

"The Forty Days of Musa Dagh"  
An Epic of Persecution

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«Days of misfortune pass and are gone,  
Like the days of winter, they come and they go.  
The sorrows of men do not last very long,  
Like the buyers in shops, they come and go.

Persecution and blood lash the people to tears,  
The caravans, they come and they go,  
And men spring up in the garden of earth,  
Whether henbane or balsam, they come and they go...»

(Armenian folk-song)

Before we can penetrate into the heart of this remarkably rich novel (1), we shall have to say something about its «story», the historical events of the Forty Days, the bare framework of the novel. Yet the word «bare» is inappropriate here, nor is it just to speak of the «heart» of the novel, for this - the inner history of individual spirits - is so inextricably bound up with the outward events of the narrative and the ethical pronouncements to which these give birth, that even to speak of them under the metaphor of different parts of the same body is entirely misleading. But I cannot see that the critic of so little-known a novel may make use of any other mode of approach.

The years 1894-5 were marked by the first wholesale massacres of Armenians in Turkey, under the Sultan Abdul Hamid. There were various reasons for these terrible events, of which the religious division between Moslem and Christian was perhaps the very least important. The Armenians, stateless since the middle ages, had never been assimilated into the Ottoman Empire: an ancient race, with a tenacious culture of their own, they had retained their language (and not merely as a colloquial tongue), their customs and their crafts. King Tiridates of Armenia, converted to Christianity during the latter part of the third century, is said to be the first ruler in the world to have adopted the Christian belief as his State religion. And since that time an extensive Armenian literature has accumulated, in both poetry and prose, mainly of a religious nature. As a monument to later Armenian culture, a thesaurus of the language was compiled in 1836, which gave Latin and Greek equivalents for every word, and of which the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* remarks that, at that time, there was no dictionary of any language comparable for exhaustiveness and accuracy. To the more warlike Turks the Armenians seemed, in Werfel's words, «a race of bookworms»; and Toynbee remarks that «the Armenians may be trusted to establish a school

in every hamlet.» The very individuality, distinctness and tenacity of culture of the Armenians, along with their adroitness both in business and the peasant crafts, might well be expected to arouse the resentment of their neighbours and rulers.

Official justifications of the massacres were based on the growing pro-Russian feeling among the Armenians (several of the leading Russian generals in the 1877 war against Turkey were Armenian) and the existence of a revolutionary movement. The European powers took polite exception to the bloodshed and Gladstone denounced Abdul Hamid as «the Great Assassin». But no action was taken.

That Abdul Hamid's arguments were not wholly irrational was indicated by the happenings of 1908, when Armenian intellectuals joined with the Young Turkish movement (the «Committee for Union and Progress») in overthrowing the Sultan and the old régime. But in spite of this co-operation the Armenians suffered a far worse fate, with the outbreak of the Great War, under the Young Turks. Armenians everywhere in the Ottoman Empire — often whole villages — were deported to the uninhabitable regions of the Mesopotamian deserts. The declared policy of the government was: «extermination of the race». The young men were generally murdered at the outset and, of the convoys, more than half died before reaching their destination. Eye-witness accounts tell the usual dreadful story of sickness, rape, starvation, thirst, madness. The reasons given for this planned extermination were much the same as in the earlier massacres: in short, the Armenian communities were accused of being a fifth column within the Ottoman Empire, intriguing with the advancing Russian forces. Again there were protests from some of the European Powers — stronger protests this time, since France and England were at war with Turkey and so could use the atrocities as propaganda. But little was done to help the victims. And indeed, whatever the Great Powers had done in the pre-War years had merely served — as is usually the case — to worsen the lot of the Armenians. Italy, France, Germany, Austria, Russia, Britain — they had all intrigued over the body of the «sick man», and their intrigues had inevitably involved the one large Christian minority, the Armenians. Furthermore, after the counter-revolution of 1909, a staff of German officers had helped to reform the Turkish army, a British admiral had occupied himself with the navy, and French and Italian officers had reconstructed the gendarmerie. In such an atmosphere of moral miasma as prevailed in 1914-15, it was only to be expected that non-official bodies alone would turn to the rescue of the persecuted Armenians — American missionaries and teachers, German pastors, Dutch nurses, English residents, Turkish peasants. The end of it was that of the estimated pre-War Armenian population of Turkey, 1,300,000, one half perished during the deportations and accompanying slaughter (2).

