

Maria, God's Angel  
To Widows and Orphans in Anatolia



M. A. GERBER  
Mother of Many Orphans

One of the most horrific legacies of war are the helpless orphans. Children left to fend for themselves on the streets are a heart-rending consequence of these conflicts. In every age the need to establish homes for orphans has been paramount and universal. Securing shelter, along with clothing, feeding and educating orphans has always been a colossal undertaking. Talking about orphanages, at least in the Christian milieu, the name of George Müller (1805-1898), immediately comes to mind. This mighty Christian and benefactor was born in Kroppenstadt in Prussia. Following his conversion in a house prayer meeting in 1825 and subsequent ordination to the Lutheran ministry, he moved to London to train for missionary service. His primary interest was Jewish evangelism. At this time he met A. N. Groves with whom he formed the 'Scripture Knowledge Institution for Home and Abroad' of the Open Brethren. Before moving to England, he followed with great interest the ministry to orphans in Halle, Germany. In 1835 he started an orphanage in Bristol, England, a notoriously despicable city where many children needed care. Bristol was the most squalid city in all of England. Müller first rented a house, and the institution gradually expanded into a great complex of buildings in the Ashley Down area of the city.

We cannot begin to exhaust the names of the benevolent followers of Christ who gave their lives, time and substance to uplift miserable little waifs. At this point, we reverently extend a posthumous recognition to all those Christians who became mother and father to multitudes of destitute children. We bow with gratitude at their memory. Our account here will deal with one woman, Maria A. Gerber, born May 30, 1858, in a small Swiss village to Christian and Elisabeth Gerber. At birth she was

named Marianne. She was one of their twelve children, growing up on the family farm in a place called Bellelay. Her mother was a seeking soul for many years, often spending nights reading the Bible, praying and weeping. She replaced the expensive family Bible with an inexpensive one as her husband did not want her to use the large, brass-plated edition. The children didn't want her to read the Bible, as they thought this was the cause of her agony. But one glorious day, her clouds were turned to sunshine and her pleas were turned to song! She was redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; she knew it and immediately started to spread her joy around. The whole family was greatly influenced by this change.

Maria was very musical and loved to sing and dance. Her father was proud that Maria had the name of being the most graceful dancer among all the family's friends. But she was a somewhat sickly child and often had to be confined to her room. Shortly after her twentieth birthday Maria was stricken with rheumatic fever, heart trouble, tuberculosis and dropsy. The family was greatly alarmed as the local physician couldn't offer therapy or healing. So they brought a professor specialist from a distant city. The prognosis of the old doctor was that she didn't have long to live. He told the family, "Don't spend more money on trying to find a cure; just give her any food her heart desires, anything she can keep down. She is a dying girl." Maria overheard this conversation from the next room.

Fear gripped her heart that she would die without knowing Jesus Christ personally. She had heard the message of the Savior many times, but had never come to her own decision to follow him. Through those dark hours foreboding continued to haunt her. She fell into unconsciousness many times, but when she was lucid her panic was intensifying. She knew she was not God's child. She grappled with this dread for three days. Finally, the Holy Spirit opened the door of faith in her heart. She cried, "Jesus, I want you to save me from my sins." Christ's peace flooded her soul. He gave her the assurance as stated in Peter's letter: "*who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time*" (1 Peter 1:5). Immediately following her born-again experience, Christ healed her and extended his call: "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...*" (Matthew 28:18).

Maria grasped the promise of her Redeemer-Healer. The risen Christ suddenly became real to her. She heard his voice, "It is done!" Then and there she turned her life over to Jesus Christ. She asked for her clothes so she could get up and get dressed. But her mother had given all her clothing away to the poor! So the family had to scurry around to find something suitable for her to wear from some of the other children. Now in robust health, Maria was eager to start a new life with Jesus. Shortly after that, one of her friends invited her to come to the dance hall, where she had previously spent so many evenings dancing the night away. She felt led to go, and with all her beloved friends lined around the walls waiting for the music to start playing, she asked if she could speak. She said, "I always was the ringleader and caused you to walk on the broad way, but now I want to offer you something better to help you lead a happier life." She read a short passage from the Bible and gave words of exhortation, after which she knelt down right in the middle of the hall and began to pray earnestly. The Holy Spirit was upon her and she wept and pled for the salvation of all those dear young people. She prayed a long prayer and when she opened her eyes she saw that there was nobody left in that dance hall! It was a bold witness and the Lord honored it. Many eventually turned to the Lord. Her pilgrimage of faith is a powerful testimony of how her God led her from that point on, step by step through spiritual battles and many joyful accomplishments, fulfilling his blessed plan for her.

## Maria's Ministry Gets Underway

Then came Christ's command: "...and you shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). She courageously and boldly acted on this call. With Bible in hand she started evangelizing the children and young people in her neighborhood. She would ask them about the meaning of life and its value. From house to house she went, testifying for her Savior. She also devoted time and energy to visiting the sick and the elderly. Including her own family, many were exasperated with her bold witness. Even her pastor who was leading a formalistic church wasn't very happy about her over-zealousness. She became the talk of all the church people. The pastor told the congregation: "This is a straw fire; it will soon burn itself out." But instead of the fire being extinguished, it grew into a powerful flame. She began to realize that wider horizons were opening before her.

In 1881 she left her village and went to the city of Bern to join the Deaconess Home. Simultaneously she was pursuing nurses' training. On April 21, 1885, before her tenure at the Home was concluded, she was abruptly obliged to leave the place. Throughout her years of schooling the head sister noticed that Maria displayed an independent mien and a presumptuous spirit, which were not in keeping with the line of conduct in the Deaconess Home. So Maria was eased out before she could become a candidate for consecration as a full-fledged deaconess. Little did anyone realize that these very traits were the ones which would enable her to become a determined missionary leader. She was to lay down her life in selfless service and in doing so would draw the love, respect and admiration of many. Her testimony for Jesus Christ was as firm as ever. The Holy Spirit was behind her service for Christ. She wouldn't miss any opportunity to bear testimony about healing, pointing out her own experience.

At one point she decided to go back to visit her village. Her father was very ill and wasn't functioning well mentally. As Maria openly spoke to him about receiving the Savior she was in the spirit of prayer. Suddenly her father opened his eyes and exclaimed, "Now I recognize God's grace in my own life!" He received Jesus into his heart, like a little boy. Shortly after this he departed for heaven.

