

A GENERAL REPORT ON RELIEF WORK AMONG THE ARMENIANS IN THE TRANS-Caucasus

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Armenian refugees from Turkey are widely scattered in the Trans-Caucasus. Yet the larger number, 105,000, are settled in the province of Erivan. It was in accordance with the call of need that the Viceroy, the Grand Duke Nicholas, who graciously granted the American Committee an audience, assigned us the privilege of relief work there. This splendid province lies mid-way between the Black and Caspian Seas and between the southern range of the Trans-Caucasus and the Aras (Araxes) river. It has fertile plains on the banks of the Arpa Chai, Zangi and Abars rivers as well as by "Mother" Araxes and grand mountain summits like Alagon, Ag Dagh and twin-peaked Ararat. Of its million population, 600,000 are Armenians, settled around Etchmiadzin, the ecclesiastical centre and ancient capital of the race.

General Tamanchef, chief of the Government Relief Committee, advised us that the greatest need among the refugees was for clothing and bedding. We accepted this suggestion which was altogether the most feasible for us. As neither our funds nor our organization was equal to covering the 23,000 square versts of Erivan Government, arrangements were made to concentrate our efforts for the most part on the districts of Nor Bayazid and Gagakh. These districts lie in the midst of the mountains,--surrounding the beautiful Lake Gokcha or Sivan, itself 6240 feet above sea-level. The need of the 20,000 refugees, there exposed to severe winter, appealed to the Committee, though the climate made their task more difficult. The fact that the villages lie from three to five days pull from the railroad either from Erivan or from Akstafa, near Tiflis, added to the difficulty. But fergeons,-- wagons somewhat like the old prairie-schooner -- which carry about two tons, have the advantage of using the splendid military macadam roads which served Russia before railroads were spread over the Caucasus. These roads are familiar to the Persian missionaries for many of them have gone to and fro on them, making speed by ~~stages~~ relays of post horses. The same mode of conveyance helps the distributors from point to point.

The condition of the refugees in the mountains, as voiced in reports and the press, called loudly for help. I quote a few items.

"The are located in broken down houses, damp sheds, stalls and stables, where sickness is unavoidable for them, where the famished family lies upon the cold, damp earth, without any heat whatever. If this condition continues, half the refugees will die".

"Everywhere comes the cry of cold and hungry people, mostly women and children. Stoves, you may say, there are none. All are half naked. Mothers in despair have put aside their babies, unwilling to look upon their pale, livid limbs. Tears have dried from their eyes and words of complaint been silenced from their lips."

"In Gagakh the condition of the refugees is lacking in every good thing. There is no organization. Of 4500, Armenians are 3145; the rest are Nestorians who in German and Russian villages. Conditions render one inconsolable. There are no stoves. Warm clothes or beds with few exceptions do not exist." "Zaxx Flour and wood-money come irregularly."

Men and women from prosperous, comfortable homes have been reduced to dire poverty. They have been sleeping for months on the bare ground and shivering through the long nights. One man said to me, "I have not known what the smell of fire is this winter". Their endurance of cold is remarkable.

Their task assigned, the Committee set to work immediately on the receipt of the telegram telling of the grant of funds and purchased in the market and made contracts for quick delivery of clothing and bedding. Mattresses and pillow slips by ten thousands were ordered which are to be filled with hay or straw. Clothing for all ages were prepared, not forgetting the little children who outnumber them all, though 3000 to 4000 orphans are cared for in institutions which have been opened for them. The women exceed the men to the number of 19,000.

Through the efforts of Consul Willoughby Smith the difficulties of transportation was overcome, the Government cordially granting freight-cars, though the demands of the army transport are enormous. We have the benefit of the work of the Government and Armenian Committees who have listed and classified the refugees. We are acting in cooperation with but independently of them and with their cordial goodwill. The work is done systematically. Each province is divided into districts, each district into circuits; the principal village of each circuit is its center. Each head of a family has a paper telling his place of residence and the number, age and sex of his household. Whatever is given, as for example a garment or the amount of the bread allowance, 15 Kopeks or 5 cents per day for each month mouth, is written on this paper. We have received from the Committees the census of the districts entrusted to us. In consequence of this thorough work, as soon as our supplies reach the circuit, we are ready to distribute them.

Besides the mountain districts, we are also distributing in the district of Samaghar, on the plain overshadowed by Mt. Ararat. Here we had on our first tour of inspection, organized a local committee. This work is being done in a most systematic and conscientious manner. These garments have been cut out and made by the refugees themselves, partly in our own Erivan workshop. While by mutual agreement, the distribution of bedding and clothing has become our chief work, yet we are also assisting by providing special nourishment for the sick and convalescent, tools and outfits for artisans and to a certain extent soap, sugar tea etc.

The tales of distress and need which have poured into our ears are heartrending, and the words of thanks and grateful prayers that are uttered would repay the givers of the funds could they hear them. At times tears, which have been dried up flow again on the receipt of the gift as if springs of gratitude had burst forth in their hearts. It is hard to keep them from kissing our hands as an oriental expression of their thanks. Surely it is a privilege to minister to their needs and to feel that the increased comfort of their bodies, warms their hearts towards God and man, and makes far off America seem a land of blessing to them.

Our work has been cordially facilitated by the Government officials, Armenian church authorities and by all parties. Expressions of appreciation on the part of the Press, and of the intelligencia and leaders among the Armenians have been very gratifying in their warmth and heartiness.

(signed) SAMUEL G. WILSON.