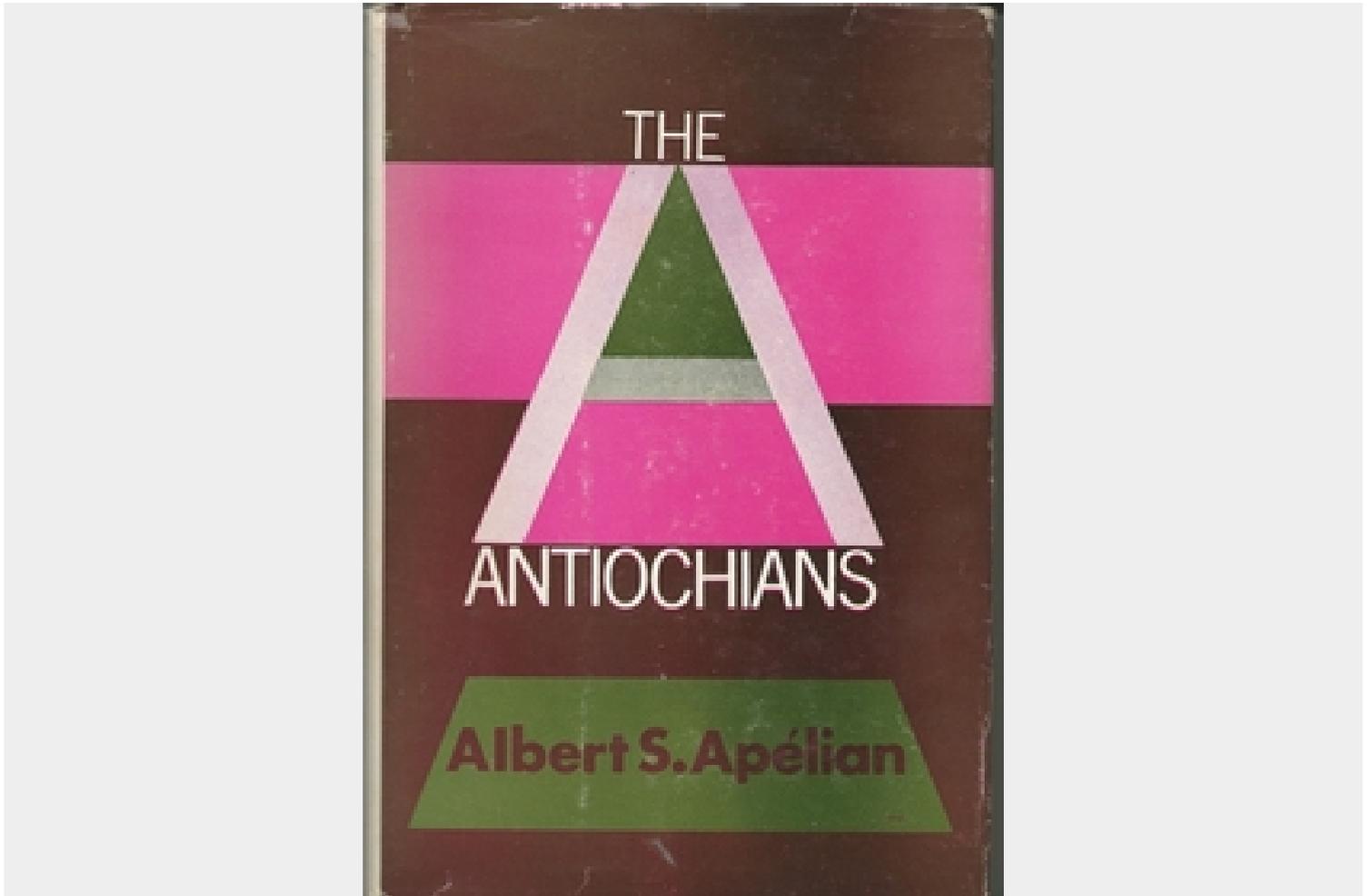


"THE ANTIOCHIANS"

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Book review by **Vahe H. Apelian**, Ohio, 15 March 2014

The Antiochians, a novel by Dr. Albert S. Apelian, was published in 1960 by Vantage Press Inc. Most of the 312-page book had appeared in weekly installments in *Hairenik Weekly of Watertown*, Massachusetts and in the *Nor Ashkhar*, a New York biweekly. 

The novel's plot is an account of the unfolding of the lives of Kevork Agha Matossian of Kessab and Keorkineh and that of his descendants. Matossian, a gentleman farmer "could trace his ancestors to the fourteenth century, to the first kings of Armenian Cilicia". He was a tall and handsome man. "What a powerful leader this man would have made, had he lived in France," had said the French consul in Antioch, present-day Hatai in Turkey. Matossian had silkworm and silk business dealings with the French.

