

## *My Cousin Archie*

by Peter Najarian

*Editor's Note: From 1955 to the year before he died, Arthur Pinajian wrote many letters about his life and art to his cousin, Peter Najarian. Excerpts from those letters are quoted throughout my biographical essay because they give us personal glimpses into Pinajian's life and allow the reader to hear the artist speak for himself. Along with those letters, Mr. Najarian has provided war drawings, family photographs, and some of the comics illustrated throughout this book. These primary source materials, and the seven key passages below, are part of his unpublished memoir, "My Cousin Archie."*

— P.H.F.

My cousin Archie's mother, Vartanoosh (née Najarian), was my father's older sister. They were from an ancient city in eastern Turkey, now called Diyarbekir, filled with Armenians and Turks living side by side. Vartanoosh was born in 1889 and my father four years later. In 1910, when my father was to be drafted into the Turkish army as cannon fodder, Vartanoosh sold her embroidery, at which she was expert, to take him under her wing and flee to America. They had a sister in West Hoboken, New Jersey, a very densely populated town overlooking the Hudson River across from Manhattan, later to be united with neighboring Union Hill to become Union City. Here a community of Armenians, mostly from Diyarbekir, had built a church and a social life filled with the music and drama they had brought with them from their culture back home.

Archie was baptized with the Armenian name, Ashod (supposedly Arthur in English), which he was called at home, but he would become "Archie" to his pals in the neighborhood. He was born on March 28, 1914, a year before the genocide of Armenians that would orphan my mother and lead her to West Hoboken as a mail-order bride to my brother's father, who was one of Archie's extended family. This family would be quite large by now, since Archie's father, who had also fled the draft, was an inlaw to his mother Vartanoosh back in Diyarbekir.

Archie's father, Hagop Pinajian, was a few years older than his wife. Though he was a "good man," he was quite passive and so ineffective at raising his family that it was my father, Armenag, who actually assumed this role after Archie and his sister were born. Archie's mother and my father were more than close, and they would live together until her death in 1932. My father continued to live in the home for a few more years until he married my mother, who by then was divorced. My mother's first husband was a cousin of Archie's father, and in the closeness of the clan she spent a lot of time with Archie as he grew up. He was seven years old when she first got off the boat, and she would remember him getting "so excited when he spoke that he would stammer."

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