Maria trusting in her Lord moved to the town of Tramelon in the French-speaking part of the canton of Bern. There she started her missionary service. Rich and fulfilling experiences were before her. She wanted to see God's power in every area of her involvement. She later mentioned a number of supernatural evidences of God's working during the time of her labors in Tramelon. She had with her the books of Andrew Murray and George Müller, along with a few others, all in German because she didn't yet know English. Fascinated with the life and work of these giants of the faith she sensed God speaking: "What these men accomplished was not their own doing; it was my work." This became a clear message to her that God had singled her out for a great ministry. In her desire to be better prepared she was led to go to the United States from where she had received favorable reports about Christian education and ministries. The great steamer 'Victoria' docked in New York harbor on July 31, 1891. Even though Maria didn't know English, she immediately entered the Christian & Missionary Alliance Bible School, founded by A. B. Simpson, in New York City (now in Nyack). She was sure that God would enable her to learn a third language. She knew only French and German at the time. To the surprise of even her teachers she grasped English and could use it rather freely after a short time. Some years later a similar blessing would be hers in learning conversational Turkish.

After New York she traveled to Chicago where she attended Moody Bible Institute for two years. As part of her training, she was involved in rescue mission ministry among the downtrodden. At this point, her association with the famous evangelist, D. L.

Moody, comes into light. Mr. Moody's life was spared in a shipwreck on his way to preaching in London. He said, "I made a vow that if God saved my life from death and brought me back to America, I would come to Chicago and preach the Gospel during the World's Fair with all the power that God would grant me." Some skeptics tried to discourage him, saying that night clubs and other appealing places of amusement would dampen any interest in the evangelistic meetings. But he was determined to go ahead, arranging the most beautiful and compelling meetings possible, so that people would want to come in. He was not going to give the 'sleazy joints' the upper hand.

Mr. Moody was a man full of faith, a true spiritual giant and a capable strategist. He divided Chicago into three sections; the north side, the west side and the south side. In each section a church was selected for meetings: the present-day Moody Church (at the time called Chicago Avenue Church), the First Congregational Church in the west and Immanuel Baptist Church on the south side. Later, many more churches attached themselves to this great evangelistic venture. D. L. Moody by God's grace was able to carry this vast ministry with the backing of many prominent Christians from all parts of the U.S. and Europe. There were numerous people taking part in the various aspects of the campaign. The Fair drew people from all over the United States as well as from many countries around the world. Moody's evangelistic endeavor was a great success with hundreds of thousands attending the meetings. Having a beautiful voice Maria was one of the soloists in this great campaign of D. L. Moody during the World's Fair, as well as helping in many of Mr. Moody's other missions. Her experiences in Chicago brought her great joy in serving the Lord.

## Call to Turkey

Disturbing news was coming from the Ottoman Empire which was in the midst of turbulence. Particularly what was being reported from the eastern part of Anatolia was frightening. At the time, the sultan was Abdul Hamid II (1841-1915). His aim was to eradicate the Armenian population during his reign. The suitable area to start the killings was the eastern provinces, native region of large pockets of Armenians. He set in motion the first massacre in 1895. The news of this perturbing operation reached Maria while she was in Chicago.

At Moody Bible Institute she became a close friend of fellow-student Rose Lambert. Rose was also a single-hearted follower of Jesus Christ who had dedicated her life to serve him wherever he called. The plight of the Armenians who were being massacred in the eastern provinces of Turkey – 300,000 people perished during this merciless killing – became the main concern of the two women. They cried to the Lord and feeling assured of his direction they dedicated themselves to go and assist the hapless Armenian widows and orphans in the Ottoman Empire. The massacre that was carried out from 1895-97 was a fearful harbinger of what lay ahead when over a million Armenians perished.

The two ladies visited numerous churches conveying to the congregations their heartfelt burden and their readiness to proceed straight to Anatolia to care for the starving survivors. They were not attached to any mission. Their only credential was a call from God to go to the Ottoman Empire as soon as possible. In 1898 they sailed from the port of New York, sixty-seven years after the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions landed in Izmir (1821). The strategy of the two was well prayed through and wisely planned. They decided to launch out from Mersin, a port city not far from Hajin, their destination. Today Mersin is a bustling commercial-military port city. Back in those days, it was an ordinary port town on the edge of the Mediterranean. With the few belongings they had brought with them they boarded the train for the hour-long ride to St. Paul's Tarsus. There they hired a horse-driven coach, in those days operated by Tartars, whose roots were in Russia. It was a tiring journey

of four days until they reached their destination. Hajin ensconced in the Taurus mountain range was a very poor city of 30,000 inhabitants – all Armenians except for the government officials. As the genocide was intensifying in the eastern provinces, a large number of widows with many children made their way to this securely protected Armenian town where they expected to find refuge.



A Group of Armenian Refugees

The American Board of Commissioners was already operating separately a boys' and a girls' home for orphans. Due to the state of war and the upheaval in the Ottoman Empire, funds sent from Boston could not reach these over-crowded orphanages, now flooded with refugees. Consequently, scores of orphaned children were left helpless on the streets, crying for help. It was providential that the two women came to Hajin right at this time. They found themselves with a heavy task before them. The immediate need was to establish an orphanage where they could lodge the children. At the outset they rented a sizeable house. This was followed by renting two more houses as children continued to pour in. The three houses became insufficient. They had to rent more places. It wasn't long until two hundred Armenian orphans uprooted from the eastern provinces were offered shelter. The financial and other needs reached the limit as hundreds of widows and orphans were pleading for a place to be taken care of. Many had to be sent away, not knowing where a shelter would be provided for them.

The two women started feeding hundreds of starving people. The gratitude expressed by the destitute women and orphans touched their hearts. Among them were widows of doctors, school teachers and other professionals who had been taken away, leaving their families forlorn. For the survivors to take the long journey from their places in eastern Anatolia to Hajin in the south-central part of the country was an extremely taxing trek. Listening to their stories was like following a horror film. Many gripping accounts were pouring out of these wounded hearts. The two missionaries were received like angels. Later Maria related with deep satisfaction the testimonies of numerous women and destitute orphans who had found salvation and fresh hope in Jesus Christ. Through experiencing Christ's love their hopeless plight turned into unparalleled joy. Many of the children who were rescued from the jaws of death

faithfully followed the Lord, eventually receiving education even in institutions outside the country. They always expressed deep gratitude to Maria and her colleague.



M. A. Gerber with Some of Our Widows in Turkey

In search of other desolate women and children Maria traveled to various towns where she discovered more people in dire need. She would sometimes ask people what they had to eat. They would bring a handful of grass and show it to Maria, saying, “This is our food.” Providing for them, she ushered them into a life they could never have imagined. During these journeys, Maria utilized her unique opportunity to evangelize as she moved from place to place. Everywhere she went she encountered misery, poverty, sickness and in many cases illiteracy. Even those who were literate did not have Bibles. She immediately arranged to order a supply of Bibles for these desperate people, offering them the source of all hope and comfort.

