

THE EFFORTS OF THE ARMENIAN BENEVOLENT SOCIETY OF THE CAUCASUS IN HELPING THE ARMENIAN REFUGEES (1896)

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Some of the Western Armenians who had miraculously survived the massacres, organized by Abdul Hamid II, were forced to take the route of emigration. The refugees, having been deprived even of the basic means of livelihood, were in a difficult socio-economic situation. Various illnesses were disseminated among them because of lack of food and living conditions. A necessity of taking urgent measures to provide both material and moral support to Western Armenians was taking shape under these circumstances.

The Armenians of Diaspora, Eastern Armenians and Russian progressive society came to help refugees. Different charitable, social and religious organizations and companies were created.

In order to give assistance to the poor compatriots the book by Gr. Djrbashyan was published in Moscow in 1897¹ and the total revenues of its sale should have been provided to the Armenian refugees. The European progressive society also tried to alleviate the condition of the tortured Western Armenians. Donations were organized in Great Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Denmark, Russia, USA and elsewhere. One million eight hundred thousand Deutschmarks (about eight hundred thousand rubles) were collected in Germany from September 1896 to 1899 to help the refugees². About two hundred fifty thousand francs were sent from Great Britain up to December 1896³. Three hundred fifty thousand francs were collected for the Armenian refugees in 1897; two million francs were raised in the USA, two hundred thousand in Switzerland⁴ and fourteen thousand in Denmark⁵.

The Armenian society could not remain indifferent, and a significant part of humanitarian aid was taken by the Armenian Benevolent Society of Caucasus (hereinafter referred to as ABSC), founded in Tiflis by Doctor B. Navasardyan still in 1881 and headed by the Council and the Local Board.

A significant number of records and the Armenian periodicals of the time, covering both the situation of the Western Armenian refugees and the assistance they received, are preserved in the National Archive of Armenia (ABSC fund).

The considerable part of the archival documents stored in the National Archive of Armenia is not published yet. Some of them have been used by the famous historian

¹ Brotherly help to the Armenian victims in Turkey, Moscow, 1897 (in Russian).

² See "Murch", Tiflis, 1899, № 4-5, p. 546 (In Arm.).

³ Ibid., 1896, № 1, p. 157.

⁴ "Taraz", 1897, № 1, p. 18.

⁵ Ibid., №12, p. 206.

Leo (Arakel Babakhanyan) in his work, "The thirtieth anniversary of the Armenian Benevolent Society in the Caucasus, 1881-1911"⁶.

As the refugees started to cross the border of the Caucasian Vicegerency because of the massacres started in Trabzon and the surrounding areas since the autumn of 1895, the Primate of the Georgian-Imeretian Diocese, archbishop Gevorg Surenyants sent an alarming letter to the Council on 13 November 1895, asking to take without delay the steps necessary for the help of the refugees. The first caravan of the Western Armenians that had passed the Caucasian border consisted of 4000 people, mostly women and children⁷. Since the statutes of the ABSC was not permitting to conduct an activity outside the territory of the vicegerency the Council of the ABSC discussed exclusively the matter of providing aid to the refugees, being sheltered in the territory of the Caucasus, at the session № 22 on 5 September 1896⁸.

The main problem of the ABSC from September 1896 was to accept and house the refugees within its capabilities. Nevertheless, the insufficient resources compelled the Council during the session of 5 September to give the President of the Council, A. Ananyan, permission to appeal to the authorities to get their consent for public fundraising⁹. The request was rejected by the Vicegerency¹⁰. Probably, it was conditioned by the anti-Armenian attitude of the vicegerent at that time, Grigori Golitsin, having extreme monarchic views. He was doing his best to restrict the activities of any Armenian public organization, which could gain reputation among Armenians.

Trying to concentrate the assistance to the refugees in his hands and to demonstrate that the authorities "take care of" refugees, G. Golitsin allows collecting donations in the Russian Empire starting from December 11, 1896 on condition that the aid be forwarded to the appropriate state agencies, which in turn will distribute both the goods and money¹¹.

Despite the fact that the authorities did not permit the ABSC to organize donations for the benefit of the refugees, the ABSC got help thanks to the publications in press. Group and individual aid was sent to the ABSC, based on the consideration that the Society was well-informed of the refugees' situation.

Women, children and elderly people were prevailing among the refugees, who were applying to the ABSC for almost everyday help. To have helped them the Council decided to set apart a private assembly from among its members, which should make trips and get acquainted with the situation of the refugees so that it was possible to decide what kind of assistance the sheltered persons needed and in which province or village the aid was to be provided¹².

⁶ See Leo, *Thirty years of the Armenian Benevolent society in the Caucasus, 1881-1911*, Tiflis, 1911 (In Arm.).

⁷ See Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁸ See National archive of Armenia (NAA), folder 28, list 1, dossier 39, n. 76 rev.

⁹ See NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 39, n. 77.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Leo, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

¹² *Ibid.*

The Council gives instructions to the chairmans of the branches for organizing appropriate committees and transferring statistical data about the number, gender and age of the refugees as well as about the kind and extent of the expected aid.

The branches of the Council started working. The Council of the ABSC discussed the reports from Tiflis and Surmalu at the sessions, convened in 18 October and 25 October, respectively.

The reports were describing in details the terrible situation of the refugees, pointing out that they needed housing, bedding and clothing, since many of them were falling asleep on a damp floor; they had no clothes and warm sheets and were consequently getting sick.

