

ՀՐԱՊԱՐԱԿՈՒՄՆԵՐ.

PUBLICATIONS

---

**NAIRA GINOSYAN**

*PhD in History*

*Institut of History NAS RA, Researcher*

*YSU, Chair of Turkish studies, Assistant Professor*

*naira.ginosyan@ysu.am*

**THE LETTERS OF A. SAFRASTIAN ABOUT THE  
UNBEARABLE CONDITIONS OF WESTERN ARMENIANS  
TO THE BRITISH CONSUL. M. SHIPLEY IN ERZEROUM  
AND TO THE CONSUL'S SERVANT B. HERD (1908–1910)**

The incidents in the Armenian vilayets were either directly or indirectly connected to illegitimate sheikhs and governmental officials. The Government was perpetrating the extermination of Armenians through them. Kurdish Begs using the permission of Turkish authorities and sometimes even with their support were plundering and robbing the peaceful population. Armenians were totally subjugated. They shared between themselves all the Armenian lands and forced the peasants to obey their direct authority<sup>1</sup>. We are publicizing the below mentioned parts of A. Safrastyan's report on the burdensome conditions of Western Armenians and the testimonies about the taxation and oppression in the Ottoman Empire, referred to British consul Shiple in Erzurum (1908–1910). Arshak Safrastian was born on September 13, 1886 in Van. In 1904 at the age of 17, he joined the service in Baksh (Bitlis) working as a translator in the British Consulate and from 1907 to 1911 was appointed to the post of Vice-Ambassador.

---

<sup>1</sup> NAA, f. 412, l. 1, work 1770, pp. 15–16).

### **The Letters of A. Safrastian about the Unbearable Conditions...**

---

He bypassed the provinces of Bitlis, Van, Diarbekir and collected information about the unbearable conditions of Armenians and the Armenian Pogroms and massacres.

The present documents were found in NAA (f. 412, 11, work 1770).

The choice of the represented parts of the publication was made taking into consideration the extent to which these documents are readable.

#### **N 1.**

Bitlis,  
23 January, 1908

Dear Mr. Sheepley

The watchmaker has just repaired the broken type wheel of the machine and I trust it will work for a certain time.

I beg to call your attention to the following point, which seems to me to be of some importance in view of the fact that Khultig is the biggest Armenian village of about 300 houses in the neighbourhood.

In October last the villagers complained most bitterly against the .....<sup>2</sup> of tax-collector Abdurrezak. Thanks to the efforts of Ms. Heard, the man was dismissed and the acting Vali<sup>3</sup> stated his dismissal officially.

A few days ago, however the Head and Villagers of Khultig told me that the dismissed Tax-collector had lately been in the village, gathered young women in a stable beaten and ill-treated them threatening at the same time the men with all sorts of tortures for their having complained against him to the British Consul.

I have heard from other sources also that the dismissed Abdurrezak far soon to be reinstated as tahsildar<sup>4</sup> of the Khultig district. If this rumour turns out to be true the villagers stated, hundreds will desert the village as Abdurrezak will get furious if he succeeds.

In case about this comes off, I will inform Firat the acting Vali and remind him the statement which he made to Ms. Heard concerning Abdulrezak's dismissal, and telegraph then to you if the case turns out to be urgent.

---

<sup>2</sup> Unreadable.

<sup>3</sup> Vali – (Turkish - vali) – governor.

<sup>4</sup> Tahsildar - (Turkish - tahsildar) – tax-collector.

---

**Ginosyan N.**

---

The price of bread has gone still up in the last few days and an Armenian is said to be dead here from starvation.

Yesterday the villagers of Khachrev, three hours north of Bitlis, came to me and told that four men and women have lately died in their village from starvation and that certainly many will starve in the nearest future. There is no doubt that some families here are living outside exposed to cold and snow, their houses being thrown down by the earthquake.

Five days ago the Mektoub<sup>5</sup> of our vilayet<sup>6</sup> was sent to the plain of Mush to inquire, it is said, into the dealings of the Mutessarif<sup>7</sup> of Mush with the brigand Kassim Bey. The former is reported being bribed by the latter and working therefore in his behalf to assure the imperial pardon for him.

***Yours sincerely***  
***A.S. Safrastian***

***NAA, f. 412, l. 1, work 1770, p. 15–18.***

**N 1.**

Bitlis,  
September 2, 1910

Dear Mr. Heard,

I found your letter of the 26th of June last on my return from Van, where I authorized to stay for three weeks. Thank you for the letter and the interest which you take with regard to the state of this country.

