

THE CROSSING PLACE

- Day 9 All horses sent back to Kharput.
Day 13 200 lira levied by zaptieh. Zaptieh disappear.
Day 15 Kurdish 'guard' take 150 men and butcher them, then rob convoy. Joined by another convoy from Sivas. Numbers swell to 18000.
Days 25-34 Harassed by villagers. Many women taken.
Day 40 Eastern Euphrates. Blood-stained clothes on river-bank; 200 bodies in water. Armenians forced to pay to avoid being thrown in river.
Day 52 Kurds take everything, including clothes.
Day 52-9 Naked, without food or water. Women bent double from shame. Hundreds die beneath hot sun. Forced to pay for water. Money hidden in hair, mouth, genitals. Many throw themselves into the wells. Arab villagers give them pieces of cloth out of pity.
Day 60 300 remain from 18000.
Day 64 Men and the sick burned to death.
Day 70 150 arrive in Aleppo.

When I rose after several hours of reading such accounts, I felt dazed and numb. I walked back into the centre of Aleppo, through the high, narrow streets with their 1950s cars and the clattering souks. But I could not erase the images of the massacres. I carried on walking until well after dark and by the time I returned to my hotel had decided to try and find out more. One place in particular had struck me - a certain cave at Shadaddie. I rearranged my plans: I took Torkom's map and a letter of introduction and left Aleppo for the desert.

South from the town of Hassakeh, the road ran straight ahead of the bus for mile upon mile. It dipped and rose and tapered towards a low horizon, but did not change direction. Beside it the telegraph poles echoed into the distance until the heat-haze dissolved everything into a shimmering mass. On Torkom's map, Shadaddie was no more than a dot in the desert. A thin arrow pointed down to it from Ras ul-Ain. Now it has become an oil-drilling station and in one of the pre-fab homes I found a technician who nodded when I gave him Torkom's letter: yes, he knew about the cave.

The technician drove me out of the town in a battered jeep. I sat

PRELUDE

half-hidden in the back and at the checkpoints crouched down behind the seat; we were now close to the Iraqi border and the oilfields were well guarded.

A dry wind swept through the flaps of the jeep. It sped out across the desert and into the jumble of hillocks ahead. It was a cool, unrelenting wind and in places it had scoured the sand from the bedrock and the quartzite gleamed beneath it as white as bone. Nothing grew here. The only things that moved were the lifeless profiles of the nodding-donkey pumps. We left the road and slowed on to a rutted track. All around it were the egg-like shapes of compacted dunes. We bumped along the track until the dunes gave way to a wide depression. The technician stopped the jeep and pulled on the hand-brake. Lighting a cigarette, he pointed into the hollow.

Flash-floods had cut a deep gulch which pushed down into the rock below. I followed its dry pipe-like channel to where it opened out suddenly into the mouth of a cave. Peering into the cave-mouth, I could see the chamber spread out as if from the lantern of a dome. I dropped down onto a damp, muddy floor. Three startled doves flew out through the skylight. At the foot of one wall, where the sun fell on it, was a green cushion of moss. Down to one side a passage led away into the darkness. The air was warm and heavy and I felt that here, if anywhere, was the Armenian story – hidden inside a muddy cupola, in an area sealed off by state secrecy, tucked away and buried in a hollow amongst a thousand other hollows, beneath the crust of a desert that stretched for hundreds and hundreds of miles in every direction. Here was where Armenia had ended.

I turned on a torch and went down the passage. There was no sign at all of what had happened, nothing to show that it had ever been anything but a vast storm-drain for the desert.

But for the zaptieh, it had provided a ready-made solution. As the mountains were emptied of Armenians so the Syrian desert filled up. The order came from Constantinople to clean up the area. All sorts of methods were adopted. Shooting was slow. Some were driven into the river. A great many simply perished from disease and hunger and thirst. Shadaddie provided its own natural apparatus. The passage was very long and very roomy.

