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Pour mon collègue de l'université d'Athènes, Hervé Georgelin, éminent chercheur et traducteur pour tant de sujets qui m'intéressent, à commencer par Smyrne, mais aussi pour les populations non musulmanes de l'Empire ottoman, Juifs, Arméniens et autres chrétiens orientaux de notre temps, sujets abordés diulement, grâce à une précieuse polyglotie,

The Righteous and People of Conscience of the Armenian Genocide

en très amical hommage, et en souvenir des rencontres avec mon père, Charles Dédéyan, gardien, avec son frère Christian, de la mémoire de Smyrne,

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Gérard Dédéyan

Preface by

YVES TERNON



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LESLIE A. DAVIS (1876–1960)

American consul moved by compassion to overcome his preconceptions

Among the non-Turks from neutral countries who remained in the interior of Turkey when war was declared in 1914, a small number committed to paper the atrocities committed against the Armenians and Christians to which they were eyewitnesses. These independent observers were in agreement with the American consul in Harput, Leslie A. Davis, that 'everything had been planned months ago' by the Ottoman authorities and was being put into action by their agents. Though not by his own admission a great admirer of the Armenians, Davis had a keen sense of justice and could not remain indifferent to the atrocities he witnessed. 'It is not that I am in any way a champion of the Armenian race,' he wrote in one of his diplomatic dispatches, but 'the punishment inflicted upon these people is so severe, the tragedy is so terrible, that one cannot contemplate it and certainly cannot live in the midst of it without being stirred to the depths of one's nature.'

He was one of the first to denounce the crimes perpetrated against the Armenians by the Turkish government, providing first-hand testimony that was both detailed and unique, as well as going above and beyond his diplomatic duties to personally save as many Armenians as he was able to.

From May 1914 to April 1917, when he was forced to leave Turkey after America's entry into the war on the Allied side, Davis was the only foreign diplomat in central Anatolia. Lying several days' journey from the nearest port or railway, Harput was virtually inaccessible—Davis described the consulate there as 'one of the

most remote and inaccessible in the world'—and it was in this wild and remote region that large numbers of Armenians were slaughtered. The campaign to eliminate the Armenians had been planned by the Turkish government at a time when Europe was plunged into a murderous war and all communications from Anatolia were censored and often destroyed. The diplomatic dispatches that Davis used to communicate with Henry Morgenthau, his ambassador in Constantinople, hundreds of miles from Harput, were frequently delayed or lost altogether, according to the whim of the censors.

After the war, Davis wrote a report of 130 pages on his activities in Harput, dated 9 February 1918. Together with some of his dispatches from 1915, the report was classified. It lay unread in the State Department archives until it was declassified in 1961, and it was only in the 1980s that the researcher Susan Blair stumbled upon them. They were published in 1989 under the title *The Slaughterhouse Province*.

Davis had studied law and worked in New York City as a lawyer before embarking on a diplomatic career. His first posting was to Batumi in Georgia, and it was in 1914 that he was posted to Harput. There he was to become an eyewitness to massacres and other persecutions to which this man of integrity and honesty was unable to remain indifferent. From the outset, he denounced these atrocities forcibly and unambiguously in his dispatches to Morgenthau. On 30 June 1915, as on previous days, he drew the ambassador's attention to the critical situation in Harput and the fears of the Armenian population that a massacre and deportations were being planned:

Last week there were well founded rumors of a threatened massacre. I think there is very little doubt that one is planned. ... Another method was found, to destroy the Armenian race. This is no less than the deportation of the entire Armenian population, not only from this Vilayet, but, I understand, from all six Vilayets comprising Armenia. There are said to be about sixty thousand Armenians in this Vilayet and about a million in the six Vilayets. All of these are to be sent into exile; an undertaking greater, probably, than anything of the kind in all history.

In a worrying sign, the *vali* would not allow American missionaries or medics to go with the convoys sent from Harput: 'Another

bad omen is that the Vali has refused permission for any Americans to accompany the parties leaving here.'

But whatever happened, it was clear that any Armenians who survived were going to need a great deal of relief: 'In any case, there is going to be terrible suffering and great need to help among those who survive the journey. Those who were formerly rich and the poor will alike be destitute.'

Davis described how the local Turks were profiteering from the Armenians' plight:

The Turks are, of course, taking advantage of the situation to get things at practically nothing. Robbery and looting were never undertaken in a more wholesale manner. Turkish men and Turkish women are entering the houses of all the Armenians and taking things at almost any price. ... The scene reminds one of a lot of hungry vultures hovering over the remains of those who have fallen by the way.

