

# **At the Crossroads of Der Zor**

**Death, Survival, and Humanitarian  
Resistance in Aleppo, 1915–1917**

**Hilmar Kaiser**

*in collaboration with* **Luther and Nancy Eskijian**

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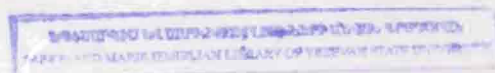
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## Preface by Luther Eskijian

It is impossible that anyone, including myself, could write a proper preface to a book regarding the 1915 Genocide of the Armenian people, and the role that many played in helping to save lives at that desperate time. However, I am privileged to say a few words about my father, Reverend Hovhannes Eskijian who participated in this endeavor.

My mother, Gulenia Danielian Eskijian, knowing the importance of a written historical account of his life and works, collected articles, testimonials, and reports, from the time of his death on March 26<sup>th</sup> 1916, to her own untimely demise in 1946. She imparted to me the singular importance of his story, so that it became a lifelong mission.

My father was left an orphan at an early age. His father, Sarkis Eskijian, was a shoemaker in the city of Ourfa, and was brutally murdered by the Turks, when beheaded in the 1895 massacre. I first received information of the manner of my grandfather's death from a native of Ourfa whom I met when I was a young man in the mid-1930's. When this gentleman of about 80 years age heard my name Eskijian connected to the city of Ourfa, he related to me what he knew about the death of my grandfather.

I also learned that my father was placed in an orphanage where he met an American missionary by the name of Corrine Shattuck. In the orphanage my father was introduced to the Christian faith, became deeply committed to the Lord Jesus Christ, and was inspired by Miss Shattuck to become a minister. He attended the Christian American seminary in Marash. In time he met my mother, Gulenia Danielian who was attending the College for Girls in Marash, and they married in 1909.

My father's first church was located in the Kessab area of Syria, where he attended to the spiritual needs of three villages, Ekiz Oluk,



Kourkene, and Kaladouran. My brother John and I were born in Ekiz Oluk.

At the end of 1913 my father was called to the Emmanuel church of Aleppo, where he served just as the Armenian nation entered into the heartbreaking events of the Genocide of 1915. The story in the following pages will describe in part how he gave his life to save others, a price he paid in the service of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The account of his life is given in the pages of this book as a historical reference of the times, but also, hopefully, as an inspiration to others.

My mother, brother and I came to America in October of 1920, following father's death and the end of the genocide of our people. In the early days all Armenian newcomers met in church or public events, as we had no radios, televisions, and practically no telephones. So the exchange of information was by direct contact. When people found out that my name was Eskijian they would invariably ask if I was the son of Reverend Eskijian. They would relate how my father had saved their life or a relative's, or how he inspired them in the Christian life and gave them hope in a troubled time by his example.

In my youth I was told that I should go into the ministry and continue the unfinished work of my father. While this sounded good, it was not possible. No one could fill his shoes. He was a man called for a time and a place and a season, a Spirit-filled, humble, loving sacrificial man of God.

At the age of 16, I, too, gave my life to Jesus Christ. Although I did not know what my life would be, the Lord was with me in my youth, through the Depression and World War II. Upon my return from Europe and the war, I realized that I could serve the Lord and earn a living at the same time. Even though I had a young family

to support, I could also work in my church, teach Sunday school, assist the church with my profession of architecture, all of which developed into nearly full time ministry.

My service to the greater community and the Armenians has included the start of an Armenian museum, the Ararat-Eskijian Museum in Mission Hills, California, designing and building Christian day schools, churches for Armenian, African-American, and American congregations. No, I did not follow my father in the ministry, but I did follow the Lord's will in my life, which is all He asks. This was made possible by the love and support of my wife Anne, at my side at all times, who was devoted to our home and children.

My father's legacy has not ended. Our oldest daughter, Carol Kazanjian, is a mother of three young men, raising them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord with her husband Howard Kazanjian. They will have to overcome the fast pace of the electronic age, with the vision of timeless Christian values.

Our son Martin, is an outstanding engineer, serving the Lord by ministry to the elderly on Sundays, at present, and many other phases of ministry in the past.