In a collection of documents laid before Parliament by Viscount Bryce in 1916 and published under the title *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire* there are papers referring to the defence of Musa Dagh, which the editor (Arnold Toynbee) describes as «the single happy incident in the national tragedy of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire». The Ar-

menians living in Yoghonoluk and the other villages on the slopes of Musa Dagh, «the Mountain of Moses», which rises sheer from the sea on the Syrian coast near Antioch, received their deportation orders at a later date and had therefore had an opportunity to see and hear what had happened to their friends. They chose to die on their own mountain, rather than on the terrible journey to the deserts, and with a few guns, flocks and some food they took refuge behind the natural fortifications of Musa Dagh. They numbered roughly four thousand, of whom less than a quarter were grown men. Here, in spite of not being a military race, they resisted full-scale attacks made by the Turkish army for forty days (according to the documents, fifty-three), and just as their supplies had finally given out and it was clear they could survive no longer, a French cruiser, noticing the banner hung out over the sea, came to their rescue and transported them to a British refugee camp at Port Said.

The moral we are meant to deduce from the official documents — they were published as propaganda against the enemy — is of course that the gallant outnumbered Armenians had triumphed over the cruel wily Turks. It was to be one of those simple adventure stories — so uncommon in modern warfare — where a downtrodden Right emerges amazingly victorious over a stupendous Might. The Word of God spoken with unambiguous clarity. But for Werfel the novelist the moral is something very different.

## II

The main events of the novel correspond to actual events mentioned in the documents: the almost insuperable difficulties of the undertaking, the storm which ruins much of their provisions at the outset, the election by ballot of a committee of defence, the surprise attack by the besieged on the besiegers, the primitive battering-ram used to propel boulders down the slopes against the Turks, the banner with its inscription, «Christians in Need. Help.» But it is exactly in those points where the novel departs from the documents that the importance, the value, the tremendous contemporary significance of the former lie. Those differences which relate to the invented characters of the novel will have to be left till later, while we now glance at the difference in tone and intention, in explicit remark and implicit beliefs, between the compilers of the documents and the writer of the novel.

First of all, the simplest distinction: the mastery of the artist-art as distinct from documentary. Here is an extract from a «Statement by Two Red Cross Nurses of Danish Nationality» describing events at Erzindjan (east-central Turkey):

«A soldier attached to our staff as cobbler said to Sister B.: «I am now forty-six years old, and yet I am taken for military service, although I have paid my exemption-tax regularly every year. I have never done anything against the Government, and now they are taking from me my whole family, my seventy-year-old mother, my wife and five children, and I do not know where they are going.» He was especially affected by the thought of his little

daughter, a year and a half old; 'She is so sweet. She has such pretty eyes'; he wept like a child. The next day he came back; «I know the truth. They are all dead.» And it was only too true...»

With this we may compare the following passage from the (translated) novel:

«A shifting carpet woven with the threads of blood-stained destinies. It is always the same... Here, for instance, a man of forty-six, in good clothes, an engineer. It needs many cudgel blows to get him away from his wife and children. His youngest is about one and a half. This man is to be enrolled in a labour battalion, for road-making. He stumbles in the long line of men and shuffles, gibbering like a half-wit: «I never missed paying my bedel... paying my bedel.» Suddenly he grips hold of his neighbour. «You've never seen such a lovely baby»... A torrent of sentimental agony. «Why, the girl had eyes as big as plates. If only I could, I'd crawl after them on my belly like a snake.» And he shuffles on, enveloped in his grief, completely isolated. That evening they lie down to rest on a hillside. Long after midnight he shakes the same neighbour out of his sleep. «They're all dead now». He is perfectly calm.»

