

TURKISH ATROCITIES [CLARA CHILDS RICHMOND, CESAREA AND TALAS].*

(Arriving in Turkey in the fall of 1909, I lived two years in the Missionary Compound in Talas; three years in the city of Cesarea; then, from the beginning of the war because of unsafe conditions there, two and one half years again in Talas. Therefore I knew both town and city.)

In the spring of 1915 the searching of the houses for firearms began in both places, and many men—always Armenians—were imprisoned, tortured and beaten, in spite of the fact that fire-arms were allowed by the Constitution of 1908. Many had procured them after the Adana massacre of 1909, not knowing when defense might be necessary. The men, whether guilty of having had them or not, were fastened with the head down and feet up, and beaten upon the soles of the feet until the strongest would faint. One old man, Kalfayan Efendi (Mr.), who lived near us, was so terribly beaten that he died, in spite of the efforts of our American nurse—and this because he did not tell (he did not know) where his son was hidden.

Another who suffered from the beating was Haig Efendi Haroutounian, our druggist, a graduate of Beirut, and an exceptionally fine young man. During his three months' imprisonment in Cesarea—as he told us afterwards—he was kept at first with a large number of men, all in one room with no sanitary arrangements and little fresh air, until the suffering was intense. Even when one died, there was no hurry in removing the body.

Two of us went to the home of Jebidelikian Efendi in Cesarea (his daughter had once been a pupil of ours); we found that wealthy merchant lying in his bed, a wreck from the terrible beatings, so weak that he could scarcely make us hear his voice. His house was practically in ruins—floors, closets, cellar, all torn up in the search for weapons which he did not have. His feet we saw, and they were terribly swollen and lacerated. Later we hear that he had been taken and beaten again.

At first a group of twenty-six men, and later other groups, were taken from the prisons and sent away in chains, we were told by their families and those who saw them go. They were allowed to hire wagons at an exorbitant price, but the wagons returned in one or two hours empty, we were told by friends, who also said they had seen the men's clothes for sale in the market.

On Sunday night, June 13, 1915, I could not sleep from thinking of the horror which I had seen at church of the face of Boghos Agha Haroutounian, the steward and buyer for all our Talas institutions and brother of our druggist. As I lay awake I suddenly saw the flashing of lanterns, and heard the loud voices, as the gendarmes came and took Boghos Agha away from his house at 11:30, and to prison. I can never forget the screams of his old mother and his boy as they came to our American men for help. I then saw from my balcony Saibalian Efendi and his son taken from a house below us, and heard the screams of the women as they went to other houses, gathering up thirty-seven of the prominent men of Talas, one being our head Armenian teacher in the Boys' School, Horen Efendi Muggerditchian. After a short imprisonment in Cesarea, as written in a last note from Boghos, they took them to the village of Gemerek, twelve hours away, where, according to what was told us by Takoohi Donabedian, one of our girls who escaped from there, they were cruelly shot. In the house of an old Turk who had saved her because of her likeness to a dead daughter of his, she overheard a young Turk describe to another the shooting of our men.

On Monday, June 14, 1915, eleven of the most prominent Armenian men of Cesarea were hanged. Our Cesarea steward, who with his family lived in our house during our stay in Talas, told us of unexpectedly coming upon the awful sight in market, for the bodies were left on the gallows for some

*. SOURCE: NA/RG256/Special Reports and Studies/ Inquiry Document 807.

time as an “example.” Our Commencement week was thus changed to a time of mourning. A few of us went to the homes of five of the men hanged. In one, the wealthiest Armenian home in the city, we found the wife and aged mother almost forgetting their sorrow in the terror of the report that they were to be exiled. In another we found the wife and three little children; in another, a poor young wife with two little ones; in a fourth, a girlwife and tiny baby. And everywhere we found that horror of the future. Afterwards other groups were hanged.

During that week there came the report of awful things in the village of Gemerek. Later two of our women escaped and confirmed the report. The young women and girls (two of them having been in our school) were taken by the Turks. The men (among them being one of our pastors, Vartavar Efendi Garabedian, and another, the husband of one of our former pupils) were never heard from again. The old women were killed. The body of one of our dear old Protestant friends was seen by one of our young men who became a Moslem to save his wife.

