

A PICTORIAL RECORD
OF
ROUTES AND CENTERS OF ANNIHILATION
OF
ARMENIAN DEPORTEES IN 1915
within the boundaries of Syria



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Խորին շնորհակալութիւն կը յայտենք սասունցի Պրն. Դանիել Պետրոսեանին, սուրիական անապատի և այնտեղ տեղաշարժուած հայ կարավաններու մասին յաղորդած արժեքավոր տեղեկութիւններուն համար որոնք նպաստեցին այս գիրքի պատրաստման աշխատանքներուն:

Мы признательны гос. Даниелю Петросяну из Сасуна за предоставленные им ценные сведения о сирийских пустынях и передвижениях депортированных армян в них, которые способствовали работам по подготовке этой книги.

We are indebted to Mr. Daniel BEDROSSIAN of Sassoun for his knowledge of the Syrian Desert and his records of the movements of the Armenian Deportations therein. The survey provided by him has been an invaluable contribution towards the preparation of this work.

Report delivered at the scientific plenary session of the Academy of Sciences of Armenia, section of Diaspora, December 26, 1989 and approved for publication.

This work is realized by a grant
from
VIOLETTE JÉBÉJIAN CULTURAL FUND

Published by Violette Jébéjjan Library
Aleppo
1994

FOREWORD

An impressive amount of literature has been compiled on the mass extermination of the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. Many of these works have been written in foreign languages, with photo documentation of the victims of the Armenian Genocide. Most recently, audio and video recordings of the accounts of survivors and foreign witnesses have added to the variety of documentation on the subject. Besides providing first hand evidence to the present historian, these records convey testimonials to the ongoing and relentless efforts of Republican Turkey to destroy remaining Armenian historical monuments and to eliminate any evidence of historic Armenia. The markers and monuments testifying to the existence of the Armenian people in their Homeland have thus become the final victims of the genocide begun in 1915.

To produce a complete photographic survey was out of reach for us, given the serious obstacles involved in any effort to record evidence in Asia Minor (Anatolia) and Western Armenia. However, the evidence within Syria was much more accessible and presented no problem.

But there was a very serious and practical difficulty: 75 years after the events, how could one locate and determine the routes of deportation and former localities? Who would be able to guide the cameraman and indicate where and what to photograph? The map of the desert had undergone radical changes during the last seventy years.

It was our good luck to find a compatriot perfectly qualified to undertake that task. Daniel Bedrossian, son of Haynents Bedros of Sassoun was that person. The patriarchal family had settled in Kamishli after the exodus. Little Daniel was brought up strictly in the spirit of his Armenian heritage. During 30 years working as a truck driver for the petroleum company, he had gathered extensive data on the details of the Armenian deportations and their routes, camps, precise sites of mass extermination, the authors and implementors of the massacres etc. Well versed in Arabic, he had lost no time in collecting invaluable information and details from elderly Arab Chiefs and notables of the desert regarding the inhuman and barbarous behaviour of the Turkish authorities toward the helpless Armenian masses.

On the suggestion of Daniel Bedrossian, an attempt was undertaken to establish a photographic archive of the routes of deportation and centers of annihilation of the Armenians in the Syrian Desert in 1915. On May 16, 1988 a small team of four volunteers, including Daniel, started out into the desert. Along with the hundreds of snapshots they brought in from their tour of the desert, they added those taken during a previous tour in 1971 under the guidance of Haigazun Kayfejian.

Another important route of exile extended in the west along the railway line to the south. The deportees along this route were mainly from the Armenian population living in Cilicia and western Asia Minor. Arriving from their provinces they were grouped in the railway station of Eintilly and its surroundings. Some 250,000 Armenians perished in

this region because of epidemics, hunger, exhaustion and massacres, according to the estimate of United States Consul Bruvent who was in Alexandretta at the time. The territory of one of the camps located within the perimeters of this region now lies within the boundaries of Syria: Katma. It is a railway station in the extreme north of Syria, near the town of Azez which lies close to the Turkish frontier.

On Sunday afternoon, July 21, 1989, we went there to take photographs. Katma is located 60 kms to the north of Aleppo, in a district with a predominantly Kurdish population. Garo Hamalian, a teacher, was our guide. He was very familiar with the sites and history of the Armenian deportee camps in 1915. Since 1930, as a youth, he had spent his summers here with his family and had picked up detailed information from elderly inhabitants who had witnessed the tragic fate of some 60,000 refugees who perished on the spot. Thousands of wretched deportees had expired here unattended because of severe epidemics and hunger. Their decaying corpses were cremated by order of the German personnel of the railway administration, to avoid further epidemics. The ashes were finally buried nearby in a common grave. According to Garo Hamalian, during the subsequent decades, local Kurds refused to buy products grown on the “grounds stained with Armenian blood.”

