

An account of Dr. Khosrov Krikorian's experiences in the desert from 1915-1918.¹

"After the outbreak of the war and during the great deportations in Turkey, I, together with my parents and a brother and several thousands of other Armenians, was expelled from Aintab² to Biredjik [Birijik], a small town on the bank of Euphrates, to be sent from there to Der-Zor to be killed. Because of a lack of proper means of transportation we could, when we left our homes, not bring any piece of furniture except from some light covers and a few supplies that could not last longer than a couple of weeks. All sizeable and valuable possessions we had to leave in the hands of the Turkish authorities. It was very hard and heart-rending to leave behind all the considerable riches that had been amassed in our homes, but the fear of the annihilation of the nation did not leave much time for these worries.

The caravans of the deportees followed each other in an endless line, old men, women, and adorable children, all equally subjected to the heat of the day and the cold of the night, [all] walked to meet their death.³ After several days of toilsome walking our caravan reached Biredjik where we, after a stay of a couple of days, had the choice between either walking to Der-Zor or paying for seats in the boats commanded by Muslims from the area. As not that many days had passed since the departure from the homes, almost all the families still had enough money to pay for the sea voyage, especially when considering the great difficulties the journey through the desert would bring, so many of our countrymen gave their last penny⁴ to pay for the journey on the Euphrates. During this journey we were many times the victims of attacks from Bedouins who lived on both banks of the river, and right until we paid a substantial amount of money to the leader of the Bedouins, we were threatened with being killed on the river itself. Three gendarmes escorted each caravan to protect them, but it was obvious that the attacks were organized by the gendarmes themselves with the aim of squeezing money out of the poor deportees. However, the provisions of the deportees ran out before the journey's end, so on the arrival at the major towns on the banks of the Euphrates everyone tried to get ashore to buy some bread or some fruit, but the Turkish antagonism toward the Armenians was so strong that at almost every market place where they showed up they were driven back to their boats by barbaric blows and cuts of whips, or, if they were finally allowed to buy something, it was at unreasonable prices. In this short account of our painful journey I wish to tell about our people's great hope and belief in God; every evening, when we arrived at the place where the caravan should stay for the night, the priests rang a small bell to gather the people to pray to Our Lord to save them from these terrible experiences, they prayed to let Him let conscience and compassion in to hearts of their enemies. They all knelt down, and with their hands raised toward the heavens they prayed to God with tear filled eyes that he should save them from these sufferings.....

Three months after our caravan had left home, we reached Der-Zor. A couple of thousands of Armenians who had also been banished to this place some months before our arrival, and had been able to build new homes for themselves, were forced to leave these to make room for the newly arrived under the pretext that the first mentioned came from the interior of Turkey, while the last mentioned came from the cities and were generally more refined and well-groomed, as they counted doctors, pharmacists, and dentists among them.⁵ The endless stream of deportees from all parts of Turkey soon filled the city of Der-Zor and the surrounding villages, and thousands of tents were put up in the desert; at the same time dysentery and pneumonia made their entries in the region, with the result that a considerable number of the 3-4 thousand deportees died of these diseases and of starvation. A couple of weeks after our arrival, me and another banished Armenian, Mr. Artin Jacob, who is presently working as a secretary at the American consulate in Beirut, were sent for. We both had to teach at the Turkish school in Der-Zor, Mr. Jacob as an engineering drawing teacher, and I as a science teacher.⁶ Initially, when Mutessarif Ali Souad [Suad] Pasha was