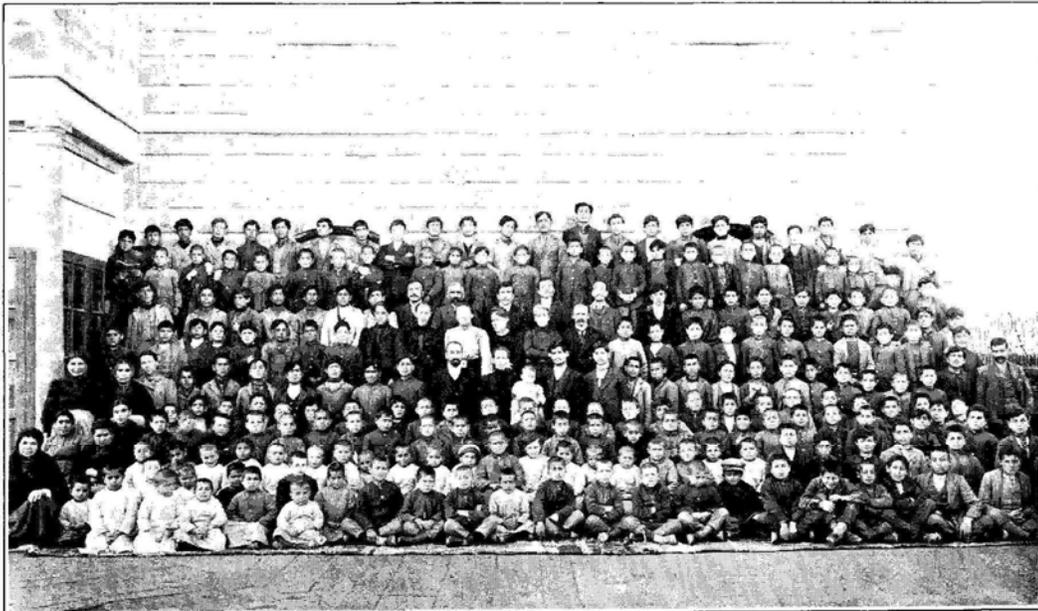
Maria had to wear a straw hat to protect her fair skin from the sun. At first the children were afraid of Maria’s broad-brimmed hat. They were immersed in deep fear; therefore anything unusual frightened them. Maria’s hat was one of those things. But before long they warmed up to her, realizing that an angel of rescue had come to them. Some of the people in the villages would not let her leave them. They begged her to stay with them forever. She encouraged them with the ever-abiding presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, quoting the passage from Hebrews: *“I will never fail you nor forsake you.” Therefore we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid; what can man do to me?’” (Hebrews 13:5b, 6).* Children desperately wanted Maria’s warm embrace and her care. So what did she do? She hired donkeys, secured the guardianship of reliable men and sent them to Hajin where she would later join them. Meanwhile she continued her travels and visits to various towns and villages.

She joyfully pursued her God-given responsibility on horseback, encountering many dangers. Riding over high and low terrain, fording streams with no bridges, she was exposed to burning sun on the plains and excruciating cold in the mountains. All these she bore with joy, considering what her own Savior had suffered for her. Working and moving from place to place in St. Paul’s land she remembered the deep sentiments of the great apostle in *II Corinthians 11:23-29*. He had gone through all those trying experiences and now Maria was allowed by the Lord to go through some of the same.

She saw hundreds of precious lives perishing before her eyes. Death was a bitter messenger knocking at one wounded heart after another. She remembered Elijah's experience with the widow of Zarephath (*cf. I Kings 17:8-15*). Along with every act of benevolence, this angel of mercy would explain the love and salvation offered by Jesus Christ. In the midst of this woeful situation, she rejoiced that people who had lost every hope on this earth went to meet their Savior with thanksgiving and rejoicing.

Maria had to invent some occupation for these desperate people in order to help them to become involved in a paying line of work. Merchants were bringing unsheared sheepskins on camels to Hajin. Maria started buying as many skins as she could. Immediately she put the widows to work, separating the wool from the hides. Then she would teach them to wash the wool and spin it. Her background in the farming village of Switzerland was good preparation for this work. After the yarn was ready, they knit socks for the children. There were more socks than were needed so these were sold locally. The return was used to buy leather to make shoes. Hundreds of little children were rescued from running around barefoot, their little feet being protected with warm socks and leather shoes, specially made for them in their own size. Another item that the merchants would bring on camels was cotton. Maria would purchase a substantial amount so that the women could spin it and make clothing. There was work for everyone. Through all these efforts sufficient food was provided and all in her care were spared from starvation and death.

At this time, Maria could count two thousand widows and children. Most of them were living in make-shift huts. Every morning they would congregate in the rented houses of the orphanage where they would pray that their needs would be met. The day would start with Bible reading and a basic message, uplifting Christ who loves men and women, boys and girls, and meets their needs. The houses were turned into workshops and the products from their labor were converted to money, so that women could purchase items for their basic essentials before returning to their very meager dwellings.



Our Children, This Photo Was Taken June, 1914, by M. A. G.

Money was being sent by Maria's friends in Europe and some from the United States. Her German Mennonite friends were quite well off in the then Czarist Russia. They

owned large farms from which they realized high profits and were sending her substantial support. But war conditions made the dispatch of funds difficult. At times the flow of money would dwindle. She taught everyone at the orphanage to pray in faith that the supply of funds would not stop. Once there was no money left at all. It was a threatening situation, as there was no cash to purchase the needed items. Maria gathered all the women and older children who daily came for food, telling them that there was no more money and no food to give them. With sadness of heart she told them not to come again until the supply began to flow once more. Several of the women began to wail, some pulling their hair, and others beating their breasts, as women express their grief that part of the world. They literally pled with their benefactor not to abandon them to a cruel death. She could barely extricate herself from their clutches and run to the privacy of her room for prayer.

There with tears she knelt before her heavenly Father and brought the distressing situation to him. A few days later a letter came from a farmer in the U.S.A. who was a regular contributor. He related a dream he had one night. In his dream he saw a great number of women and children crying in despair. At this he woke up and noticed his wife was also wrestling in agony in her sleep. She too had a dream with about the same content. Being informed through separate dreams they came to the conclusion that they could not reduce their share of contribution to this worthy ministry in Asia Minor. However, they did not respond immediately. Then came a horrible storm causing much damage to the farm buildings and crops. The farmer with great pathos related the story to the two missionary ladies. He confessed his and his wife's slackness in meeting the acute need in Hajin. Understandably, they rededicated themselves to help meet the needs of the orphanage. In his letter he quoted Malachi 3:10: *"Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."* The two ladies being encouraged by God started praying with increased faith that all their needs would be met regularly.



