

Sweet is Remembrance of the Righteous

by Wendy Elliott

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This article was submitted to a well known publication, but it was published with so many editorial changes my voice was lost and, most importantly, was done so without my permission. Therefore, I have decided not link to the published version, and am providing the original here.

Poem at right, published in *New Zealander*, Volume 7, Issue 549, 19 July 1851 (courtesy of the National Library of New Zealand).

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After the massacre in two of Christchurch's mosques on March 15th, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern vowed never to mention the terrorist's name. "Speak the names of those who were lost, rather than the name of the man who took them," she told her parliamentary colleagues. "He may have sought notoriety, but we in New Zealand will give him nothing. Not even his name." Hearing this I was reminded of a verse from the Bible: The remembrance of the righteous is a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot (Proverbs 10:7).

April 24th is the commemoration of the start of the Armenian genocide in the Ottoman Empire. We know the names of the government and local leaders who orchestrated the deadly deportations and massacres, because it is important for our understanding of attitudes, motives and actions that lead to genocide. There were also thousands of members of the Special Organization, the gendarmerie, vigilante groups and others who carried out the wicked deeds. Most of their names are not known. We don't need to know them. They have rotted away, as is just. Instead we remember the victims of the genocide and the survivors.

In the last few years there has been a growing movement to include in the remembrance the righteous. The term *righteous* became part of our parlance following the Holocaust when Jews began to identify non-Jews who aided Jews during the terror of the Nazi regime. As I was researching for my book, *Grit and Grace in a World Gone Mad: Humanitarianism in Talas, Turkey 1908-1923*, I came across many examples of righteous people who helped Ottoman Armenians during this period of terror. The righteous were of different ethnicities and nationalities, but they all had one thing in common—a deep-seated streak of humanity. In some cases, as with North American missionaries stationed in Turkey, there was a sense of friendship and compassion mixed with religious duty. For humanitarian aid workers, who were not allowed in the country until the Ottoman government fell, it was part of their innate and professional desire to help rehabilitate and reconstruct. Some of the righteous were friends and neighbours of Armenians. There were even government officials and military personnel who believed that the

Sweet is the Memory of the Righteous

Our days will soon depart, and death will close
The changes of each life, our joys our woes;
The graceless tyrant then no more can harm!
'Tis actions pious will the good embalm.
Torn from its stem and withered on the ground,
The flower amidst its fragrance oft is found;
So sweet will be the memory of his name—
Who saved his neighbour from the burning flame;
Rescued in furious storms from whelming waves,
Or snatched the poisonous cup mid yawning graves;
Who when deep guilt was pointing to despair,
Its victim urged death's horrors all to date;
Exhibited a Saviour's lovely face—
By faith, on earth, in heaven a resting place.
Who led to life, to bliss; to Christ the way;
Sweet, sweet will be to him eternal day.
A gentler passage leads him to the tomb,
His sacred memory wafts the sweet perfume.

—JH

Ottoman government's policies were illegal, immoral and vile. All of these people took action—within their power—to try to help.

As research into this period of history continues, the list of the righteous grows. Some of their names are familiar, such as American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, one of the first to sound the alarm internationally; Norwegian nurse Bodil Biørn and German military lieutenant Armin Wegner, whose photographs provided evidence of the terror and its aftermath; and Danish missionary Marie Jacobsen, who worked tirelessly to alleviate pain and suffering.

Others are not so well known, and some will remain anonymous forever. However, it's important to honour them and their acts of kindness, too. I would like to contribute to the blessing of remembering by adding a few who are documented in my book.

Some of the Unnamed Righteous

An American Relief Worker: After the war, a decree was issued to release all Armenian women and children who had been kept in Turkish households, either as servants or through forced marriages. One relief worker pointed out that instant freedom was not always a good thing. He knew of a young woman who had been forced to marry the son of the Turk who had killed her parents, thus turning over her inheritance to her husband. By 1919, the woman had a child, whom she loved and did not want to abandon. Without money or assistance, she had no choice but to stay with her husband. The relief worker estimated there must be thousands of such cases and suggested that “rescue homes” be established to help her and similarly situated women and children. Within months these homes were established by the humanitarian agency, Near East Relief, throughout Turkey and beyond. It provided these women some hope for a better future.

A Bedouin Sheikh: When news of deportations reached a sheikh near Aleppo, he immediately went to the home of his Armenian friend in Aintab (Gaziantep) to see how he could help. He discovered the man and his wife had been killed and their children were alone and desperate. He took all five of them—three boys and two girls—home with him to be part of his family. When the local kaimakam (governor) tried to kidnap the girls, the sheikh and his brother fought him off. For the rest of his life, the sheikh carried the scars of four bullet holes to mark the occasion. After the war, in conjunction with the order in Turkey for all Armenian women and children to be released, Emir Feisal ordered the same for Arab households. At first, no one wanted them to go. The children refused to leave the sheikh because they loved him, and he and his family loved them. Eventually, though reluctantly, he persuaded them to accept the order, but insisted on accompanying them to Aleppo to ensure they would be safe and well cared for. As he and the children tearfully drove away, the whole village “ran beside the car shouting farewells and weeping.”

