At the age of sixty-seven Ahmet Ağaoğlu wrote in his memoirs that since his early youth he had been struck by the question of why there existed such huge differences between what he called the Eastern and Western ways of life. “When I grew up,” he noted, “this question would also grow; it would expand its meaning and character; it would surrender [me] and, by becoming a pain..., it would poison my entire life.” Ağaoğlu's memoirs, the 1936 version, read as the story of a heart and a mind torn between what he calls the East and West. On the one hand, it offers us a fascinating reading of how a man lived his life seeking to understand his life's quest. On the other, it invites to us to be cautious. The reader of Ağaoğlu's memoirs, which were written at a time when he was deeply preoccupied with the issue of East-West differences, must be aware, as Hayek once speculated, that “the existence of an autobiography may be the cause of our knowing less about its subject.”

Fortunately, there are two different autobiographies of Ağaoğlu. The first one was written at an uncertain time in the 1910s and was never published. It covers his early youth through until his arrival in Istanbul and his first years there in the early 1910s. It shows some stark contrasts with the second one published initially in Kültür Haftası in 1936 and later in his son Samet's Babamdan Naturalar (1940) and which cover only the period from his birth to his trip to Paris in 1888. The 1910s version of his autobiography does not mention the question of the differences between East and West at all. Nor does it entirely match with the 1936 version of Ağaoğlu's life story.

Even though there is strong need to avoid, while reading autobiographies, the snares which the writer lays for posterity and his subjectivity, his or her

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4 Ahmet Ağaoğlu, “Altmış Yedi Yıl Sonra”.
own version of the story also needs to be respected. This is because, as Jones underlines, “if a real confession is to be wrought from the author’s testimony, the first step must be to listen to the story [she or] he wants to tell us.” This chapter aims to critically read the stories that Ağaoğlu wants to tell us about his early life. It will attempt to show Russian and early French influences on his thought, which helped him to form the nucleus of his later liberal ideas, before reviewing his early writings that appeared in French journals in the 1890s.

2.1 Family Life and Education

According to the 1910s version of his autobiography, Ağaoğlu was born in 1868 in Shusha, in Russian-controlled Azerbaijan with the family name Aghayef. His family was originally from the Kurtlareli tribe, which had emigrated from Erzurum to Karabagh in the eighteenth century. Their native tongue was Azerbaijani (a language of Turkic origin, but more ancient than standard Ottoman Turkish), but they could also speak Arabic and Persian. A wealthy landowner family, they gained the nobility title of “bey” which, as Ağaoğlu notes, was officially recognised by the Russian authorities. Along with other major landowners, his family had been positively affected by Russian control in the region, gaining private ownership of lands that had once belonged to the khan.

In the Caucasus, Muslim people of the time, no matter what their ethnic origins, identified themselves with the religion and culture of Islam. Ağaoğlu's

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6 Ibid., p. 15.
7 Jones notes that “reading autobiographies critically is an everyday task for the historian, who has to address not only the fallibility of memory but also the desire of their subjects to present their own lives in the most favourable possible light and so to weave webs of myth in which later generations have become entangled,” Ibid., pp. 15–16.
9 Akçura, Türk Yılı, p. 420.
10 Ibid., p. 420. This was due to the fact that Azerbaijan had been torn for a few centuries between different identities under the concomitant influences of Iran, Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The Persian language was highly predominant in the countryside and Azeri was limited to more intellectual parts of the population in urbanized zones; for more detail see, Charles van der Leeuw, Azerbaijan: A Quest for Identity, A Short History, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000.