MISSIONARY WHO SAVED 3,000 ORPHANS

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By **Kamo Mailyan** and **Wendy Elliott**, Canada, 2 April 2015

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Starting in 1902 Orvis traveled the world as a missionary for the American Congregational Church, and later the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. At the start of World War I, she was asked to go to Caesarea (now Kayseri), Turkey by the Near East Relief Orphanages. Within a year, she was in Tiflis, Russia (now Tbilisi, the capital of Georgia). "In the Turkish Empire we were going to try to help the Christian people who had escaped massacre and death by deportation, and had taken refuge in Russia," she wrote in *Through Russia in 1917*. "The number of these Armenian refugees was several hundred thousand... In Tiflis only we provided 15,000 orphans with clothing. Other missionaries were unable to arrive on the account of Kurds around the foot of Mount Ararat. They were at Igdir, where there was more trouble than at other places."

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The condition of the refugees was extremely distressing to Orvis. "We helped 'home orphans', too, who were children that had lost their fathers in the massacres; many of them were with their

mothers but destitute. Old people were even more pitiful than the children because they were so cold and miserable and sick and lonely and neglected. Perhaps more forlorn than these 'old people' were the 'blind' who were being cared for." Orvis's frequent references to the "blind", in quotation marks, throughout her writings were likely coded references to the horrific practice of the Ottomans of gouging out prisoners' eyes. It is estimated that one-and-a-half million Armenians perished between 1915 and 1923, but their supporters were not treated kindly either. Orvis lived under constant fear of having her belongings checked by the authorities, and perhaps being deported, so she self-censured her words. "It was so depressing to see such utter misery and wretchedness and squalors and need," she wrote, "and not to know any way to relieve it."

Her mission was soon forced to move from Tiflis to Alexandropol (currently Gyumri, Armenia) for a short time. "In Alexandropol we tried to care for thousands of refugees who had no other means of existence but only the relief we were able to give. People were dying on the streets every day. I began with looking after the milk depot, and we increased the number of babies fed till we had 300 on our list."

Soon they were "ordered out of Alexandropol because the Turks were advancing from Kars. All Armenians had to flee. Many were massacred there and on the way out. They were such helpless people so they were with no friends able to save them from being cut to pieces – men, women and children."

"Aunt Susan and her fellow missionaries returned to the Caesarea region in 1919," Nancy Moore said. "Of course, their aim was to help the orphaned children, but since Caesarea itself was not recognized by other countries, it was hard to get relief supplies in, or to feel any sense of security. She was almost like a prisoner, living for four years under the strict and suspicious supervision of the local government."

"For months I had my suitcase packed," Orvis wrote, "and carried money with me, not knowing what might happen any minute. Our great fear was that we might be deported and the thousands of Christian orphan children under our care would then be sent out on the roads to die of starvation and cruel treatment as we saw many others were being treated."

By now Susan Orvis was accustomed to the harsh conditions of post-WWI refugee camps. But her greatest challenges were yet to come, with the Great Fire of Smyrna in 1922. Smyrna was an important financial and cultural city at the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea on the coast of Turkey. It was roughly divided into three quarters: the upper portion was Muslim and Jewish, and the port area was Christian, inhabited by Greeks and Armenians. Since the end of WWI, and what was the beginning of the short-lived Greco-Turkish War, Greece controlled the city. On September 9, 1922, the Turks invaded Smyrna, and immediately targeted the Christian district, looting their shops and homes, separating the men from their families, and sexually assaulting the women. Within days the port district was set on fire. It burned for four days, but the systematic destruction of people and

buildings went on for two weeks. More than 10,000 Greeks and Armenians, and visiting foreign nationals, were killed. Many people were rescued by offshore foreign navies who did not have the authority to intervene, and who witnessed the massacre of many more on shore.

Orvis raced to Smyrna with the goal of saving as many children as she could. "On my way I met a great company of Greek women and girls who were being deported to Cesarea from the Smyrna region, and who were dropping dead along the road from starvation. I was too much overcome to think of much else. The greatest Thanksgiving dinner I ever shall see was when I was able to try to feed that mob of humanity that were like wild beasts because of hunger. They went crazy at the sight of food. But we fed them out there at the foot of the mountain. And I took some of them with me, but many were beyond help." This is not surprising because the distance they walked between Smyrna and Cesarea was 800 km.

In November, she organized transportation for 3,000 orphans from Cesarea, south through Tarsus, to get them out of Turkey and into Syria and Greece. Fifteen caravans of covered wagons crossed the mountains to the Baghdad Railway. "It took each caravan five days to get there," wrote Orvis. "I had charge of all of them to see that they had food and a place to stop where they would be safe at night. I rode back and forth along the line in a R.E.O. truck, and kept track of them on the road."

One incident stood out for her. "Lifting garments, I uncovered two little girls about twelve years old. They were white, staring skeletons, so close to death they could not move... We succeeded in reviving them and obtained permission from the authorities to place them in our orphan caravan. After four-and-a-half days we reached Ouloukishla on the Baghdad railway, where we paid full fare for our children to ride in six inches of snow in open freight cars to Mersine. My last moments in Ouloukishla were devoted to making the strongest representations to the authorities for protection against soldiers who tried to carry off our oldest girls." Of course, here she used "carry off" as a euphemism for the opportunistic and systematic rape and sexual abuse of women and girls during the mass deportations and massacres.

As Nancy Moore leafed through the letters and photographs of her aunt's family, she said that Orvis had written an article for the February 1923 edition of *The New Near East*, and had encapsulated her experiences in two sentences: "I have never in my whole experience in the Near East witnessed such human sorrow, distress, and death, as caused by this vast flight, which is depopulating one of Turkey's richest provinces. It was like a march of terror."

In 2004 Canada officially recognized this march of terror known as the Armenian Genocide. Many countries, including the United States, have yet to do so, mainly for political reasons. Nevertheless, every year on April 24 Armenians around the world lay flowers at genocide memorials to remember. They may not know who their ancestors were or who saved their lives, but they honor the dead and the saviors.

One particular letter in Moore's collection summed things up: "Aunt Susan wrote to a friend that she

was happy to report that, of the 3,000 children she had helped rescue from Ottoman Empire, not one had died on the way. All of them were saved. She was 48 years old at the time. Isn't that remarkable? I'd like everyone to know her name."

Susan Wealthy Orvis died at the age of 67 in 1941 in Ohio.

The first genocide of the 20th century, known as the Armenian Genocide 1915, has been recognized by Canada, Switzerland, France and many other countries. However, it still remains unrecognized by a group of countries, including the United States. Canada officially recognized the Armenian Genocide in 2004. Nevertheless, every year on April 24 Armenians around the world lay flowers at genocide memorials to remember. They may not know who their ancestors were or who saved their lives, but they honor the dead and the saviors.

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