Government Officials: The governor of Basra and three other officials in Miintefak, Midyat, and Bafra were murdered for their opposition to the deportation policies of the Ottoman government; about twenty other local officials were fired for refusing to comply.

Trebizond Area Turks and Greeks: In the summer of 1915 almost 6,000 Armenians had been deported from Trebizond (Trabzon) though 500 or so escaped into the woods, caves and dens of the nearby mountains. In the spring of 1916 when the Allies temporarily occupied the area, a missionary recorded that “God had sent modern ‘Obadiahs,’ in the shape of some kind-hearted Turks, and some Greek men, but mostly Greek women, who, during the storms of the winter, had secretly come to the city to get help and then to bake and carry bread to the hiding places in the woods, week by week for all these ten months.”

A Turkish Patient: In 1916 when Armenians were being rounded up for deportation in the Talas region, an Armenian nurse, some of her children and two little grandchildren were hidden in the house of a Turk in a nearby village. He had been her patient in the Talas hospital, suffering from a serious scalp wound. He had never forgotten the kindness and caring of the nurse, and was now in the position of demonstrating his regard for her. When he judged it safe to travel, he secretly escorted them all to Talas to the home of the woman’s other daughter.

A Wealthy Circassian: In a similar situation in another nearby village, a wealthy Circassian hid a former student of the Talas Girls’ Boarding School in his home and then arranged for her to go to Cesarea (Kayseri) to find her relatives.

Turkish Friends: In July 1915 the Ottoman government, aware that some Turks had been helping their Armenian friends, decreed that from now on “if any Muslim protect a Christian, first his house shall be burned, then the Christian killed before his eyes, and then his family, and then himself.” There still remained one safe way to help and that was to convince Armenians to convert to Islam. The druggist in Talas, an Armenian, was a popular man, and listened for months to the pleading of his Turkish friends to convert to save his life. Over and over again he refused, but in the end it was a combination of an order from a powerful administrator and begging from his family members that convinced him to convert. He regretted the decision but was grateful for the well-meaning intentions of his friends.

Another Government Official: Just before several gendarmes were to deport eight Armenian employees of the Talas Boys’ Boarding School to the desert, their route was mysteriously changed by a government official. Rather than travel along the northeastern route through Sivas, where so many Armenian men had been ambushed and murdered by Special Organization forces, they were to travel south through Eregli (Erekli), where the dangers were less. The German Consul later reported that the former teachers all arrived at their destination intact.

An Entire Village: In the small village of Tavlusun, three miles northeast of Talas, lived several hundred Armenians, Turks and Greeks. They were mainly farmers and animal breeders, though a few were artisan plasterers. When the gendarmes came to begin deportations, the entire village banded together as one. The Turks and Greeks declared that if the Armenians went, they would go, too. No one left the village, except the gendarmes.

Some of the Named Righteous

When almost fifty Armenians in Zeitoun (Süleymanlı) were accused of being part of a pro-Russian armed revolt and arrested by the local kaimakam, **Jelal**, the governor of Aleppo,

investigated the incident, which was within his jurisdiction. He determined there was no revolt, and released those who were not charged. He was reprimanded for his efforts by the Ottoman government by having Zeitoon removed from his authority. He saw the government's attitude and policies against Armenians as "a misfortune for his fatherland," and begged German Consul Walter Rossler to persuade the German Ambassador to "counteract this trend." He had tried to prevent the deportations, and his suggestion of erecting protective shelters for the deportees was rejected. For his views and actions he was removed from his position and transferred to Konya. He was probably saved from a worse fate because he was a great grandson of Sultan Abdul Hamid.

Karen Marie Petersen, a member of the Danish *Kvindelige Missions Arbejdere* (Women Missionary Workers), had been in Mezreh and Harput (Elâzığ) since 1909. She bore witness to the deportations and the aftermath of the massacres, and recorded the testimonies of survivors. As the director of the Emaus orphanage, she cared for as many children as possible, including "rescue women" after the war. Eventually she adopted an Armenian orphan, naming her Hope. Like a handful of other women who had stayed at their posts throughout the "dreadful time", she was exhausted by 1919. When she heard relief workers were on their way, she wrote, "Would it be possible for me to buy from your supplies stuff for dresses and underclothing for the children? They are almost in a worse condition than the children outside. I have been so ashamed to have them going around in rags! . . . Please come soon!"

Huseyin Nesimi, kaimakam of Lice, delayed deportations and arranged fake marriages for Armenian women in an effort to protect them. He was called to account by the governor of Diarbekir, and on the way to see him was murdered by a brigand. **Sabit Es Suveydi**, the 25-year-old deputy kaimakam of Beshiri, was also killed after he refused to participate in the Diarbekir deportations.

