

"That's How It Was" Narrated by Eitan Belkind, member of the NILI

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Eitan Belkind (1887 – 1979) was born in Rishon LeZion and graduated from Turkish military high school. During WWI he participated in a team fighting locust invasions. Together with a few other outraged witnesses of the Armenian massacres, he founded NILI, an organization, which collaborated with the British against the Turks.

...The majority of the Jews in Israel, the Old Yishuv and the newcomers alike, kept their non-Turkish passports in order to be protected by the Capitulations of the Ottoman Empire. The Capitulations were privileges granted to European citizens resident in Turkey in exchange for assistance given by the European nations to the disintegrating Empire.

During the war the Turkish military powers could not agree with the fact, that dozens of thousands people from hostile countries having foreign citizenship lived in Israel (the newcomers were mainly from the Russian Empire fighting against the Turks). The Turks demanded that the Jews either acquire the Ottoman citizenship or leave Israel. Bilium (the first settlers in Palestine coming from Russia) and other founders of the first Aliyah led by Eliezer Ben-Yehuda, made a public appeal to the Jews, encouraging them to adopt Ottoman citizenship. However, very few people responded, as most Jews were afraid that once they would get Turkish passports, they would be drafted to the Turkish Army, something the Jews greatly feared. Many Jews preferred to be exiled from Israel to serve in the Turkish Army.

On Friday in late March 1915, about 10000 Jewish were exiled from Israel. They were taken to Jaffa and forced to board ships belonging to neutral states such as Italy, USA, etc. The deportation was carried out with great cruelty. The deportees left all their property behind, women and children were hurled into the ships. It was a tragic and oppressing sight.

Avshalom Feinberg, who witnessed the deportations, went to Jerusalem to the Anti-Locust Department, and encouraged Aharon Aharonson to start an uprising; because the Jewish settlements were on the brink of annihilation. Avshalom insisted that, in his opinion, that it had been the Germans that advised Turkey to deport the Jews.

..."We must help the English and the French to win the war, -said Avshalom, - otherwise if the Germans win, God forbid, our country will become a German colony as part of Germany's slogan *Drang nach Osten plan*. Germany has no settlements, with a population of over 85 million; it is looking for new lands. Israel is one of its targets the Germans had already started to populate it, masquerading as the Knights Templar".

THE EXTERMINATION OF THE ARMENIANS

... On the second day of our journey, we saw a corpse floating in the Euphrates. We were surprised but the soldier accompanying us reassured us that this was a body of an Armenian. We found out that there was a camp nearby, on the other side of the Euphrates where Armenians deported from Armenia were being held. Our friend Shirinyan turned white and asked us to cross the Euphrates and go to the Armenian camp.

We found several hundred people in the camp living in small handmade huts. The territory was clean; the huts were built on one line. We passed by huts and looked inside. We saw women and children. In one of the huts, Shirinyan found one of his aunts, who told that all men had been killed; only women and children remained. Shirinyan had no idea what had happened to his nation. Shocked, he began to cry on his aunt's shoulder, but Jacob Baker and I tried to cheer him up and said that we still had our duty to do. We went on; the further we traveled the more floating corpses of Armenians we saw.

After six days, we reached Der-el-Zor, an important city of the region. We paid a visit to the military Commandant of the city, the Circassian Colonel Ahmab Bey. We presented our papers and explained the purpose of our journey. My friend Jacob Baker was given an accommodation, but I and my friend Shirinyan were arrested. Later Jacob Baker visited us and said that we were detained for being Armenians. It turned out the Commandant believed I was also Armenian my first name Eitan, was written in Turkish [*which then used Arabic characters – Translator's note*] with the sound "i" was presented by two dots subscript, the character "t" was written with two dots superscript, so the Commander read my name as Etian, which sounded perfectly Armenian.

"No matter how much I tried to explain things to the Commandant,-said Baker,-I could not persuade him. I have sent a telegram to the chief in Damascus". I was kept in custody for two days until a telegram with order to release me. I do not know what happened to our friend Shirinyan. Der-el-Zor, was a military centre, so it had a military hospital lead by a Jewish doctor Bhor (?) and a Jewish pharmacist called Arto. **There we found out that Ahmad Bey, was the commander of Circassian troops mobilized for exterminating the Jews.** The doctor and the pharmacist invited us to their roomy house, told us that all Armenian men had been killed on the way from their homes in Anatolia, and beautiful women and girls were left to the mercy of Bedouins.

