

STATEMENT OF OBSERVATIONS WHILE IN BITLIS AND ON THE
ROAD BETWEEN BITLIS AND HARPUT —
MAY 1915 TO DECEMBER 1915.*
[MYRTLE O. SHANE]

Toward the end of May, 1915, Armenians from villages around Bitlis crowded into the city, the majority being old men, women and children. Our school compound was filled, probably six or seven hundred, perhaps more. Some carried small bundles, but most of them had fled with only the clothes they were wearing. Mr. Knapp and I walked out to a monastery on the Sindian road, where we had heard that a large number of these refugees had gathered. We found several hundred here, many without food. Gendarmes were stationed on the ground to prevent their escape.

In the early part of June we saw many of the refugees in the city gathered up and driven through the streets by the gendarmes and police. From a bluff overlooking the south road leading from the city we saw when large numbers of them were gathered before being sent down the road. Those on our premises were taken, old men and women, young women and babies in their arms, and little children, and girls. Many of these had witnessed the horrors of the massacres of 1895-96 and there was probably not a child among them whose young soul had not been seared by listening to his elders recount the events of these awful times.

The sight of one armed soldier would have been sufficient to strike terror to their simple village hearts, broken as they were with the horrible suspense of the past week or so since being driven from their homes. They became cowering, weeping, terrified crowd in the presence of the gendarmes who came to take them away. Mr. Knapp and I went about among them doing what we could to comfort and encourage them. Moans and cries could be heard, some who refused to go willingly were beaten, but for the most part they went quietly, weak and shivering in their terror.

On one occasion the superintendent of hospitals, a Turk, said to Mr. Knapp in the presence of all us Americans, that these ignorant village Armenians were not fit to live—they ought to die.

Fear was growing among the people of the city, but to the best of my knowledge there had been no disturbance, the Armenians in Bitlis hoping against hope that the gathering storm would pass them by. On June 23rd our premises were surrounded by armed soldiers and police. We were all at the Ely residence except Mr. Knapp who was at his own house within calling distance. I ran down stairs intending to go over to the girls' school, but at the gate leading into the street was forced back at the point of the gun. Sister Marhta (Miss Kleiss, German nurse from Van) also attempted, but with the same result. Mr. Knapp was finally permitted to go with Sister Marta to see the Vali and was

*. SOURCE: NA/RG256/Special Reports and Studies/ Inquiry Document 804.

told that an order had come for deportation and that those not found guilty of disloyalty to the government would be allowed later to go peacefully together with their families. He was also warned that the government would brook no resistance and it would be better for the men to surrender quietly.

We had previously allowed several men and their families to come on to our premises. All together there were about twelve men, old and young, and about twenty boys including the boarders in our school. Mr. Knapp had allowed them to come in, only on condition that all arms be given to him. So there was no resistance. The search was not thorough, but those who succeeded in hiding were taken the next day as the whole place was so well guarded night and day that they had no chance of escaping. A few of the younger boys were allowed to return.

Firing could be heard throughout the city. Women came bringing children to Sister Marta that she might dress their wounds, inflicted by shots fired by soldiers who were trying to take men from their houses. A bright little boy, one of our pupils, had lost one eye and was suffering intensely. Two little girls from the home of Moses Effendi, a prominent lawyer, had been badly wounded in the head.

A number of villagers had been left in our compound because they were too sick to be moved without being carried. An epidemic of fever was raging, probably typhus. Before our men were taken, June 23, we had been allowed to bury those who died, in a neighboring garden. After that we were compelled to bury them inside the compound. A few of our stronger women and three little boys, who had been allowed to return, dug the graves, it being necessary oftentimes for Mr. Knapp to assist. There were often as many as five or six deaths a day. In digging a grave in one place, the women unearthed graves that had been made at the time of the 1895 massacre.

Our premises were now under strict guard. A number of children found their way inside through a sewer opening under the wall. We were not forbidden to talk with those who had the courage to come to our gates. Part II. p. 3.* A woman came from the quarter from which it was reported women were being gathered up to be sent away. She was the mother of Digin Takoohi, one of our former teachers, and had with her another daughter, a beautiful girl about seventeen years old, who was disguised and whom she implored us to take inside. The guards at the gate refused to allow her to come in.

