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Ruth A. Parmelee



A Pioneer in the  
Euphrates Valley

# A Pioneer in the Euphrates Valley

by

Ruth A. Parmelee



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## Introduction to New Edition

*A Pioneer in the Euphrates Valley* is a personal reflection on the 1915 genocide of Armenians, written by an eye-witness, fifty years after the events in question.\* Dr. Parmelee was in Harpoot, central Turkey (western Armenia) when the mass murder of Ottoman Armenians began in spring 1915. She was obliged to leave the area two years later, when the United States entered WWI. She returned in 1919, after the Ottomans had capitulated, and was forced to leave, once again, with the rise of the Kemalist Turks. Dr. Parmelee thus witnessed much of the Armenian Genocide in one of the central arenas of the event. Though her recollections in *A Pioneer in the Euphrates Valley* are limited, her testimony is important because it corroborates with other witnesses and reflects on many aspects of the Genocide that remain understudied to date. Parmelee recounts not only the mass murder of Armenians, but also the fate of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of Armenians, who lived through this period. These were mainly women and children who were not killed but kept alive for assimilation into Muslim households. The assimilation of Armenians was a key element of the Armenian Genocide.† However, as long as such Armenians remained alive, foreign missionaries strived to free them from the clutches of Ottoman authorities.‡ Indeed, American missionaries spearheaded a major (clandestine) relief program for Armenians, and this effort developed into the biggest humanitarian effort in United

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\* For a contemporary report of the Armenian Genocide written by Dr. Parmelee, see “A visit to the exile camp in Mezreh” in *Turkish Atrocities: Statements of American Missionaries on the Destruction of Christian Communities in Ottoman Turkey, 1915-1917*, edited by James Barton (Gomidas Institute Books, 1998, pp. 56-61).

† See Ara Sarafian, “The Conversion and Absorption of Women and Children as a Component of the Armenian Genocide” in *In God’s Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (Phylis Mack and Omer Bartov, eds.), Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 2001.

States history.\* Thousands of Armenians were saved as a result, and Ruth Parmelee played her part in these efforts.

### Editorial Policy

The present publication is a complete rendition of Ruth Parmelee's 1967 work, which appeared under the same title, *A Pioneer in the Euphrates Valley*. The work has been retyped, repaginated, and silently edited for spelling and grammatical errors. All additional annotations appear in square brackets and are initialled by the present editor. There is also a new biographical sketch which is appended to this introduction.

This publication would not have been possible without the help of Florence Avakian, as well as our volunteers at the Gomidas Institute. Needless to say, all errors and shortcomings remain my own.

Ara Sarafian

April 2002, Gomidas Institute (London)

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‡ Hilmar Kaiser, *At the Crossroads of Der Zor: Death, Survival, and Humanitarian Resistance in Aleppo, 1915-1917*, Princeton and London: Gomidas Institute, 2002 (2nd edition).

\* The first organisation in this American relief effort was the *ad hoc* Committee on Armenian Atrocities (CAA), also called Armenian Relief Committee, which was formed in September 1915. The CAA soon became the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR), and then Near East Relief (NER). The primary activities of these organisations were to publicise the plight of Armenians and Assyrians, raise funds, and provide relief wherever possible. These committees enjoyed the close support of the United States Department of State in Washington D.C. See Ara Sarafian, "The Paper Trail: the American State Department and the Report of Committee on Armenian Atrocities" in *Revue du Monde Armenien* I (1994), pp. 127-160. For an authoritative account of this period, see James L. Barton, *Story of Near East Relief*, New York: MacMillan Company, 1930.

## **Biographical Sketch**

- 1885 Born in Trebizond to Dr. and Mrs. Parmelee. Schooling at home with parents.
- 1896 Comes to United States and continues her education.
- 1907 Graduates from Oberlin College.
- 1912 Graduates from University of Illinois. Interns at Philadelphia Women's Hospital.
- 1914-17 and  
1919-22 Works in Harpoot, Turkey for ABCFM and later Near East Relief.
- Oct., 1922 Arrives in Thessaloniki with Greek refugees fleeing Kemalist Turkey. Finds "American Women's Hospital." Finds school of nursing in Greece.
- 1923 King George II of the Hellenes awards her the Silver Cross of the Chevalier of the Order of the Saviour.
- 1925-33 Transferred to Kokkina. Appointed director of American Women's Hospitals of Greece.
- 1935-41 Works with various Greek institutions and organizations.
- 1941 Comes to the United States following the German invasion of Greece.
- 1942-43 Harvard School of Public Health. Receives a Masters of Public Health.
- 1945 Returns to Greece following the liberation of that country. Regional Medical Officer for the Cyclades Islands.
- 1946-47 Medical Adviser and Director of the School of Physical Therapy conducted by Near East Foundation.
- 1948 After a year's absence in the United States returns to Pierce College in Elleniko (near Athens, Greece).
- 1953 Furlough in the United States. Awarded the Royal Order of Efpia (Beneficence) by King Paul of Greece.

# A Pioneer in the Euphrates Valley



## PREFACE

Never did I think I could be a pioneer, but one day, after beginning my work as a medical missionary, it suddenly came to me—"I *am* a pioneer, the first woman doctor to practice medicine in the Harpoot region."

Throughout this booklet I have used and spelled the names of places in the same way we did fifty years ago, although the latest atlas shows many changes. For instance, Smyrna and Constantinople are now Izmir and Istanbul.

The education of nurses was my special interest always, whether in Turkey or later, in Greece. Not only did we have better nursing of our hospital patients, if the young women caring for them were receiving instruction, but also, these nurses could use their knowledge and training in the service of others, all the rest of their lives, whether in earning their living or in their homes as wives and mothers.

In being refunded for the cost of printing this booklet, I am not interested. Anyone, however, who would like to do so, may send a contribution to help support the nursing education project in the American Hospital in Gaziantep in the interior of Turkey. Here, a two-year course for nurse aides is given to "a group of Christian and Muslin young women."

Such gifts should be sent to Rev. Everett A. Babcock, Treas., U.C.B.W.M. (United Church Board for World Ministries,) 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10027.

Although many years have passed since the occurrences took place that are described in this brief account, I have found some associates of mine who refreshed my memory on certain incidents of those days and to all of them I am grateful. I should like, also, to express my gratitude to my friend Miss Martha Stacy, for help in