During a terrible week in July the small village of Derevenk, a twenty minutes’ walk from Talas, was sent into exile on the 16th, two of my American companions seeing them go. The reports of their horrible sufferings were later confirmed by women who had suffered. One woman months later came to us from the hut of the old Turk who had taken her and told us how she had thankfully let him take her that she might escape the further outrages of the Koords to which she was being subjected in the mountains.

In the first week in March, 1917, when four of us were for eight days in Eregli awaiting permission to board the train for Constantinople, one of our neighbors in the old khan (inn) was a Turkish lady also waiting with her husband. After she had called on us a few times, she broke down one day and said, “Oh, don’t you know me? I am an Armenian girl from Talas.” She was one of the Gregorian families there, had married and lived in Constantinople fourteen years, for her husband’s health had come to her old home, because of the troublous times had gone to this village of Derevenk away down in a deep ravine, had been exiled with all the others, after a short journey had seen her husband and the other men and boys separated from them, was told that they were killed, had seen the women and girls taken by the Turks and Koords in the mountains and outraged, had herself been quarreled over by them because of her beauty and property in Constantinople, had finally been taken and protected very kindly by a wealthy Circassian, and had finally been allowed by him to go to Cesarea to find some of her relatives. She had gone under the protection of an apparently honorable Turk who had a Circassian mother, who, however, took her to his village, refusing to go further until she married him. This at last, seeing no hope, she had done. She had been married two months, and was on her way to Constantinople where she hoped to “lose” him, as he was to enter an Officer’s School.

On July 18, our druggist was released, that he might be ready to go into exile with his family. Though all expected the order at once, it did not come until Sunday morning, August 8, 1915; our people crowded to us telling us that the order was posted in the market and on public buildings that all Armenians should go from Talas five days from then, and from Cesarea in ten days. That terrible week! Crowds of people came to us for help-money, clothes, shoes for the road, but more especially for faith, courage, and hope that the war might soon be over. They were not sent all at once, but gradually through the weeks and months following. They would bake their hard bread for the road, eat it, bake again, and so on, living in an agony of suspense, neither sleeping nor eating much, not knowing what might come at any minute of day or night. In the meantime many of the men had been taken as soldiers, and were working as slaves in rags, and nearly starved, breaking stone for the new automobile roads for the big German touring-cars.

Before the exiling had begun, the order came from Constantinople that Protestants, Catholics and soldiers’ families were to be “forgiven!” We feared a trap, and many were afraid to stay, but were not

allowed to go with their Gregorian friends and neighbors.

As nearly as we can estimate, 20,000 Armenians were exiled to the South from Talas and Cesarea. The first party was composed of 72 families from Talas, among them being some of our own girls and pupils whom we were not allowed to save, as we could take only from the three classes “forgiven.” Never can I forget the terror on the girls’ faces, as they struggled with their loaded donkeys through the crowd to say “good-bye” to us, until the gendarmes with shouts and blows on the donkeys hurried them on. From the old men, weak and hopeless, to the little children clinging in terror to their mothers’ skirts, they had to go. Our neighbors told us that parties that went from lower Talas—where we could not see!—went in terrible distress, with the blows upon their heads and backs instead of on the donkeys!

One day we were calling upon the most influential Armenian in Talas, Hadji Bey, when the sound of the town crier’s voice came to us. As we listened with bated breath, we heard, “All Armenians of this district out of here by tomorrow morning!” The old man’s face turned as white as a sheet, as he thought of his aged wife, his four crippled daughters, and his youngest daughter who was expecting a little one. It was too much for him, and he was sick in bed when the gendarmes came for him. One of our former teachers then living in our Compound told us that from the school window she saw him dragged in his nightclothes through the street in front of us, the soldiers suing their cruel whips on him. They finally allowed his friends to dress him and get a wagon; and thus they sent him into exile from which word came back that he was dead.