The second passage, though perhaps based on the first (in both the man is forty-six, the daughter a year and a half), is in a different class. It is, in fact, more real — it is too real to be good propaganda (which is provided satisfactorily by the first passage). The soldier of the document «wept like a child»: the touching prerogative of «our allies». But the soldier of the novel was «gibbering like a half-wit»: and his «torrent of sentimental agony» drowns all distinction between ally and enemy, between political right and wrong, between Moslem and Christian. We would stop that torrent, but we are given to understand that reprisal, revenge and all the devices of war can only increase it all — the torrents of sentimental agony, the gibbering of half-wits.

Similarly this letter from members of the German Missions Staff in Turkey to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs, describing conditions in Aleppo:

«All this happens under the eyes of high Turkish officials. There are forty or fifty emaciated phantoms crowded into the compound opposite our school. They are women out of their mind; they have forgotten how to eat; when one offers them bread, they throw it aside with indifference. They only groan and wait for death.»

This letter may well have been the basis for the description of the desert concentration camps which Werfel puts into the mouth of the shocked Turkish officer in the second «Interlude of the Gods»:

«THE CAPTAIN: «They're no longer human... Ghosts... But not the ghosts of human beings... the ghosts of apes. It takes them a long time to die, because they chew grass and can sometimes get hold of a piece of bread... But the worst thing is that they're all

too weak to bury their tens of thousands of corpses... Deir ez-Zor is a horrible cloaca of death...»

**THE OLD SHEIKH** (after a long pause): «And how can they be helped?»

**THE CAPTAIN:** «Helped? The best anyone could do for them would be to kill them all off in one day... Their dehumanized misery is so great that they have ceased to be able to distinguish between friend and enemy... Whenever I came into a camp, they came round me in swarms. Usually there were only women and old men, all half naked... They roared with hunger... The women scraped up my horse's dung to pick out the undigested oat-grains...»

The document is horrible, but the extract from the novel is terrible. The first is likely to arouse our emotions against the Turks; the second acts as a warning — it is possible for man to turn his fellow-men into animals. The victims, in the novel, are not «injured innocents» — those things that may soothe a balm to those who befriend them in words or deeds — they are «dehumanized» creatures, who cannot be helped, for whom right and wrong, friend and enemy, has no meaning. It is not Pity that is aroused in the reader but that less specious and perhaps more useful emotion, Terror.

Occasionally in the documents one hears the overt tones of the propagandist. The American mission at Van had first harboured Armenian refugees, and later, when the advancing Russians had captured the town, was asked to take care of Turkish refugees. Here is the authentic voice of the Christian proselytiser:

«The effect on its followers of the religion of Islam was never more strongly contrasted with Christianity. While the Armenian refugees had been mutually helpful and self-sacrificing, these Moslems showed themselves absolutely selfish, callous and indifferent to each other's suffering. Where the Armenians had been cheery and hopeful, and had clung to life with wonderful vitality, the Moslems, with no faith in God and no hope of a future life, bereft now of hope in this life, died like flies of the prevailing dysentery from lack of stamina and the will to live».

That Armenians who died of dysentery should be the victims of Turkish inhumanity whereas Turks who died of the same disease should be the victims of their own lack of faith in God and of «the will to live», savours of that detestable species of war-time «logic» — the logic of hate — to which we have grown accustomed during the last decade. All races, all religions, are capable of dying of dysentery; and of committing atrocities. Werfel's own attitude is nearer to that of the impersonal scientific historian on this point.

The atrocities have been revealed in their true light, as crimes incidental to an abnormal process, which all parties have committed in turn, and not as the peculiar practice of one denomination and nationality (3).

Werfel presents the Turkish-Moslem case in all fairness. At the meeting of the mystical order of dervishes called «the thieves of hearts» attended by Johannes Lepsius (the German pastor who is working for Armenian relief), the Türbedar, «guardian of the tombs of sultans and holy men», throws the blame for the massacres on the Western powers whose «progress» inspired the Young Turks to overthrow the Sultan:

«At the [Berlin] Congress you Europeans began to meddle in the domestic affairs of the empire. You urged reforms. You wanted to buy Allah and our religion of us, for shabby sums. The Armenians were your commercial travellers...»