governor of the district, the Armenians suffered no harm, but after 9 months Souad was transferred to Baghdad to be the Vali's assistant, and Mutessarif Zeki [Zekki] was sent to Der-Zor to replace him. The new Mutessarif was well-known by all the banished from Everek and Cesarea as a great enemy of the Armenians, and much was told about his cruelty in the Cesarea district. Shortly after his arrival at Der-Zor he dismissed several high-ranking officials on the grounds that they had been too kind to the Armenians, and he issued warrants for the arrest of the before mentioned Mr. Jacob and me; we were to be taken to Sheddadi [Sehdadiye], a village in the vicinity of Der-Zor, to be shot. Mr. Jacob was arrested the day before me, but the next day on the road to Sheddadi I was handed over to his escort in order for them to lead us in a body to our destination. The journey was terrible,⁷ but we were especially tormented by worries about the other members of our families. After 12 days of harsh journey in the desert we reached Sheddadi with our mounted escort, who immediately handed over instructions of our execution to the Mudir of Sheddadi, Ali Takki Bey Jevherg, an old lawyer and a friend of Mr. Jacob and me in Der-Zor. The Mudir received us very politely and we were shown great hospitality; he reserved a room for us in the Khan and informed us of Governor Zeki's order to shoot us at our arrival. But Ali Takki Bey did not obey Governor Zeki's order, as he would not go against his conscience and shoot two human beings whose only guilt was to be Armenians. A couple of weeks passed in uncertainty; one afternoon a large caravan arrived consisting of some 1200 men and women, all naked as they had been plundered by the gendarmes and by Bedouins.⁸ When asking around we learned that these were Armenians banished from Intilly [Intilli; Intily; Entilli] in Northern Syria, and after a long journey through the desert between Aleppo and Mardin they had been brought to Sheddadi on Mutessarif Zeki's orders. Here I will put in a remark that when Zeki was told by the Ministry of Interior in Constantinople to move toward Der-Zor he passed through Ras-el-Ain, and there he had conversations with the leaders of the Chechens [sic] where he offered them the opportunity to carry out the extermination of the Armenians. The Chechens – the tribe most famous for their blood thirst – enthusiastically accepted the proposition.⁹

On the arrival to Sheddadi of the abovementioned 1200 persons Mudir Ali Takki Bey immediately wrote to Governor Zeki asking for provisions and clothing for the wretched who had nothing to eat except grass, which was scarce in the dry desert at that, and naked as they were they were equally subjected to the heat of the days and the cold of the nights. Zeki's answer to Ali Takki's request was that he should 'take the deportees to a distance of 15 minutes from the village and kill them with the aid of the gendarmes that the Mudir had under his command.'

Takki refused to obey and immediately wrote back to the Governor and asked him to either grant him his resignation or transfer him to another post. Takki was sent to another village and the Chechen leaders with their mounted men replaced him in Sheddadi. Before Takki left us he recommended us to the leaders as innocent people and asked them to spare us for the sake of Allah. Suleiman Bey, the Chechen leader who took Takki's place, shortly after received instructions from Der-Zor and one night he sent the 1200 deportees from Intilly away; we could hear the shooting, we knew what was going on, and the next morning before sunrise one of the deportees, seriously wounded in the back of the head, did in fact come in to our room and told that all of the 1200 men and women had been killed. Now we, too, became very scared, as we simply every minute waited for our turn. New caravans with thousands of deportees arrived, one after the other, and one day Governor Zeki arrived himself escorted by 3-400 gendarmes and many mules loaded with ammunition. After having rested in the Mudir's house, followed by having given the necessary instructions to Chechens and gendarmes about how they should proceed during the massacres, Zeki disguised himself as a Chechen and with rifle in hand he came out and started shooting at the Armenians. This was most likely a signal to all his subordinates to start shooting at the approximately 20.000 men, women, and children. We were nearly half dead after the shots from 3-

400 rifles that filled the desert with their thunder and from the deep, expressive Allah, Allah, Allah, as well as screams and shouts that came from the Armenian camp. The tragedy lasted about 2 hours – valuable things were collected in the camps and brought to the Mudir's house to be distributed among the murderers. Bedouins approached, drawn by the noise of the rifles and hoping that they would get their share of the loot that had been left behind by the martyrs. However, they did not get anything out of this until they had dug big graves and buried all the dead, which they did in a very satisfactory way, and this way they earned their share of the loot. I must mention that before the massacres took place the gendarmes went at all times in to the camps and took all the pretty women and young girls from their families; the Bedouins also took a number of women and children; the number of Armenians taken by the Bedouins are estimated to be around 6 thousand; these are still in the Bedouins' camps, and they are waiting in vain for someone to come and free them from the desert.

