

# "Papa Kuenzler and the Armenians" [part two]

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# “Papa Kuenzler and the Armenians”

## The Story of a great Swiss Philanthropist, Part II

Deportees from Palestine, the Lebanon and Syria arrived; hospitals were overcrowded and people were dying in the streets. Hundreds and thousands of despairing deportees passed through Urfa before being driven into the deserts of Mesopotamia.

Conditions were ghastly, and Jacob Kuenzler and his wife and staff worked all out. Ida Alamuddin's book is full of horror stories.

Commissioners came, fighting broke out, and no more bread could be obtained; all the bakers were Armenians and they closed their shops. Resistance began. Shelters were dug under the houses and passages tunnelled. With the arrival of Turkish soldiers the siege of the Armenian quarter began. When the young Armenian leader was killed, the older men surrendered. All women and children were to be deported, and though Jacob helped where he could, it was little compared with the enormity of the misery. Hundreds of Armenians were still in hiding. The Europeans were suspected of harbouring “traitors” and their houses searched. Women and children were taken from the Mission to be tortured and left to die. Typhoid broke out and added to the difficulties. But many Armenians were still being hidden in the caves beyond the walls and in private houses. All Jacob's Armenian patients were removed and never seen again but he was allowed to keep the Armenian doctors.

Elisabeth and Jacob worked independently from each other. In Turkish eyes, she was “only a woman” and not capable of much. She and her Assyrian girl assistant would go about the streets, unobtrusively collecting abandoned children. Some of the deserted houses were furnished by Elisabeth and her helpers with goods left in the Mission's care by fleeing Armenians. A couple of her Turkish women friends acted as landladies. Food was the problem.

Everything had to be done in the greatest secrecy. The Turkish police chief closed his eyes to a lot of what went on, for Jacob had successfully operated on his son, and that was his way of showing gratitude.

The bread was baked in Elisabeth's wash house, and the

bigger boys smuggled it to the children's houses. The plight of the ever-growing numbers of refugees passing through Urfa was dreadful, and Elisabeth and her helpers did what they could and more. Jacob kept away so as not to jeopardise his own work at the hospital. Though he smuggled many a human bundle into his house, concealed under vegetables in his saddle bags. The Kuenzlers went to the refugee camps every day to distribute bread and to treat and comfort the sick.

Under the house of Jacob's young Bedouin groom Ali and his wife Animeh was a natural cave used as a hiding place for people on the run until Ali could guide them across the border. Animeh helped Elisabeth to smuggle young girls into Syria, dressed as Bedouins. They left with Animeh and her flock of sheep. Chanoum Effendi (Elisabeth) helped servant girls escape from Turkish houses. The police never found anyone. Another typhoid epidemic broke out, and Jacob visited the sick on horseback all over the town and neighbouring villages. Soon he knew more about typhoid than he could learn from any book. In fact his findings were published later.

His wife contracted typhoid and their son Arnold too. Jacob's days were full – complete responsibility for the overcrowded hospital, medical care of the town that still had 39,000 inhabitants, and his own sick family to worry about.

A new doctor arrived who would not let Jacob practise without a licence, so the hospital was cleared and the dispensary closed. This meant a short holiday for the Kuenzlers, and none too soon.

After Jacob had treated a German major, hospital, operating theatre and dispensary were opened again, for a short time only though. But Jacob knew how to get into the dispensary whenever he needed drugs. And not much later he was able to take up his work fully again. He became an expert on various diseases and on making his own remedies.

Towards the end of 1916 the Armenians who had managed to survive began to emerge from concealment. The Kuenzlers helped where they could in rebuilding their homes. Jacob twice went to Aleppo to collect money from Switzerland

and to buy medical supplies. The trips were fraught with danger; he was even imprisoned once for five days.

In the following winter the persecution of minorities was extended to the Kurds. More refugees arrived, weak, emaciated, starving. Again, Jacob went to Aleppo to get money from the German and US consuls. He scoured the villages for wheat and barley to distribute it amongst the survivors.

When Turkey had lost the war, the British soldiers came to Urfa. They trusted the Kuenzlers and gave Jacob the task of buying large quantities of wheat to be distributed to the hungry population. They asked Elisabeth to organise the building of a landing strip for British planes. With 200 women she cleared a large field. The trust by the British compensated the Kuenzlers somewhat for their disappointment that some Armenians had turned against them. They were also praised by an American mission that they had made the best use of any US money sent to various mission centres.

Armenians were returning in ever larger numbers, and Jacob and Chanoum acted as reception officials, advisers, housing officers, priest and lawyer. Houses were got ready, employment was found for several hundred women in the weaving factory. A school was started in a part of the Protestant Church, which had only partly been damaged by shelling. The bell was rehung, and on the first Sunday in March, 1919, 2,000 people came to the opening ceremony.