By my letter in February last I had written to you about the bright prospects and the satisfactory condition of things which prevailed throughout this Vilayet under the reforming and energetic administration of the Vali Salim Pasha. I had informed you also as regards the administrative, judicial and Police Reorganization which was carried out more or less thoroughly in various centres of this Vilayet, as well in every Vilayet of the Empire, owing to which many old

---

<sup>5</sup> Mektoub - (Turkish - mektup) – letter.

<sup>6</sup> Vilayet - (Turkish - vilâyet) – a major administrative district or province

<sup>7</sup> Mutessarif - (Turkish - mutasarrif) – Sanjak (sancak) an administrative division of the Ottoman Empire.

### **The Letters of A. Safrastian about the Unbearable Conditions...**

---

corrupt and abusive scoundrels were expelled from the Government offices at the end of last year. Salim Pasha naturally incurred thus the enmity and rancour of all influential Kurdish notables in Bitlis and as these rejected. Officials happened to be close relatives to the Kurdish Deputies of Bitlis in the Parliament, the letter combined made representations at the Porte, urging upon the Minister of the Interior to recall the honest Salim “whose presence in Bitlis might foment serious troubles” and replace him by the Octogenarian Tahir Pasha, whose considerable experience and “tact” in dealing with Kurds, in their opinion, was above all doubt.

I am sorry to say the Minister yielded to the demand of the Kurdish Deputies, probably on account of his personal considerations, and Tahir Pasha was appointed Vali for Bitlis at the beginning of April last, in spite of unusually popular demonstrations of all classes of Armenian and Kurdish population of Bitlis, Mush and Sairt, against the arbitrary recall of Salim pasha and calculating to satisfy only some notorious Kurdish brigands.

All popular reported efforts in behalf of the reinstatement of Salim as Vali proved futile and Tahir Pasha arrived here in the second half of April. You know him so well that I hardly need to describe him to you. You may, however, have forgotten that he has been Mektubji<sup>8</sup> here some thirty years ago, tied in close blood-relationship with the notorious brigand Haji Nejmeddine Efendi of Bitlis, the most powerful notable here: an intimate friend of the notorious Musa Bey and other ill-reputed Moslem Chiefs.

I must say at the outset that since he has been here as Vali, Tahir Pasha in all his acts and decisions has distinctly been under the influence of Haji Nejmeddine and his small but still very powerful clique.

The Agrarian Problem existing between Armenians and Kurds has been since July 1908 the most burning question touching the well-being of Armenian peasantry. This same question was revived with a new acuteness last spring at the season of cultivation. In certain cases even Armenians and Kurds combined protested to Tahir Pasha against Haji Nejmeddine and his clique, who have expropriated through the most fiendish means the lands of the whole Nahis of Tchukur (near Bitlis) belonging to Armenians and Kurds. The indifference of the Vali in this matter verged on the impertinent, he systematically turning a deaf

---

<sup>8</sup> Mektubji (Turkish - Mektupçu) – the head of the department of archival documents.

ear to the shrieks and desperate cries of dispossessed peasantry. In Mush and Bulanik, the fugitive Armenians who lost almost all their land under the old regime, are waging now a fierce battle for the ownership of their own property.

The Ministerial orders with regard to this most vital problem, issued in September, 1909, were logical and honest. According to these orders any disputed land or property was to belong and in case of unlawful occupation to be restored to the claimant in whose hands were seen the title-deeds (Tapu) or in whose name the land in dispute was recorded in the Great records at the Cadastre Office here. Armenians profited very greatly of these dispositions of the Government; hundreds were enabled to take possession of their land unlawfully occupied by Kurdish oppressors. But in April last a very foul play was played I don't know by whom, and the practical orders of September 1909 were withdrawn and new orders issued by the Ministry of the interior, according to which all cases of disputed land taking origin before July 1908 were to be settled before the ordinary civil Courts, and those taking origin since the last-named date were to be solved in an administrative manner.

You can well understand and judge the real meaning and the tendency of these last orders. However reformed and just may be the Courts of Constitutional Turkey in Bitlis, however independent and unrestrained may feel themselves its members, under present circumstances the Armenians can scarcely expect to get justice at the Courts, where the shadows of all-powerful Haji Nejmeddines, Musa Beys and the Sheikhs of Khizan and the like are hovering still under the form of misty menaces or sweet presents for the benevolent decisions on the part of Courts in their behalf. In the series of such disputed lands, frauds and tricks of such a revolting nature committed by Moslem Chiefs have lately been brought to my notice of which we could hardly have any idea during the political persecutions and horrors in the autumn of 1907.

