

[STATEMENT BY ISABELLE HARLEY,
HARPOOT]¹

What I Saw and Know to Have Been True in Turkey

On May 1, 1915, I know Armenian men were imprisoned. I saw Turkish soldiers stationed in front of Armenian houses with their rifles. I saw one of our professors after having been taken to the prison, brought home again by gendarmes, two of whom stayed with him on the roof of his house while the others searched his house taking from it everything they could find in the line of manuscripts, notebooks, textbooks and other literature. I know he was taken back to the prison in company with the same gendarmes and kept there and horribly tortured until two months later when he in company with two other professors and other leading Armenians were taken out on the road towards Diarbekir and killed.

That the Armenians in prison were tortured by having the hairs of their heads, moustaches and beards pulled out, by having finger nails and toe nails pulled off, by being hung by the arms for a day and a night, by being beaten upon the head, body and hands until they dropped, by being starved, by being thrown and made to stay for a whole night in a filthy water closet, by breaking fingers, I know to be true because I heard the testimony of one of the Euphrates College professors who was himself tortured in these ways, beaten to insensibility by the mayor of the city himself who, when tired, called upon anyone who loved his country and his nation to continue the beating. This professor was later taken to the Red Crescent Hospital in Mezereh. Afterwards he was released, found shelter in the American Consulate and in the fall of the same year escaped to Russia where he died of typhus. This was Professor Lulejian. I know that one man died in prison from being tortured.

The testimony of Professor Vorperian, who was first kept in prison one night and made to witness the beating to insensibility of some of his friends, the sight of which temporarily affected his mind, and later sent into exile with his family and murdered near Malaria, is proof also of the truth of the torture dealt out to those in prison.

The note written by Professor Boujicanian to Dr. Atkinson, "Send us poison, we cannot endure it any longer," is another proof. This note was scribbled on a piece of paper and secretly handed to a small boy who had come to the prison to bring food to some one of his family. That day the city was guarded and no Armenians were allowed to go out of the city; but this small boy wound his way through the streets of the city to an unsuspected road leading to a village. He took that road going through several villages, a walk of an hour or two, and finally reached the American Hospital. The poison was not sent.

The first batch of martyrs was sent away from Harpoot on the twentythird of June, 1915.

1. SOURCE: NA/RG256/Special Reports and Studies/ Inquiry Document 812.

Imprisonment continued daily until all the Armenian men had been rounded up including the old, the lame, the halt, the deaf and the blind. In one group of men sent out to be killed were 800 of the finest Armenian manhood, among whom was Hovhannes Dingillian, treasurer of Euphrates College, as fine and upright a man as ever lived. That they were made to sit down in a valley while the gendarmes and officers in charge shot them until their ammunition was gone and then used the bayonet is the testimony of one, Melcon Lulejian, pharmacist in the American pharmacy at Harpoot, who escaped and told the story to some of the Americans.

I saw the group of old men in which was Hagop Agha Benneyan, a dear old soul, a saintly man, one obedient in every way to the government, led down the road from Harpoot to Mezerch. They were kept in the prison at Mezerch over night and taken out and killed the next day. Some of them dropped by the road from weakness and exhaustion.

That wholesale slaughter was going on was evident everywhere. One did not have to go more than an hour's journey from home to find signs of it in fresh dead bodies, skeletons, and dismembered bones and skulls. I saw such with my own eyes.

I saw the wives and daughters and sisters of the men who were in prison. I went to see them in their homes. I found them white and weak from fear, and inability to sleep and eat. I know that they were constantly frightened by gendarmes and police going to their houses to search and in their searching take away whatever they saw that they wanted. I know that the mayor of the city frequently went on these searching expeditions and when he saw anything that he wanted, such as a bedstead or a rug, he preemptorily demanded it and the owner gave it simply because she dared not refuse it.

The government was searching for all kinds of literature and arms. This searching was very thorough. A committee of leading Armenians of which the Rev. Vartan Amirkhanian, pastor of the Armenian Protestants, and Sukias Effendi Pashigian, a very trustworthy man, were members, was appointed to go around to all the houses of Armenians and persuade them to give up every and any kind of arms which they had or knew about, from a toy pistol to a bomb. The government gave a promise that if they did so nothing would happen. This committee did very thorough work and delivered to the government building all the arms which they had collected. Still the government would not believe that all the arms had been surrendered. At the Sunday service in the Gregorian church during the first part of the month of June Rev. Vartan Amirkhanian, Mr. Elimann, a German missionary, and a notable Turk supposed to be friendly to the Armenians, again made a plea that they surrender everything in the nature of arms saying that the government gave their word that if they did nothing would happen, but if they did not there was no telling what would happen. They surrendered everything, though they had not the slightest faith in the promise of the government. Why should they have? Had they not had plenty of reason to know that a promise from the Turks did not last as long as the time it took to utter it? However, there seemed to be nothing else for them to

do, so, with just a faint hope that by surrendering every means of resistance it might go a little better with them, they gave up their arms.