British aid workers **Alfred E. Backhouse** and **E. St. John Catchpool** of the Lord Mayor's Fund, and **Thomas Dam Heald** of the British Society of Friends (Quakers) were early and tireless organizers of relief centres in Russian Armenia. From 1916 they administered the donated funds (Heald oversaw the distribution of money from the American relief fund) in the region. It was their job to ensure that the most destitute were fed and orphans were cared for, but they also directed the majority of funds to the creation of industries. The result was the manufacturing of much-needed woollen cloth, shoes and clothing, and dignified, meaningful work for refugees.

American teacher **Ethel Putney** was in the first group of international aid workers who established a refugee camp in Port Said, Egypt in 1915. Within months she was joined by **Mary Kinney**, former missionary from Adabazar (Adapazarı), who set up and supervised workshops for Armenian women, and **Lilian Cole Sewny**, who put her considerable nursing skills to work. Before the war Cole Sewny had worked in the Talas hospital but later moved to Sivas where she met and married Levon Sewny, the mission's Armenian doctor. In 1914 he was conscripted into the Ottoman army medical corps at the Russian front, but soon succumbed to typhus which was rampant among the soldiers. She had been working in a hospital a nine-hour trek away and had raced through the snow on bad roads to be at his side. Two days later he died. She had no time to mourn because a typhus epidemic swept through the region. Instead she threw herself into her work there and later at Port Said to try to make a positive difference.

Omer Efendi, a Turkish trader in Keskin, a village near Talas, received a smuggled message from his friend and fellow trader Tateos Minassian. Minassian had been rounded up while on business in Angora (Ankara), and was now part of a deportation convoy headed for the desert. He needed help. Omer managed to extract Minassian and hide him in his house. He also found a hiding place in the village for Minassian's wife and children. At tremendous risk to himself, he hid the family for three years until the war was over.

When gendarmes entered the mission's compound in Marsovan (Merzifon) and removed sixty-three Armenian women and girls for deportation, **Charlotte Willard**, American principal of the Girls' Boarding School, and YWCA secretary (field worker) **Frances Gage** sprang into action. First, they asked to accompany the deportees and were denied. Next, they appealed to the local authorities and were again denied. They persisted. It took three days before they were given written permission to travel. Meanwhile they had gathered all the money they could find, swift horses, a couple of wagons, an interpreter and a faithful Circassian servant. It took two days before they caught up with the convoy, only two-thirds of whom were left. Twenty-one girls had been separated from the group and sent on another route. Willard and Gage negotiated for days with the Turkish guards, using persuasion, argument "and the judicious application of large sums of money" to finally return to Marsovan with the remaining forty-two Armenians.

Halil Rami Bey, a Kurd, was the new governor of Malatia in 1919. James Barton, Chairman of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, noted that one of Halil Rami's "first proclamations after his arrival was to the effect that all Armenians should come personally to him if they had a grievance that was not receiving adequate attention" and that he was committed to the restoration of the country.

During the deportations, the Turkish mayor of Cesarea, **Rifat Bey**, appealed to the governor for his friend and treasurer of the municipality, Garabed Kasakian, to be allowed to remain at his job. Permission was granted. Rifat Bey had made the appeal for Kasakian's extended family, which included siblings, nieces and nephews.

American missionaries **Stella Loughridge**, principal of the Girls' Boarding School in Talas, **Henry Wingate**, principal of the Boys' Boarding School, Henry's wife **Jane**, teachers **Clara Childs Richmond** and **Elsey Bristol**, nurse **Theda Phelps**, and Canadian missionaries **Herbert and Genevieve Irwin** appealed to the local governor to release the men who had been unjustly imprisoned, visited the prisoners, took in as many children as possible, and acted as advocates, guardians and financial sponsors to try to protect Armenians. When they were expelled in 1917 as wartime belligerents, these missionaries stayed in Talas until the last minute and were the first to return to the town as relief workers in 1919 to participate in the post-war reconstruction.

American missionary **Susan Wealthy Orvis**, a member of the Talas team, had been on furlough in late 1914 and was therefore not with her colleagues during the genocide. In 1917 she answered the call to establish a refugee centre in Alexandropol (Gyumri) and travelled more than 7,000 miles with seven other relief workers in the middle of the Russian revolution to do so. Her companions were **Rev. Ernest Partridge**, **Rev. Theodore Elmer**, **Rev. Walter James**, **Carl and Ruth Compton**, and **Henry H. and Irma White**. Orvis organized a milk program to feed 300 babies in the area, and turned a decrepit old barracks into a functioning hospital before being

forced to flee a day ahead of the advancing Ottoman and German armies. She was one of the first to return to Talas after the war and, with her Talas colleagues, saved 3,000 Armenian and Greek orphans when Christians were expelled from Turkey in December 1922.

The Value of Remembrance of the Righteous

Some of the names of the righteous are known, some are not. Collectively, their actions stand to remind us that in the midst of great wickedness, there is still goodness in the world. When times are dark, it is especially important to remember and honour that.