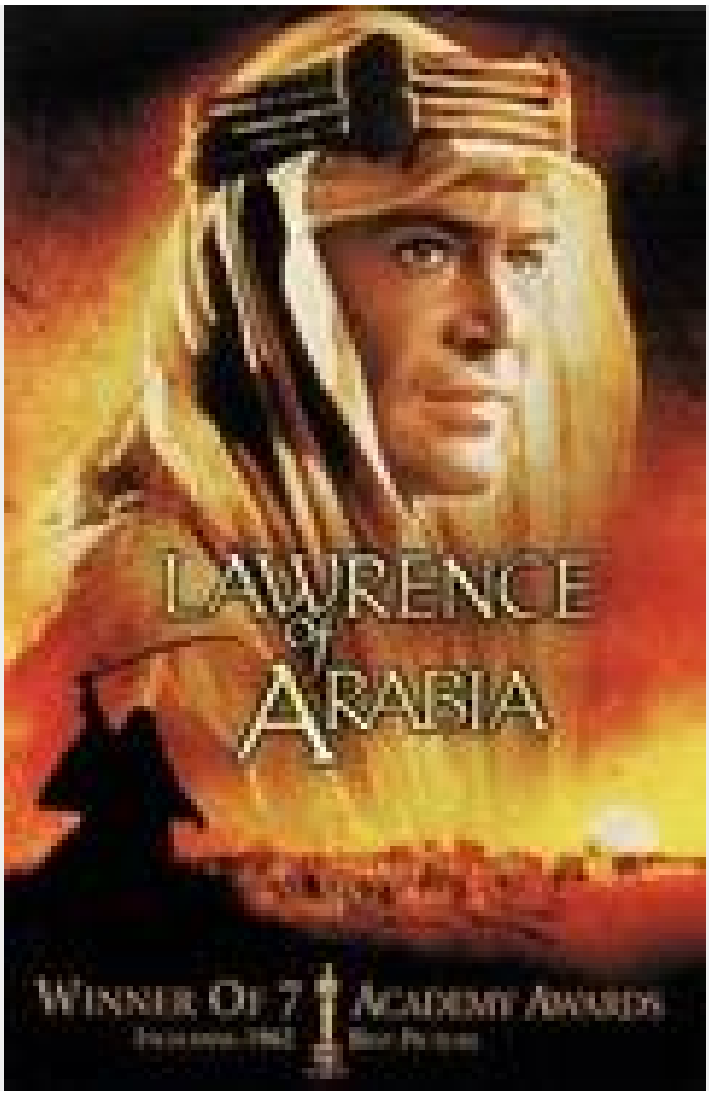
OPEN LETTER TO STEVEN SPIELBERG

Posted on May 2, 2012 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

April 21, 2012, Toronto
DreamWorks Studios
100 Universal City,
CA 91608,
USA

Dear Mr. Spielberg,

I would like to tell you the saga of two famous 20th century books and two famous movie projects. They feature celebrated European writers, imperial heroes, several Hollywood and British stars, MGM bigwigs Louis Mayer and Irving Thalberg, the US State Department, Winston Churchill, ambassadors, British movie mogul Sir Alexander Korda, war and peace, heroes, villains, betrayal, censorship, boycotts, victory and defeat, wars of independence, and… as they say in Hollywood… a cast of thousands.

The first book is T.E. Lawrence's "The Pillars of Wisdom". It's about the adventures of a British soldier, who acted as a liaison officer between the British government and the leaders of the Arab Revolt, against the Ottoman Turks during the First World War. When it was published in 1922 it was recognized as a modern masterpiece.

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Nine years later, another famous book was published about resistance to the Ottomans: this one in Germany. Its title? “The 40 Days of Musa Dagh”. Musa Dagh means the Mountain of Moses. Austrian novelist Franz Werfel was the author. Although 900 pages long, the two-volume novel—based on events in Cilicia in 1915 when a small community of Armenians refused to die without a fight—became an international success. The following year the English version sold 34,000 copies in the first two weeks of its publication. Among the fans of the book were Jews the world over who were inspired by the Armenian struggle against the Turks. During the Warsaw Uprising the novel became a bible and a textbook to Jews fighting the Nazis. David Godine, who published a complete and new version of "The 40 Days of Musa Dagh" this year, said in an interview recently: "Werfel clearly intended his novel as a message to the Jews of Germany. He accurately saw the fate of the Armenians at the hand of the Turks as precursor to the slaughter of the Jews by the Nazis."
Irving Thalberg, the legendary MGM producer, bought the film rights and had it translated for the studio screenwriters. Pre-production work began in 1934; Clark Gable was cast as Gabriel Bagradian, the leader of the Musa Dagh Armenians. The year before, Gable had portrayed an Armenian journalist in the now-classic “It Happened One Night”. Meanwhile, critic Louis Kronenberger of the "New York Times" wrote: "If Hollywood does not mar and mishandle it, it should make a magnificent movie."

