REMEMBERING THE LAST HERO OF ARARA

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Former Legionnaire Hampartsoum Nazrian was born in Hajn in 1889. The youngest child, he lost his father when he was only six-years-old. In 1896—when he was seven--he witnessed the hanging of his older brother Haygazoun during the Hamidian massacres of the mid-1890s. Other than his innate nature, perhaps the slaying of his brother is the event which made him resolve to avenge the injustice.

When he was a young boy difficult financial and political circumstances forced him to seek a career rather than attend school. Growing up, he became more immersed in political-revolutionary pursuits, and as a young man joined the Social Democrat Hnchagian Party. In adolescence and later as a member of the Hnchagian Party, he became a secret messenger and revolutionary worker from Armenian centres in Cilicia to various regions of the Arab world. As a result, he established strong friendships with Arab political activists and leaders.

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As is well known, immediately prior to the WWI, the Arab world had risen against the Ottoman regime and demanded independence. In 1916 the Allies had made many promises to the Arab leaders so that the latter would rise against Ottoman Turkey. Among the more famous of the Arab rebel leaders was Sharif Hussein (the great-grandfather of King Hussein of Jordan) and his son

Prince Faisal, the future king of Iraq. Because of his advanced age, Sharif Hussein had appointed Prince Faisal as leader of the Arab revolutionary-military movement.

Just prior to the start of the war, Prince Faisal, having known of Mr. Nazrian's reputation and his loyalty, invited Mr. Nazrian to join his bodyguards, along with six other Armenians. Nazrian accepted the invitation and for the next three years, along with his six comrades, participated in the Arab liberation struggle, from Mecca-Medina to Iraq.

In 1917, when they heard of the French government's plan to form an Armenian Legion, alongside its Foreign Legion, Nazrian and his armed companions were among the first to volunteer. Prince Faisal, who by then had achieved his goal allowed his Armenian bodyguards to resign and join the struggle on behalf of the Armenian people.

By coincidence, the Armenian Legion was ordered to concentrate and hold positions across from the Arara hills (northern Palestine), where a Turkish-German united army had established a most important defile. From their positions, for eight months, they had managed to halt the advance of the Allied forces to the south and the east. The head of the Allied forces was General Allenby while French Commander Jolie had assumed immediate charge of the Armenian brigade. The months of inactivity had made the Armenian fighters impatient for action. Finally, a special delegation, including Nazrian, following long and arduous negotiations, persuaded a reluctant Jolie to allow them to attack the enemy positions, according to a plan designed by the Armenians.

The Armenians, made up of around 200 fighters, went on the attack on Sept. 10 of 1918. Nazrian and 40 others rushed the enemy's military headquarters and surprised its leadership and fighters. The foe, whose soldiers numbered six to eight times the number of Armenians, surrendered to a handful of Armenian fighters. Twenty-one Armenians legionnaires lost their lives in the battle that day. The victory opened the way to the Allies to advance south, east, towards Jerusalem and Port Said.

Upon the declaration of Armistice, General Allenby proudly talked of the bravery of the Armenian fighters. At the end of the war, the Armenian Legion, including Nazrian, moved to Cilicia upon the promises of the Allies according to which the Armenians would be granted freedom.

Nazrian and his friends continued their volunteer work in Adana's Yenni Mahalle neighborhood until 1921 when the deportations and the massacres of Armenians resumed. Together with his mother, older sister and niece Nazrian hit the road to the Arabian desert—the road which he had traveled during more hopeful and optimistic circumstances.

Months later the Nazrians settled in Jerusalem. The former warrior married in the Holy City and had six children. A few years after settling in Jerusalem, while roaming through the villages around the city, he discovered that Arara wasn't too far. After some difficulty, but with the support and blessing of Patriarch Yeghishe Turian, Nazrian succeeded in exhuming the 21 Armenian warriors and transferring their bones from the obscure Arara village to the Saint Savior National Cemetery, just outside the Armenian Quarter in Jerusalem.

Years later he would tell that the happiest day in his life was the day he helped bring his comrades' relics to Jerusalem and to witness their burial with prayer, Holy Mass, and incense of Armenian clergy.

From that day on for the next 59 years the Genocide Day was the holiest day of the calendar for Nazrian. Every year, on April 24, he led the national procession, medals on his chest, with a laurel and group photograph of his comrades in his hands. He maintained the tradition until he was 95--the last year of his life.

In 1933 the French ambassador, in the name of the French government, pinned the Croix de Guerre medal on the chest of Nazrian. The ceremony was attended by religious and government leaders.

In his eulogy of Nazrian Alex Kalaydjian said: " You are one of the last ones, who through beautiful coincidence, come to rest next to your martyred comrades-in-arm, who on a beautiful day, fell on foreign soil, giving their lives for freedom, justice, and human rights, which were exiled from this region for centuries.

"This is how Arara—soaked with Armenian blood--speaks to us," added Kalaydjian: "I am a symbol of the vigor of the 20th century Armenian, his bravery, self-sacrifice, selflessness, martyrdom and patriotism. There were before me and there will be after me other mountains and hills, fields and valleys, not to mourn for the tribulations of the Armenians, but to sing for their unexcelled bravery and heroism. I am a stranger to you and will remain stranger to you. My slopes are painted with the blood of many other nations, but I was called to life only when you blessed me with your blood: with pure Armenian blood. You made me eternal and immortal. On my slopes, with their death, 21 heroes left an inheritance—to maintain the pure Armenian soul, to nurse over traditional Armenian sanctities and to protect with my life everything that belong to the Armenian as a right—character, vigor, manhood, religion, language and fatherland. This is the Arara soul, which doesn't recognize defeat, and which is immortal."

For 68 years Hampartsoum Nazrian lived in Jerusalem as an ideal Armenian, always holding high his nation's integrity, the success of his fatherland, and the unity of the Armenian Nation. That's how he lived. And just an hour before his death, Nazrian asked me to extend that same message to you.

"May God rest your tired bones and may the earth be light on you."