There were considerable numbers of death cases because of lack of basic medical care. It was mentioned in the report of the Surmalu branch that 775 refugees had found shelter in Igdir and the surrounding areas; at the beginning they were provided with food and housing by the local villagers¹³. The branches were demanding for necessary help. The Council decided to send 500 roubles and a case of clothes to Igdir for the refugees. Those being sheltered in Kars were in a similar situation¹⁴.

The fact that the frosty days of winter were getting nearer was also a great problem for the branches of the ABSC; the problem of finding shelters for almost naked refugees was becoming more difficult. They were placed mainly in cowsheds.

The medical assistance was a great problem for all branches. The sick and the healthy people were accommodated in the same room because of which infectious diseases were spreading easily.

There was almost no medical aid. Discussing this question, the Council made a conclusion that it was not convenient to send physicians but there was a need to reach an agreement with those working in provinces to help the sick people for a certain amount of money.

At the same time, the number of refugees was increasing day by day. For instance, the local administration of Vagharshapat wrote a letter to the Council that the number of refugees was being constantly increased; if their number reached around 500¹⁵ about a month ago according to the data collected from 24 villages of Vagharshapat, then the figure achieved 1150 as of December 20¹⁶.

Looking into the reports of the branches, the refugees can be divided into three groups:

1. People in a comparatively stable situation, that is, the persons or families who were able to sell their property beforehand and to emigrate from the cradle in a little bit of safe condition. Such refugees were small in number;

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ NAA, f. 28, l.1, d. 358, n. 130.

¹⁵ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 357, n. 112.

¹⁶ Loc. cit., l. 1, d. 921, n. 137.

2. Families in poverty, but able to work, who were stayed unemployed. There was a need to help this group before finding a job;
3. Families in extreme poverty, the great part of whose members were in sickness. This group needed long-term assistance.

The Council was requesting from the branches a detailed account about the expenditures along with the reports to be able to distribute its scarce resources.

The accountable report of the ABSC, dated February 4, 1897 and sent to Bishop Aristakes Sedrakyan¹⁷, was providing detailed information about the number of refugees in the Caucasus, their situation and the aid to be granted them. The secretary of the ABSC Council, Hambardzum Arakelyan, mentions in the report that the refugees were mainly settled down in the Kars region (24.000) and Yerevan province (10.000)¹⁸. The terrible situation of the refugees was also described. Then the document deals with the presents and the way they were distributed.

The Council had received 19.248 rubles and 74 kg of aid for the benefit of Armenian refugees as far as the beginning of 1897. Then it was mentioned in detail how much of that aid was sent to the refugees and to which of the regions.

The activities of the Batumi branch of the ABSC had also a significant impact on providing help to the Western Armenian refugees and mitigating their situation¹⁹. The principal purpose of the committees of the said branch was to provide the correct and appropriate aid to the Western Armenian refugees sheltered in Batumi, after having heard the reports of those persons who were supporting the Batumi branch and the cases of refugees. These individuals were getting acquainted with the situation of the refugees in place, rendering accounts during the sessions, where the amount of aid was determined. The protocols deal with the matter of how much money was given to the refugees and for what purpose. The lists also give the number of a refugee's family members and the place they emigrated from. Based on these archival documents, one can conclude that the average number of refugee families was 5-6, most of them having migrated from Trabzon, Van, Baberd and other places.

There is a need to argue that the Armenian public and religious organizations did not provide full assistance to the Armenian refugees who had escaped the Hamidian massacres. This was conditioned by the fact that the entire attention of all Armenians was focused on the mass murder in the Western Armenia and Armenian-populated areas of Asia Minor as well as on giving help to the rebels of Sassoun and Zeitun. Hence, the refugees who had reached the Caucasian Vicegerency found themselves in the center of improper attention.

¹⁷ Sedrakyan (Melik-Arakelyan, 1845-1906) Aristakes Sedrak - a philologist, historian, clergyman, bishop, member of the Echmiadzin Congregation. He was a bishop in 1882. In 1869-1882 Aristakes Sedrakyan was the abbot of St. Karapet in Yerndjak and St. Gayane in Etchmiatsin. He was the leader of the Armenian Dioceses of Tatev, Artsakh, Georgian Imeretia and Astrakhan.

¹⁸ NAA, f. 28, l. 1, d. 967, n. 34.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 10-93.

Except of that, the inadequate aid to the refugees was conditioned by the anti-Armenian attitude of the Russian government and, especially, the Caucasian vicegerent G. Golitsin. By the directive of November 1901, addressed to the governors, Golitsin ordered to inform the refugees, having been resided in the Caucasus after 1893, that they should leave the territory of the Empire by their own will, and they would be helped in this case only. And those who had no desire to leave “the Russian soil” were obliged to become Russian subjects, and they would be given a “proper permit”²⁰. In this case, they and their generations would have been given permission to obtain real estate in cities after twenty years they were granted citizenship. These rules were related to those being sheltered in the Russian Empire up to February 1, 1901. Those who came after that period should have been deported from the empire²¹. In addition, the Armenian public organizations and newly formed national parties did not have enough experience and skill to assist the refugees.

***Translated from Armenian
by V. M. Gharakhanyan***

²⁰ "Murc", 1901, № 11, p. 246.

²¹ Ananun D., Social development of Russian Armenians, vol.3 (1901-1918), Venice, 1926, p. 1-12 (In Arm.).