Moslem oppressive Chiefs: pious and worshipped Sheikhs like those of Khizan and Kadris at Bitlis, much-respected and "noble" Notables like Haji Nejmeddine at Bitlis and series of Haji Ibrahims, Haji Nazirs, Haji Alis&c. at Mush, "honest" Government Officials like Haji Shemseddine Rasul Effendis at Bitlis, Bedrkhanbey at Mush &c., &c., have employed the most wicked and unjustifiable means to transfer secretly the Armenian land to their names; very common threats of murder, paid but false Moslem witnesses, forged seals of

### **The Letters of A. Safrastian about the Unbearable Conditions...**

---

Armenian proprietors, large sums of bagshish to Cadastre Officials &c... One never could fancy such a deeply rotten government mechanism as that of the Hamidian Government at Bitlis, probably still worse than the decayed French monarchical regime, just before the outbreak of the Revolution of 89.

It is, however, stated that Armenian Deputies in the Parliament have submitted a programme to the Ports with reference to the solution of this most complicated question, which possibly will be discussed in the Chamber of Deputies during the next session in November next.

Political affairs in this Vilayet took a very bad turn with the arrival of Tahir Pasha at Bitlis. The most turbulent and quarrelsome Kurds who by severe punishment or imprisonment were taught by Salim Pasha to respect the law and keep quiet, and forget the old good days when they were free to behave themselves as it suited them almost sure of impunity, wished to see in the person of Tahir Pasha their old friend, who under no circumstances was willing to offend the susceptibilities of Kurdish chiefs, his friends. And really they were not disappointed in their beliefs.

From the beginning of the present year, signs of discontent and restlessness were being noticed amongst the Kurds. The notorious Haidorantly Hussein Pasha had fled to Persia to avoid the "persecutions" of the Young Turk government, which in fact was requiring the price of tithes amounting about £510.000, bought by the above Hamidie scoundrel under Abdul Hamid's Regime. Some other Hamidie Chiefs too followed him in Persia. They began to correspond with Reactionary chiefs in these Vilayets with a view to plot against the Government; their efforts were being backed by allied. Yildis emissaries and spies, who during the last few months of the year were reported as visiting various districts of Bitlis, Van, Diabekr and Erzurum inhabited by Kurdish majority to stir up the Kurds and bring about a reactionary movement. Christians all over the country were alarmed at the whisperings and secret meetings of the Kurds, which bore a striking resemblance to the preparations of wholesale massacres under Hamidian Regime.

Hardly a fortnight passed after Tahir's arrival here, the notorious Musa Bey gave the signal: At the beginning of May, Musa Bey almost on the brink of starvation with his family, was visiting Armenian villages in the Plain of Mush followed by a big band of professional armed robbers, threatening them with murder and violence as under the old Regime if they did not give him the

ordinary presents and the Hafir-tax. The Armenians expelled him naturally, and armed some young men from each village to watch during the night. A few days later, one Armenian of Ardonk and another at Mushekshen were shot dead at daylight in the fields. Terror began to prevail again in Mush. The Armenian Patriarch and the Press at Constantinople raised their voices and forewarned the Porte of the troubles which might happen at any time in Mush if local Authorities did not take strong measures to repress Kurdish agitators.

On the 10<sup>th</sup> May, Musa Bey attacked the peaceful cultivator Kurds of Dap (Khuyt) who would not follow him and would refuse to pay him any tax. A fight ensued in which four Kurds were killed on both parts. The vali was ordered to hurry to Mush; in the plain he met Musa Bey followed by his 40 armed brigands, who on the remarks of Tahir Pasha that such a conduct was no more admissible replied that Armenians were to be disarmed first, then he would deliver theirs themselves. In Mush during this two months' stay, Tahir Pasha was surrounded by Moslem scoundrels in that town. Presidents or Judicial Courts here and local Turkish clubs protested at the Ports against the indifference of Tahir in face of crimes and murders committed by Musa Bey. In defiance of all these Tahir Pasha did his best to vindicate the cause of such a criminal as Musa Bey. If Salim Pasha was Vali here at the time, I am sure he would smash Musa Bey to the ground. Instead of taking repressive measures against the violent breaches of the law and public security and crimes committed by Musa Bey (as he continued to murder two more Armenians and one Kurdish Sheikh who did not follow him) Tahir Pasha undertook to pursue M. Karmen (the Companion of Rupen) Head of Arm. Daschnaksutiun Committee at Mush, no doubt under the influence of Moslem Agas there. Even in the opinion of honest Turkish officials, M. Karmen is a more faithful and loyal Ottoman than the Vali himself. The Misunderstanding between the two grew to threatening dimensions; but the Vali was rebuffed from Constantinople for his reckless step of persecuting a famous Revolutionist. Happily the question ended peacefully and Karmen attends now to his work as before.

