

# "Papa Kuenzler and the Armenians" [to be continued]

Autor(en): [s.n.]

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - (1980)

Heft 1763

PDF erstellt am: **27.06.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-687059>

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# “Papa Kuenzler and the Armenians”

*The Story of a great Swiss Philanthropist*

*At the January 1979 meeting of the Swiss Mercantile and the Nouvelle Société Helvétique Mrs. M. Meier retold the gripping life-story of Jacob Kuenzler (uncle of Mr. Arnold Kuezler of MAT Transport), after having read the book by his daughter Ida Alamuddin. We present Mrs. Meier's summary in instalments.*

In 1970 a book was published by William Heinemann Ltd, London, on Jacob Kuenzler, “Father of the Armenian Orphans”. It was written by one of his daughters, Mrs. Ida Alamuddin, a doctor, and wife of Sheikh Najib Alamuddin of an old Lebanese Druze family (later Chairman of Middle East Airways).

Jacob Kuenzler was born at Hundwil, Appenzell, on 8th March, 1871, the second of seven children of Konrad Kuenzler, a master mason, and his frail young wife.

His childhood was no easy one; his father died early, he was poor, and he was partly brought up by his uncle. Young Kobi had a warm and sensitive nature. He loved work and was quick to learn anything he put his hand to. What he did not like was quarrelling, and whenever tempers rose and heated arguments developed, he would slip away quietly.

At his uncle's he was homesick and unhappy, for his aunt resented him. He stuck it for three years, and then had to go home to look after the younger children, his mother being sick. He spun thread at the local factory part-time and did the housework. When his mother died he was barely twelve. He went to another uncle's who trained him as a carpenter, and he worked there for several years. He joined several choirs, learned to play the zither and always carried a mouth organ.

Since there was no money for him to become a teacher, he applied to the Mission Training Centre, but was rejected for insufficient educational standards. He worked on a building site and then had to go to hospital for an operation for hernia. It was a Deacons' Hospital run by a Protestant nursing order. At 22 he decided to get a deacon's training, which he did in addition to nursing, physiotherapy and bible studies. He had found his true calling and applied for admission to the Order.

His special interest was in surgery, and he studied anatomy. While completing his practical training at Basle's Municipal Hospital he decided to become a teetotaler.

At the hospital he met a young doctor, Hermann Christ who was greatly impressed by Kuenzler's abilities, and when Dr. Christ was in charge of the Medical Mission at Urfa in Turkey, he called the young deacon to become his assistant.

The Mission at Urfa was started in 1895, the year when thousands of Armenians were brutally massacred. There was an orphanage, a medical centre, and, to help Armenian widows, a carpet factory and various workshops. The women were instructed in dressmaking and weaving and the boys in the dyeing of wool, tannery and shoemaking.

Before Jacob Kuenzler left Switzerland, he had to take a crash course in Turkish, Armenian and English. He had to learn to ride, and he bought a saddle which had belonged to a former Swiss cavalry officer – it proved an excellent choice and he used it for all the 25 years he spent in Turkey.

Before leaving he visited his mother's grave and vowed that she would never have to be ashamed of him. The long journey took him by train to Trieste, and from there by boat to Alexandretta in Southern Turkey, at that time the main outlet for the overland trade route from India and Persia. From the port of Alexandretta he went by carriage over the mountains, a slow and hazardous trip. In Aleppo, the Swiss Consul invited him on an excursion arranged for a party of friends who included a young German girl, Elisabeth Bender, daughter of a missionary, who later became his wife.

Dr. Christ had sent a man to Aleppo, called Eckart, a carpet expert, who was to accompany Jacob across the Syrian and Mesopotamian Steppe, across the Euphrates and on to Urfa, the Edessa of ancient times. Of the 60,000 inhabitants, 20,000 were Armenians, 5,000 Assyrians and some Kurds and Arabs.

It was the day before Christmas 1899 that Jacob Kuenzler and his companion rode up to the Mission Centre at Urfa, stiff and tired and

cold. The Medical Mission building was on the edge of the Armenian sector of the town, with the Moslem quarter stretching beyond. Dr. Christ was away, and Jacob began immediately by cleaning up the room serving as operating theatre, and almost at once he had to operate on a patient with acute appendicitis. It was his first operation, but it was an emergency, and he was successful.

Yacoub Effendi, as Kuenzler was called locally, developed a friendship with the Turkish Commissioner of Police, a most useful relationship, for he wanted to open an orphanage and a hospital. Soon the first patients arrived, and Kuenzler was in charge of the nursing staff's training under Dr. Christ.

There are lots of anecdotes in the book about the treatment of Armenians, Kurds and other simple folk, most of them ending on a note of gratitude to Kuenzler's medical and psychological skill. The latter helped him to get money from patients who pretended to be poor – the really poor could not pay. Only occasionally was he taken in.

