

145. DER-EL-ZOR: LETTER, DATED 12th JULY, 1915. FROM SCHWESTER L. MOHRING, A GERMAN MISSIONARY, DESCRIBING HER JOURNEY FROM BAGHDAD TO THE PASSES OF AMANUS; PUBLISHED IN THE GERMAN JOURNAL "SONNENAUFANG," SEPTEMBER, 1915."

At Der-el-Zor, a large town in the desert about six days' journey from Aleppo, we found the big han full to overflowing. All available rooms, roofs, and verandahs were occupied by Armenians. The majority were women and children, but there were also a certain number of men squatting on their quilts wherever they could find a spot of shade. As soon as I heard that they were Armenians, I started going round and talking to them. They were the people of Furnus (a village in the neighbourhood of Zeitoun and Marash); herded together here in these narrow quarters, they presented an extraordinarily melancholy appearance. When I enquired for children from our Orphanage at {Marash}, they brought me a protégée of Sister {Rohner}, Martha Karabashian. She gave me the following account of what had happened.

One day Turkish gendarmes had come to Furnus and arrested and carried off a large number of men, to turn them into soldiers. Neither they nor their families knew where they were being taken to. Those who remained were told that they would have to leave their houses within the space of four hours. They were allowed to take with them as much as they could carry; they might also take their beasts. After the lapse of the specified time the poor people had to march out of their village under the escort of soldiers (zaptiehs), without knowing where they were going or whether they would ever see their village again. To begin with, as long as they were still among the mountains and had some provisions left, things went well enough. They had been promised money and bread, and were actually given some in the early stages—as far as I can remember, it was 30 paras (1 *Vid* per day. But very soon these rations ceased, and there was nothing to be had but bulgur meal—50 drams (=150 grammes) per head per day. In this fashion the Furnusli, after four weeks of extremely hard travelling via Marash and Aleppo, had arrived at Der-el-Zor. They had already been three weeks there in the han, and had no idea what was to happen to them. They had no more money left, and the provisions supplied by the Turks had also dwindled almost to nothing. It was days since they had had any bread. In the towns they had been barred in at night, and not allowed to speak to the inhabitants. Martha, for instance, had not been allowed at {Marash} to go to the Orphanage. She said to me sadly: "We had two houses and we had to leave everything; now there are mouhadjirs<sup>+</sup> in them." There had been no massacres in Furnus and the zaptiehs, too, had treated the people well. They had suffered principally from lack of food and water on the march through the burning hot desert. These Yailadji or Mountaineers, as they called themselves, suffered twice as much from the heat as other people.

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Moslem immigrants from Europe.

The zaptiehs escorting them told us then that, since the massacres, the Armenians had cherished such hatred against the Turks that the latter had always to go in fear of them. The intention now, they said, was to employ the Armenians in building roads, and in this way to move them on gradually to Baghdad. When asked the "wherefore" of this, the zaptiehs explained that the people had been in collusion with Russia. The Armenians themselves declared that they did not know the reason for their expulsion.

Next day, at the midday rest, we fell in with a whole convoy of Armenians. The poor people had made themselves primitive goat's hair tents after the manner of the Kurds, and were resting in them. But the majority lay on the burning sand without defence against the scorching sun. On account of the number of sick, the Turks had allowed them a day's rest. It is simply impossible to conceive anything more disconsolate than such a mass of people in the desert under the given circumstances. One could tell by their clothes that they had lived in considerable prosperity, and now misery was written on their faces. "Bread!" "Bread!" was the universal cry. They were the people of Geben, who had been driven out with their Pastor. The latter told me that every day there were five or six deaths among the children and the sick. This very day they had only just buried the mother of a girl about nine years old, who was now quite alone in the world. They besought me most urgently to take the child with me to our Orphanage. The Pastor gave precisely the same account of what had happened as the little girl at Der-el-Zor.

