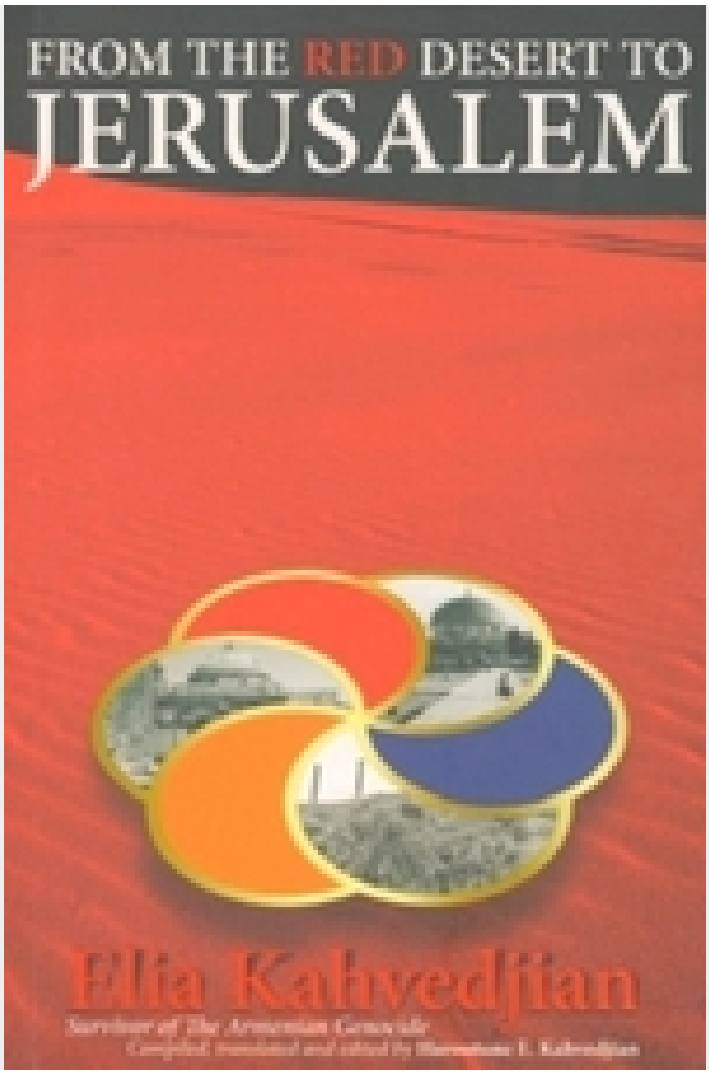
FIVE-YEAR-OLD URFA BOY REMEMBERS

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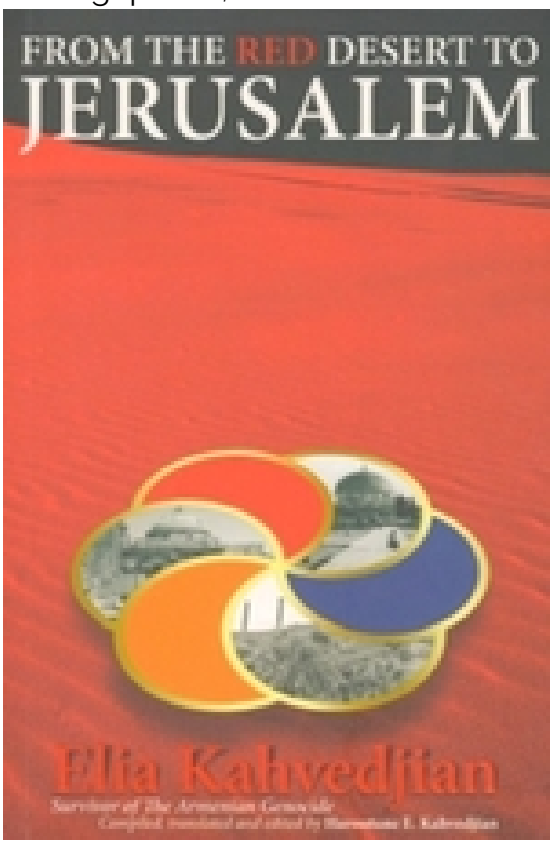