Things went from bad to worse. On the evening of the ninth of June bands of soldiers were sent to the gardens of Turks outside of the city to hunt for Armenians who they said were in hiding. They came to the Americans' garden where they said they knew Armenians were hiding. Not finding any they held one of the American gentlemen, Mr. H. H. Riggs, up at the point of a revolver while two of their number went to the city to ask what they should do in case of not finding any Armenians. They were told to come back and it would be decided the next day what should be done.

The next day, June 10, the city of Harpoot was surrounded and all roads leading out of it were guarded so that no Armenian could go out of the city. Nothing more than that and the imprisoning of more men happened that day, but a night or two later I was awakened by the fearful shouting of Turkish soldiers and pounding on doors of the homes of Armenians. They were continuing their hunt. A few Armenian men were dragged out of their homes that night. Several Armenian girls of the best class were frightened out of their homes that night and sought refuge in the home of Dr. Atkinson in Mezereh.

Deportation

On June 26 the street crier went through the streets of Harpoot announcing that the whole Armenian population was to dispose of their possessions and be ready to go a week later into exile. They were not sent until three weeks later.

In the meantime bands of exiles passed through Mezereh. I visited the camp of the exiles from Erzroom. There were about three thousand people there, mostly women and children, in a field with nothing to protect them from the hot sun. They told us there were eight thousand when they left Erzroom. The men and big boys had been separated from them on the road and killed. They were not brought by a direct road but had been taken over and through the mountains so that they had been forty-five days on the journey and had been attacked again and again by bands of Kurds. Many of the young brides and girls had been taken captive and carried off as slaves in Turkish and Kurdish harems—a life worse than death. In fact, it was part of the day's program for the gendarmes and officers to go through the camps at night selecting the pretty girls. The girls to defend themselves from this fate rigged themselves up hideously in order to appear unattractive. Many had died of starvation; they had gone days without water; in fact, one of the tortures they administered was to lead these thirsty souls up to a spring of water, hold a glass of it up before them and then drive them on without giving them any, or else make them pay an exorbitant price for a cup full. I have this from a woman who came as an exile from Ordoo, a woman whose word is absolutely reliable.

Their condition was indescribably pitiful. The sick and the dying were lying on the ground with the hot, scorching sun pouring down upon them and nothing to shield them from it. As I and my American companions passed through the camp women held

their babies out to us and begged us to take them to save them from starvation. They begged us to take their girls, those that were left, to save them from the fate of becoming slaves to Turkish men. They begged us to tell them why they were being treated so and what was to be the end of their trouble. They begged us for food and money. All this happened as we passed hurriedly through the camp. We were not allowed to stop and talk with them for when they crowded around us the guards beat them back with their clubs and we passed through the camp without being able to give them any help whatever. Just at one side of the camp were many new graves and more were added every day as the sick and the starving succumbed. Here, as in other places, where they had been encamped, there was no water except a dirty stream from which the people were obliged to drink. Tired, sick, hungry, beaten, dirty, vermin infested, frightened, hunted, broken-hearted creatures they were pushed on the next day and then on, and on, and on, and on, not knowing where they were going nor when the end would come. It was the plan of the government to keep this up until the last had dropped. This was what they called deportation!

Later, the exile camps were put in a cemetery—a very appropriate place. They had not far to be carried. Those who had died were thrown into a trench and a little earth sprinkled over the bodies, not enough to cover them.

The sick and the dying had to see this and only longed for the end for themselves. The stench was so terrible that the Turkish guards, think of it, the Turkish guards! standing at the gate had to wear wet sponges over their noses to stand it.

On Sunday, July 18, the first group of several thousand were sent from Harpoot. In the morning early they were driven from their houses, herded together in back of the American premises and like cattle sent out on the road to meet the same fate as the exiles described above. The girls as sort of a protection had rigged themselves up hideously so that I did not recognize them. Their only safety lay in making themselves unattractive so that they would not be desired by the gendarmes and officers in charge. The men were very soon separated from the women and killed. Some of the women dropped very soon, some took their own lives by jumping in the river, some lived to reach the wilderness near Oorfa and there they were told to take off their clothes preparatory to fording the river. When they had done this their clothes were gathered up by the guards who disappeared leaving them in a naked condition to perish in the sun. It should be remembered that among these people left in this condition were girls as nice and refined as any American girl. A few survived to reach Aleppo and a few others reached what was called the final destination near the Arabian desert. I had this report from two different people who were mercifully delivered at the wilderness near Oorfa and returned to Harpoot. Of the arrival of a few of our people at Aleppo we knew from the American Consul at Aleppo. Of those who arrived at Der Zor we heard through one of our teachers who herself reached there and through whom for several months we sent relief money. Maritza Chopoorian by name.