No one without personal experience of the desert can form anything approaching a conception of the misery and distress. The desert is mountainous, but almost entirely without shade. For days together the route leads over rocks and is extremely difficult going. On the left hand, as one comes from Aleppo, there is always the Euphrates, which trails along like a streak of clay, yet not near enough for one to be able to draw water from it. The poor people must suffer intolerable pangs of thirst; no wonder that so many sicken and die.

As it was the midday halt, we, too, unpacked our provisions and prepared to eat. That morning we had had bread and tea; our midday meal consisted once more of hard Arab bread, cheese and a tin of sardines. In addition we had a bottle of mineral water. It was not very sumptuous, and yet it was not an easy task to eat anything in face of that crowd of distressed and suffering humanity. We gave away as much as we possibly could, and each of my three companions silently pressed into my hand a medjidia (3\*. 2d.) "for the poor people." A bag of bread from Baghdad, as hard as stone, was received with extraordinary gratitude.

"We shall soak it in water and then the children will eat it," said the delighted mothers.

Another scene comes back to me, which will give an idea of their destitution. One of my companions threw away an empty glass bottle. An old man threw himself upon it, begged to be allowed to take it for himself, and gave profuse thanks for the boon. Then he went down to the river, washed it out, and brought it back filled with the thick clayey water, carrying it carefully in his arms like a treasure, to thank us for it once more. Now he had at least drinking water for his journey.

Followed by many good wishes we at last continued on our way, with the impression of this misery still weighing upon us. In the evening, when we reached the village, we met yet another Armenian convoy of the same kind. This time it was the people of Zeitoun. There was the same destitution and the same complaint about the heat, the lack of bread and the persecutions of the Arabs. A little girl who had been brought up by Kaiserswerth Deaconesses in the Orphanage at Beirout, told us of her experiences in good German:—

"Why does God allow it? Why must we suffer like this? Why did not they strike us dead at once?" were her complaints; "In the daytime we have no water for the children and they cry of thirst. At night the Arabs come to steal our bedding and clothes. They have taken girls from us and committed outrages against women. If we cannot drag ourselves further on the march, we are beaten by the zaptiehs."

They also told us that other women had thrown themselves into the water to escape their shame, and that mothers with their new-born children had done the same, because they saw no other way out of their misery. Along the whole desert route there was a dearth of food—even for us who had money to pay for it—on account of the number of Turkish soldiers passing through and resting at every han. In Zeitoun, too, no one had been killed; the people could mention no instance of it.

The Armenian is bound up with his native soil; every change of climate is extremely upsetting to him, and there is nothing he misses so much as clear, cold water. For this reason alone residence in the desert is intolerable for him. A speedy death for the whole family at once seems a better fate to the mothers than to watch death by starvation slowly approaching themselves and their children.

On my arrival at Aleppo I was at once asked about the Armenians, and how they were doing for supplies. Their case had been taken up in every possible way, and representations had been made to the Government on their behalf. All that could be obtained was permission for the formation of an Armenian League of Help, which the Government at Constantinople as well as the Vali of Aleppo had sanctioned. The Armenian community at Aleppo at once proceeded to raise a relief fund among themselves, and have been supporting their poor, homeless brethren with money, food and clothing.

In the Amanus mountains, on our second day's journey after leaving Aleppo, we met with Armenians again. This time it was the people of Hadjin and the neighbourhood. They explained to us that they were going to Aleppo, but they knew nothing beyond that. They had only been nine days on the road, and did not ask for any assistance. Compared with those in the desert, they were faring sumptuously; they had wagons with them carrying their household goods, horses with foals, oxen and cows, and even camels. The procession making its way up through the mountains seemed endless, and I could

not help asking myself how long their prosperity would last. They were still in the mountains on their native soil, and had no suspicion of the terrors of the desert. That was the last I saw of the Armenians, but such experiences are unforgettable, and I publish them here with the most earnest appeal for help. Many of the Armenians may be guilty and may only be suffering what they have brought upon themselves, but the poor women and children need our help.