In 1935, Hamalian had informed His Grace, Archbishop Artavazd Surmelyan of the Aleppo See of the Armenian Apostolic Church about the relics buried in Katma. His Grace, proceeding to the site and after verification of the facts, conducted an impressive memorial service.

The deportations to the south took the following course. Trainloads of deportees having reached Aleppo, were temporarily deposited in the main stations of Baghdad and Damascus. Those in the Baghdad station were to be forcibly marched to Deir Zor. Those in the Damascus Station were routed by rail to Hama, Homs and Damascus.

Deportees reaching Hama erected tents near the railway station. Many of them later took refuge in Khans in the Hadar Quarter on the entrance to the city, on the left. The first convoy arriving in Hama was forcibly marched through the desert to Deir Zor. “Only two survivors returned alive to tell the stories of atrocious massacres befallen on the rest of the company,” writes Hovhannes Zarikian: a deported child within the following group.

From Hama and Homs, thousands of refugees later fled to Selimieh, an isolated town further to the east. Here, the Kaimakam (governor), Mejeddin Bey, a kindly person of Arab origin, and member of the opposition Itilaf Party, showed particular sympathy to the Armenians arriving in his town. The Ismaili Moslem population of the town also showed friendliness and did its best to mitigate the sufferings of those fleeing.

In the south, Armenians found refuge in the surrounding villages as well. Some went as far south as Ras Baalbeck, in the Bekaa plain. Others reached Hauran, sheltering in Draa, Irbid; Ajlum, Nikhil and Bal as well as Suweida, Khabab, Ghrawa, the town of Sultan Atrash in Jebel Druz. Lastly, some dispersed as far as Jordan establishing themselves in Amman, Jarasli, Salt.

His Holiness, the Catholicos of Cilicia, Sagak Khabayan was exiled to Tafileh, south of Jerusalem, with his attendants.

The Armenian population of Kessab, a mountainous district in northern Syria, having failed to join the Mussa Ler (Dagh) Revolt, were driven in successive convoys on foot to Jisr Shughur and stayed there 8 months. Some of them were later marched off to Deir Zor. The rest were driven to Hama and further south, afoot. Of the original 7500 deportees from the mountain range, only 1500 returned home at the end of the war.

A groups of Armenians resisting in Vaspurakan, together with persecuted Assyrians retreated to Persian territory and then towards the Persian Gulf. On their way they passed through a small village called Vanik, presently located in the north-eastern extremity of the Syrian territory. Some also went through the Kurdish village Sakho, now in northern Iraq. Truck drivers having recently been in the above mentioned localities tell of their encounters with descendants of Armenians who have been totally assimilated in language and culture with the local elements. However, elderly members still remember their origins. In Tel-Hafer, on the outskirts of the Sinjar Mountains, 120 km. south towards Mussul, one can find other remnants of the Armenian deportees, now completely assimilated.

Southward moving Armenian convoys were also stationed for a while in Mussul and the surrounding areas. Their descendants still live in colonies here and many are prosperous. In Mussul, there was an orphanage which later on was moved further south.

Bakuba, some 450 kms further south (50 kms north of Baghdad) was a large camp in which some 50,000 Armenian and Assyrian refugees lived in tents under the protection of the British Army. An Armenian orphanage with more than 1000 children was founded there, looked after by the Organization for the Armenians in Exile of the Baghdad Armenian Community. Not far from the above camp was also a small center called Um el-Adam.

In 1920, 12,000 Armenian inmates of Bakuba camp were removed to a new location in the far south, the Nahr el-Omar District near Basra, on the Shat el Arab, not far from the junction of the rivers. The camp was finally dissolved in 1922. Two thousand refugees from Vaspurakan, in the company of 800 orphans sailed away. The orphans landed in Palestine and were placed in the care of the Armenian St. James Monastery in Jerusalem. The survivors from Vaspurakan continued their voyage to Batumi, to be repatriated back to the newborn Armenian Republic. The remainder in the camp made their way to Persia.

Refugees from Western Armenia who were deported towards Iraq, during the First World War were all Armenians from Vaspurakan, the heart of Armenia.

Our rich photographic documentation from the desert was supplemented with a series from the Violette Jebejian Library. The latter includes pictures of sites in northern Syria - Aleppo and other urban centers - connected with the deportations and

reminiscent of past events. The documentation from Aleppo is the most abundant, as it was the main administrative center for the routing of deportees.

Even with all of this, however, we cannot claim to possess a complete coverage of the events of seventy years ago. The routes taken by the deportees southward remained unexplored, simply due to lack of contemporary guides and markers. Regarding the retreat of the Vaspurakan people towards Iraq, the reader is referred to the report of two richly illustrated volumes by Yeghishe Vartanian.

The work we present here is a belated effort long due from the Aleppo Community. It is a modest contribution with obvious insufficiencies. We trust that any persons having in their possession any relevant documents would offer them so that we may bring nearer to completion the present collection as a more comprehensive historical document.

R. JEBEJIAN

Trans, by K. Mazlounian