Jacob made several more hazardous trips to help people and to get money. Elisabeth accompanied him once, and the British authorities in Aleppo were greatly impressed by her spirited resolve.

In spring 1919 Dr. Vischer returned, at the same time as a small American Red Cross unit arrived. The Kuenzlers went to Switzerland for a well-earned rest, protected by the British on the first part of their dangerous journey. They spent a year in Basle, and Jacob was offered many attractive jobs. Yet they decided to return to Urfa. They gave talks to thousands and collected money for Armenian relief. Names like Leopold Favre, Theophil

Gautier, Krafft-Bonnard and Rigenbach will not easily be forgotten. Jacob Kuenzler also sat exams at the University of Basle and got his Certificate of Proficiency in Medicine and Surgery.

In June 1920 the Vischers came back to Basle with bad news. Turkey under Kemal Pasha was in revolt against the foreign occupation troops. The British in Urfa had been replaced by the French – 14 of their officers were living in Dr. Vischer's house. Fighting broke out and the Kuenzler's house and the hospital were badly damaged. The French finally capitulated, fled, were attacked in the hills and two-thirds of them were killed. The rest escaped or were brought back as prisoners. That was the town the Kuenzlers chose to return to.

Elisabeth remained in Basle to arrange for boarding schools for the children and followed Jacob in the autumn with Rosa, the adopted girl now 18. On his way Jacob made various arrangements with American and German orphanages. When he got home to Urfa, his friends were very happy to have their Jacob Effendi back.

The Kuenzlers had to rebuild and refurnish their home and the hospital. They were accused, too, of being spies, but having friends in all quarters, they were saved from being deported.

Smallpox brought more work again, and Jacob kept the hospital open as long as he could. But one day the Swiss Committee told him there were no more funds available and he had to close it. The American Near East Relief Organisation arrived, the most important philanthropic effort the US had attempted up to then. In the 15 years of its existence, 116 million dollars were spent. Over 130,000 orphans were helped and thousands of refugees were assisted. The Kuenzlers became active members of that great organisation.

First the orphans had to be nursed back to health, and possible relatives were searched for. It was decided to evacuate the orphans to neighbouring countries, those from the South to Syria and the Lebanon, those from the North to Greece and the Caucasus. Papa and Mama Kuenzler, as the children called them, were put in charge of the immense trek to the South. At the beginning of spring 1922 the great exodus started. It was a tremendous undertaking beset with difficulties, weather, blown bridges, illness, accidents, brigands, problems of getting food, etc. but all valiantly and resourcefully overcome by that marvellous couple. Once a convoy of 700 children from the North was ready to leave Urfa. But when their trucks had left and Mama was

finishing her work in the town, the permit for her van had been withdrawn by the Commander who wanted the van himself. She braved the public baths and went to a café – outrageous acts by a woman – and faced the *Wali* and the Commander. Her resoluteness won the day and she got her van!

By September 1922 the great orphan migration came to an end. The Kuenzlers were asked by the US Relief headquarters to take over the orphanage at Ghazir. The decision to leave Urfa was harder for Jacob, for it meant giving up medical work.

It was 23 years to the day since he and his wife had crossed the Euphrates for the first time when they crossed it for the last time. After a few weeks in Basle with their children, they left with their four young daughters to take up their work at Ghazir. On arrival they found 1,400 orphans and the staff in near-revolt. They sorted it all out, got new teachers, and that was the end of the trouble.

A few months after their arrival, on the first Sunday in April 1923, Jacob got a bad infection in his thumb, which led to blood poisoning and finally to the amputation of his right arm. But his family and friends helped him to overcome this tragedy which he bore with the same great courage he had always shown. A long period of re-adjustment followed, but they went on together, he and his wife, to look after the orphans housed in several buildings. They found teachers to take care of 150 blind orphans not wanted by other institutions. Other invalids and cripples were given special care and training.

A rug factory was started which became a flourishing success. A rug was sent to the White House in Washington, and President Coolidge wrote a personal letter of thanks and saw to it that more funds were collected.

Papa was also decorated with the Lebanese Order of Merit.

Many orphans got married and others were helped to get to Europe to be trained and educated. There were fewer and fewer, and in 1930 the orphanage was closed. Papa Kuenzler continued to look after refugee camps near Beirut. He went on fund-raising tours, and they used the money to the best possible advantage by starting soup kitchens and medical care services, and Mama still found work for girls and women and taught them needle-work.

In February 1933, after a big fire, they took on the care of several hundred homeless. New houses were built, each with the name of a Swiss donor. The settlements for widows and old people became

models of their kind. Grain was grown on waste fields. And the youngest refugee children were finally set up in a house in the mountains at Zahlé. Again a feat of organisation, and yet new responsibilities. They also still helped Armenians on the run.

