

# A WREATH ON GAMAVOR'S TOMB

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Ամերիկաբնակ քեսապցի կամաւորագրուած երիտասարդներ  
պարեզ կատարելու դիրքով, 1916, Նիւ-Եորք:

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Vahe H. Apelian, 19 July 2012

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The Armenian soldiers were motivated by a French and Diaspora Armenian pact which promised that in return for Armenian military support to the Allies against the Ottoman and German alliance, the French and their allies would help the Western Armenians lay the foundation for home rule in Cilicia, part of historic Armenia. Most, if not all, of the volunteers were expatriate Cilicians. Approximately 1,200 came from the United States, including 70 Kessabtsis. Among the latter was Nshan, the paternal uncle of historian Dr. Antranig Chalabian. When the doctor dedicated "Revolutionary Figures" to his uncle, he included the following inscription in the book: "*Towards the end of 1916, when my father was subjected to deportation, his brother left America and returned to the homeland to enlist with the volunteers to fight against the Turks. After training with the Armenian Legion in Cyprus for two years, my uncle and his cousin Panos went to Palestine along with thousands of volunteers, fought in the Battle of Arara, went to Cilicia and after the turnabout of the French Government, returned to America and died in Fresno in 1973.*"

The Battle of Arara was the major military engagement of the *Gamavors*. It took place on Sept. 18, 1918, near Megiddo (the Biblical Armageddon) in northern Palestine. The valor of the Armenian combatants in securing victory against the German-Turkish forces merited special commendation of the Allied High Command. Twenty-three Armenian combatants were killed in action. What followed the battle was another sad chapter in Armenian history.

The French forces, having secured victory, headed north and eventually captured Cilicia. Their presence encouraged the Genocide survivors to return to their ancestral villages. But instead of honoring their pact with the Armenians, the French reneged on their promise and withdrew their forces, without giving notice to the Armenians and without having negotiated with Turkish forces about the state of the Armenians they were to be left behind. I recall being told during family conversations that the French even padded the hooves of their horses to muffle the sound of their unannounced midnight evacuation. "Chivalrous France" became a sarcastic expression in Armenian conversation and literature.

Abandoned and left to the whim of the Turkish onslaught, without the protection that they had rightfully expected from their French allies, and unable to protect themselves, the Armenians once again fled their Cilician homeland to disperse around the world.

Only two Armenian villages were left from a thriving Armenian enclave on the prime northeastern Mediterranean region-- Wakf in historical Mussa Dagħ in Turkey and Kessab in Syria.

The Kessabtis tenaciously held on to their enclave, establishing a de facto home rule, mostly under the leadership of the *Gamavors*. The home rule lasted from 1918 to 1921 during which the Armenians established administrative and judicial bodies to enforce law and order. They also had an army to protect the population from the prevailing lawlessness. It's said that members of other minorities, such as the Greeks and the Alevi, were given refuge in Kessab. Eventually the French disbanded the self-rule, as they cemented their colonial control over Syria and Lebanon.

The British and the French, as the supreme powers in that part of the world, redrew the map of the region to suit their interests. The straight-lined borders of present-day Middle Eastern states were the work of Sir Mark Sykes of Britain and Franois Georges-Picot of France. They carved, among themselves, what had remained of the Ottoman Empire, without regard for the mosaic of the area's ethnic, religious or social fabric.

The redrawn map put Kessab within Turkey. The prospect of ending up in Turkey terrified the Kessabtsis, although they had been under Turkish rule for centuries, had adopted Turkish words, traded almost exclusively with Turkish-occupied Antioch and had almost no dealing with their Arab neighbors in the south. The uncertainty over the fate of Kessab heightened in the latter part of the decade (1937 to 1939) as Turkey began imposing its presence in Kessab and made Turkish language teaching mandatory. Many members of the first post-Genocide generation born in Kessab had reached conscription age by then. They were urged by their families to flee, lest they be drafted into the Turkish army. These young men also became the last resort for their families forced to leave their ancestral village.

The Kessab episode may be the only instance where the great powers gave in and redrew the map in that small corner of the Middle East to save it from Turkish occupation. Kessab was incorporated into Syria but at a price. Most of the arable lands of Kessab were given to Turkey.

It is generally accepted that Cardinal Krikor Bedros XV Aghajanian (Գրիգոր Պետրոս ԺԵ. Աղաճանեան, French: Grégoire-Pierre XV Agagianian, Italian: Gregorio Pietro XV Agagianian) played a decisive role in the redrawing of the border as he struggled to secure the last remnant of Armenian Cilicia. The first official visit to Kessab (March 20, 1944) of Shukri Kuwaitli, the first elected President of Syria, was Syria's token of appreciation to the Armenians for urging that their native land be included in Syria.

The late George Azad Apelian, in his pre-teens in the mid-'50s, remembered the *Gamavors* arrival to Keurkune--one of Kessab's twelve villages--for a September reunion and celebration. Their arrival created much excitement among the villagers, particularly among the youngsters: seeing the men in their military fatigues and carrying ammunition and rifles was a thrill for all. The *Gamavors* celebrated their victory at the Battle of Arara seated next to the village spring, feasting on food over white sheets spread on the meadow. They sang about the *Gamavors*. George had memorized the old song that ended with:

From Arara to Cilicia  
Are reminders of the Volunteers  
On the tomb of the Volunteer  
There is no wreath, however.