I went to the Vali and asked that those on our premises be allowed to remain. (The fact that women in the city were being taken by Turks, or driven away, proved his statement about peaceful deportations untrue.

The Vali finally agreed to allow those with me in the school, about sixty, including women and small children, to remain—until the last. But added that orders had come from Constantinople to the effect that not a single Armenian was to remain in Bitlis.

*. There is no explanation for these references in Miss Shane's report. They presumably refer to sections of the original report submitted to Rev. Barton.

We could see women and children driven from houses near our premises. If they refused to come quietly they were dragged out.

As far as I know, with but one exception, the choice of accepting Islam was not given to men and boys, nor to the poorer classes of women. However, many of those belonging to wealthy families were urged to become Moslems. One day three women from the principal ward of the city came to tell us that if they refused to accept Islam, they would be sent down the road. One was Mrs. Altonyan whose husband, a judge, was a brother of Dr. Altonyan of Aleppo. He had been among the first to be taken. Her four boys, very bright, fine little fellows, were still with her. Part II. p. 4. Another of these women was a sister of Oriort Takoohi, a teacher in our girls' school. She had two daughters, one a fine young girl, with me at the time, and a younger girl about ten years old.

(From July 4th to the 24th I was ill with typhus. During this time the city was evacuated owing to the danger of Russian occupation. Armenian women and girls left by Turks, and many who had so far escaped capture, fled to us to escape being captured by Kurds who were plundering the city.) Upon the return of the Turks, following the Russian retreat, persecution of surviving Armenians was renewed. On July 24th they took from our premises those who had fled to us. We almost lost our own women and girls, but through the intervention of the new superintendent of hospitals they were allowed to remain on condition that they would help in the hospital work.

Women escaped, came back to beg at our doors for food and protection—fingers off, hands off, faces and bodies mutilated. When we told them we were not allowed to take any more Armenians on penalty of losing the few we had, they would snatch the food which we gave, look furtively hither and thither and run away like hunted animals. One woman tore open her dress, showed me her breast—no milk for the baby starving in her arms. The Ely residence was not under such strict guard and we often managed to give help to these women at the gate. Though not often, for it was dangerous for them to appear in the street and they would never have done so if they had not thought we would take them inside.

One day I saw an old woman left lying in the street near the school compound. She had just the strength enough left to lift her hand faintly in an effort to ward off a dog sniffing at her face. Some of the Turks passing by stopped out of idle curiosity, others went on taking no notice. Finally at Miss McLaren's bidding a common soldier carried her to a neighboring garden. We later succeeded in having her brought to our premises where she died. Several times we were allowed to bring women inside whom we found in a dying condition.

On July 30th, shortly before the simple service that was to precede Sister Marta's burial, just beneath the window, in the street I saw a gendarme beating an old white-haired woman who was stumbling along beneath the blows of his gun. A younger woman herself so weak she could scarcely walk was trying to support her. Suddenly the gendarme sprang in front of them and pointed his bayonet at the old woman as if to run it through

her body. She fell in a heap at his feet. Whereupon he seized her first by the girdle and then by the hair, dragging her through the rough street. She was left near our premises and we were allowed to take her in. She died soon after. Her face was very sweet and gentle. One of our teachers told me she had belonged to a wealthy family.

When for the first time after my illness I entered the room overlooking the large garden on the opposite side of the street, I saw the ground there covered with the charred remains of human bodies. Whether these were the remains of some of those who were taken from our premises on July 24th, or whether it was the result of something that had happened during my illness, I do not know. I doubtless was told but have forgotten. Death was so common, this was only one added horror. All my time and thoughts were taken up with those still alive and under my care.

The cries of women and children could be heard at almost any time during the day. If there was anything more heartrending it was the cries that rang out through the darkness of the night. Once I was startled from sleep by a woman's shriek of terror, followed by cries and pleadings which were answered only with the jeering laugh of men. For about two hours I could hear the woman's low moans like those of a tortured animal. The sound grew fainter and at last—silence. Two soldiers were stationed in front of a building nearby, which was filled with the household furnishings of any value that had been gathered up from the Armenian houses in the neighborhood. The woman had probably attempted to make her way to our premises not knowing that this spot was guarded at night.