A lonely widow

At the same time, they began praying for a spiritual awakening among the large number of women and children in their care. Some of the women with spiritual perception joined them. Their group grew as they were convinced that there was something of far greater value than being physically satisfied. The Armenian ladies of Hajin offered these praying women a room for their meetings at the local school.

The Gregorian church leaders were highly appreciative of what the two missionaries were accomplishing. They did something extraordinary by offering them the use of their large church sanctuary. Nightly meetings were held there for several months. Maria was always the speaker and her message was interpreted by a lady who had studied in one of the American academies in Anatolia. The Gregorian church, a sanctuary for ordinary liturgy for years suddenly became an evangelistic hall. People of all ages from the community started attending. Rose Lambert did not take part in the meetings but remained behind at the orphanage to handle the ongoing responsibilities. Sometimes the meetings would last until after midnight. The messages were eagerly devoured by a delighted audience.

There was nothing more propitious than presenting Christ the Redeemer-Restorer to people who were still in the throes of a catastrophe. Maria would extend the invitation with amazing response. People were fervently seeking the Savior realizing that he was the only One who could offer them salvation and continuous support. Out of their liturgical church milieu they were transferred to a living faith. Those converted began asking questions about what they should do next and how they could grow in their faith. Christ's regenerating power showed its true effect in these lives. Maria was strong in the doctrine of the Second Coming of the Lord. She would often switch her theme to this subject. Those assembled knew nothing about Christ's triumphant appearing and his glorious kingdom. Many grasped how totally different Christ's kingdom would be from the oppressive rule of the country where they lived. Maria's practice was to always pray for the sick, often with amazing results.

Nobody could have imagined that Hajin would shelter a great company of women and children who had come out of the massacre, that they would be properly fed and in the meantime receive God's manna for their needy souls. Those were the days of the genocide initiated by Abdul Hamid II in the eastern provinces. Hajin being far away was not touched until the general massacre of 1916-17, engineered by the infamous Talat, which would be more catastrophic. The town would be entirely wiped out during this massacre. All residents, including the refugees who had fled from the east would be banished to Der-ez-Zor in the Syrian Desert, most of them perishing on their cruel journey. Hajin being a totally Armenian enclave would be reduced to rubble, becoming the abode of vultures and wild animals. God in his mighty providence sent Maria Gerber and Rose Lambert to this important town at the time of its eclipse. The testimony of the Lord Jesus Christ would be upheld, desperate people would be fed, and some would die, making heaven richer. How boundless are the sovereign designs of the mighty Pantocrator!

### Nunia's Homegoing

She was a little homeless child. God led her to the orphanage where she found the shelter she had longed for. In those desperate years the child had been entirely neglected. One of the many forlorn orphans, she was begging from door to door in Hajin. One night God led her steps to Maria's house. With bashfulness and reticence she asked for help. She had no place to sleep. Death was dogging her steps in the very budding of her youthful life. She later related to Maria that a particular anxiety gripped her soul. "What if I die now? Where will I go?"

**Maria, as she did with every person who came her way, pointed her to the waiting arms of the Savior. She encouraged Nunia with motherly words, telling her that the Savior was there ready to receive her. He would meet every need of her life. Nunia was about eleven years old at the time, very much aware that she had sin in her life. When she started praying for salvation she confessed every sin she could remember. Suddenly she began praising God as her newly-found Father. She expressed the joy that flooded her soul and thanked Christ that the burden of her heart was taken away. She joyfully told Maria about the happiness that filled her heart and soul. She became a transformed girl, assuring Maria that the Holy Spirit had come into her heart. Without hesitation she submitted to water baptism. She became an obedient follower of the Lord Jesus Christ from the very outset.**

**Maria noticed in Nunia a desire to serve Christ, so she assigned her to go from one child to the other, telling them of God's salvation. This she gladly did, explaining to each one that the Savior was waiting to receive them. She brought new joy to each bedside as child after child came to Christ in simple faith. But Nunia's delightful service was not to last long. One day she showed signs of illness. It was soon discovered that she had contracted typhoid fever from another child. Much prayer went up on her behalf, but she was not to recover. Maria would visit her often as she lay in bed. Nunia told her, "Mother, I must tell you that Jesus Christ appeared to me, stood next to my bed and told me that he would soon send a band of angels to carry me to his glorious land." As she was relating her story, her face shone. Maria tried to comfort her, suggesting that they further pray in faith to Jesus Christ for healing. "No, no!" she emphatically responded. "Jesus told me that he is taking me to be with him. I must go home." With this shining testimony Nunia was transferred with absolute assurance into the arms of her Savior. She was now freed from all earthly suffering. Maria related later that Nunia's salvation would have been reward enough for having left the States and coming to Hajin. "Among the numerous children I sought to assist, this one was a bright star and she is now shining in heaven."**

**There were other children also who succumbed to the hardship and misery of life. God knows how many desperate women and children entered through the pearly gates of heaven during those dark days in Hajin. Maria wrote: "Each of the dear orphan children who died while in my care during the nineteen fruitful years I spent in the Ottoman Empire had a particular story. The loving heavenly Father received them. They went to their eternal home rejoicing." A little boy of about eight had a wonderful ministry of intercession. In one particular meeting the Holy Spirit so powerfully anointed him that the whole assembly was in tears and many people repented, turning their lives over to Jesus Christ. He also shines up in heaven, shouting 'Glory! Glory!**

**"Around the throne of God in heaven  
Thousands of children stand,  
Children whose sins are all forgiven,  
A holy, happy band,  
Singing Glory, Glory.**

**In flowing robes of spotless white,  
See everyone arrayed,  
Dwelling in everlasting light  
And joys that never fade,  
Singing Glory, Glory.**

**What brought them to that world above  
That heaven so bright and fair,  
Where all is peace and joy and love,  
How came those children there?**

## **Singing Glory, Glory.**

**Because the Savior shed his blood  
To wash away their sin;  
Bathed in that pure and precious blood,  
Behold them white and clean,  
Singing Glory, Glory.**

**On earth they sought the Savior's grace,  
On earth they loved his name;  
So now they see his blessed face  
And stand before the Lamb,  
Singing Glory! Glory!**

The rules of the house were these: Rising bell, 5:30. Until six, the children had to wash up and make their beds. From six to six-thirty there was Bible study and prayer time. Breakfast was served at six-thirty. At the table the children were supervised by the teachers. At eight o'clock a general chapel service took place for children, teachers, widows, workers and people from outside. After the chapel service, classes began with teaching sessions until twelve. At noon, the dining room bell rang for a very simple lunch. Afternoon classes started at one and continued until four. Then there was recess, when children joyfully played outside in the fresh air. Supper was served at five, which was somewhat relaxed time-wise. Evening prayer was called at six-thirty and at seven o'clock the little children were tucked into bed. From seven to eight-thirty the older children prepared their lessons. Bedtime was at nine. It was a tightly regimented schedule. Naturally, Sundays were special. Sunday school was at ten o'clock, followed by preaching. At seven pm, the evening service was held with testimonies, singing, and a short Bible lesson after which there was opportunity for the children to raise questions relating to the study. The meeting was closed with prayer.