The Türbedar's strong arguments, the force of his reasoning — «Do we send you missionaries, as you us? You only send out the cross before you so that the Baghdad railway and the oil trusts may pay better dividends...» — help to preserve the essential balance of the novel, which might otherwise seem (since we tend, when we ourselves are not directly implicated, to take the side of the «underdog») to be heavily weighed in favour of Christian and European values. Yet when, after describing the Armenians in Turkey as an electric wire which «conducted your devil's restlessness into the midst of our peace», the Türbedar cries: «Can't you yourself see the justice of God in these events?», we feel that if this is logic (and it appears to be) then logic is of no use. Neither the Türbedar's logic nor the logic which the Christian lady brought to bear on the incidence of dysentery among Mohammedans. We need something that is beyond logic. And more hopeful than argument or logic of any kind is the unofficial, human, behaviour of many of the Turkish villagers related in the chapter called «The Great Assembly»:

«Often, as he rode about his district, a surprised mudir would pull up in the village street, where he had just read out his decree of banishment, to watch Turks and Armenians mingle their tears. He would marvel as, before an Armenian house, its Turkish neighbours stood and wailed, calling after its dazed and tearless inhabitants, who without looking back were leaving the doors of their old home: «May God pity you!» And more, loading them with provisions for the road, with costly presents, a goat or even a mule...»

All this, so to speak, is ground which must be cleared before Werfel can come to grips with the real problem of the novel... and we find that this, eventually, is no problem at all. For the novel's theme is **Persecution**. Not an argument over the rights or wrongs of persecution, its inevitability or avoidability — but simply a painfully detailed «psychology» of persecution: the printed words on the page collapse sickeningly beneath us and we fall headlong into the experience of persecution. Persecution, even today, is for most of us something we read about in the newspapers; it happens in Germany, or Whitechapel. It happens everywhere and always: and yet most of us never find out what it is and what it really means. Systematically breaking down all the defences — of false logic, cultivated scepticism, sentimentality — which we erect against the attacks of unpalatable knowledge, Franz Werfel brings us suddenly face to face with it: the experience of the victim.

III

A study of persecution divides into two related parts: the experience of the persecutor and the experience of the persecuted. Firstly, how does persecution begin? A governmental order is not in itself the beginning. And the stages by which the common human emotions of irritation at another's «differentness» or smarter business sense, or jealousy of his house and furniture, or suppressed desire for his «foreign-looking» wife — the stages by which these feelings (which are certainly not confined to any one race or religion) pass into murder, rape and looting, are dramatically realised in «The Great Assembly». I can quote only a brief extract:

«These saptiehs [Turkish police] were not all brutes. It is even probable that most of them were good, plain, middling sort of people. But what can a saptieh do? He is under stringent orders to reach such and such a point with his whole convoy by such a scheduled hour. His heart may be in perfect sympathy with the screaming mother who tries to snatch her child out of a ditch, flings herself down on the road, and claws the earth. No use to talk to her. She's wasted minutes already, and it's still six miles to the next halt. A mad scream from a thousand throats. Why did not these crowds, weak as they were, hurl themselves on the saptieh and his mates, disarm them, and tear them into shreds? Perhaps the policemen were in constant terror of such assault, which would have finished them. And so — one of them fires a shot. The rest whip out their swords to beat the defenceless cruelly with the blades. And, with this blood, another emotion comes to life in the excited saptiehs — their old itch for the women of the accursed race. In these helpless women you possess more than a human being — in very truth you possess the God of your enemy. Afterwards, the saptiehs scarcely knew how it all had happened».

Man's recognition of humanity, of the peculiar worth of being a man, is — the book tells us — so easily lost. And once lost, it is difficult to recover. After the first beating, the first killing, the first atomic bomb, the others follow quickly, painlessly. A little thing like what we euphemistically call «losing one's temper» can lead directly to action which denies all that we ever told ourselves about the «sacredness» of human life. And once the principle of force is admitted there is no logical turning back. Talaat Bey, the Turkish Minister of the Interior at the time of these events, is said to have made the following pronouncement in an interview for the *Berliner Tageblatt*:

The sad events that have occurred in Armenia have prevented my sleeping well at night. We have been reproached for making no distinction between the innocent Armenians and the guilty; but that was utterly impossible, in view of the fact that those who were innocent today might be guilty tomorrow.»