In the meantime crimes and murders increased all over the Vilayet. Several Armenians were killed in Kharzon, Bezvari (Sairt). In June, again two Armenians in Horshen (Mush). Kassim Bey robbed Armenian cattle in Khlat, the authorities were fully aware that Kasim was the thief. The latter was compelled by Tahir Pasha to restore only the cattle, but he was not punished. Could you imagine

### **The Letters of A. Safrastian about the Unbearable Conditions...**

---

such a criminal proceeding under a Constitutional Regime? Instead of bringing to law the worldwide murderers and thieves, Tahir Pasha ordered the Monastery of Surp Garabet to be searched, the inviolability of domicile being guaranteed by the law of Constitution.

Since July last Sheikh Sayid Ali of Khizan is moving up again. Four Armenians have been murdered in Khizan during last two months; and I understand from a trustworthy source that he has lately designated ten Armenian Notables of Khizan to his men to be killed in course of time, Notables who were the leaders of protest against him. Some such Armenians, who scarcely escaped an obvious death, have fled here a fortnight ago, dropping thus the works in field at this season.

In August, some ten robberies have happened here, two daring ones in the outskirts of the town, just as under the old Regime. Kodkills are accused of some of them, though the complicity of Kurdish notables here is suspected. In Akhlat and Bulanik caravans have been robbed and some Armenians wounded. In one case only soldiers were sent to pursue the robbers; they tortured very harshly the notorious Sheikh Suleiman of Abri (Bulanik) and the stolen goods were restored.

Thus you will see that Musa Beys and the Sheikhs of Khizan are as defiant as before, and the administration of Tahir pasha as weak, criminal and cynical as under his beloved master Abdul Hamid.

I fear if Tahir Pasha is not removed from here very shortly the state of affairs may be worse still. He evidently protects Musa Bey and instead of fulfilling his most formal duties when crimes are committed, he sends private notes to the President of the Civil Court here requesting him to be quick to settle the land disputes in behalf of Haji Nejmeddin and the other friends.

For the last two months rumors and a Ministerial promise have been in circulation as regards Tahir's appointment for Mosul. Last week the Turkish semi-official organ Tahir wrote that Major Hakki Bey the Mutassar of Ipek is appointed as Vali of Bitlis. Tahir Pasha, however, is still in Bitlis and has received hitherto no official communication. A military Vali, especially a Staff Officer Hakki Bey, who displayed considerable courage and initiative in the Albanian rising will certainly crush down any Kurdish Chief for any crime or theft, if he is granted full powers to deal with the situation as the conditions of the moment may require, powers which have already been granted to the Valis



**Ginosyan N.**

---

at Van and Erzurum. Though in the course of the last four months Tahir pasha spoilt greatly the Kurds who under his predecessors were taught more or less to be orderly and quiet, I expect, however, that as soon as this old imbecile is removed from here, a Governor like Hakki Bey will set things right in a short period by an exemplary and honest rule.

My compatriots continue to prosper by degrees and to rebuild their ruined economic and moral conditions. Much depends of course of the solution of the Agrarian problem; but thousands of fugitives who return home from every corner of the world, are bringing sums of money to help them in their regeneration and overcome several difficulties in the way. Such a people accustomed to infernally harsher conditions will not be much affected or discouraged by some murders or robberies, as they have occurred lately; though, it may be admitted, it will possibly prevent hundreds of Armenians desirous of returning home.

Since a certain time I was thinking of writing my memoirs and impressions; your kind suggestion leaves now no doubt about it. But I do not quite know in which way I am to write them as to suit them to the tastes of English readers. You will I hope put them into some shape. In any case, however, your directions as to the method of writing them will be very useful to me. As I am condemned to spend the next winter too here, I intend to translate into Armenian the "Wealth of Nations" of Adam Smith, the famous Scotch economist, which I expect will be of use to my people so thirsty of such science. The Armenian Publishing Company, just formed at Constantinople, will no doubt publish it at a cheap price. One of the members has asked me already to do the job. Then I will write also my memoirs.

Miss Ely was very glad to learn about you. She asked me to communicate to you her sincerest greetings and wishes.

I expect that you are enjoying very pleasant holiday at home and are in good health.

***Yours sincerely***

***NAA, f. 412, l. 1, work 818, p. 1-2.***