## **Maria leaves Hajin in Rose's Hands**

Maria was a person who could not stay in one place. She was always looking for new opportunities and uncharted frontiers. Her illustrious service in Hajin lasted for five years, every day full of worthwhile activity for her Lord. After serving day and night, her strength was not as robust as when she first arrived in Hajin. She started praying that the Lord would lead her to another fruitful field. But first she needed some rest. In 1902 her health broke, so she went to the United States to recover. As she regained strength, she went around the country sharing information in churches and exposing the various congregations to the crying needs in Asia Minor. Rose Lambert stayed on in Hajin as matron of the orphanage. There were about three to four hundred orphans at the time. A few young ladies from the United States joined her there as volunteers.

At the outset of the massacre the acting superintendent and two of the most useful and trustworthy Armenians who were assisting in the work were brutally murdered. Aside from the terrible grief she experienced, Rose Lambert was suddenly left with the total responsibility of running the orphanage. She contracted typhoid fever, but eventually recovered. She related to her supporters in the United States: "The heaviest burden is not the work we do, but the work we continually see remain undone." On a subsequent visit to Europe where she presented the work of the orphanage, many European children took special interest and wanted to help. The Mennonite Brethren were faithfully supporting her ministry until finally she had to give up because of poor health. Even then, as much as her strength would allow, she went around the U.S., lecturing and informing people of the ministry among the Armenians, and also writing articles on the subject. When she went back to Turkey her health broke down and she realized that she had to retire from active missionary service.

Maria belonged to the Mennonite denomination. Through her, many of these people caught a vision of missionary work in Asia Minor. The missionary board wanted her to continue the ministry in Hajin. However, Maria's attention had been drawn to another area. Being a very independent-minded person, nobody could prevent her from pursuing her new goal. Of course, the mission board could not go along with this entirely new vision of hers. So Maria determinedly turned in her resignation.

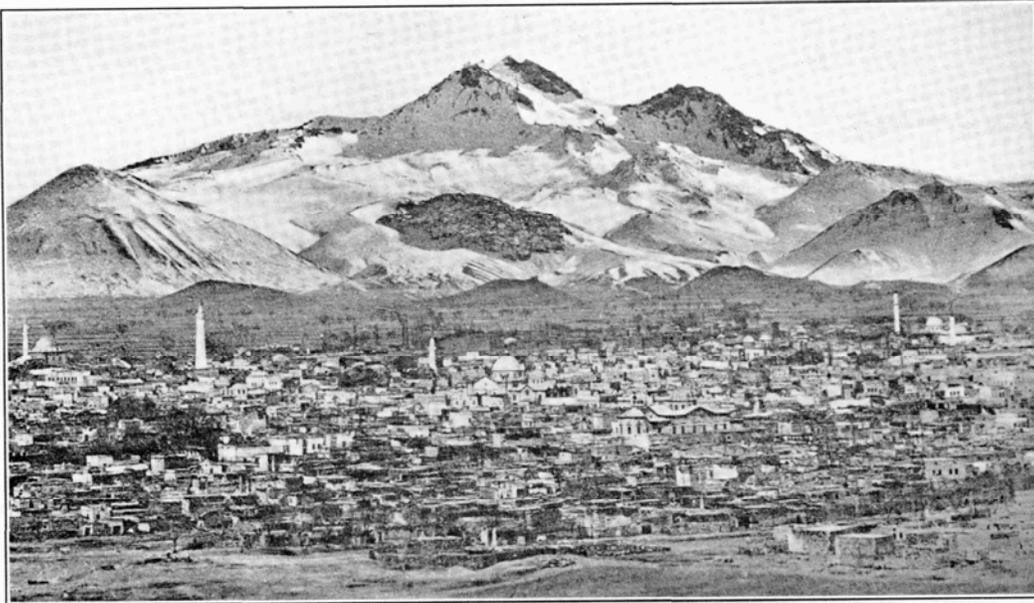
In October 1904 she sailed back to Turkey from America, arriving again in the port of Mersin where she had landed the first time. She hired a coach and went straight to Konya (Iconium). She spent six months there evangelizing many people, but particularly the Armenians. The population of Konya at that time was about sixty thousand, made up of Turks, Armenians, Greeks and other people groups. Once more she came face to face with a large number of Armenian orphans. She began contemplating starting an orphanage in Konya, as she had done in Hajin. However, Sultan Abdul Hamid II had become harsher than before and was very suspicious of everyone, a well-known characteristic of his. So he didn't give her permission. His policy was to get rid of all missionaries and Christian institutions. This cruel emperor was toppled in 1908 by '*Ittihad ve Terakki*,' i.e., the Party of Union and Progress. Following the few initial signs of encouragement to the minorities, this coterie turned out to be thoroughly nationalistic and more blood-thirsty than the toppled ruler.

### Move to Zinjidere

Maria Gerber understood that her brief time in Konya had come to an end. She began asking her heavenly Father for guidance regarding her next ministry. The leading was to the historic and large city of Kayseri (Caesarea) in Cappadocia. There was a vast minority element in this city. She did not find it wise to be established in a large city. So she moved on to a nearby town by the name of Zinjidere, which was in the neighborhood of Talas, home of an American Board academy and hospital. She arrived in Zinjidere and immediately took fifteen orphans into her care. There were many of these poor children begging for a place to stay. Some of them were already being supported by Christians in Europe but they had no place to live. Maria's desire was to build a suitable orphanage in Zinjidere. She planned to erect four buildings. Before too long this worthy dream materialized. A well-known Greek businessman appreciated the great service Maria came to offer in his town. He gave two acres of land to her for this purpose. At the time she had only two Swiss francs in her pocket, but she was moving ahead with absolute faith in the total sufficiency of her God. The businessman who gave the land implicitly trusted her and said, "You make the deed in your name." The eventual use of these premises was to be extremely beneficial to many.