By working quietly we had managed to take in about twenty little children off the streets. We felt sure we should not be able to keep them, but would provide for them as long as possible. One day a policeman came to take them away. He demanded the little children whom I had kept from the beginning. I refused to give them up and did not press the matter. Among the others was a little girl between two and three years of age. She was a grandchild in the Kindarian family, one of the best families in Biths. She had one of the sweetest, most winning baby faces I have ever seen. We had grown to love her. When she was put in line with the others, I rushed forward to protest, but to no avail. As they started off, her little bare feet pattering over the stone pavement, a Turk employed in the hospital came by, snatched her up and was allowed to keep her. (Even baby faces were grave in those days. The dear little tot, perhaps realizing that her rescuer was a Turk, refused to make friends with him, and he not knowing what to do with her, gave her over to the care of one of our women, Varzhabed Semon's wife.) The other children trudged on in single file under the eye of the policeman, their serious, innocent, questioning faces turned back for one last look at their temporary haven.

One day I was watching a crowd of women and children in the street below. They were led by a gendarme to a spot just beneath the window where they were made to stop. A few women gave money to the gendarme and were allowed to go. They ran frantically hither and thither like frightened animals. Where could they go for safety? There was no

safety for them. The fiendish grin on the face of their deliverer, as he led the others on, showed that he relished the sport.

Miss McLaren and I went down past the place at the edge of the city to the south, where we had heard that women and children driven from the city were now being kept without food or shelter. (This was in November.) At that time we saw only about ten or twelve, huddled together in small groups. Sitting there so quiet and motionless, they seemed unreal like dark phantoms hovered to earth or risen from it, waiting for the moaning of the night winds that would carry them on their way. Their faces were weird and surely those limp rags did not cover bodies of flesh and blood. Why, then, the guard?

Search was continually being made for men who might be in hiding. The slightest suspicious circumstance would be sufficient occasion for a raid. The Armenian house adjacent to our garden was the scene of such excitement at one time, but the man if there was one there was not found. Many men in hiding must have died of starvation after the women were taken away as they themselves would not have dared venture out even at night. On one occasion a man was discovered to be hiding in a house just back of the British Consulate, a part of the house being visible from our windows. It was as if hounds had scented a fox. Turks ran yelping from all directions. Some climbed upon the flat roof and leaned over with their guns pointing downward, in order to have a good chance at the man if he should attempt to escape. The commotion lasted for about two hours. I did not see nor hear what the outcome was.

We left Bitlis for Harput November 30th. By that time the road had been fairly well cleared, but in every gully could be seen the remains of human bodies. Beyond Diarbekir it was evident that there had been a massacre of men the night before, lasting on into the morning. We saw soldiers returning from the hills, who had evidently done the killing. During the first two days after leaving Diarbekir we quite frequently saw bodies on or near the road. Some of these had apparently been killed while trying to escape. Others had been stripped of their clothing. In many cases the bodies were terribly mutilated. In one place we passed three lying near together. The faces had been so mutilated that no features were discernible and the bodies were one mass of gashes. Once our driver had to turn the horses aside in order to avoid running over a body which lay across the road. We saw a dog standing over one corpse, and as we drew nearer could see that it had already gnawed a part of the flesh from the bones.

We passed the spot where the men had evidently been led off the road. It was far from any village, a wild, desolate, hilly region with enormous jagged rocks covering the hillsides. At this point many of the men had apparently tried to escape the torture and death that awaited them in the hill ravines. Many bodies were in plain view. Of others we could see an arm or leg projecting from behind some rock. It appeared that most of these men had been shot and were left where they fell. Judging from the bodies which we saw, it would seem that the men taken out on that occasion were unusually big and sturdy.

Farther on we met two Turks on horseback, behind them a man in a village dress, shuffling along as if his feet could hardly carry him. His body was bent with weariness, his face dull with hopelessness. One of the Turks called back gruffly to him as we passed. I imagined that their stopping place would be somewhere in the rugged region through which we had just come.

Later we saw the body of an old white-haired woman lying near the road a deep gash in her forehead.

All along the way we saw villages that had been completely destroyed by fire.