A few days later another group of a thousand or more was sent from Harpoot and later another group. From Mezereh and the nearby villages the Armenians were sent before the Harpoot people. It is safe to say that at least 75% of the Harpoot vilayet people were destroyed.

As soon as the people had gone the Turks began to move in and take possession of the best houses. The other houses they robbed of doors and windows even pulling down some to burn the wood for fuel. Whole Armenian sections in villages and cities have been pulled down throughout Turkey. I know it to be true around Harpoot for I saw it and I've heard of it from missionaries in other places.

About the last of August release from exile came for the remaining Protestants, those who had in some way or other been hidden, or befriended and thus saved from deportation. They were left, but without homes or money. The government granted permission for them to return to these deserted houses. Relief work then began and the missionaries applied themselves to the task.

On November 1, 1915, a second deportation took place at Harpoot and the surrounding villages. All Armenians who had remained in Harpoot, including refugees from Trebizond, Erzroom, Ordoo and other places to the north, who had been released from exile camps at Harpoot, were again driven from their houses and carried to the government building. It was reported that this was to be the final sweeping up of Armenians, that not a single one was to be left; all who had escaped until now were to be sent away. It was a fearful day. I saw people driven out by Turkish soldiers at the butt of their guns. Some of my comrades saw women pulled out of their houses by the hair of their head. The air was filled with the wails of these suffering people, some of whom had already had the experience of being exiled. During the day, however, the order was changed and the people of Harpoot were allowed to return in the evening to their houses. But the villages were entirely emptied of Armenians. This is the story of one of our Bible women, Pompish Tuskhoon, of Hoghi. An officer came to her house and accused her of having some kind of firearms. She said that she had none. He, however, refused to believe her and insisted that she produce what she had. She still insisted that she had none and he still insisted that she had. When, however, she could not produce any he went away saying that he would return the next day and that if she did not have her revolver, or whatever it might be, ready to surrender she would be killed. She, poor woman, was frightened out of her senses. She took the only Turkish pound she had and went and bought a gun from one of her Turkish neighbors. The officer returned the next day and she gave up the gun which she had bought. The officer said, "There, I knew you had concealed arms, and because you had you will have to be deported." She was taken out from her village and killed.

There was one alternative held out to people and that was to renounce Christianity and accept Islam. Many under threat of death did so. Whole families turned Moslem. Some mothers sacrificed one or two daughters to Moslem husbands in order to save

themselves and the rest of their children. In some cases it succeeded and in other cases it did not. I know several men who accepted Islam and because they did it were distrusted and killed. I know a few men who accepted Islam and were saved.

When the massacres were apparently over there was a real pressure brought to bear on all surviving Armenians—a so-called compulsion to accept Islam. In Harpoot it was not enforced but in Sivas, Aintab and Adana and other places in central Turkey it was enforced and Armenians were obliged to become Moslems.

Conditions After Deportations and Until We Left Turkey

Robbed of all earthly possessions the surviving Armenians are living where they can find a place, some fortunate ones in fairly good houses, some in stables, some in windowless, doorless houses and I have seen many women and children lying on roofs or in the street with absolutely no place to call home.

Typhus is raging, smallpox also. Around the missionary premises were seen every day anywhere from a hundred to a thousand poor, half-starved walking corpses some of them—dirty, frightened, sick creatures—begging for food and clothes and beds and soap and everything which they used to have but haven't now. Orphans are found everywhere; little children not able to care for themselves are left in the streets to be picked up by someone and brought to the missionaries. The people are crowded in small rooms, lying on earthen floors of which the water leaking in from the roof above makes mud. There may be one bed for several people and there may be none at all. Many of these people have had nothing but bread to eat and not enough of that for two years. They are dirty because they cannot be clean; it is not their fault. They are in a state of fright all the time—so much of misrule have they endured that they are constantly expecting something to happen. They are dying in great numbers from sickness, hunger, exposure and fright.

The above is a testimony of what I know to be true. It is a story of Harpoot and its people as I saw it. When we passed through Sivas on our way out of the country Miss Graffam told us that Sivas was practically emptied of Armenians in two days. There the work of massacre and deportation was very thoroughly done. The only Armenians left there are the few school girls now engaged in military hospital work and a few Armenian doctors, most of whom have been forced to become Moslems. In Malatia as in Harpoot there are some survivors among whom are a few of our Harpoot people. When we were there we were not allowed to see them lest we should give them assistance. At every place where we stopped on our journey out of the country we made inquiries concerning Armenians and at every place heard the same story of deportation and massacre. The best of the Armenian race in Turkey is dead.

[Signed and dated] Isabelle Harley, April 15, 1918.