As soon as we found horses to ride and soldiers to accompany us, Jacob Baker went on his way to Mosul, I set out to my region, along the river Kibur (?). At night before departure we heard terrible, heart-rending female screams. The Armenian camp was one kilometer away from our house. The screaming continued all night. We asked what was happening, they told us that children were being taken from their mothers to live in dormitories and continue their education. However in the morning when we set off and crossed the bridge across Euphrates, **I was shocked to see the river red with blood and beheaded corpses of children floating on the water. The scene was horrible, as there was nothing we could do.**

After three days riding, I reached Aram- Naharaim where I witnessed a terrible tragedy. There were two camps next to each other, one Armenian and one Circassian. The Circassians were "busy" with exterminating the Armenians. There were also Arab sheikhs, who selected beautiful Armenian girls as their wives. Two women approached me and gave their photos to me. Should I ever get to Aleppo and find their families (whether their families were alive, was a question), the women asked me to send their greetings to whomever I find there.

The Circassian officer seeing me talk to the two Armenian women ordered me to leave but I stayed to see what would happen to the Armenians. The Circassian soldiers ordered the Armenians to gather dry grass and pile it into a tall pyramid, then they tied up all the Armenians who were there, almost 5000 souls, their hands tied together and put them in a circle around the pile of grass and set it afire in a blaze, which rose up to the heaven together with the screams of the wretched people, who were being burned to death. I fled from the place I could not stand this horrifying sight. I rode as fast as I could, wishing to get as far from the place as possible. After two hours of crazy gallop I could still hear screams of the poor victims until they died out. In two days I returned to that place and saw the burned bodies of thousands people.

I approached the *Sandjer* Mountains where Yezidim lived. At the foot of the mountain, on my way to the city Urfa in the north, I witnessed several mass-exterminations of the Armenians. People were wretched, desperate to madness. In one of the houses I saw an Armenian woman cooking her own child's body in a pot. All the roads were strewn with the corpses of murdered Armenians.

A JEWISH WOMAN IN A SHEIKH'S TENT

...I went to the sheikh's tent and was very happy to find my friend Jacob Baker.

At midnight after the meal was over, the sheikh went to his tent and we stayed back. There was a little boy watching over the fire. Jacob Baker and I spoke French. I told him about three things that happened to me in Urfa and about Armenian pogroms that I saw on my way and he told me about his work in Mosul. We sat talking late in the night, when suddenly the child whom we mistook for a Bedouin told us in French that he and his mother are Armenians and the chief of the tribe had saved them from extermination. His mother became the sheikh's wife and he helped welcoming guests. The child went on and told us that the chief of the other tribe had a Jewish wife taken from the family of the city Caesarea in Anatolia. Her husband had been killed and the sheikh took her.

We were shocked upon hearing this and asked the boy whether we could meet the woman. In spite of the danger the child got into the tent where the Jewess was. Everyone in the tent was asleep and the woman managed to get unnoticed. She was 25 and very beautiful. She told us her surname was Biram, a typical Turkish name. Her family lived in the Armenian quarter of the city and when they were taking the Armenians, they also took this woman with her husband and child despite all their protests. Her husband and child had been killed but she was rescued by the Arab sheikh who took her as his wife. We promised to take care of her.

...Two weeks later I turned towards the Euphrates and hurried back to Der-el-Zor. In the post I found a letter from Haim Khanum in Constantinople (the main city of Turkey), who asked me not to interfere in the case of Mrs. Biram, as she had connections with the killings of the Armenians that was a military secret. Besides I sent a letter to my niece Tsilya, who was a student in Berlin, in answer to my letter sent by German military mail, where I described everything that had happened to the Armenians. I got my letter back with a request never to write to her about such things again, to beware of the German military mail, because my letters might get opened by censors.

In Der-el-Zor I stayed with the pharmacist Arto, who now had five Armenian wives whom he married so as to save their lives. He told me that about 30 Armenian women were working in the military hospital this had been Doctor Bhor's way of rescuing them.

I must mention that all the time I was in Aram Naharaim, I was unable to eat the splendid fish from the Euphrates, which I liked very much, remembering that those fishes had fed off the corpses of murdered Armenians, including young children. I was also unable to have sexual relationship with the Armenian girls who were offered me by Doctor Bhor and pharmacist Arto.

While still in Damascus... I gave my records about the Armenian massacres to Josef Lishansky.

When we returned testing station I stayed with Sara. She told me that my records of Armenian massacres, which she had sent to Egypt [*to the British-J.S.*], had made a great impression.

...In my trips in the south of Syria and Iraq I saw with my own eyes the extermination of the Armenian nation, I watched the atrocious murders, and saw children's heads cut off and watched the burning of innocent people whose only wrongdoing was to be Armenian. I also suffered horrible torments in prison; and my dear brother Neiman and his friend Josef were killed. And yet despite all this, I will not feel true to myself unless I write down what I carry in my heart. I pitied the Turks, who fell so mean at the end of their power in the East because of collaborating with the Germans. On the advice of the Germans the Turks perpetrated brutal massacres of the Armenians with the hands of the Circassian Muslims fanatics.