He often had to make long and dangerous trips, sometimes transporting patients under most terrible conditions back to the hospital. All the time he remembered Elisabeth Bender, and he wrote to her while she was training as a nurse in Perth in Scotland. They were married on 7th November, 1905, and a wonderful partnership began. She was a resolute, resourceful woman and a born organiser. Dr. Christ had been replaced by another Bâlois, Dr. Vischer, and Elisabeth made a happy and cosy home for them all. She took over the management of the kitchens and the nursing staff and worked as an operating sister. When she was expecting her first child she went to her sister's at Safed, for the summers were very hot and intestinal diseases were rife.

In the spring of 1912 they bought a house in the vineyards on the hills, within walking distance of the hospital. When their family had increased to several members, they built a bigger house next door to Dr. Vischer's in Urfa. Apart from their five children, they also cared for an adopted foundling, Rosa. It was a happy family, and the parents spent as much time with the children as possible. Papa was a great story

teller, also read the bible and sang hymns with them. He also worked as a vet and as a dentist.

In order to fully understand Jacob Kuenzler's great achievements, one has to say a few words about the political situation. The Armenian Question arose after the Russo-Turkish war in 1878. Under the pretext of liberating Armenians from their Turkish overlords, Russia annexed more of Georgia and Armenia. Great Britain intervened. Under the Treaty of Berlin the Russians left Erzerum and the Upper Euphrates Valley in return for a promise from the Turks that reforms would be made in the provinces inhabited by Armenians. Thus the Armenians became an instrument of British anti-Russian policy in Turkey, and slowly they were being oppressed; their language was stopped, the schools closed, the property of the Church confiscated and many Armenians exiled to Siberia.

Gradually the situation worsened, and in 1895 the Sultan succumbed to British pressure and agreed to implement the proposed reforms, but was exasperated by foreign interference in his country's affairs that he gave orders for a general massacre of Armenians — 300,000 were killed. This appalling slaughter led to an attack by a group of

Armenians on the Ottoman Bank in the capital in 1896, hoping to attract Western attention to the suffering of their fellow-countrymen. 6,000 Armenians were killed in Constantinople before the very eyes of the Western Powers who were supposedly responsible for their protection.

In the Balkans and South Arabia there had been uprisings against the Turkish Government and these had been put down in bloody massacres. The Union of Progress planned a bloodless revolution in 1909; separatist movements and national minorities became active, and in turn Kurds attacked Turks, Armenians and Assyrians in Eastern Anatolia. The Turks, reacting against the liberal policies of the new leadership, attacked Armenians and killed another 30,000 of them. A year of unrest followed until the government of the Young Turks was firmly established, but the hopes of the minorities remained unfulfilled.

In 1909 Jacob and Elisabeth Kuenzler and their young family went on leave to Switzerland. On returning they carried on their work right up to the war in 1914. When it came nothing changed at first. Dr. Vischer was in Switzerland, was called up and did not return to Urfa until 1919. The Kuenzlers were faced with the well-nigh super-

human task of running the Mission in wartime. Some of Jacob's assistants were called up. Every fund-raising opportunity had to be seized, as all communications with the outside world were cut.

Beds at the hospital had to be kept for soldiers. Elisabeth was busy dipping candles, smoking meat, drying fruit, making corn starch and grape sugar, grinding wheat for flour. Children and servants collected twigs and manure which were made into flat "cakes" dried in the sun, to be used as fuel later.

Jacoub Effendi fell ill with typhoid fever. In mosques and churches they prayed for him. Fighting on all fronts with Turkey went on, and casualty lists lengthened. Lots of Armenians deserted, and the population suffered rough treatment at the hands of the Turkish police.

In March, 1915, eighteen of the more influential families in Urfa were arrested and deported. Over 200 Armenians were taken prisoner. When Jacob had recovered, he went to Aleppo to report the state of affairs to the Consuls of Britain, France, Germany and the USA. But though his statements were put on record, nothing was done — the nations had bigger worries. Things went from bad to worse, all Armenian soldiers were put in labour camps.

*(To be continued)*

## FOR THE GARDENER

### LUPIN (*Lupinus*)



**LUPIN**

Hardy and half hardy annuals and perennials of more than 100 species. Only a few of these species are now grown as they, with their hybrids provide a great variety of lovely plants.

Both annuals and perennials are best propagated from seed which should be sown outdoors from March to August. The small plants should be pricked out and planted in position.

Lupins do best in a good rich, well drained soil, preferably in a sunny position. They do not like lime and care in choosing a site should be taken in this respect. A heavy dressing of manure should be given annually with plenty of liquid manure during dry spells.

Plants should not be moved when once planted out and early staking is

advised. To prolong the flowering season dead spikes should be removed as soon as possible.

Modern Russell Lupins are a variety which come in various and mixed colours looking very handsome when planted in clumps.

Apart from their decorative use Lupins can be used as a green manure as they are capable of obtaining nitrogen from the air.

Species:

*L. polyphyllus*: is the commonest type. Has really lovely leaves and good spikes of dark blue flowers.

*L. arboreus*: (Tree Lupin) is a hardy evergreen which develops into good bushes with yellow and red flowers.

*L. a. Albus*: is the white variety of the Tree Lupin. It is very fragrant.