Sheddadi was not the only place where these massacres took place. The villages Swer, Mergedé, Sheddadi, and Hassitche were the most important centers where approximately 300.000 men, women, and children found their miserable death. I am in the possession of photographs, taken 2-3 months ago, that show the bones of the murdered Armenians spread out over the desert. These places are now under French command, but the bones have not yet been collected and buried with the reverence one owes the martyrs as it has been done with the Unknown Soldiers in so many of the European countries. After having participated in all these massacres a Chechen was seriously wounded by a comrade's bullet, and as there was no doctor I was called to tend the wound; I told them that several months of meticulous care was necessary before it could heal, and as they were returning home after the end of the massacres they offered me to go with them to tend the wounded. Naturally I accepted the offer and had it arranged so that Mr. Artin Jacob and Khatchik went with me. Khatchik was my brother who had escaped to us from Swer where the rest of our family was murdered. After a long journey we reached the home of Elias Bey, the wounded, and the first two days we had enough to eat, but later we were quite neglected. Mr. Jacob was sent to a nearby German railway station to interpret for the Germans who led the construction of the Baghdad railway; and after a couple of months my brother and me succeeded in leaving Elias Bey's home and reach the Germans who took both of us into their service. I was entrusted with managing the hospital, a position I kept for about one year, and after that I managed to reach Beirut to continue my medicine studies. My brother and Mr. Jacob continued to work with the Germans until the end of the war; then they went to Aleppo, and after the British occupation of Syria they resumed their former normal life. From Beirut I went to Constantinople where I received my doctor's diploma, where after I went back to Beirut in 1923, and since then I have held the position as doctor at 'THE NEAR EAST RELIEF COMMITTEE' there.

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The abovementioned is a short account of my experiences in the desert. I could fill several books with a detailed description of the tragedy, and I intend to do so as soon as I can spare time for this. My plan with writing this account is not just to leave a document describing the events in the desert for our following generations, but to secure the world's interest in saving 5-6 thousand Armenians who still suffer in the Bedouins' camps, and to have the bones of all the innocent martyrs gathered at one place."

¹ *Rigsarkivet (Danish National Archives, Copenhagen), Kvindelige Missions Arbejdere (Women Missionary Workers), Arkivnr. 10.360, Pk. Nr. 15, "Arminier-Missionen, Diverse skildringer vedr. Arminierne [sic], 1906-1927."* Type-written account in Danish annotated and translated from Danish into English by Matthias Bjørnlund. The translation of the account has been silently edited re. spelling and style. According to Kevork Sarafian, *Armenian History of Aintab (Ge'org A. Sarafean, Patmut'iwn Ant'epi Hayots')*, Vol. 2, Los Angeles 1953, pp. 663ff, Khosrov Krikorian is mentioned in a list of doctors on page 665. I thank Levon Avdoyan, The Library of Congress, for this information.

² On the Aintab deportations, Biredjik, Zeki, the Der Zor massacres, etc., see, e.g., *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917*, comp. and introduced by Ara Sarafian, Princeton & London: Gomidas Institute 2004, passim (also: http://www.gomidas.org/gida/index_gida.htm); Wolfgang Gust, ed., *Der Völkermord an den Armeniern 1915/16: Dokumente aus dem Politischen Archiv des deutschen Auswärtigen Amtes*, zu Klampen 2005, passim (also: <http://www.armenocide.de/>); David Gaunt, *Massacres, Resistance, Protectors: Muslim-Christian Relations in Eastern Anatolia During World War I*, Gorgias Press 2006, pp. 218-19, 258; Ishak Armale, *Osmanernes och ung-turkarnas folkmord i norra Mesopotamien: De kristnas hemska katastrofer 1895/1914-1918*, Nsibin 2005, pp. 346-51; Raymond Kevorkian, *L'extermination des déportés Arméniens ottomans dans les camps de concentration de Syrie-Mésopotamie (1915-1916)*, online at <http://www.imprescriptible.fr/rhac/tome2/>; <http://www.massviolence.org/Kevorkian-Raymond>.