Indeed, Zinjidere was the right place for the site of the orphanage she had in mind. It lay at the foot of Mt. Argius, a magnificent mountain towering above the plain in central Anatolia. Fresh water was abundant. The air was fresh and invigorating. Mary stopped at the given lot to have a time of prayer. She was thinking primarily of the need for hard rock to build the foundation. However, there was no trace of any stone around other than porous soft stone, not good for building. To haul rocks from a long distance would not have been feasible, as this would have required great funds and much hard labor. She began studying the terrain. Her eyes were drawn to two small pieces of stone which seemed to indicate something interesting. Could it be that there was hard stone under the soil in this place? She dispatched one of the boys who had come with her to ask a neighbor to bring some tool in order to dig up the ground at that spot. The poor old man worked very hard to please this kind foreign lady. After considerable arduous exertion, God honored Maria's faith and expectation. The 'gold mine' was struck! Granite, solid rock! This was exactly what was needed for the foundations of

**the initial three buildings which Maria had planned. The old peasant was overjoyed. Zinjidere had granite less than five feet under the surface of the ground!**



Cesarea

**Immediately Maria pressed the two precious Swiss francs into his hand and promised him work, provided the necessary funds would come in. She took some boys from the orphanage with long sticks (not having a measuring rod) to lay out end-to-end on the ground where the foundations of the first house should stand. Amazingly, the granite was in the exact location needed for the foundations of the building.**

**When the miracle of finding the granite was heard in Europe and in the United States, Christians were convinced that the building of this projected orphanage was God's design, and they started contributing liberally. This discovery of abundant granite was a stimulus to witness to the local people of Maria's heavenly Father and his faithful provision. The miracle had occurred right before their eyes. It convinced the townspeople that God was behind the whole project. The local people were very happy – first for employment and then that an important institution was to be part of their town. She had no difficulty to enlist the services of capable craftsmen from as far away as Tarsus. Particularly, in the machine shop was Hamparsum Pambukian. He brought along another friend, Kevork Toumayan, an ardent young Christian who ably contributed substantial practical service with his skill in several areas.**

**The work went very fast. Building after building went up. There were sizeable rooms for the children, a large hall with a capacity for over one thousand for meetings, kitchen and laundry room, a bakery, rooms for learning trades, housing for staff, places for recreational activity and a stable. During the time of building there was constant prayer and financial support. God honored his worthy servant Maria and her faithful supporters. The construction of the four stone houses was completed from start to finish in two years. She and her associates seriously contemplated possible names for this place. Several suggestions were put forward, each one weighed against the other. "Zion Orphans' Home" was one of the proposed designations. As the discussion continued, at last Maria decided on this biblical, historical name of Jerusalem. 'Zion'**

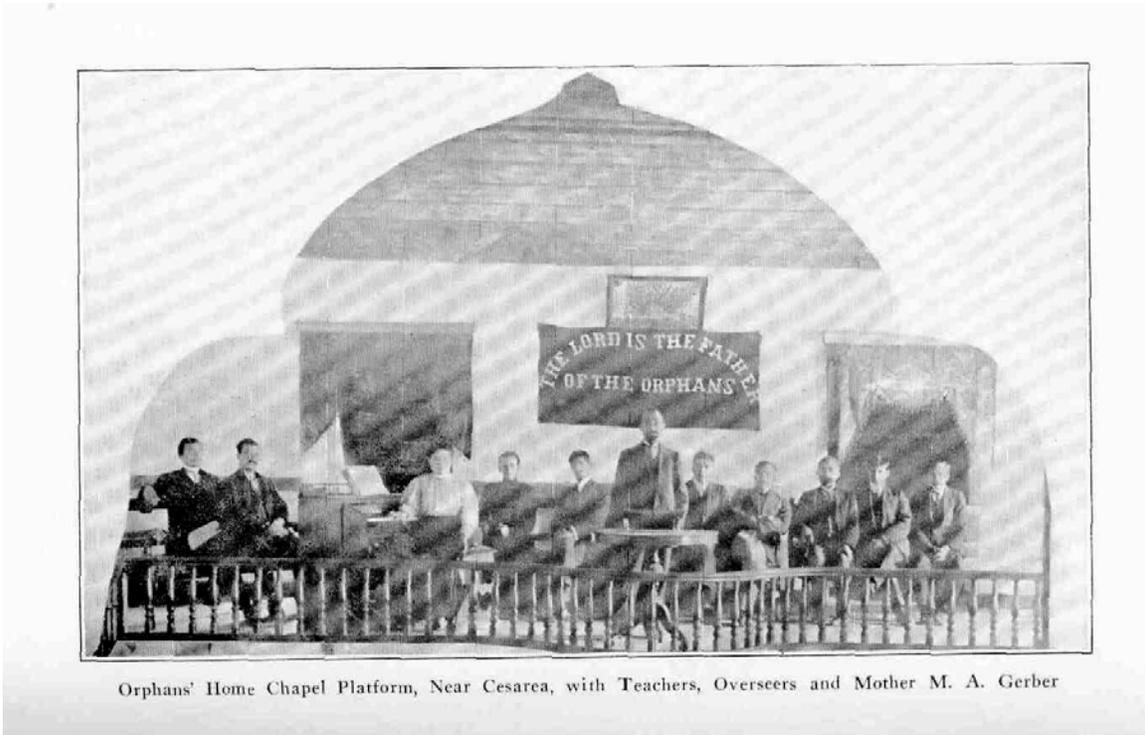
was precisely the fitting name for this orphanage built on the beautiful slopes of majestic Mt. Argius. The orphanage was completed in 1908 and began operating in 1909.



The Ceremony of the Laying of the Cornerstone of Zion Orphans' Home, Near Cesarea, by M. A. G.

The day of dedication arrived. A commodious dwelling place and school for orphans were to be consecrated to God's glory. American missionaries from the nearby Talas academy and hospital were all present. Turkish officials were also in attendance. Greek and Armenian community leaders were delighted for what God had brought to their town. The Scripture reading by an Armenian preacher was from *I Kings 8* and *II Chronicles 16*. The orphans enthusiastically sang hymns, of course all in Turkish. The older boys who had a music teacher, himself a former orphan, and instruments supplied by Christians added to the joyful celebration with their rousing brass band. The assembly hall was spacious. Maria had foreseen that in such an important institution there should be an auditorium large enough to accommodate several hundred people. That day the overflow crowd, numbering a few hundred, had to stand outside. Maria, herself being an evangelist, realized that the orphanage should have its own evangelist-pastor. The first person to be assigned for this duty was the Reverend Mr. Migirdich Aijian. Well-known Christians such as Haralambos Bostanjoglu and Vahram Tahmisian later became part of the pastoral staff.

At one point Zinjidere was hit by a catastrophic fire. The tragedy destroyed the nearby huts of widows and orphans. There were about two hundred of these improvised dwellings that burned to the ground. Women and children were going through the smoldering ruins picking up whatever was left, including half-burned wheat and rice. Even these could not go wasted. Once again an unexpected duty fell on Maria's shoulders. She rushed to the help of these devastated people, offering them immediate assistance and consoling them in their desperation. The many widows welcomed her with tears and deep grief. Now they were really on the verge of starvation. She assured them that she would dispatch letters to supporters in Europe and the U.S.A. without delay. Meanwhile she prayed that the Lord would touch hearts of the recipients of her appeal.