While Hollywood was gearing up for the production of the Werfel’s saga, on the other side of the Atlantic, film producer Alexander Korda bought the film rights to “The Seven Pillars of Wisdom” from Lawrence. The script was written and Zoltan (Alexander’s brother) was assigned to direct and the shoot was scheduled for 1937 with Leslie Howard as Lieut. Col. Lawrence. Winston Churchill was hired as historical advisor.

Despite the glittering reputation of the people backing the project and the fame of Lawrence (he had died in a motorcycle accident in 1935), the movie was cancelled due to Turkish government pressure. Informal pressure was brought to bear on Korda by the British Foreign Office to drop the project. For good measure, the British Film Classification Board informed Korda that there was no chance that the board would certify the film. Without certification the movie couldn’t be shown in Britain. Korda, a recent Jewish immigrant from Hungary, decided not to challenge his hosts.

Similar pressure was applied to Werfel’s novel by the Turkish ambassador in Germany. ’Das Schwartz Korps’, the official newspaper of the SS, alleged that “The 40 Days of Musa Dagh” was anti-Turkish propaganda, that the author was an anti-Nazi Jewish agent and that his novel was being promoted by “America’s Armenian Jews.” The novel was burned at a public auto da fe, along with other books the Nazis disapproved.

Meanwhile back in Hollywood, Turkey's ambassador to the United States had been busy trying to stop MGM's "The 40 Days of Musa Dagh." Despite the State Department's several attempts to mollify the Turkish government by watering down the MGM script, Turkish Ambassador Mehmed Ertegun would not budge. He threatened that Turkey would launch a global boycott against MGM if the movie was made. The Turkish press, in full racist throttle, went on an anti-Semitic binge. In a Sept. 3, 1935 editorial, Istanbul's 'Heber' newspaper opined that since Werfel was Jewish and MGM was owned by Jews, Turkey would boycott not only MGM but all Jewish companies around the world. In the face of Turkish threats, Louis B. Mayer, the MGM head, shuttered the movie.

While Korda had succumbed to Turkish and foreign office pressure in the late '30s, twenty-two years later the famed producer-director team of Sam Spiegel-David Lean revived the "The Seven Pillars of Wisdom" project and titled it "Lawrence of Arabia." It was shot mostly in Jordan. The movie, two years in production, starred Peter O'Toole, Omar Sharif, a host of British stars and a cast of many thousand Bedouins. Jose Ferrer played the sadist Turkish bey who raped Lawrence in Der'aa, in southern Syria. The movie was made despite Turkish objections and despite Turkish family ties to the Hashemite royal family of Jordan. The movie won seven Oscars, including Best Picture. Since then 'Lawrence of Arabia' has been hailed by critics and the public as one of the best epic movies ever made. Mr. Spielberg, I know it's one of your favorites.

While the gutsy decision by Spiegel/Lean paid off artistically and commercially, "The 40 Days of Musa Dagh" script gathered dust at MGM. In 1982 a low-budget, cowboys-and-Indians version was made by director Sarky Mouradian. Few people, other than Armenians, saw the film.

Since then several actors, including Sylvester Stallone, have expressed an interest in the novel. However, Turkish campaigns have succeeded in dissuading these actors from proceeding with the project.

Dear Steven, politically controversial movies have an honorable tradition. Costa Gavras filmed the classics "Z" and "Stage of Siege" about the Greek colonels and the Argentinean generals respectively; Richard Gere made "Red Corner" despite Chinese government threats; you made "Amistad" about slavery. Roman Polanski recently directed "The Ghost Writer"—an expose of former British PM Tony Blair.

Throughout your career you've shown daring not only in artistic and technical innovation but also in the handling--in truthful manner—of controversial and sensitive issues such as slavery, the Shoah, the Japanese occupation of China. You know about covert and overt pressure.

In 2015 it will be 100 years since the Ottoman Turkish government exterminated 1.5 million innocent Armenians and drove the rest from their 4,000-year-old homeland to the deserts of Syria. In three

years, Armenians around the world will again raise their voices and demand that the international community persuade Turkey to admit its crime and atone for it. Armenians everywhere are, of course, thankful to the Shoah Foundation Institute (which you've established) for helping make Armenian Genocide survivor testimonies available to universities around the world.

I humbly ask you to film the Musa Dagh epic: an exciting story which will mesmerize millions of movie lovers. Don't let Turkish intimidation and boycott strangle truth and justice. On the genocide centenary what better way to tell to the world about the martyrdom of 1.5 million Armenians? I believe you and your colleague, Steve Zaillian, are uniquely qualified to do justice to this grand story.

The centenary is three years away. Time is running out. We know how time consuming movie production is—specially an epic.

Armenians and righteous people around the world would love to see, in 2015, giant billboards proclaim, in block letters, "STEVEN SPIELBERG's THE 40 DAYS of MUSA DAGH". It's time to call "action" for the Musa Dagh shoot.

Thank you.

An Armenian Movie Buff