And he was absolutely logical and correct — given the premises which most cultivated Europeans readily give themselves today. The only good Armenian is a dead Armenian. The only good German is a dead German. We must praise Talaat Bey and the inventors of the latter slogan for their penetrative insight and transparent honesty. They are quite right. Once the principle of physical violence is accepted, there can be no distinction between the innocent and the guilty. Force, the instrument supposedly for exterminating the guilty, is precisely that great instrument which produces guilt, and in terrifying, ever-increasing ratios. Force is always tending to the extermination of the race that uses it -- the human race — the last war seems to indicate that. But apparently it is left to a work of art, a mere novel, to prove it. This study of persecution is a microscopic scrutiny of a stage in the slow process which violence goes through in its journey towards its final end: the destruction of human life.

Werfel achieves this proof, as I have remarked, by systematically demolishing our various kinds of mental defence — pseudo-logic, «cold commonsense», «historical necessity», wishful thinking, rationalization — by precluding the possibility of exercising the bad mental and moral habits which we ourselves, aided energetically by politicians, philosophers and public figures of all descriptions, have encouraged in ourselves.

One of the chief defences is the conception that there is a difference of kind between the professional soldier, the regular, with his rifle or bombing plane on the one hand, and, on the other, the «thug», the Turkish saptich, the Nazi brute with his rubber truncheon. But there is no real distinction: a mere circumstance may suffice to make one pass into the other.

And that is why anti-German atrocity propaganda is so irrelevant, as anti-racial propaganda. A country that drops bombs from aeroplanes can register only aesthetic — not moral — disapproval of a country that makes lampshades from the skins of its victims. Werfel is most concerned with atrocities committed at close quarters, in «hot blood» and against defenceless victims: but he makes no suggestion that this is in any way more disgusting than the warfare in Europe. It is even more «innocent»: at least there is a possibility of redemption among thugs and killers which seems to be denied to the users of atomic bombs — we exponents of modern warfare, like the members of a firing-party, tell ourselves: surely it was our gun that held the blank cartridge. As the villagers prepare for their secret exodus to the mountain, Werfel reminds us of Europe:

«...there the dog-fight was being conducted with all modern conveniences, according to the most advanced scientific principles, not with the innocent blood-lust of the beast of passion, but with the mathematical thoroughness and precision of the beast of intellect.»

«Intellect» and «passion»: these are accidents of circumstance: the «beastliness» is the same.

Another common defence mechanism, a protective skin for the conscience which has been growing for many centuries, is the idea that «suffer-

ing refines», and therefore cannot be an entirely deplorable thing after all. But even the writers of the eye-witness accounts in *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire* — eager as they were to praise the Armenians at the expense of the enemy Turks — were too close to the reality to be able to suggest this. And Werfel blows this consoling notion sky high. Part of the poetic symbolism of the novel lies in the quiet suggestion that Musa Dagh is a kind of Garden of Eden:

«The flower-strewn meadows of its eastern slopes, the fat pasturage of its many-folded flanks, its lithe orchards of apricot, vine and orange around its feet, its quiet, as of protecting seraphim — all this seemed scarcely touched by the fall of man, under which, in rocky melancholy, the rest of Asia Minor mourns.»

But the fleeing Armenians bring with them to Musa Dagh the angel with the flaming sword who turns Paradise to a gutted wilderness: the last desperate device of the defenders is to set fire to the mountain. And the settlement, right from the start, is far from being a Utopian community: the Armenians hang on firmly to their social and financial class-distinctions, and eventually spy fever, food-stealing, disloyalty, apathy, personal antipathies, jealousy and egotism prove to be enemies just as dangerous as the Turkish army. On the thirty-third day of the defence, the Agha Rifaat Bereket, a pious Moslem of pre-revolutionary sympathies and one of «the thieves of hearts», obtains admission to the camp and, though he has visited the worst of the deportation camps, is sickened by what he sees:

