ARMENIAN JERUSALEM'S VALIANT STRUGGLES

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By Jirair Tutunjian, Toronto, 29 April 2023

In the past decade or two there have been a number of books and scores of articles about Armenian Jerusalem. The overwhelming majority have focused on the Patriarchate, the Armenian Convent, and the magnificent St. James Cathedral. While not ignoring ecclesiastical properties and issues, the main focus of Varsen Aghabekian's forthcoming book "The Saga of Survival: Armenian Palestinians, the British Mandate and the Naqba" is the lay Armenian community and its turbulent recent century. In focusing on civil society, Aghabekian has filled an important gap in the contemporary history of Armenian Jerusalem. In doing so, she has highlighted the *Naqba* (the dispossession of Palestinians whose homeland was occupied in 1948 by Israel) and its impact on Palestinian Armenians. Although an academic (Aghabekian has a Ph.D.), the writing is accessible and free of impenetrable jargon and diction. Two years ago, Aghabekian published "Armenian Palestinian, the Intertwine between the Social and the Political".

Before zooming on the *Naqba,* Aghabekian talks briefly about the 1,700-year presence of Armenians in the Holy Land, the influx of Armenian Genocide survivors to British-ruled Palestine, their impact on the existing Armenian community known as *Kaghakatsis,* and the heady two decades preceding the 1948 *Naqba* when the community experienced sort of a renaissance. The salad days of the late Twenties and the Thirties witnessed the establishment of a co-ed school, an impressive library, a modern printing press and other structures and institutions. These glory days attracted great teachers such as Hagop Oshagan and Shahan Berberian to Jerusalem. Meanwhile, the Armenian civil society burst with energy as a significant number of Armenians—both *Kaghakatsis* and Genocide survivors-- became successful businessmen, built modern villas in West Jerusalem, dominated several professions, and helped establish a dozen or so community-elevating organizations…sports clubs, choruses, dance groups, cultural societies (drama, music), physical education groups, and athletic clubs. Armenian basketball and football teams competed with Arab and Jewish teams.

The above mini-renaissance began to show cracks immediately after the end of the Second World War. Arabs and Jews, who had been pacified during the war years, exploded in violent exchanges as both fought to be sole masters of Palestine. The other "hit" suffered by the community was the repatriation (1946-'47) of more than 1,260 Armenians to Armenia. For a small community, their departure was a huge blow. But the devastating hit—*Naqba* of 1948--was still to come.

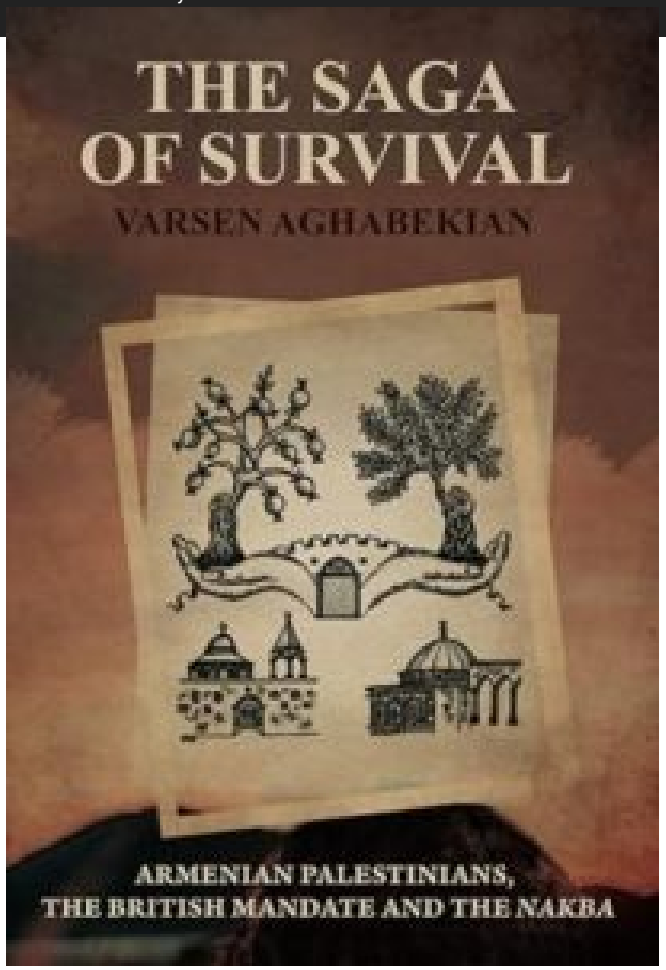
Immediately after the end of the British Mandate of Palestine in May1948, Jews and Arabs engaged in war which witnessed the forced flight of 750,000 to 950,000 Palestinian Arabs from western Palestine as Jewish forces drove them out and established a "Jewish homeland" on Arab homeland. The loss of maritime Palestine to foreigners from Poland, Ukraine, and Germany and the concurrent expulsion of Arabs from their ancestral lands became known as *Naqba.* Among the dispossessed Palestinians were Armenians some of whom moved to neighboring countries or sought shelter in

the overcrowded Armenian Convent in Jerusalem. Some of the latter families, who had had villas in West Jerusalem, were forced to live in single rooms in the convent and depend on charity.