The guards brought the Armenians here and pushed them in by the thousand; as more fell in so the first ones were forced down the passage. Then the guards dragged scrub to the entrance and set fire

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to it. That night they kept a watch over the cave, camping on the edge of the hollow. Then they returned to the town.

They might have got away with it (are there other Shadaddies that went unreported?), had a young boy not been able to get enough air from the depths of the tunnel to survive and, three days later, to crawl over the bodies and the ashes of the fire, back up to the desert.

The passage went on, curving and dipping in ways I could only imagine. I could see little in the yellow tube of light. The air became still and I could no longer feel the breeze from the entrance. I felt drawn on into the tunnel by a strange irresponsible urge. Each foot-fall seemed to take me further from the familiar. I felt a huge emptiness behind me – but a bigger one in front. I was trespassing, a grave-robber motivated by something darker than greed: I was driven by curiosity. I knew there was nothing I would find, but I carried on. I carried on without really thinking. I carried on because to turn back was to lose what there was left of Armenia.

My feet slid and splashed through unseen puddles. I steadied myself with a hand on the damp wall. I could feel the tunnel narrow and I began to stoop. Then one foot slipped on a mud bank and the torch spun out of my hand; it clanged against a rock and went out.

For several minutes I squatted there, quite still. I passed a hand in front of my face, and saw nothing. I turned my head one way and then the other, and soon did not know from which way I had come. I tried to imagine the smell of smoke seeping down the tunnel, and the noise – would there have been hysteria, or simply quiet resignation? Mothers murmuring for their children in the void, the few men too broken to care, the tangled bodies, the slow suffocation . . .

For an instant I felt the cave spin around me. Submerged by the horror it had witnessed, I was suddenly disoriented.

It passed almost at once. I crouched and ran my hands around my feet, probing for the torch, wrist-deep in the slimy clay, pushing through the cave's damp and formless floor. My fingers struck something hard. I clutched it and with the other hand found the torch, several yards away. I thought it must be another bone but when I switched on the torch it turned out to be a large crystal – five inches of transparent calcite in the shape of an arrowhead.

Outside again, the Armenian technician clapped a hand on my shoulder and smiled for the first time. He was worried I'd got lost. He lit another cigarette and started up the jeep. I wrapped the crystal

in a scarf and buried it away in my bag. It seemed an appropriate relic from the cave: Armenia may have died here, but something survived. A year or so later, in Israel, I took it with my unanswered questions to Jerusalem.

The old city of Jerusalem, the holiest square mile on earth, is divided into four distinct quarters. Three of the quarters – the Jewish, Christian and Muslim quarters – represent the great monotheistic faiths that have sanctified and fought over the city for hundreds of years. The fourth quarter is the Armenian quarter.

That the Armenians have survived in this, the most intense of all cities, is proof of their extraordinary resilience. The Armenian quarter is in fact the longest established of them all – and it remains the most secretive. Much of it lies within its own high walls, where the laity live cheek-by-jowl with the monastic order of St James. It is closed to visitors and only for half an hour each day are non-Armenians allowed inside to visit the cathedral.

Peering into the side chapel of St James, which contains those of the saint's limbs which did not reach Compostela, I heard a voice behind me.

'Can I be of any help?'

A man with black-rimmed glasses introduced himself as George Hintlian, the community's historian. I told him I had seen Ani and Digor and that I had brought something from the cave at Shadaddie.

'I could tell you were not interested just in the cathedral.'

'How could you tell?'

'I could just tell.'

He took me up to his office and I laid the calcite crystal on his desk. He smiled and shook his head in disbelief. 'Let me show you around the quarter.'

For several hours we wandered through a labyrinth of crypts and alleys and sunny courtyards. He took me up over the roofs and in amongst the cloisters to meet the monks, and when I left he said, 'If ever you want to find out more about the Armenians, why not come and spend some time here with us?'

I left the crystal with George and within eighteen months I was back. My Armenian questions would not go away. I told George I wanted to get to Armenia and he said he could help. I stayed in Jerusalem for a few months, in a small, vaulted room on the border