Our youngest daughter, Nancy, is an attorney who divides her time between the practice of law and pastoring an inner city store front church with another pastor. The mission of the church is to meet the spiritual needs of the congregation, introducing them to their Savior, Jesus Christ, as well as reach out in tangible ministry of food, clothes, and daily necessities. The conditions in which Nancy ministers are not much different from those of my father. The purpose: To reclaim lives that are lost and floundering by introducing them to the saving knowledge and power of Jesus Christ.



The writing of this book has been a lifelong goal. How it was to be accomplished was not determined until by chance a young energetic German historian crossed my path in 1999. He had been researching the Genocide for many years, including investigation into Turkish and German archives. He came across the name of Reverend Hovhannes Eskijian in several places, never expecting to meet a descendant of the man. But the Lord has many ways to honor His servant. Suddenly in 1999 Hilmar Kaiser found me and the storehouse of information that we had been collecting about my father. Now he could close a chapter on the life of one who lived and died for his people, and I could close a mission in my own life, started decades ago. I am now 87 years old.

April 2001

## Preface by Hilmar Kaiser

The present study is the result of two independent research projects on the Armenian Genocide. One project is my own, the other is that of a family of genocide survivors. Over the past ten years, I have spent considerable time and effort in various archives, libraries, and other relevant collections in Europe, the United States, and the Middle East. My main object was to obtain primary information on the planning, execution, and impact on the victims of the – as far as we know – first administratively organized genocide in history. In the course of my research, I found information on numerous perpetrators, by-standers, and victims. Accounts of resistance against deportations and massacres, aside from the well-known episodes at Van, Ourfa, and a few other places, however, remained very scarce and fragmentary. Nevertheless, some information occasionally came to light. The experiences of a Swiss woman, Beatrice Rohner, attracted my special interest. I tried to reconstruct her activities at Aleppo in 1915-1917. Soon, however, I understood that her work had depended on the efforts of a local Armenian underground network active in the city. The few details I could gather from Ottoman and German sources remained fragmentary but I understood that a Protestant pastor by the name of Eskijian had played a critical role. Later, I found a copy of John Minassian's outstanding memoirs *Many Hills Yet to Climb*, which gave some deeper insights into Armenian humanitarian resistance in Aleppo, written by one of the very few survivors of that remarkable effort.

In 1999, I participated at an academic conference in Los Angeles. During a break between the sessions, I tried to relax a little outside the conference hall. Suddenly, I heard the word "Eskijian." I was electrified and rushed to the two persons who seemed to speak about Eskijian. To my surprise I learned that a certain Luther Eskijian was living in Altadena and I even got his phone number. I

rushed to a friend and colleague of mine, J. Michael Hagopian, and insisted that we call Mr. Eskijian immediately and arrange a meeting the next day. The following day we met in Altadena and after a while Luther Eskijian opened a safe. He took out a large box with material about his father, Hovhannes Eskijian, the Reverend of Aleppo. The collection was the result of Luther Eskijian's decades of dedicated endeavor to learn more about his father and his work. Over the following months, we met several times and put together the information we both had. In the end, Luther Eskijian suggested to produce this volume that would be a first step towards a history of the Armenian underground in Aleppo and also on the work of Reverend Hovhannes Eskijian.

Working on the project, I understood that I would not be able to do full justice to the motives of the Reverend because I lacked the necessary religious training to comprehend some key aspects of his work. To overcome this shortcoming, Nancy Eskijian, the Reverend's granddaughter, added a chapter focusing on the religious aspects of the humanitarian work at Aleppo. In writing these lines, I realize that we still know too little about those outstanding personalities that had the vision for a future after the Genocide. It was their unselfish and tireless struggle that secured the survival of the remnants of the Ottoman Armenian communities. All of them knowingly risked their lives and most of them died in the pursuit of their humanitarian goals. Perhaps this small volume will help their story or at least ensure that a small part of it will not be forgotten.

I am indebted to many people for their support on this project. Among them are the Eskijian family, Ara Sarafian, my friend and colleague, Sirvart Sarafyan who translated Armenian sources for me, Barbara Gilmore and J. Michael Hagopian of the Armenian Film Foundation for helping me during my visits to Los Angeles.

Rome, April 2001

# Ottoman Empire circa 1915