Although the sympathies of Armenians leaned towards the Palestinian Arabs (Armenians could see similarities between the Armenian Genocide and the plight of the indigenous Arabs), they remained neutral and focused their energies on the protection of the community and the Armenian Quarter which made up one-sixth of the Old City of Jerusalem.

As soon as it became obvious the clashes had degenerated into war, the Armenian leadership (church and civilian) of Jerusalem organized a "battle" plan to protect the Armenian Quarter, which because of its location, was vulnerable to deliberate and stray bombs, mortars, and bullets. The "wise "men of the community formed operations, safety, and logistics committees to insure the safety of the community. The three Armenian clubs were assigned specific responsibilities. The *Kaghakatsi* Club JABU (Jerusalem Armenia Benevolent Union) was given several tasks: to provide medical supplies and guard the residences in the *Kaghakatsi* neighborhood which were vacant because their occupants had sought shelter in the Armenian Convent. The defenders were armed. Most of their weapons had been acquired just before the war because Armenians had sensed war was imminent. An Armenian mechanic taught the defenders on the use of weapons while a blacksmith made Italian-style guns and defused bombs. He lost two fingers while defusing a bomb.

The *Homenetmen* Club was assigned defense responsibility of the Armenian Quarter. The



Hoyadhma Cultsquad novel an underground cave which century earlier served as horse stable and camel-driven mill. They converted the cave to a clinic-hospital attended by Armenian physicians, nurses, and volunteers.

Despite Armenian preparedness, 16 Armenian men and 7 Armenian women were killed in Jerusalem, six Armenians were killed in Haifa and four in Jaffa, In addition, 124 Armenians were injured. The injuries were mostly due to continuous shelling of the Armenian Quarter by the Jewish forces. On the night of July 16, 1948 the Armenian Convent became the target of a seven-hour barrage of bombs, mostly originating in the nearby Jewish Quarter. Another horrendous day was Sept. 11 when six Armenians were killed. Aghabekian says casualties would have been much higher had the Armenian leadership not put the community on a war footing. In addition to the threats on their lives, Armenians suffered food, water, and electricity shortages. They also were threatened by several infectious diseases.

Throughout its long history, the Armenians of Palestine have had no newspaper. This was amended briefly when several clergymen and civilians published a newsletter which carried local and international news. The newspaper folded upon the termination of the war.

At the end of the war which the Israelis won, Jews grabbed 78 percent of Palestine while the remaining 22 percent became under the Jordan rule/mandate .

Despite its resolute discipline and neutrality, the Armenian community was severely hurt by the war. The community shrank as a result of immigration. There was a huge loss of property, including businesses. At the end of the war there was rampant unemployment and an unknown number of Armenian refugees. Unfortunately, says Aghabekian, there are no estimates of the monetary, political, and cultural losses of Armenians related to the *Naqba*. The war cast a long shadow and a lasting impact on the community.

The next six years (1949-1955) were a period of dire economic conditions, including widespread unemployment. At least one Armenian who had a top job during the British Mandate committed suicide because he had exhausted his savings and had been unable to find a job.

Despite the economic free-fall, Armenians amazingly launched another mini cultural renaissance to revitalize the shrinking community. The three clubs put aside their guns and medical equipment to initiate social, cultural, and athletic programs. JABU organized annual bazaars complete with a docile camel. There was a tight-rope walk by a trapeze artist who took a live sheep to the tightrope and slew the animal. A *kemanchist* from Egypt or Lebanon gave a concert. "Vartanants" and other plays were performed on the JABU stage. Because in the early post-war years there were no cinemas in Arab Jerusalem, several enterprising groups, including JABU, began to screen movies to packed houses. Meanwhile, *Hoyetchmen* and *Homenetmen* Clubs had annual bazaars, presented piano concerts, sponsored stand-up comedy nights, plays, poetry evenings, *Teayaseghan* (Tea Table) evenings, club picnics to Jericho, and women-only cultural programs. Armenian folk dancing groups were invited to dance for the Jordanian royalty. Throughout the economic freefall of the Fifties, Armenian clubs did their best to entertain their community.