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Through his association with the French consul and with lots of *baksheesh*—bribe in Turkish-- Matossian succeeds to have his son, Haig, appointed Antioch's medical doctor. Haig, newly graduated from medical school at the American University of Beirut (AUB), falls in love with Osanna Melidonian soon after his return home. An orphan, who had been brought up and educated by American missionaries, was a teacher in Kessab. The newlyweds make their home in Antioch where their son, Ara, is born. Ara is also sent by his parents to Kessab early on so that he would grow in Kessab instead of Antioch.

Ara lives through the ordeal of the 1909 pogrom, the sacking of Kessab, and the Armenian Genocide while a medical student at his father's alma mater in Beirut. During the First World War, he is drafted in the Ottoman army. After the war, he moves to the U.S., completes his medical training and starts a successful practice. He marries and has a son Vahakn. Dr. Ara loses his wife to cancer and then his

only child in the Second World War. Distraught, he returns to his ancestral village and finds his mother had died just a few days before his arrival. He ends his life there and is buried in the family's ancient cemetery in Keorkineh thus putting an end to Kevork Agha Matossian's lineage.

The author said of the novel, "despite its historical background and true-to-life picture of Armenian people, places, and customs, is a work of fiction from beginning to end". It is a superbly narrated book. His descriptions of events and places are akin to pictorial presentation. The narrative is "liberally spiced with foreign words, phrases, most of which are easily understandable when taken in their context". *The Antiochian* has a Victorian flavor: some of the dialogue at times drag way too long and come across as being staged than real and may bore some readers.

Dr. Apelian's narration of historical events indicates a sharp mind that analyzes events with a revealing insight. Two that caught my attention: in 1909 most of the Kessabtsis were able to flee to safety, when their village was also attacked in the aftermath of the Adana Massacres that decimated the Armenian population of that city and some of its surrounding towns. Kessabtsis have historically attributed their survival to their fighters who, for few hours, held at bay the marauding Turkish mob thus giving time for the Armenian population to flee. It turns out there is more to this interpretation. Had it not been for the outright help of their neighboring Turkmen village Faku Hassaan (pronounced now as Fakassan), the fleeing Kessabtsis would not have had a secure northwestern passage to the Mediterranean Sea and have their representatives reach Lattakia to ask the French and British consuls' help to evacuate to safety the survivors reaching the sea. Also the sudden change of guard in Constantinople, due to the dethroning of Sultan Abdul Hamid, and his replacement with the more moderate Sultan Reshad came at this opportune time enabling the French and British consuls to send for boats to evacuate the escapees, without concern for repercussion from the Sublime Porte.

The other revelation for me was his analysis of the Dardanelles campaign. Historically it has been claimed that had the Turks not emerged victorious over the Allied forces, they would not have had the opportunity to commit the Genocide of the Armenians. According to Dr. Apelian, "no one can definitely be sure whether or not British diplomacy at that time favored an early occupation of Constantinople. A premature collapse of the Sultan's government could seat a victorious Russia at the peace conference". Dr. Apelian's keen grasp of such historical events indicates that he had an intimate knowledge of Armenian history, more than one would expect from a busy medical doctor.

Despite the author's assertion that any similarity of the characters to persons living or dead is coincidental and unintentional, a reader who has some knowledge of Kessab is bound to draw a parallel between the novel and actual people and places. For example, Dr. Albert S. Apelian, 1893 (Kessab) - 1986 (Massachusetts), was the son of Dr. Soghomon Apelian, known to be the first Armenian to graduate from the AUB medical school. Both were drafted to serve in the Turkish Army

He regarded *The Antiochians* the crowning achievement of his writing career, a fulfillment of his father's prediction that one day he might "write a long novel". He attributed his interest to his father's encouragement. Previously he had published medical books for general public, short novels and stories. The latter in English and Turkish as well. The dissertation he wrote in Armenian (1913) as a graduating student was the basis for a book that Dr. Yervant Kassouny edited in 2002. The book--Kessab and Its Villages (ՔԵՍԱԿ ԵՆ ԻՐ ԳԵՂԵՐՆ) is the earliest first-hand account of Kessab and its inhabitants.

Dr. Albert S. Apelian ended his introduction of the novel writing with "It is self-evident that truth must prevail, or we shall all perish! And the truth is to be found everywhere, even in the pages of a work of fiction." After reading the novel a reader could ask whether he had read a personal account of a crucial period in Armenian history or a figment of writer's imagination.