On the morning of the last day of our journey we met a group of men coming down the road, perhaps two or three hundred. They were lined up ten or more abreast, their hands tied. At first I had thought they were a group of soldiers, since at a distance the guns of the soldiers interspersed and walking along them were quite in evidence. They were accompanied by gendarmes and a Turkish officer.

II. STATEMENT OF WHAT I HEARD AND BELIEVE TO BE TRUE.

Sometime during the early spring of 1915 the German Consul of Mosul, Herr Holstein, came through Balls. He urged us to warn the people and to have our workers spread the warning, that if Armenians took advantage of war conditions to make trouble for the government, the whole race would surely be exterminated.

Villagers fleeing into the city during the latter part of May, told us that Kurds were attacking Armenian villages, killing young men, carrying off girls, sheep and cattle and burning houses. In order to escape, they had been compelled to leave everything behind.

Mr. Knapp told me that at one time there were eight thousand on the list of those to whom he was giving relief, and that the Arrachnort was helping about three thousand.

When these refugees were driven from the city early in June, some, who escaped, came back and told us that they were being killed or taken by Kurds on the way to Diarbekir. One woman related how the gendarmes told the party in which she was taken that at a certain point farther on the Kurds would attack them. Not as a warning, however, for those who tried to escape were shot. Her own condition, fingers off and an open gash in her face, told too plainly what their fate had been at the hands of the Kurds.

Mr. Knapp and our native pastor, Badveli Khatchig, asked the Vali that these refugees be allowed to go by the Moush road, so as to avoid the Kurdish attacks. The Vali replied that the Moush region was quiet now and must remain so.

Word was brought to us that Mukhitar, one of our senior boys, and his father were killed as they were fleeing from their village.

Nothing happened in the city until the 20th or 21st of June. Then word came that Badveli Khatchig had been arrested in the street and taken to prison. Mr. Knapp and Sister Marta went to inquire the reason. The Vali informed them that an attempt was being made to discover spies and that those found innocent after the matter was investigated would be freed.

Dr. Nishan and Dr.—, the former at Beirut, the latter from Constantinople, Armenians who had been helping in the military hospital, came to us and said that they had been ordered to go to Sird. They were both greatly troubled; the former especially felt certain that they would be killed. A Turkish doctor, Kyamil Effendi, returning from Sird later, told us that he had seen their bodies lying on the road.

On June 22nd Aristages Effendi, one of the teachers in our boys' school, was seized on the street. A few days later Mr. Knapp told me that he had passed him with a group of men under guard. All were carrying shovels. Mr. Knapp suspected then what was later confirmed by the rumor, that some of the Armenian men had been compelled to dig the trenches into which the] o bodies were thrown later.

One day, after our men had been taken (we had heard also that men throughout the city had been seized), Miss McLaren was passing Moses Effendi's house at the time it was being fired upon by soldiers. We were told later that Moses Effendi, a prominent lawyer, had been imprisoned and after his sons who had barricaded the house were captured, and the house burners with some of the inmates including the wife of Moses Effendi; the latter, before being killed himself, was taken to his home, that he might see the outcome of attempted rebellion.

Though our school compound was still under guard, we were not prevented from talking with women at our gate. Few had the courage to come. About three days after our men were taken from the premises (the Vali had promised that the men would be allowed to go peacefully with their families) some women ran to our gate and told me that soldiers were taking women from one of the wards of the city and that they (the women) were allowed to take nothing with them.

A few days later, Digin Takoohi's aunt told me that her niece (whom hey mother had brought to the gate but whom the guards refused to admit) was being placed first in one harem and then another. Part 1. p. 3.

On June 30th the women who had been allowed to carry bread to the men in prison, some of whom they had been permitted to see, came back reporting that the guards at the prison had told them that our men and boys were in the dungeon and that no one could see them. The following day they were told that the men had been taken away. The guard at the Ely house had been removed and it was commonly reported by women who came there that the men (our men) had been killed on the outskirts of the city, and their bodies thrown into trenches. One of our little school boys, son of Gerges Kirkorian, [sic, Yeghishe Krikorian]* eluded the guards at the gate of our school compound and went off alone to investigate. Upon his return he said that he had found the trench as the women had described and had seen arms and feet sticking from the newly made mounds.