While the clubs were entertaining, many members of the community jumped into various business endeavors. They built chocolate, paper, and jewelry factories. Armenian doctors, dentists, pharmacists, and nurses were among the best. Dr. V. Kalbian, a patriot of long-standing, was the confidential family doctor of the Jordanian royal family. Armenians served in the Jordanian government and held key positions at UNRWA (United Nations Relief Work Agency) which helped Palestinian refugees. Armenians also excelled in shoe- and shirt-making, as goldsmiths. In addition they were among the top teachers. One Armenian taught at four high schools.

The third "hit" was devised by a misguided and PR happy San Francisco restaurateur (George Mardigian) who devised ANCHA (Armenian National Committee for Homeless Armenians) to facilitate the immigration of Armenians to the United States. In practice it meant "helping" members of the pro-American Homenetmen club members. As a result of Uncle Sam-worshipping restaurateur's "good deed" many of club's leaders and members immigrated to Detroit, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The community could ill afford their departure.

Then came the 1967 war and the second Arab defeat. As a result the West Bank (i.e. the rest of Palestine) was occupied by Israel. From day one, Israeli intent was to establish an exclusively Jewish

state. To achieve their goal, they made life for Palestinians, including Armenians, living hell. Through arbitrary "laws" the Israelis intended to pressure non-Jews to leave the country. Many Armenians, like the Palestinian Arabs, were forced to leave the West Bank. As a result, the Armenian population of Jerusalem shrank to the current 1,200 to 1,800. Another reason for the decrease in the number of Armenians is the Zionist policy of not granting immigrant status to non-Jews.

What about the future? Will the community curl up and die due to the blatant and subtle harassments of the Israeli government whose far right-wing supporters make it clear Jerusalem should not have a single non-Jew resident? In her final chapter, Aghabekian grabs the bull by the horn and warns of the perils Armenians of Jerusalem face. She calls the chapter "Despite All. We are Still Here". While she doesn't overlook the threats, she is optimistic that Armenian Jerusalem will survive.

She says the promising fact is that there are still 1,200 to 1,800 Armenians in Jerusalem. She adds that no matter how big or small the Armenian community is in the Holy Land, the Armenian institutions with their invaluable possessions will stay: the churches, the Patriarchate, the museum and other institutions will reflect a rich Armenian history in the Holy Land.

"The interest of the Armenian diaspora in supporting the steadfastness of the Armenian community in the Holy Land cannot be underestimated and must be encouraged," Aghabekian writes. In her previous book ("Armenian Palestinian"), she offered practical advice on how the diaspora can help Armenian Jerusalem.

Most of the Armenians who lived through the turbulent past century of Jerusalem have passed. Yet, through intensive research and through interviews with the few survivors and their often-expat offspring, Aghabekian has revived the place and the period. Compliments to the far-flung offspring of those who have left us: mostly ex-patriots—from Sydney to Los Angeles to Toronto--they have provided priceless information to Aghabekian and helped her salvage the recent history of Jerusalem's Armenian community. Special thanks to Jerusalem historian Kevork George Hintlian who has acted as consultant and key data provider to Aghabekian.

The profusely illustrated book has scores of black-and-white, and color photos of traditional Armenian weddings, Xmas parties, food distribution to refugees, bombed buildings, armed Armenian guards, banquets, bazaars, group photos of club executives, churches, several maps, Boy Scouts, and the photos of villas of Armenians which are now occupied by Israelis. The book, which has an impressive bibliography, will be available on Amazon at the end of May.

Comments



Sonia Peltekian – 2023-06-23 17:47:24
Thank you Vars Aghabekian for your book "Armenian Palestinian"; and thank you Jirair Tutunjian for your article in Keghart much appreciated. This is our history. The saga of Kaghakatsies and the Genocide survivors, mainly orphanages such as the Mardin Orphanage ran by Near East Relief Fund were transferred to Jebail Lebanon before it was called Birds' Nest, then to Nazareth, Palestine. The Van Boys' Orphanage as well as the Girls' Orphanage were brought to Palestine in the 1920's; several of our clergy were members of the Vanetsy Orphanage and later Patriarch Yeghishe Serpazan. Later on Genocide survivors came to find jobs during British Mandadte so our community prospered. They worked hard to prosper, and when they had started to enjoy their life the 1948 Naqba came and as you stated everything changed for most of the Armenian community. And from 25,000 Armenian community presence in Palestine the number now is not more than 4,000 in all Israel and West Bank. Sad!