Orphans' Home Chapel Platform, Near Cesarea, with Teachers, Overseers and Mother M. A. Gerber

She returned to the orphanage with a burdened heart. It was breakfast time. The soup was already poured into the bowls and the bread was sliced. But the children were just sitting before their plates with folded hands. Puzzled, Maria asked them why they weren't eating. A little boy who was the group's appointed spokesman stood up. He asked Maria (whom they all called 'Mother') on behalf of all the children for permission not to eat breakfast, but instead give their morning meal to those who had been ravished by the fire. Deeply touched, Maria accepted this request. Suddenly, shouts of joy swept through the dining room. The children inundated Maria with thanks. The order was given: Each child was to take his or her bowl and spoon in one hand and the piece of bread in the other, and walk carefully down the hill in an orderly fashion so as not to spill the soup. A teacher guided this happy band of little benefactors on their way to give their soup to whomever they chose.

A while later the exuberant children came back carrying empty bowls in their little hands, each with a story to tell of the expressions of thankfulness from those who had received their offering. They realized that since Christ gave his life on the Cross for others, his true followers must share whatever they have with people in need. Quoting the words of the Apostle Paul: "...one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, 'It is more blessed to give than to receive'" (Acts 20:35). The children forgot their own hunger. Full of joy, they studied their lessons and played happily without having a morsel of food until the noon meal.

This was not an isolated incident in the life of the home. Being grateful for the Lord Jesus Christ's supreme offer on the Cross and observing Maria's readiness to help wherever needed, the 'little lambs' as she called them, learned the joy of giving and receiving. Another time the children did not rush to their places at mealtime as they usually did. Again Maria asked them why they were not running to the table to eat their food. One of the children volunteered to explain. At noon the children were usually given bread and cheese or olives. Meals were cooked only in the evenings. On this particular day their meal was raisins with bread, a special treat. Children waited to

receive their share of raisins, carefully counted out, with a thick slice of bread. The boy who volunteered to speak on behalf of the others asked permission to eat only bread, sell the raisins, then buy bread from the home and offer the bread to the destitute folks who had lost everything in the fire.

Maria always alert to add a spiritual tone to such activity gladly accepted the request. She ordered a bag to be brought in, told two or three children to hold it open, and every child emptied his or her raisins from the plate into the bag. There was a particular joy in each face as they proceeded with their act of offering for the poor. After all the raisins were collected the bag was weighed on a scale. The realized value was determined, against which money bread was bought from the home's bakery. The loaves of bread were carefully cut, each child taking a few slices, then running down the hill with joy to feed the desperate fire victims. Acts of generosity like these were quite common in this home. Also, when a child was given a little money by someone, he/she would run to Maria and present part of it for the missionary offering box.



Taken in 1914, Our Largest, Very Useful Class of Orphan Boys, Music Teacher Who Is One of Our Grown-Up Orphan Sons, with Mother M. A. G.

One time, news reached all the way from India that a terrible famine was wiping out many lives. Maria shared the sad news with the youngsters. The grief that gripped them could be read in their faces. They immediately empathized with the poverty-stricken perishing Indians. They approached Maria with the request that the few dollars — the dollar was real money in those days — which they had collected be sent to the famishing Indians. The irony of the whole matter was that they themselves were surrounded by destitute people. But the Holy Spirit put a genuine desire into these young hearts to stretch out their helping hands to India. Maria wrote the following to friends who were sending aid: "I find that one of the best ways to keep children busy is to inject into their hearts some kind of missionary involvement of their own." True to form, Maria taught the children at the home to save their pennies for some missionary or philanthropic cause and then correspond with those they were helping. This practice formed a tie between the children and the people they were assisting in distant lands. They learned from childhood to think about others' needs and to write letters, with the side benefit that their English was improved.

**Maria was eager to gather the victims of massacres, deportations and famine wherever she could find them. The presence of death horrified the children. Maria taught them to defy death by emphasizing the giver of life, the Lord Jesus Christ.**

### **The Orphans' Intercessory Ministry**

**The ominous signs of World War I were intensifying. It was summertime and the weather was extremely hot. One night the intense heat brought restlessness to everyone in the house. Maria, too, was affected by the heat and became ill. The following morning she was not able to get up and resume her duties. One of the teachers came in to check on her condition. Maria instructed her to carry on the work of the home, taking on her responsibilities, as she needed to rest. The teacher informed the children that Mother was very ill and that they shouldn't make any noise. Fear gripped each little heart. Death being all-pervasive, they worried about the possibility of Mother dying. No child was given permission to go into her room. However, the children were so eager to see her that they came in secretly. Without any talk, her first visitors started praying for her. Within a few minutes, more children crept into the room. They all knelt around the bed, lifting their prayers of faith to Jesus Christ. Those who couldn't enter the room were kneeling outside the door in the corridor.**

**One girl prayed, "Oh Lord, this is the only mother we have. Our mothers are all gone. Please, Jesus, don't let Mother, whom we love so much, die!" Another child said, "Jesus, I promise you right here, if you will make our mother well, I will never, never, never be disobedient again." Immediately after this prayer they started thanking God for healing their mother. Maria had taught the effect and significance of divine healing. God answered these intercessions of faith without delay. When they saw Maria feeling better, they whispered to each other, "We prayed for our mother and Jesus healed her!" The orphanage had no resident doctor or nurse, although there was an American hospital in nearby Talas. Maria Gerber often said, "We have no other house physician than Jesus. He is all-sufficient for everybody's needs." And she would remark joyfully, "My faithful native helpers are immersed in faith, zeal, self-denial and loyalty to their heavenly Father."**

### **World War I**

**The anticipated war broke out on August 4, 1914. It brought with it extremely harsh conditions and an ordeal almost beyond endurance. This happened while the ministry of the orphanage was progressing with much encouragement. A volume of intercession ascended from all those who had found such a beautiful home in Zinjidere. However, the pernicious conflict coming upon them was going to usher in grief and sorrow beyond all that had been experienced until then. The effect of the war was immediately felt. Among the staff there were several highly qualified and dedicated young men. Abruptly they were all drafted into the Ottoman army. As Armenians their wretchedness was going to be extreme. One of them was a young fellow who had been brought up in the orphanage and eventually become a capable teacher at the school. Other than his teaching duties he was a genuine father to many boys and girls. At the time there were two hundred orphans. He was a model mentor to all the children. He himself was an amazing intercessor in every quandary, and he passed the spirit of prayer on to the children.**

**Night after night he would go from room to room, kneeling beside the bed of each child. Where he found some already sleeping he held their hands and prayed for the child's particular needs. As in every institution there were difficult children. Through prayer and fatherly love and discipline he led them to the obedience taught in the Scriptures.**

The happy outcome was that they could lead untroubled, joyful lives. This newly-married young man was immediately snatched by the army. He was never heard from again.