«The savage, feverish masks of men grimaced round him avidly. Waving arms, as thin as twigs, thrust out of tattered sleeves. Little children close up to his face, as the women begged. Nearly all these children had swollen heads, on the thinnest necks, and their huge, staring eyes had a knowledge in them, forbidden the children of humankind. The Agha perceived that not even the most brutal convoy could, in its effects, be more dehumanizing than this isolation, this cutting off. He believed that man, by world leaders, and by how much this draining off of the spirit, was more cruel than the massacre of the body. The most horrible thing that had been done was, not that a whole people had been exterminated, but that a whole people, God's children, had been dehumanized. The sin of Enver, striking these Armenians, had struck Allah. Since in them, as in all other men, even unbelievers, Allah dwells. And who so degrades His dignity in the creature, degrades the Creator in his victim. This, then, is God-murder, the sin which, to the end of time, is never forgiven.»

To the old man, it felt as though he were walking through clouds of ashes, the thick death-cloud of the whole burnt-up Armenian race rising between time and eternity.

Suffering, on this scale, does not refine; it «dehumanizes». And nor does continued persecution, of however mild or spasmodic a nature, tend to improve the character of a minority; a race which has no State of its own, to

which it can appeal without having to beg favours or buy them, is bound to develop certain unattractive traits among some of its members. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* has a remark which is relevant here:

The want of courage and self-reliance, the difficulty in truth and honesty sometimes noticed in connexion with them [the Armenians], are doubtless due to long servitude under an unsympathetic government.

But the effects of persecution — the spiritual disasters resultant on this kind of «refinement» — are most persuasively, most finely, most poignantly brought out — and agonisingly thrust upon us — in Werfel's depiction of the people of his story: especially Gabriel Bagradian, Juliette, Kilikian. And these we must still leave till later.

Yet Werfel's most successful stratagem in his attack on our muffled sensibilities is his consistent avoidance of overt moralising, preaching, and his continual use, instead, of a telling irony. (There is something Swiftian here). Irony is integral to the book, but there are several instances which are too good not to quote. The Armenian camp has been unmolested for over a week: unknown to the refugees, the authorities have had something more important to contend with — a violent outbreak of spotted typhus which originated with the masses of putrescent Armenian corpses lying in the Mesopotamian deserts:

«The wordly wisdom of Talaat Bey, in the Serail Palace of the ministry, might well have been confounded by the perception of what strange results may emerge from any attempt to exterminate a whole people. But neither he nor Enver let it perturb them. Power and the dullest insensitivity have gone together ever since there has been a world...»

«Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind...»

Perhaps the finest example of this quiet, ferocious irony is Werfel's account of how the rescue of the refugees came about — a complete departure from the actual facts, of course. One of the village teachers, Hrand Oskanian, off his head with jealousy, hurt pride and the general desperation, has become the leader of a small suicide cult. There is no God — he teaches — the world is a lump of dung spinning in space; but there is one way in which man can show his power and spite this non-existent God: and that is by committing suicide. This will spite the Turks as well. On the fortieth night, Oskanian and his four converts gather on the edge of the mountain, ready to throw themselves into the sea. The three women jump first, leaving the prophet with his stern male disciple. When Oskanian refuses to jump till sunrise, the latter suspects his leader of backsliding; in the ensuing struggle the disciple is flung over the cliff. Oskanian, hopping around insanely, falls over a flagpole — the banner «Christian in Need. Help» which the wind

had blown over long before. He picks it up, shoulders it without knowing what he is doing, and continues his antics. The French cruiser Guichen notices these mad wavings and signals an answer back. But Oskanian, consumed with the desire to escape the consequences of his guilt, steps too far and the weight of the flagpole draws him over the cliff-edge:

«At that minute the twelve-inch guns of the Guichen halted the Turks with a shell that crashed down into Suedia».

That such a significant event — yet what does it signify that the Armenians should be rescued, now? — should hang on the inglorious twitchings of an almost mindless body, is by itself enough to assure the reader that the novel is more than a thrilling adventure story.