We saw the refined, educated women recoil from the beastly talk and rough handling of the gendarmes, as they were thrust out from their homes, sometimes not even allowed to stop to pick up the little bundle of clothes for the baby. We saw them thrust out, and the doors locked behind them, while they waited in the street for hours until the going. We were not even allowed to take them into our courtyard to wait in chairs. One formerly wealthy woman, just up from a sick-bed where she had been brutally beaten because she could not tell where her son was, stopped at our door to say “good-bye” and thank us for her bag of bread. Our cook took the message for us, as we were in another part of the city. The woman was starting off for a forty to fifty days’ journey—walking—with two daughters-in-law and seven grandchildren.

Finally the 20,000 had gone! There followed days and nights of terror for those remaining. Then, one evening as we were in our sitting-room listening to the story of the Gemerek girl who had escaped, Takoohi Donabedian, we were again startled by the town-crier: “All Protestants, Catholics and soldiers’ families out of here by eight o’clock tomorrow morning!”

They were sent to Turkish villages anywhere from one hour to ten hours distant, villages beyond description for filth, ignorance, and degeneration. Not more than five women (with their children) were allowed to a village, often not more than three or four. There they lived in want and fear until—after months of this life—many of them yielded and became Moslem to save their children. Their subsequent hopelessness and slavery were almost more than we could bear, as they crept back to us once in a while for financial help. “We can no longer even look to God for help” they said to me. Among them was one young woman from our Cesarea church, one of the most refined and gentle. With her mother-in-law and her boys she was sent to such a village where one night ten Turks broke into her house. After she had suffered at the hands of six, and her mother-in-law at the hands of four, she became Moslem in order to escape from the village to Cesarea. With scarcely any flesh covering her bones she came to see us, and her mother told us the story.

Our preachers and teachers had been sent to near and better villages. Suddenly, on November 11, 1915, there came to many of the men left the choice between Mohammedanism and death. Our abovementioned druggist, Haig Efendi Haroutounian, had been pleaded with for months by Turks

who liked him and respected him, officials, religious leaders and prominent Turks, but he remained firm. One day, when I went to our dispensary for some medicine, he looked white and worn as he said, "Twenty Turks have been here today trying to persuade me, but I can never turn." On this November 11, when the faces of other men were white with terror, he was calm and strong. But late that night Sabri Bey, chief scribe to the Governor, came to his house saying he must be Moslem or go out to death in half an hour! The Turk walked up and down the room with his watch in his hand, pouring out a torrent of words, but Haig never wavered. Finally as Sabri Bey said, "One minute more!" Haig's mother, his murdered brother's wife and six children, his fiancée's mother, all fell upon him crying to him to save them from the fate that would surely be theirs; and—as he said to us afterwards with the most wretched and hopeless face I ever saw, "I gave my soul for them."

The next day our Cesarea cook came with her two year old girl, saying that her husband, Nisan Agha Terzian, our steward, had been exiled. As he went to lock our big gate in the evening, he was taken and when she went to the prison in the morning he was gone—we know not where. He chose death or exile to Mohammedanism.

On Friday, the 12th, the gendarmes suddenly came to the Boys' School and took twenty year old Garabed Efendi Nigoghosian, one of our teachers. He smilingly and bravely said "good-bye" to us, going out to death for Christ, but just out of sight of us became insane, and was brought back to us that night. Even in his insanity he would cry out, "I won't be Moslem." On Sunday afternoon, the 14th, they told preachers and teachers that they must go out to die that night or turn Moslem. That evening, until near eight o'clock, we were all down on the main street by the wagons, waiting with them for the final order to go, the insane boy lying in a wagon, held down by two of us. Then the order came to wait until morning and in the morning of the 15th we saw them go away, waving their handkerchiefs back at us:—three of our preachers then teaching in our school (Manook Efendi Norhadian, Vahram Efendi Tahmizian, Meseeh Efendi—), two teachers (Garabed Efendi Kondahjian and Yervant Efendi, twenty-one years old), our nineteen year old assistant druggist, Hovhannes Effendi Kitabjian, and the Catholic Bishop, two of his priests, and the sister of one. Leaving their wives, children and mothers to worse than death, they never faltered in their allegiance to Christ. The insane boy was left with us, and probably his pitiable condition saved the lives of the others who were sent far down into the South.