Knowing that they were being sent to their deaths, many Armenians entrusted the consul and American missionaries with their life savings, begging them to send the money to their relatives in America:

I have never seen a more pathetic or tragic scene. All feel that they are going to certain death ... They hand over the savings of a lifetime with the simple request that if they are not heard from after a few months to send their money if possible to their relatives.

As for their houses and lands, they knew that they would be confiscated: 'All the real estate belonging to the Armenians will be confiscated by the Government. Many people will be unable to dispose of their personal property and will probably walk out leaving their houses and stores with all their contents. Those who have made fortunes will lose everything.'

By 11 July, Davis was no longer in the slightest doubt as to the criminal intentions of the Turkish authorities, as he wrote to Morgenthau:

If it were simply a matter of being obliged to leave here and go somewhere else it would not be so bad, but everyone knows it is a

case of going to one's death. If there was any doubt about it, it has been removed by the arrival of a number of parties, aggregating several thousand people, from Erzurum and Erzincan. The first ones arrived a day or two after my last report was written. I have visited their encampment a number of times and talked with some of the people. A more pitiable sight cannot be imagined. They were almost without exception ragged, filthy, hungry and sick. This is not surprising in view of the fact that they have been on the road for nearly two months with no change of clothing, no chance to wash, no shelter and little to eat.

The condition of these people indicated clearly the fate of those who have left and are about to leave from here. I believe nothing has been heard from any of them as yet and probably very little will be heard. The system that is being followed seems to be to have bands of Kurds awaiting them on the roads to kill the men especially and incidentally some of the others. The entire movement seems to be the most thoroughly organized and effective massacre this country has ever seen.

In his dispatch of 24 July, this seasoned and level-headed lawyer expressed his conviction, based on first-hand accounts that he had gathered, that the Turkish government was bent on the total destruction of 'the Armenian race':

It has been no secret that the plan was to destroy the Armenian race as a race, but the methods have been more cold-blooded and barbarous, if not more effective, than I had first supposed. . . . I do not believe there has ever been a massacre in the history of the world so general and thorough as that which is now being perpetrated in this region or that a more fiendish, diabolical scheme has ever been conceived by the mind of man.

In addition, very little resistance had been possible, a fact that was 'due very largely also to the clever way in which the scheme had been carried out':

when practically all the Armenian men had been gotten out of the way and every weapon surrendered or found by the police, it was announced that all Armenians must be deported. Effective resistance to such an order was impossible.

He gave a detailed description of the circumstances surrounding the death of the archbishop of the local Armenian Catholic church, Monsignor Israelian, with some forty others, even though all of them had been granted safe conduct by the *vali*. Among the dead was a Frenchwoman who was known to Davis, Mlle Marguerite Gamat. Three young women were saved and taken away to marry Muslims. 'One succeeded in getting free,' added Davis, always scrupulous in giving his sources, 'It was from her that I obtained the above information.'

Another witness to an atrocity was a local gendarme:

Another incident that was reported to me the other day was that some of the people who were sent from here were actually burned alive in a cave between here and Diarbakir. This was told me by a gendarme who was with them and who expressed himself as being very strongly opposed to the barbarous treatment the Armenians were receiving.

Davis himself witnessed the conditions in which those who were too weak to go any further were left behind in Harput to perish: 'After the departure of the parties that arrived here from Erzurum and Erzincan a few hundred of those who were too sick or feeble to continue with the others were left here to die. Their camp is a scene from the Inferno. Greater misery could not be imagined.' His descriptions of the dead and dying, mostly women and children, are harrowing.

In his dispatch of 7 September 1915, Davis confirmed that all the Armenians in Harput and Mamuret ul-Aziz had been massacred, along with thousands more from the outlying villages, with only a small number of women and children remaining. A few days later, he added, the women and children had been rounded up and massacred as well: 'During the last week of July and the first part of August large numbers of women and children were rounded up both here and in the villages. They were sent away under guard and there have been persistent reports that they were killed as the men had been.'

He was now under no illusion about the possibility of re-opening the American schools in the autumn:

The situation in regard to the American schools is well summarized in Mr. Riggs' letter of July 19th to Mr. Peet, copy of which was

sent to the Embassy. He calls attention to the fact that two-thirds of the girl pupils and six-sevenths of the boys have been taken away to death, exile or Moslem homes; that four of the seven professors have been murdered on the road in general massacres.