With the aid of the American University of Beirut and financial help from Switzerland Jacob started research experiments into malaria. It was largely due to this that Lebanon and Syria would be cleared of malaria – a large-scale operation of introducing fish into all stagnant ponds and rivers.

He was also concerned with fighting tuberculosis and his findings were of great importance. In 1935, at the age of 64, he went to Palestine and other countries to raise funds. He was disappointed with New York's help, but money arrived again and again, until the sanatorium could be built.

In 1947, when Jacob was 76, he was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Basle for all his great services to humanity and to medicine. Their life slowed down, but the couple could still be seen walking, Papa with his carefully trimmed beard, now white, and Mama on his right, with her hand in his pocket where he had no arm. They had lots of friends and loved being with their grandchildren.

In November 1946, Papa had his first heart attack, and they moved to Ghazir, back to their original house in the Lebanon. He finished his autobiography which was later published "*Kobi, der Lückenbüsser im Dienste des Lebens*".

Papa passed away quietly on 15th January, 1949, surrounded by family and friends. Thus his fervent wish that God would spare him long suffering was granted. The funeral was attended by hundreds of people in spite of a raging storm – friends, representatives of governments, embassies, missions, churches, relief organisations. The Head of the Armenian Catholic Church said:

*"You have loved. You have loved the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the persecuted and the forsaken. This love was the soul of your soul, the heart of your heart. It sustained you for 50 years, for 50 times 365 days. You had only one ideal, one ambition, one impulse in your heart: to help, to comfort, to bring hope, to strengthen faith, to let love shine, to show kindness, truth and godly mercy."*

Jacob Kuenzler received the strength to be all he was from his unshakeable faith that was deeply rooted in his heart. And it applied not only to this extraordinary man, but equally to his devoted wife. Mama took the great loss with the courage expected from a woman with her



strength of character. She was 74 and still fit. She took three children of her recently widowed son and looked after them for over a year. After visiting her daughter in America and whilst staying with her daughter Ida in the Lebanon, she fell and became a cripple. But she still travelled and went to Hundwil, Jacob's birthplace, where a plaque was put up in the village church.

Slowly she grew weaker and finally took to her wheelchair. But she shared in the happiness and disappointments of those around her and kept up a lively interest in world events. She had her 93rd birthday on 9th January, 1968, and died a few days later. Outside, a storm was raging, just as there had been 19 years before when her husband was buried.

At the end of 1971 a small monument was unveiled in Jacob's memory at Walzenhausen. The Commune wanted to honour the memory of their great citizen born 100 years before. The inscription says, "To Jacob Kuenzler, citizen of Walzenhausen, died on 15th January, 1949, in Ghazir in the Lebanon, carpenter, deacon, honorary doctor of medicine, the Saviour and Father of the Armenians. Its home Commune expresses its warm thanks to him on the 100th anniversary of his birth."

This then is the story of Jacob and Elisabeth Kuenzler. In Ida Alamuddin's own words, "They stood for what was highest in life and true religious faith. They believed in deeds rather than words. Goodness and kindness in a human being were of more importance to them than pious words or sermons."

"Papa's deep unquestioning faith brought him the happiness that shone from him, warming and charming all he came into contact with. It made him strong in the face of danger and tragedy which he accepted cheerfully as being God's will. "Mama, though a true believer, lacked so absolute a faith. She was practical and saw through people, hated hypocrisy and false piety. She was too busy looking after others to bother much about the various religious theories. Happiest when looking after children and old people, quiet, modest, perfectly sincere, she had the courage that comes with loving others and disregard of self. In her presence, there was understanding, wisdom, an acceptance of life for what it was, and a great peace."

Mariann Meier

## Ciba-Geigy 1979 World Results

Ciba-Geigy Group operating profit after tax amounted to 327 million Swiss francs in 1979, 33 million francs less than in 1978, despite an 11 per cent increase in Group sales to 9,891 million Swiss francs.

Sales value growth was due chiefly to greater volume. The lag between sales and profit is attributed principally to the inability to raise selling prices sufficiently to cover rising costs. Fixed costs increased appreciably, due to expansion and inflation and raw material prices showed a distinct rise in the second half of the year. Fluctuations in foreign exchange rates, though less marked than in 1978, continued to have a significant effect on profits.

Operating cash flow at 957 million francs was similar to the 1978 level.

Capital expenditure throughout the Group in 1979 amounted to 598 million francs – 44 million francs more than in 1978. Total depreciation on fixed assets was 630 million francs, and hence exceeded capital expenditure.

Research and development expenditure was 62 million francs higher than in 1978. At 824 million francs it represents, as in the preceding year, approximately 8.5 per cent of sales.

At the Annual General Meeting of the Company, to be held on Wednesday 21 May 1980, the Directors will recommend a dividend for 1979 at the same level as in the preceding years, namely 22 francs per share and per participation certificate.



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