“From the Red Desert to Jerusalem” by Elia Kahvedjian

Book review by **Jirair Tutunjian**, Toronto, 20 September 2014

Fortunately/unfortunately, published eye-witness accounts of the Genocide of Armenians can fill a small library. So why, one could ask, yet another book about the attempted extermination of the Armenians by Ottoman Turkey? Because “From the Red Desert to Jerusalem” by Elia Kahvedjian is an account not only of the Genocide and the heroic resistance of the badly-outnumbered and ill-equipped Urfa Armenians but it’s also our national calamity as witnessed by a 5-year-old boy; and because the author symbolizes-- through his survival, his courage and his success-- the undying spirit of Armenians. Finally, the second half of the book is an almost sociological report on Armenian Jerusalem, through several wars, from the mid-‘20s to the early ‘90s.

In addition to vivid descriptions of the death march through the Syrian Desert, along with his mother, brothers and sisters, the autobiography is about the adventures of a little boy who saw Mgrdich Yotneghparian, the heroic leader of the Armenian self-defense militia; the boy who was given away by his mother to Kurds so as to save his life); and the boy who became an urchin in Mardin and is almost grabbed by Turkish cannibals during famine in that city.



Kahvedjian somehow survived the long march, several abandonments, racism, starvation, life on the streets of Mardin and Nuseibin, as prey to cannibals to finally find his way back—four years later--to his hometown of Urfa and the Armenian orphanage during the short Allied occupation. Then soon

after it was back on the road to Lebanon with other Armenian orphans as the Allied army withdrew from Urfa because of Turkish attacks. After stays at two more orphanages (Jubeil in Lebanon and Nazareth in Palestine), teenager Elia finally found a permanent sanctuary in Jerusalem where he became a photographer.

For the next 60 years he flourished, despite several wars, to become one of the most prominent photographers in the Holy Land. The dramatic, moody, historic photos he shot from the mid-'20s to the mid '60s are still sold today to tourists and pilgrims.

Because of his fame, he came into contact with such famous military figures as Glubb Pasha, the founder of the Arab Legion; Dame Edith Kenyon, the preeminent archeologist of Palestine; Pere Roland de Vaux of Ecole Biblique, Dutch archeologists, judges, and celebrities visiting Jerusalem. He also photographed the fire at the Holy Sepulcher Church, the Holy Land earthquake, the flight of the Zeppelin over Jerusalem in the early '30s. During the Second World War, in addition to running his studio (Elia Photo-Service), he served as British field security photographer.

But throughout his long life Kahvedjian remained focused—some would say justifiably obsessed—on his childhood memories, the Genocide, and the world's indifference to the almost-mortal blow the Armenia nation had suffered from 1915 to 1923.

Starting in the early '80s, after an interview in the "Homenetmen Newsletter" of Jerusalem, Kahvedjian's story began to draw the attention of the foreign media. On several occasions the Israeli (newspapers and TV) reported on his life and memories of the Genocide. He was then interviewed by other non-Armenian media, including Japanese media. But the most enduring and influential coverage was provided by the "National Geographic". When the American media giant produced a program about the Jerusalemites from various ethnic/religious groups, Kahvedjian was chosen to represent the Armenians. As he talked about his life, he described his experiences during the Genocide of Armenians. The program was aired around the globe on a number of occasions. The "National Geographic" also released a video of the program.

More recognition came in the last ten years of his life as various exhibitions of his photographs were held in several locales. Finally, in 1995 (just four years before his death), he sat down and wrote his autobiography. The book, titled "Memories of the Heroic Battle of Urfa in 1915 and Subsequent Events" was published in Yerevan.

His eldest son, Harout, decided to translate his father's story into English, and add his own memories of his father to the book. "Throughout his life my father was upset, frustrated and highly emotional about the indifference of the world to the Genocide. By translating his autobiography, I wanted to spread the word about the Genocide to non-Armenians," says Harout Kahvedjian, a long-time resident of Toronto. The result is "From the Red Desert to Jerusalem", a 290-page book with more than 60 black-and-white and color photos, some of them of historic importance.

"From Red Desert to Jerusalem" will be launched at Glendale's Abril Books in late November.