*. Miss Shane makes this correction in a note to Rev. Barton, *see* Myrtle O. Shane to Rev. Barton, November 15, 1917, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge Mass., ABC 16.9.7, vol. 25d, doc. 410.

Of the manner of death of these men we could learn nothing. Of all the men who were taken from Bitlis and ultimately that would mean all (except those who died of starvation in hiding) I never saw nor heard of one who came back, nor have I heard since of one who escaped to any other place.

The superintendent of hospitals, Dr. Mustifa, told Miss McLaren that on one festive occasion the Vali exhibited the beard of the arrachnort.

Before leaving Van, Sister Marta had secured papers from the military commandant promising safety to two Armenians, boys, who had been working there with her in the military hospital and who came with her to Bitlis on May 18th. After reaching Bitlis, one of them had been taken sick and was in the hospital as a patient. On July 4th Sister Marta learned that a few days before he had been taken away. She immediately went to the Vali, told him of the paper which had been given by the military commandant, and demanded the return of the boy. The Vali said he would see what could be done. When Sister Marta went back the next day to find out what had been done, the Vali told her that the boy had been killed.

In Mr. Knapp's journal was recorded what had been told him by a woman who escaped from her hiding place on the hillside near the Gate of Semiramis, about two hours from the city, she saw fifty men near the road forced to lie down on their backs in a row, their hands and feet bound. Then a butcher proceeded to cut their throats one after another, each man knowing when his turn would come.

Part I. p. 4. During the early days of my illness (I was in the girls' school) one of our teachers, Leah Hagopian, told me that Oriort Takoohi's sister having refused to accept Islam, had been sent down the road with her little daughter and that both had been taken by Kurds. That the mother had come back to the school accompanied by a Kurdish woman, and asked her sister Oriort Takoohi for ten liras, saying that the Kurds had threatened to kill her daughter if she did not give that much money, but if she did, she would be allowed to take her daughter away. She received the money and went away. (She herself was never heard of again.) I might relate what I learned some time after I recovered from my illness, from a Turkish Murali's wife upon whom I was calling. (She and her husband had shown kindness to Armenians and were friendly to us.) She said that Oriort Takoohi's little niece had come back. They had found her wondering half naked in the streets, in a terrible condition, having been maltreated in most inhuman fashion: They had taken her in and were having an old Armenian woman take care of her. She said also that they were out of favor with the government because of the lack of sympathy with the way the Armenians were being treated and were being sent to Aleppo. Mrs. Altonyan had asked to be allowed to go with them, but she thought it not best as the Vali would promise her (Mrs. A.) safety only as far as Diarbekir, saying that the authorities there would have to arrange for her further journey. Later Mrs. Altonyan herself came in. She told me that she had accepted Islam (in name only), that she had been allowed to keep part of her own house and that her boys were still with her. Her

jewels, worth about three hundred liras, had been stolen and she was still paying money for her freedom. In another part of the house was Muggerdich Effendi, formerly of Van and now in the government service in Bitlis. His wife was with him. He had given his daughter to a Turk. He was the only man as far as I know whose life was saved by turning Moslem. (I heard recently from Mr. MacCallum that Mrs. Altonyan was saved when Bitlis was taken by the Russians and that she is now either in Tiflis or Erivan.

During my illness, the Russians came near the city. The Turks fled. Two bankers, one Italian, Mr. Artom, the other Greek, Mr. Polychondriati came up to stay with Mr. Knapp, being afraid to remain in the business district, owing to the wild fearless Kurds who were swarming into the city to rob and pillage. The Vali, a few soldiers and officers had not yet gone. The danger from Kurds was so great that we asked for a guard and were given several. The bankers watched half the night and Mr. Knapp the other half. The Vali sent word that we must all leave. We refused. The bankers before leaving said that we were in great danger of being attacked by Kurds at the instigation of the government, to prevent our giving information to the enemy.

Word came that the Vali was leaving and we allowed women and girls, some who had been left by Turks, others who had been in hiding, to come into the premises. But the Vali did not go. A few hours later word came that the Russians were retreating. Word was immediately sent out to the fleeing populace to return. It was either the 18th or 19th of July that the Vali had been on the point of leaving the city. On the 24th the Turks were back again and straight-away the persecution of surviving Armenians was renewed. Those who were taken from our premises on the 24th were either again taken by Turks or driven down the road.

