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"THE LIONS OF MARASH" by Stanley E. Kerr

State University of New York at Albany Press

Reviewed by Olga Briggs

It is a truism that a proper view of history requires the perspective of time; perhaps even a half-century is not sufficiently long to provide such a view. But how long does a man who had watched history being made when he was already mature wait to tell his story?

Stanley E. Kerr, from his vantage-point as member of the ^{American} Near East Relief Mission, observed the forced exodus --or the massacre of those unable to escape -- of thousands of Armenians from the villages in the district of Marash during the Turkish uprising of 1920. He has carried the terrible memories of what he saw or heard down through the intervening five decades; and now, aided by the diaries and recollections of colleagues on the mission staff who shared his experiences, letters saved by his own family, recorded eye-witness accounts of surviving Armenians and Turks, officers of the French garrison stationed at Marash, and parish priests and missionaries, he has written them all down that the world may not forget. His story has been authenticated and his research facilitated by the recent declassification of the official documentary records in the British Archives. It is anticipated that these records in the French Archives will also soon be made available. France will naturally release them more reluctantly, since much of the terror that occurred in Marash was owing to their desertion of the Armenian people they were pledged to protect. Dr. Kerr was, however, given access to certain files ^{dealing with the period} prior to the French withdrawal.

By various avenues, therefore, the author has been able to carry on

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the intensive research necessary to verify his own memories of the almost incredible incidents he relates. Almost incredible; these would be utterly unbelievable if, during World War II and the years since, we had not known of the horrors of Buchenwald and Hiroshima and the pitiful plight of refugees from Southeast Asia, central Europe, Africa --and the rest of the tragic chain of rapacity which literally encircles the globe.

Dr. Kerr's own memories of Marash were kept vivid by the circumstance of his presence in Lebanon as Chairman of the Department of Biochemistry at the American University in Beirut. During his forty-year tenure there, the author and his wife, also a teacher, counseled ^{certain} hundreds of students whose parents had been killed or had been refugees from Marash or nearby villages. These students were among the orphans the Near East Relief Mission had protected from the fate of thousands of slaughtered children.

The story of Marash has a too-familiar ring of persecuted minorities under the protectorate of compassionate --or economically-involved larger nations -- and of their desertion by strategic withdrawals when danger or policy dictated; for it has been repeated throughout history in "holy wars", pogroms, inquisitions, partitions, and even during our more enlightened era of the League of Nations' and United Nations' intervention. One wonders how mankind can justify or forgive itself. But as Richard G. Hovannisian, in his admirably-lucid introduction, puts it, quote:

"Some students of history believe that an essential aspect of their craft is to teach future generations. But the conscience of mankind is short; and the lessons of history are rarely heeded." close quote

What, then, is the historical background of Marash? "The starving Armenians", "The Unspeakable Turk" are glib phrases recalled by many of us from rapid survey-of-history courses; but most of us are vague as to the events now overlaid by other wars and other tragic mass-deportations and atrocities. To state it briefly: in 1920, after the close of World War I, and in accordance with the Treaty of Sevres, the independence of Armenia as a republic was declared. By agreement, a French Army of Occupation was stationed in Marash to replace the English regiments which had been serving there. Marash was then the home of the war-decimated remnant of the many more

who had lived there in 1914.

Although unrest had long been seething below the surface on the part of young Turks against the presence of the Christian Armenians, against the oppression of the Sultanate, and now against the occupation forces, the Turkish War of Independence, in secret planned for some time, suddenly erupted in 1920. As a result of the uprising, the endangered French Army of Occupation withdrew under cover of night, leaving the Armenians to their fate --which was the forced abandonment of home and property by those who were able to escape and the massacre of those too old and infirm or too young and weak to flee by rough roads and snow-covered mountains to uncertain freedom and certain poverty. The decimation of the Armenians was absolute: less than three years later, none remained of the 86000 whose home Marash had been prior to the Great War. All had been killed by brutal slaughter or driven out, many to perish on the way.

Among those survivors of the dreadful period whose own stories appear in the book is a distinguished physician of our Albany area, Dr. Dieran Berberian, who was a young pharmacist in Marash afterward and who learned from a former neighbor, a Turk, callously and even gloatingly, how his parents were slaughtered. Dr. Rudolph J. Pauly, also of Albany, is given appreciation for assisting the author in obtaining some of the interviews. These were both colleagues of Dr. Kerrs on the faculty of the American University at Beirut. Dr. Bayard Dodge, President of the university for many years, had provided, before his recent death, a clarifying foreword about the Near East Relief organization, which is credited with saving, often by great heroism, the lives of thousands, and which his father, Cleveland H. Dodge, at the urgent request of Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, was instrumental in organizing and financing.

When, as a member of the commission, Howard Heinz of Pittsburg went to the region, he exclaimed, "Merciful God! It's all true! Nobody has told the whole truth. Nobody could!" But now Dr. Stanley Kerr has told much of it in his compassionate and poignant collection of experiences in "The Lions of Marash", just published by the press of The State University of New York at Albany. His book takes its title from a stone

lion which had stood at the gate of the Marash citadel for three thousand years as a symbol of heroism. And though it had been carved and inscribed centuries before, the author uses it in the period he writes about as recognition of those in the beleaguered city who deserved, in their own time, to be counted among "The Lions of Marash".

Dr. Kerr apprehends the national pride of the Turks in the uprising; but his sympathies, like those of most of his readers, are with the Armenians during the siege of wanton cruelty in the massacre of innocent peasants, artisans, and merchants, and the forced migration of thousands. "Soon", to quote a sentence from the foreword, "there will be virtually no one who shall be able to recall the customs and daily life, the flora and fauna --in short--the Armenian national existence". close quote. Armenia, which appears in history as far back as the Seventh Century B.C., and as a people had a relatively advanced civilization even in prehistoric times!

Dr. Stanley Kerr's book is at once an important historical document, a tribute to fellow Near East Relief workers, and a memorial to all those of whatever national allegiance who deserve to be known as "The Lions of Marash".