After recounting a litany of atrocities, he concludes: 'This may well be called the "Slaughterhouse Vilayet" of Turkey, for it appears that exiles from all directions have come this far safely only to be massacred in some part of this Vilayet.'

In his dispatch of 30 December, Davis described the fear and anguish of the remaining Armenians in the province, not knowing when they would be arrested, deported and massacred, and the duplicity of the Turkish authorities in their stratagems for luring those who were in hiding out into the open. Even converting to Islam proved no guarantee of safety:

The last four months have been full of uncertainty and anxiety for every one. There has been no security for any of the few Armenians who were left here after the deportations of July and August ... On Sunday, September 26th, the Vali had an announcement made that no more Armenians would be deported. For several weeks afterwards everything appeared to be quiet and many Armenians who had been in hiding up to that time ventured to come out. Some became Moslems thinking they would be in no further danger. Suddenly in the middle of the afternoon on Thursday, November 4th, the day being a fair one when many people were in the streets and market-place, the police began to arrest all the Armenians and Syrians they could find.

The lengthy report that Davis wrote for the State Department on 9 February 1918 makes it clear that in the face of the persecution and annihilation of the Armenians, his integrity and sense of justice impelled him to do all he could to save desperate people who would otherwise face a certain death, and that he managed to save many of them through his personal intervention. Extending the protection of the consulate not only to American passport holders but also to those who had given up their American nationality, he prioritized anyone 'who had documents of any kind'.

Taking full advantage of his good relationship with the *vali* and local officials, he went far beyond his consular duties, which

required him to protect American citizens and institutions, and took huge risks in allowing dozens of Armenians to seek sanctuary within the substantial walls of the consulate and its extensive grounds. When he ran out of space, he found other accommodation close by:

I have, as a matter of fact, been keeping about thirty or forty people at the Consulate ... As the garden of the Consulate is very large it has not been so very difficult to keep people here in summer. I have recently found two or three houses in the neighborhood in which I have placed some of them.

Throughout the summer of 1915, Davis had done everything in his power to help the Armenians. When it became clear that despite his efforts the deportations were going to take place, he tried unsuccessfully to persuade the *vali* to allow missionaries to accompany the deportees in order to care for the sick and help with the children. When some of those who were forced to leave asked him to look after their money and precious documents, he agreed to do so and to follow their instructions if they did not return. When he became aware of the scale of the looming catastrophe, he informed his ambassador and asked for large sums of money to aid the survivors.

With this money, he was able to help the Armenians who arrived from Erzurum in a pitiful state and convinced the local police chief to let them stay in Mamuret ul-Aziz. When Erzurum was captured by the Russians, he helped the refugees to get away and return to their towns and villages. Often, to allay suspicion, he would go to the market himself to buy provisions to feed the Armenians to whom he gave refuge in the consulate for two years. Meanwhile, he helped others to escape to the Dersim region, guided by Kurds whom he paid, in some cases taking them to the Kurds and handing them over himself.

The few thousand Armenians who remained in Harput and the surrounding region were dependent on what Davis was able to give them. In addition to this, he gave monthly sums to foreigners—French, British and Russian—from nations with whom Turkey was at war.

Above and beyond the humanitarian aid he provided, Davis was also a conscientious witness, setting out to verify accounts of massacres and so becoming an eyewitness to the aftermath, describing

the corpses and skeletal remains of slaughtered Armenians. On one journey to Lake Geoljuk (now Lake Hazar), he estimated that he had seen the remains of 10,000 Armenians. His determination to keep his ambassador informed of what he had seen and of what he had heard directly from survivors of the massacres, and even from some gendarmes, made him an invaluable and arguably unique witness to the tragedy that was unfolding in the 'slaughterhouse province'. He was also quick to detect and denounce the duplicitous stratagems by which the Turkish authorities issued false reassurances and guarantees to the Armenians in order to capture and arrest them without resistance.

While his duties as consul required him to offer assistance to American citizens and safeguard American possessions, Davis was unable to stand by in the face of the tragic events to which he was witness. His dispatches and the report he composed reveal a man of uncompromising integrity, independence and courage, who in his determination to do everything in his power to—as he put it to Morgenthau—'keep people alive for the present', fully deserves his place among the Righteous.

Sources and further reading

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