The wife of Gerges Krikorian, a wealthy merchant, came back a few days later. She said that when she was taken from our compound she was told that she was wanted at the government building. Hoping that it might be a matter of money and that she might buy her freedom, she went willingly. She was taken to a Turk's house instead. The shock of the discovery made her so ill that the Turk sent her back to us, fearing that she might have typhus. She was later allowed to do menial labor in one of the hospitals. The money that her husband had deposited in the bank was not hers.

A little innocent faced lad, one of our school boys who had found his way back to our premises during the evacuation of the city, told me how he was one of a large party of women and children driven down the road. He had escaped a short distance from the city and come back to the house of a friendly Turk. The Turk, however, insisted on his becoming Moslem, so he ran away. Before his escape on the road, he had seen a young woman carrying a baby in her arms, shot down because she had not strength to keep up with the others. Her body was left lying where it fell, the baby still in her arms.

In the early part of September, a few days after their return, the two bankers called. They said they would never forget the horror of what they had seen on the road. The Bitlis river, a shallow mountain stream, was filled and the banks covered with bodies, in

all stages of decomposition. Bodies lying on both sides of the road and sometimes the highway itself obstructed by heaps of the dead. In one place for a space of about two rods, the road was covered with corpses over which Turks would force their horses to go rather than turn aside. Oftentimes a child was still alive—wailing there among the dead. In one spot, under the shade of overhanging branches, placed there perhaps by some Turk a bit kinder than others, were three babies. Dead is the word that we usually shrink from using in connection with sweet, innocent babies, but these three babies were alive—and those two men had to pass on and leave them there.

Owing to such a condition of the road, many of the Turks in their flight and return, sickened and died, many of typhus which was then raging. On one occasion the Vali said to Miss McLaren that more Turks had died than Armenians and that he thought it was God's punishment visited upon the Turks because of the Armenian massacres. (However this conviction did not cause him to prevent the atrocious treatment of women and children that was going on. Perhaps it was not in his power to do so. He had told me that orders had come from Constantinople that not a single Armenian was to remain in Bitlis.) This Vali's name was Mustafa Bey. The latter part of September he was replaced by another from Erzingan, a brother-in-law of Jevdet Bey, Van Vali. It was reported that Mustifa Bey would go to Kastimuni, but we later heard that he was sent to Aleppo. The information may or may not have been true.

One of our pupils, a girl, was sent to prison but later released and allowed to go back to the house of Mustifa Bey, superintendent of hospitals, where she had been staying. She told me that the prison was crowded with women and children, kept without food and water.

Some time in October, two German officers connected with the German Embassy in Constantinople, Herr von Scheubner Richter and Mr. Paul Leverkus, came through Bitlis and stopped there three days, on their way to Persia. They told us that they were sending relief to the women and children, thereby incurring the dislike and arousing the suspicion of Turkish officials. They also said that they knew that in one place (where, I do not remember) the Vali had sent men on ahead to cover the bodies along the road and wondered if the same thing were now being done on the road south of Bitlis. Mr. Leverkus said to me, "As officers we are compelled to shut our eyes to these things, but as men the alliance with these people is unbearable."

One day, Miss Ely's old cook, Sirpoohi, was brought in, very ill from typhus. She was lying in the court yard when a Turkish doctor passed through. Dr. Mustifa who was with him at the time, told Miss McLaren afterwards that this doctor had stopped on his way out and had administered an arsenic pill to the sick woman.

We had heard that gendarmes whose business it was to drive women from the city, were accepting as bribes the bit of money which the women had been able to keep with them. Of course they were captured again later, and having no money to give as bribes,

were taken on down the road. This report was partly confirmed by what I myself witnessed. Part I. p. 7.

We had also heard that instead of being taken for some distance down the road, the captives were now gathered together in a spot on the outskirts of the city to the south, compelled to remain there under guard without food or shelter, this in October and November. Kurds passing by were allowed to take their choice. The bodies of those who died were thrown into the river close by. This was confirmed by what Miss McLaren and I witnessed. Part I. p. 7.

[Signed and dated] Myrtle O. Shane, April 20, 1918.