The final ironical situation — it is part of the personal tragedy of the novel's chief character — occurs with the subsequent landing of the fleet-commander, the French rear-admiral, and his ceremonial inspection of the locale of so heroic an action. Gabriel Bagradian, as the Armenian commander, does his best to rise to the occasion by asking the admiral to accept, «in the name of the French nation», the two howitzers captured from the Turks by his young son (who was later killed). It is found impossible to move them to the ship, however, and they have to be blown up. The admiral then asks for an account of the defence, while Gabriel grows more and more impatient:

«What did these electro-plated bigwigs know of the Armenian destiny, of the gradual, slow undermining of every individual life up there? His impatience became tinged with disgust. Couldn't he simply turn his back on them and walk away?»

The admiral makes a short speech in praise of Gabriel and his «Christian heroism». But this talk of victory, unforgettable deeds, Christian heroism, *la gloire*, is utterly out of place on Musa Dagh at the end of the Forty Days: Gabriel has broken irrevocably with the world in which such words can be spoken and have a meaning:

«As Gabriel bowed the deepest gratitude in answer to this sincerely felt little speech, cordially grasping the rear-admiral's small, thin hand, he casually thought: «Port Said? Alexandria? I? What should I do there? Live in a concentration camp? Why?...»

#### IV

Now, at last, for what I called — not altogether accurately — the «heart» of the novel. There is hardly space in the present essay for a detailed examination of the tragic fate of the four main characters, let alone any discussion of the many lesser persons, all of them portrayed with skill and economy, whose vivid individualities and idiosyncrasies are nonetheless pressed unobtrusively into the book's main theme. Of the four outstanding

figures, one, the priest Ter Hagasun, may be quickly dismissed here: for, monumental as he is, his function is simple enough. The «man of God», iron in his faith, fire in his enthusiasm. Without him and the powerful religious sanctions which he is able to invoke, the camp on Musa Dagh would not hold together for a single day: yet against his account of the rescue — «the evil only happened... to enable God to show us His goodness» — we have to place the unedifying, bitter little farce of the suicide cult. Werfel clearly has the greatest respect for Ter Hagasun, the Moses of the mountain, but he does not propose him either as a possible model for other people or as a typical representative of persecuted humanity. The priest cannot be persecuted, he could only be killed. He is both greater and lesser than Gabriel Bagradian.

Gabriel Bagradian is the hero of the novel. Both of the novel as adventure story and of the novel as tragedy. The former because he has the qualities of a leader and some technical knowledge of warfare: the latter because he is civilised, aware, and thoroughly articulate (4). Born, of wealthy parents, in an Armenian village which he left at the age of twelve, he has spent twenty-three years in Paris, marrying a French woman and living the life of a cultured *déraciné*: a scholar, a *bel esprit*, an archaeologist, a historian of art, a philosopher. He has almost forgotten that he was ever an Armenian. «Massacre and torture he only knew through books and stories». With his wife and son he returns to Yeghonoluk on family business and is trapped by the outbreak of war in Paris. His Armenian blood quickly begins to re-assert itself and the Parisian years fall away. It is he who first senses the coming persecution:

«I heard all kinds of disturbing things — but that's not the point. Perhaps, really, very little may have changed. But it always comes suddenly, like a desert storm. It's in my bones. My ancestors in me, who suffered incredible things, can feel it. My whole body feels it. No, Juliette, you can't understand! Nobody could understand who hasn't been hated because of his race».

— and it is he who leads the exodus to Musa Dagh and takes responsibility for the camp's defence. But, «the gently nurtured cannot do butcher's work unpunished, though right may be a thousand times on their side.»

Gabriel's French wife, Juliette, who can feel little but antipathy for the unpolished Armenians, is the symbol of the «average person», unacquainted with persecution, confident in the strength, rectitude and protection of her country. She cannot adjust herself to the way of life of a refugee and, more as an act of pitiful defiance than anything else, she commits adultery with the other «outsider» on the mountain, a nomadic Greek-French-American. This is surely the most unpornographic adultery in all literature: its painfulness made almost unbearable by the doubt as to whether she is in her right mind when committing it or in the early stages of fever. At the end, her self-respect gone, her marriage in ruins, her beauty destroyed, she searches madly for a dress in which to greet the French naval officers — yes, there is a happy ending, of a sort, for her: