"* signifying "stone fort"), a town about 40 miles to the northeast, probably sometime in the nineteenth century, and both Malatia and Kharpert were part of a much larger body of land, once largely Armenian, comprising eastern Turkey, northwestern Iran, and the current Republic of Armenia.

Hagop's father Toros, born about 1870, carried on his own father Hagop's silkworm business after Hagop died but also sold medicinal opium to Constantinople for export to Europe and, in addition, managed a dye store in Malatia. Toros and his wife Hrepsime (née Karian) were married in 1894 and had five children in all: a girl, Yeghisapet, born in 1896; a boy, Yeznik, born in 1902; another boy (name unknown), born in 1905; Hagop, born in 1907; and Diran, born in 1914. Hagop's three older siblings died in a cholera epidemic in 1909. Awaiting Diran, as well as his parents, was a different, far crueler fate.

Hagop remembers his father Toros as a good and kindly man, one who played cards and backgammon with him. Following the cholera epidemic, Toros was especially protective of his remaining child, taking him everywhere. Once, Hagop recalls fondly, his father made him smoke in order to alleviate jaundice and, when that par-

ticular home remedy failed, took him by horseback to a local monastery on the outskirts of town, boiled some eggs, and, discarding the yolks, gave his son the whites mixed with dirt. Subsequently, Toros left some money on the monastery wall. On a month-long trip to the village of Moushovga to acquire poppies for Toros' medicinal opium business, Hagop recalls that, despite being only five or six years old, he kicked and broke the door of the local church. They left the village early in the morning, perhaps to escape, but a sleepy Hagop fell off his horse and Toros had to lay his son on the ground for some much-needed rest. Subsequently, they embarked once again on their return to Malatia.

Hagop recalls life in Malatia as virtually idyllic, but as a young boy he had few responsibilities and little awareness of the insecurities plaguing Armenians of the empire. His father, of course, was well aware of the danger, and after the massacres of the mid 1890s moved his family in 1895 from the Turkish section of Malatia, the eastern "uptown" section, to the western "downtown" Armenian section. Thus the integrated yet predominantly Turkish area of Malatia became increasingly devoid of Armenians after the initial massacres. Despite this growing ethnic segregation of the Armenian minority (approximately thirty thousand of a total population of about ninety thousand), there were few, if any, overt class divisions by neighborhood. While there was certainly a variety of levels of wealth, there seems to have been little, if any, discernible poverty.

The town's architecture comprised largely wooden, one- or two-story residences. Hagop describes his own home, for example, as a one-story edifice with a dirt, later wooden, floor and four rooms: a kitchen (although cooking was done in the fireplace), a living room, and two bedrooms. Interestingly, there were no interior doors. In the living room was a wooden sofa with large pillows that he particularly remembers for their covers' deeply rich colors. There were no chairs, and for dinner, family members sat on the floor around a circular table. When heat was necessary, from January to March, a stove near which family members slept kept them warm. Artificial light was available by means of kerosene lamps, and water could be

obtained from a backyard well or in the front yard from either a mountain stream or a municipal system of outdoor pipes. In all and at various times, nine people occupied the home, including the seven members of Toros' family and his two younger, unmarried brothers, Krikor and Selabion.

The Kharpertians' domestic life was, not surprisingly, a traditional one. While Toros was the principal decision maker and attended to his three businesses – the family silk business, the dye store, and the medicinal opium business – Hrepsime filled the role of homemaker, caring for the children, cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing, and gardening.

Toros shopped for food in the marketplace, and typical fare, prepared by the women in the home, included a rich assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables, grains, and meats – in particular, lamb. (In fact, to this day, Hagop regards the foods of Malatia as almost ideally healthful, while the foods of his progressive Westernization, especially those of the United States, as increasingly and dangerously unwholesome.) Most foods were stored in large crocks while perishables like lamb were purchased on a daily basis as necessary and cooked in the fireplace from which the ashes served as soap for washing dishes.

Laundry and baths took place at a backyard copper tub filled with either rainwater or well water, although Hagop recalls washing his face in front of the house as well, near the outdoor commode. Once every couple of weeks or so, in addition, both men and women visited the Turkish baths, men typically in the morning before work or on the weekend and women with children up to fourteen years of age in the afternoon.

Children, of course, attended schools, and Armenian children attended exclusively Armenian schools, of which Hagop recalls two run by an alliance of church and community. In one of the schools, his own kindergarten class was taught by a female teacher about thirty years old and had approximately one hundred students occupying a single room. However, Hagop recalls far more vividly frequent visits to his father Toros' dye store (despite the fact that he

was in effect playing hooky). On these visits, he was accompanied by his uncle Selabion, about ten years his senior. At the store, he was impressed by the beauty of the rich and deep colors, not unlike those on the sofa pillow cases at home. Indeed, Hagop recalls these visits to the dye store as among the happiest moments in his childhood.

It was, prior to the Genocide, not an unhappy childhood. The Armenian community in Malatia was decidedly a community. Relatives lived nearby, and supportive friends and neighbors abounded. On Sundays, Toros took Hagop on his visits to family and friends. Hagop himself had numerous playmates, including several boys next door, the Gananians, whose friendship he continued to maintain later in France and the United States. Their games were a testimony to the inventiveness of children. Lacking manufactured "toys" as such, they nevertheless designed forms of play based on available materials such as sticks, balls of yarn, and buttons. When Hagop recounted these games, it was with the gleeful innocence of an unencumbered childhood.

Unfortunately, that innocence was soon shattered. With the accession to power in 1908 of the Young Turks, whom the Armenian minority initially embraced as agents of progressive reform, conditions for the Armenian minority nevertheless distinctly worsened. Massacres of fifteen to twenty thousand Armenians occurred in Cilicia in 1909 during an unsuccessful counterrevolution by the recently deposed sultan Abdul-Hamid II, and anti-Armenian violence of a less organized kind, including the looting of homes, took place with some degree of regularity in the eastern provinces. Hagop recalls robberies by Turks of Armenian homes in Malatia before 1915, although he remains uncertain whether the perpetrators were agents of the government, which by 1913 was under the control of a radical wing of the Young Turks – the ultranationalists Enver, Talaat, and Jemal – or simply lawless citizens encouraged perhaps by the growing atmosphere of hatred and pan-Turkism.

In any case, in late 1914 and early 1915, features of a systematic genocide of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire had begun to

emerge. First, just prior to the outbreak in mid-August 1914 of World War I, Armenian men were drafted for service in the Ottoman army in anticipation of Turkey's support of its European ally, Germany. Prior to 1914, Armenian men had been permitted to pay an exemption tax of forty gold coins to avoid military service, but this recourse was no longer open to Armenians in 1914. In early 1915, however, the Armenian draftees were disarmed, put to work as road crews under conditions of extreme brutality and starvation, and ultimately shot or left on roadsides to die. Remaining able-bodied Armenian men in the towns and villages of Turkey, including in particular the community's leaders, then were disarmed, arrested, imprisoned briefly, tortured, and then deported or taken to the countryside and shot en masse. Finally, in late May 1915, an official edict of deportation, designed *de jure* to rid Turkey of those suspected of subversion but intended *de facto* to erase from the empire all but the most necessary traces of Armenian presence, was issued.

Forced by executive order to abandon their homes and leave on a march over mountains and through deserts, ostensibly to the Syrian refugee camps of Aleppo and Der-Zor, most remaining Armenian citizens of the empire, including the elderly, women, and children, perished in the attempt. Gendarmes who accompanied the caravans frequently murdered the men, and Turkish units specially assigned to raid the caravans did so with relative impunity; Kurdish tribes also attacked the deportees, taking young men for work and women for less honorable reasons in addition to robbing and murdering the defenseless Armenians. As a result, the post-Genocide population reflected the loss, according to most reasonable estimates, of seventy-five per cent of the pre-Genocide population of two million Turkish Armenians. Among those whom the Genocide claimed as its victims were Toros, Hrepsime, and Diran Kharpertian.

Hagop was only eight years old when the Turkish authorities came for his father Toros. It was April or, more likely, May 1915. Toros had hidden himself in the home of an Armenian man whose store was adjacent to Toros' in the central marketplace. The man himself had already been arrested, so Toros might have felt some-

what secure. Nevertheless, he was discovered, and, as he was led away peacefully as part of a large group of some forty to fifty Armenian men, a young boy of eight was playing outdoors, a young boy who was witnessing an extraordinary event, his father's arrest.

Did Hagop comprehend? Did Toros see the young boy, his son, and consider the possibility, the likelihood, that he would not see him again as a free man? These were not questions I could bear to ask Hagop, but I believe that he did not then fully grasp the significance of the events that overtook his father on that fateful day in the spring of 1915. As evidence, I offer the natural tendency of parents to protect their children and, more powerfully, the natural tendency of the latter to remain unaware of adult experience. I see this tendency in my own children, and I am reminded of the opening stanza of "We Are Seven," a poem by the British poet William Wordsworth: " – A simple Child, / That lightly draws its breath, / And feels its life in every limb, / What should it know of death?"

