

# ENDURING RESILIENCE

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✘ **Vahe H. Apelian**, Loveland OH, 24 July 2015

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The once beautiful Churukian-Missakian Cultural Center building, in the center of the town, was still burning when they had arrived. The returnees soon found out that even the dead were not spared as cemeteries were desecrated and graves opened. The orchards and the gardens--left unattended--had gone wild with overgrowth. The machinery to tend them had been taken away by the plunderers. Even the wooden poles supporting the electric grid were cut off and the wires were removed and hauled away for sale as scrap metal in Turkey.

Over a century of long hard work had been wiped away.

History was repeating itself for the Kessabtis. What they saw and experienced bore a stark resemblance to what Miss. Effie Chambers, the beloved American missionary in Kessab, had witnessed in the aftermath of the sack and pogrom of Greater Kessab in 1909. "It was a most desolate picture that greeted my eyes," she wrote in her unpublished autobiography which her

family has shared with me. "Houses had been burned after being looted, and silk worm eggs in the hatching process (one of the principal financial resources of the region) had been destroyed. The gardens stood in ruins. The grapevines, and other foods used for standby winter diets, such as raisins and molasses, were damaged beyond hope. The houses, my own, the Mission House, Girls' School, church, parsonage, and the market were all a holocaust. The outside villages fared the same."

More than a century ago, the ever-resilient Kessabtsi did not spare a day and embarked on rebuilding their shattered lives anew.

Just two days later after the liberation, on July 18, 2014 Father Nareg Louisian, the priest of the Kessab Armenian Catholic community, reported on his Facebook page that the St. Michael Armenian Catholic Church was cleaned of debris, thanks to the diligence of its parishioners. The church was ready for Holy Mass. The St. Michael Church, much like the other churches, had been desecrated and vandalized but it had not been torched. Father Louisian invited the clergy and the members of the other two denominations to use the sanctuary, saying that the St. Michael Church is their sanctuary as well.

Within a week of its liberation, on the July 24, 2014, Rev. Haroutune George Selimian, the president of  the Evangelical Churches in Syria, visited Kessab accompanied by an official government delegation from Latakia. Rev. Sevag Trashian, the pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Churches of Kessab, and lay dignitaries met the Reverend at the Armenian Evangelical Holy Trinity Church, at the town center. The historic over-a-century-old church that also stood had been desecrated, vandalized and torched. Rev. Selimian launched the cleaning and restoration work of the Armenian Evangelical Churches by symbolically wiping slogans written by the extremists on the walls of the church. Rev. Selimian also addressed the media covering his visit. He said that Armenians stand firm on their land in Kessab and remain loyal citizens of the Syrian Arab Republic. The Syrian officials, in turn, promised to provide Kessab with the necessities to re-establish power and water supply.

On Friday July 25, 2014 Archbishop Shahan Sarkissian, the prelate of the Aleppo Armenian Apostolic Prelacy, consecrated the desecrated Armenian Apostolic Church of Kaladouran, Kessab's coastal village. Lay and clergy representatives from the other two denominations attended the consecration. In the evening Divine Service was conducted and on Sunday Holy Mass was held for the first time in the newly consecrated church.

I have cited the chronology of Kessab's rebuilding by the three Armenian denominations as testament to the indomitable and resilient spirit of Kessab's Armenian inhabitants. It is this tenacity that has made possible the continuous Armenian habitation on that rocky terrain over many centuries. As the Armenian phrase graphically puts, "They eked a living off of the stones".



Miss. Chambers was in Adana to assist the survivors of that devastating massacre as marauding Turkish mobs had also attacked Kessab on the morning of April 23, 1909. She wrote in her autobiography: "Upon my arrival the people, those who could get around, were assembled in the yard of the Mission House to greet me.

"Their first question was 'Will you stay with us and help us start again?'

"I said: 'That is what I came for, to stay and help you get on your feet again. If you want to stay we'll do it and God will help us rebuild our homes, shops, and churches and reclaim your land.'

'Is it a promise?' they asked.

"I said: 'Yes, on my part it is.'

'On ours also,' was the reply.

"I can't tell you how we did it,' she elaborated. 'Just step by step, one day at a time, and by the autumn of 1911, before the rains set in, those who had stayed in Kessab and lived through the horrible ordeal, were back in their rebuilt houses, with their schools and churches going.'"

On Sunday July 12, 2015, the renovated and refurbished Armenian Evangelical Church of Keurkune was formally reopened and Sunday service was held there. Rev. Selimian welcomed Rev. Jirair Ghazarian, the newly-appointed pastor for the Armenian Evangelical Churches in Kessab. After the service a reception was held in the church's courtyard.



The battle to rebuild Kessab for the third time is underway. If only the greater forces of the region appreciate the value of the enduring resilience of the inhabitants of this ancient Armenian enclave who, not long ago, made Kessab a safe summer resort for families of all faiths to come and enjoy its refreshing weather, natural beauty and unmatched hospitality.