³ The last part of this sentence has been altered by pen from the type-written "wandered toward their destruction" to "walked to meet their death."

⁴ "Penny" is also the word used in the Danish text. Since a Dane would normally use the word "øre" rather than "penny," this could indicate that the Danish version of the testimony was either at some point written down in English by a Danish missionary, or, more likely, it is a translation from an English-language original text. Krikorian, an educated man who went on to work for Near East Relief, is not unlikely to have mastered English, and could thus have written such an account himself as is indeed stated in the account.

⁵ That some among the first groups of surviving deportees to reach Der Zor were seemingly allowed to attempt to (temporarily) settle, and were subsequently massacred, is supported in at least a couple of contemporary Danish accounts: Rev. H. L. Larsen (one of the founders of former KMA missionary Jensine Ørtz/Jensine Oerts Peters' "Industrimission"), *Blodets og Taarernes Land i Europa – En Orientrejse 1922*, Industrimissionen i Armenien [1922], writes on p. 36, that an Armenian photographer in Rodosto who had worked in Anatolia and Syria for the Turkish army posing as a Turk had told him that: "The first [Armenians] to arrive in Der-Sâd did not have it any worse there than they did in other places. They received a little land to cultivate, but after a few months it was ordered that all men should show up 10 hours from there to receive tools. They entered the barracks. – 'Take off all of your clothes and leave money and rings on a carpet, fold your clothes properly in a corner,' and then they were driven out naked onto the field 10 minutes from there where they were lined up. A platoon of Cherkes [sic] came from the front, and a platoon of soldiers came from behind. It was the first massacre in the Der-Sâd district in March 1916." Aage Meyer Benedictsen, *Armenien – Et Folks Liv og Kamp Gennem To Aartusinder*, Copenhagen: De Danske Armeniervenner 1925, pp. 256-57, writes that Djemal/Cemal Pasha allowed Armenians to settle various places in Syria, including at Der Zor, but that Talât Pasha had other plans. On p. 261 it is said that Talât used the pretext of an aborted attempt to establish an army corps ("Jilderim," supposed to be used on German initiative to free Baghdad) to get rid of the remaining Armenians in Syria: "Before the execution of this attack the roads had to be cleared, had to be free from potential spies and hostile minds, the communication lines had to be secured, and therefore the suspects, the Armenians, had to be gotten rid of. The army corps never came into existence; but the Armenians, hundreds of thousands were killed. [...] A pen cannot describe what happened in the spring of 1916 in these areas that became an image of hell. All the sensitive Turkish officials were removed; the hard hands of the Committee stepped in."

⁶ In the last part of the sentence the word "fysik," i.e., "physics," has been crossed out and the word "naturfag," i.e., "natural science" or, in a public school context, "science," has been added in pen.

⁷ The type-written text has "umaadelig frygtelig," i.e., "immensely terrible," but "umaadelig" has been crossed out with a pen.

⁸ The last part of the sentence originally goes "by the gendarmes and the Bedouins from the desert between Aleppo and Mardin," but this additional information has been crossed out, seemingly by type-writer.

⁹ On massacre at Ras-el-Ain, see, e.g., Hilmar Kaiser, *At the Crossroads of Der Zor: Death, Survival, and Humanitarian Resistance in Aleppo, 1915-1917*, Princeton & London: Gomidas Institute 2002, p. 61.