Toros was imprisoned, and during the week of his imprisonment, his wife and two children visited him twice, bringing him food and sharing their concern. During the visits, Toros spoke primarily with Hrepsime and seemed to be in good health, but Hagop is unable to recall whether there were any signs that he had been beaten while in jail. At the end of the week, Toros disappeared from the prison, presumably taken, like other Armenian men, to the outskirts of Malatia and executed. Hagop never saw him again.

Toros Kharpertian was uninvolved in politics, possessed no arms, and had committed no crimes. He was simply a businessman with a family. Nevertheless, for the crime of his ethnicity, he, like thousands of other Armenian men across the Ottoman Empire, paid with his life. There was no formal accusation, no trial, no defense, no due process – just arrest, imprisonment, and execution – and, unfortunately, the pattern was repeated consistently across Turkey that violent and evil spring of 1915.

Deportation orders quickly followed. While Armenians had already been deported in early April from the town of Zeitun, some fifty miles to the southwest of Malatia, and several thousand from

Constantinople, following the arrest in late April of that cosmopolitan city's Armenian intellectuals and other cultural leaders, these events, while ominous, seemed more happenstance than systematic. In late May 1915, however, the Temporary Law of Deportation, authorizing local authorities to deport any and all persons even suspected of treason, was promulgated. Given the primitive state of communication in the Armenian community, indeed throughout the empire, and given the relative powerlessness of a disarmed and emasculated Armenian population, the deportation was necessarily met with little resistance. Who, after all, was left to resist? The women, children, and aged who formed the preponderance of the deportees had neither the collective will nor the ability to do battle with armed police. Often, in fact, the Turkish gendarmes themselves removed the men from the groups of deportees and executed them on the spot, thereby ensuring the helplessness and compliance of the remaining victims.

Hrepsime, Hagop, and Diran Kharpertian left their home sometime in late May 1915 as part of the official deportation of the Armenians of Malatia. Hagop does not know how much advance notice Hrepsime was given (throughout Turkey, it varied from as little as a day to as much as a week), but on that day she carried food in addition to her eighteen-month-old son Diran and gave Hagop provisions to carry as well. Hagop recalls laughing innocently as they walked near the marketplace escorted by the Turkish gendarmes when he was sternly rebuked by a fellow deportee who demanded, "Do you think this is a picnic?" Needless to say, until that moment, in his eight-year-old's mind, he probably did. He was soon to learn otherwise.

The march soon took the Armenians of Malatia outside the town. Late in the afternoon of the first day of the deportation, they arrived at a farm. On the way, the young boy had witnessed at least one beating, that of a twenty-year-old neighbor by a Turkish gendarme. At the farm, however, an interesting thing occurred: according to Hagop, an "order from Europe" compelled the Turks to return safely to Malatia all Catholics and Protestants. Indeed, the Young

Turk government, under pressure from the Vatican as well as the German and Austrian ambassadors, made a pretense of sparing the non-Apostolic Armenian population. However, for the vast majority of these Armenians the reprieve was only temporary; and most of them met the same fate as their countrymen. Hrepsime took advantage of this opportunity and delivered Hagop to her youngest sister, Tundo Yaghoupian, who as a Catholic would soon be repatriated to Malatia; indeed, she did return the very next day to Malatia but without Hagop, who, missing his mother, refused to go with his aunt and returned to Hrepsime of his own volition. Finally, along with Catholics and Protestants, certain professionals were also returned, as the Turks realized the destruction of the Armenians meant the evisceration of their economy and commerce, eighty percent of which, it is estimated, was controlled by the Armenians.

On the second day of the march, Hrepsime, Hagop, and Diran arrived in the village of Fourounji, where Hrepsime Kharpertian was to face the most momentous decision of her life. Prior to the deportation and even throughout the journey, a minority of the Turkish population, which had been expressly forbidden by its government to help the Armenians, had nevertheless assisted in various ways: by hiding Armenian families, for example, and by "adopting" Armenian children, converting them to Islam in the process. In Fourounji, this latter option presented itself to Hagop's mother. An elderly and nameless Turkish man from Malatia, who had evidently followed the caravan of deportees, offered to take Hagop from Hrepsime. Uncertain about her prospects for survival, Hrepsime handed Hagop to the man, paying him in the process. Unable to save both Hagop and Diran because infants were too much a burden even for sympathetic Turks, Hrepsime did the next best thing: she gave up Hagop. For her it was a Hobson's choice; for Hagop, there was no choice. He would never see his mother or his brother again.

Hagop and his Turkish deliverer walked and rode by donkey back to Malatia. The journey, beginning in the middle of the afternoon of the second day of the deportation, took some two to three hours, but this odd couple did not, could not, communicate across