In February, 1916, the Government took our Cesarea building. During that month they gathered up many of the women and exiles from the Turkish villages, and put the choice before them. One wrote to us that they were fifty women, eighteen girls, and I forget how many children in one miserable, cellar-like room. Then they were sent out on the road where one by one—overcome by terror—they turned Moslem, except a little band of seven women and six children who were months on their journey to Aleppo, but strong in faith and courage throughout. Zaroohi Han, wife of a soldierpreacher, had a little baby come to her on the way, and another woman took off her petticoat to wrap it in. There was nothing else! Some of the women of Talas who turned Moslem at first, and had paid much in bribes, were then taken, even from the street, and sent away, one not even being allowed to go home for her children.

During the previous months about 4,000 exiles, from Kastamouni and Black Sea coast places, came through out town in different parties—at one time 400—and stopped over night in the big khan near our school. After much pleading we were allowed to carry food—our girls and boys giving their suppers—and water to them. They were obliged to pay high prices for water except as we gave it. I was there several times; one dark, rainy night I went about from room to room with water in the filthy old inn, where the 400 were crowded in like animals. Some lay out in the mud of the courtyard where they had fallen from the donkeys. We found among them some relatives of our people. In the morning we went up on the high road to try to give them sympathy and cheer as they started on again. One old man lay in a heap in the road where he had fallen; he could not rise; the party was going on without him, shouting

to him to get up. He appeared to notice nothing. Finally we paid quite an exorbitant bit of money to hire a Turk to take him on his donkey, and hold him on. But how far would he take him after he was out of our sight!

Those girls who turned were let out to their friends or relatives if they had any left; they were there slaves of fear, and suffering from extreme poverty when we last heard. We believe that there are about 5,000—mostly women—who when we left had become Moslem and had returned to Cesarea and Talas where they were poor miserable creatures instead of the well-to-do, happy people of “before the war.”

Of our boys who were taken, the little ones were put into a Turkish orphanage, the next older into schools, the larger boys into a Turkish school (?) in Adana, while the oldest were sent as soldiers. Four escaped from Adana and got back to us. They told us how the Turks tried to make them turn and, when they refused, twenty-three of them tried to take them by force and circumcise them. Hadji, one of those who came back, upon refusing was thrown down and stamped upon until nearly dead.

Many of our girls and boys were in their villages for the summer vacation when the troubles broke out in 1915; their villages were burned, men and boys killed, girls and women taken by Turks, according to the reports brought by a number who escaped. One of our boys, Mirajan ——, about nineteen years of age, was in his village of Chakmak. Because he had a fine new European suit of clothes, they thought at first that he was a Turkish official’s son; so he saw everything unmolested.

This is what I can remember of the horrible story he told me: The men—among them, his father—and boys were locked in the church, bound by fives, taken out and shot. He saw them killed. Many girls were taken. The Armenians hid Victoria Tavlian, a beautiful girl, one of my pupils, but she was driven out by the fire. The highest official took her, put her on a horse from which she several times threw herself to the ground; when being taken off, she was praying with clasped hands, “O Jesus, save me.”

Mirajan was finally taken, but, when the soldiers were quarreling over his new coat, he escaped; for two months he lived with some companions in the mountains, coming down to a village at night for food, over and over hiding under the heaps of dead bodies. He said that a band of 200 were, before that, being brought over the road, and were told that they were perfectly safe, were simply being taken to work for the Government: but they were murdered in a ravine near his village. He finally was caught, beaten and left for dead, was rescued by a “Moslem” Armenian woman, and finally—when well—was taken as his scribe by a Turkish officer who could neither read nor write, and whose duty it was to go among the ruined villages taking a record of the number of Armenians taken or killed. Mirajan found that some of our girls were wives of the lowest Turks; and some, of officials, while two of our own had been killed. The terrible sorrow of it all finally made him break down, and cry; and so he had to fly for his life, and got to us.

[Signed and dated] Clara Childs Richmond, May 11, 1918.