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The long shadow of the Genocide: Detwig von Oertzen in Mardin 1917

In the second half of the World War One, the Armenian community in Mardin had already been destroyed to a great extent. Yet even later, it was obvious what had happened. Mardin was one of many cities where German troops were based because of the German-Turkish Pact (*Jehuda L. Wallach, 1976; Carl Mühlmann, 1929*). In addition, it was an important base for the transports to Diyarbakir. Given that the number of Germans in Mardin rose quickly, the army command decided that a priest was necessary. Next to pastoral care, his most important duty was the administration of the so called "Soldatenheim" (soldiers' home). The administrator of the German soldiers' home in Turkey, the priest Hermann Kieser, hired an internationally well known missionary of the German Oriental Mission, Detwig von Oertzen, in 1916 as administrator for the soldiers' home in Yanikoi near Constantinople (*Detwig von Oertzen, 1961. P. 77–78; Martin Tamcke, 2006; Martin Tamcke, 2010; Martin Tamcke, 2011*).

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Detwig Von Oertzen directed the soldiers' home from July till October 1916, then the administration of the soldiers' home in Baghdad was transferred to him. He directed this soldiers' home till the breakdown of the Turkish-German front caused by British attacks (*Detwig von Oertzen, 1961. P. 78–83*) He left Baghdad in the last-minute by rowboat (*Ibid., P. 84*) He then served shortly in a provisional casern in Mosul with his wife (*Ibid.*). As he continued his journey, he received in Aleppo an order to build the soldiers' home in Mardin (*Ibid.*).

Von Oertzen and his wife liked the city of Mardin right away:

Mardin lays beautifully in the lowlands of North Mesopotamia, bordering on the extensions of the Tur Abdin, almost without any greens in the South, with many beautiful houses (...), on the northern face behind the castle with glorious green gardens (*Ibid., P. 84*).

But the man, who managed orphanages for Armenian and Syrian children by order of the German Oriental Mission before he dedicated himself to the Kurds, had an open eye for the situation of the local Christians. His report about the reasons for the vast extinction of this part of the population was characterized by a clear understanding of who is to blame. In retrospect von Oertzen writes in his autobiography:

During the war, hundreds Armenians had been chased away while many, including high ecclesiastical dignitaries, had been driven into the desert to starve to death. Many had been murdered by Turkish police (*Ibid.*).

This was confirmed in the actual meetings with the remaining Christians. Von Oertzen explicitly mentions the conversation with the Patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church, Mar Ignatius Ephraem II Rahmani (1898–1929), who emigrated to the Lebanon only 1920:

He told us how, before the expulsion of the Christians, hundreds of members of his congregation gathered on the roof next to his residence to be blessed for their path to death, a memory which still moved him deeply (*Ibid.*, P. 85).

The bizarreness of such a farewell of an entire community on its passage to death is underscored by a detail communicated to the German priest by the patriarch: the community had gathered in their festive clothes.

His own work was initially difficult. The German military couldn't get a house from the Ottoman military (*Ibid.*, P. 85). Von Oertzen managed to persuade a Kurdish commander by telling him about his life with the Kurds and his works about the Kurdish language. Both had an interest for famous Kurdish poets. Soon a suiting house was found. Three remaining American deaconesses helped to furnish it. The American mission with a doctor and a school was diminished due to the war. One of the three nuns was Swiss. The most important employee was Gustav Schade, who worked in the Salvation Army prior to his military duty. Because the American mission was already missing a priest, von Oertzen also worked there (*Ibid.*, P. 86). He preached, baptized children and celebrated the Eucharist. He left all confessional reservations aside and accepted the common practice to use not one chalice, but one for every member of the congregation, and he accepted the fact that only alcohol free grape juice was used instead of wine. It was a "very nice addition" to his duty that he could serve "the local Christians, Armenians and Syrians" in remembrance of his work in the orphanages in Persia (*Ibid.*, P. 88).

Not only did he visit an orphanage in Diyarbakir, which was once maintained by the Mission, he also took "two Syrian children whose parents were killed" with him to their relatives in Mardin (*Ibid.*, P. 87). The actual reason for his visit were the few Armenians who survived. He held a small devotion for them in a hideout in the ruins. In his opinion, this was only possible because his position in the army hindered the Turks to stop him. ("As officer, no Turk bothered me.") Otherwise he would not have been able to do so.

Von Oertzen quit his work as administrator of the soldiers' home in Mardin in the summer of 1917 and took over the responsibilities of a military chaplain and parish minister in Beirut (*Ibid.*, P. 88–96). In the corresponding passage in his autobiography he says that this did not happen "without very painful experiences in the end", but leaves the reader in the dark about what these experiences were (*Ibid.*, P. 88). The assumption that his commitment to the surviving Armenians and Syrians could have been the reason for such painful experiences at the end of his term of service in the city cannot be verified based on the current text of his autobiography. Von Oertzen, who had to return to Germany from his work in Egypt due to the war before he was called to Turkey, did now start to work in Beirut (*Ibid.*, P. 70–76). He worked in the Orient for the rest of his life.

Von Oertzen's reports remain merely vague. How did he find the survivors in Diyarbakir? Why did he held a devotion in the ruins? It is more than probable

that these survivors were solely Protestant Armenians since believers with Orthodox faith and Catholics most likely wouldn't attend to a Protestant service. In Mardin, he contacted specifically the Patriarch of the Syrian Catholic Church. The cooperation with the American mission was a matter of course for him. But it remains uncertain which networks he could use and who helped him to find the surviving and still threatened Armenians.

What impresses most about his report is: He entered a space which was familiar for his former employer, the German Oriental Mission. But in this space, what bounded him and his former employer to this region didn't exist anymore: the Armenians. The absentees were still present for him in the shape of ruins, of orphans and survivors. The previous events are only vaguely perceptible. But now von Oertzen was seeing only the shadow of the Genocide and the bruises it left, the long shadow of the Genocide which was present through the absentees.

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Длинная тень геноцида: Детвиг фон Эрцен в Мардине в 1917 году

Во второй половине Первой мировой войны армянская община в Мардине была практически полностью уничтожена. А немного позже стало с еще большей степенью очевидно, что армянская община Мардина претерпела невероятные лишения. Мардин был одним из многих городов, в которых, согласно германо-турецкому договору, находились немецкие войска. Кроме этого, Мардин был важной базой на пути в Диярбакир. Учитывая то, что число проживавших немцев в Мардине стремительно увеличивалось, военным командованием было принято решение о необходимости присутствия в городе немецкого священника. Одновременно с обязанностями о пастырской заботе важнейшим возложенным на него поручением была опека над так называемым «солдатенхаймом» (солдатским домом). В связи с чем духовник немецких солдат в Турции священник Герман Кизер в 1916 г. привлек всемирно известного миссионера немецкой восточной миссии Детвига фон Эрцена в качестве духовника для солдат, проживавших в Яникои возле Константинополя.

Ключевые слова: Детвиг фон Эрцен, Мардин, Герман Кизер, Первая мировая война, армянская община.