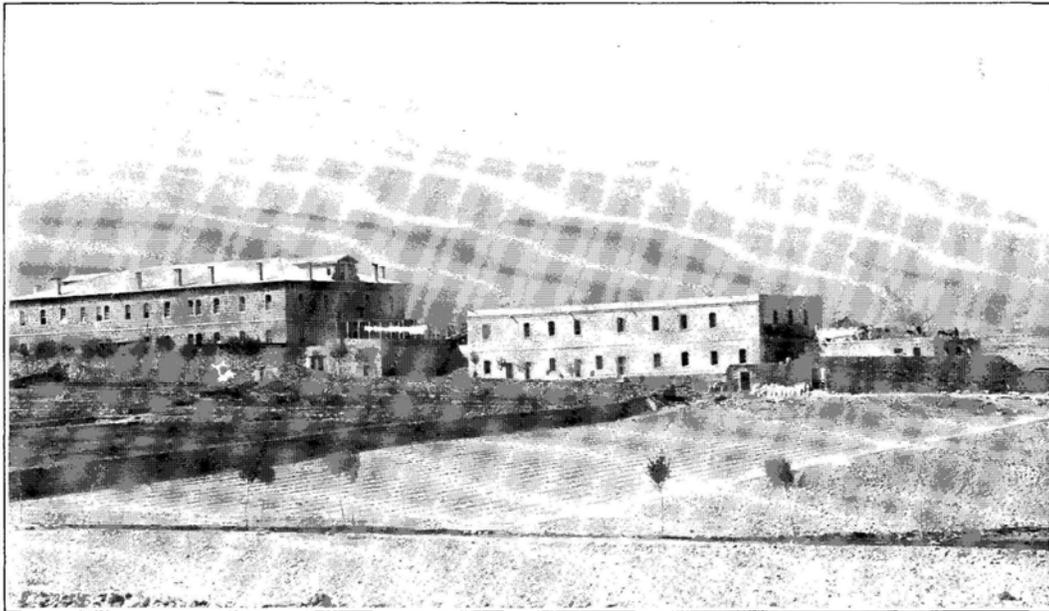
Orphans' Home Staff of Workers and M. A. G.

The armed conflict immediately showed its effect on the assistance coming from foreign countries. In many cases such help could not be sent, or its delivery would be held up by the officials without their giving any reason for doing so. Every day 700-800 meals had to be prepared, most of these for people who were living outside the home. Two hundred children had to be clothed. There was no other way to supply all these needs than teaching the widows and children trades such as sewing and knitting, shoe-making, rug-weaving, carpentry, and other useful skills. About five hundred pairs of children's shoes were made in the orphanage workshop. All bread was baked at the home. Even a small printing shop was started to print a periodical in Turkish with Armenian characters. When practically all assistance sent from abroad was cut, people had to make do with whatever they had. As the Turkish proverb has it, 'Kendi yağınla kavrul!' i.e., 'fry with whatever cooking oil you have'.

Until the war broke out containers from abroad were regularly coming in. These were now reduced to a trickle. Europe itself was in the midst of bloodshed with many orphans of its own. The effect of the conflict severely hurt the orphans' home. Under these conditions, Maria literally wrestled with the Lord whom she had tried many times until she received an affirmative response. She pled to God not to abandon the orphanage and the Lord heard her plea. She prayed, "God, you sent manna and quails to the Israelites in the desert. Now we are in a situation even worse than the desert life of your people. You have to feed and clothe all these lives you entrusted to us." In the midst of the horrendous war she was led to take a trip to the United States to plead with churches and individual Christians not to forget her home in Cappadocia. Of course, the war was bringing an increasing number of children into the home.

Then came the inevitable disaster. Turks having no qualms about taking over Christian institutions, told Maria that they needed the larger buildings for their wounded soldiers. Maria was not the only one to receive such a harsh demand. The American Board was

also deprived of some of their buildings in nearby Talas. Now, what to do with the children who were suddenly left homeless? God always gave special ingenuity to his faithful servant Maria. She traveled to Kayseri, where she besought Armenian and Greek families to house children who had been left on the street. She promised to meet their expenses for room and board. When she returned from America she had a good amount of support for them.



Zion Orphans' Home, Near Cesarea, by M. A. G.

The nationalistic party of Union and Progress (I & T), holding the government reins firmly in their hands had become even more cruel and merciless than Sultan Abdul Hamid II, whom it had toppled in 1908. When it came to power there were brilliant promises to the minorities, particularly the Armenians, but it soon became clear that they had diametrically changed their policy. Chilling winds were blowing across Anatolia with the awful genocide of 1916-17. Much has been said and written concerning this massacre which cost over a million Armenian lives. Teachers, pastors and evangelists were not spared. In many cases, Greeks and Assyrians were also victims. Churches, schools, hospitals and of course orphanages like the one of Maria were either closed or their premises taken over by a government now at war.

Maria and her colleagues who had joyfully experienced the birth of this oasis in the desert were now witnessing the demise of all their labors. Their much-loved home where desperate children were tenderly cared for was snatched away. Seeing the Turks prevail over the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ in the name of Allah was the devastating climax of their overall conquest. The first Turkish victory won in Manazkirt in 1071, with a long series of intervening triumphs was about to be consummated with their final supremacy. This marked the end of an illustrious institution where many lives were spared, met Jesus Christ as Savior and became useful to God. One could say "*Ichabod*" was written over the place (*I Samuel 4:21*). Following the passing of nearly a century the illuminating power of the Cross is being felt here and there in Anatolia. History bears witness that the light of Christ's Good News will never be extinguished.

*Adapted from Maria Gerber's memoirs written in simple English, also from minutes of several annual conferences of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, Board of Missions, Pennsylvania, U.S.A. Pictures are also taken from Maria Gerber's original manuscript.*

*Addendum ~~*

## History of Orphanages

Jeremiah cried his heart out in the sight of his nation's defeat and demise (*cf. Lamentations 5:3*). The cruel Babylonian conquest resulted in leaving numerous widows and orphans. The plight of orphans in older times was at least as bad as it is in many countries today. In days when there was no social concern for fatherless and motherless children, genuine uplift and assistance were extended only here and there. In the Middle Ages Christian monasteries and convents were the few avenues where such boys and girls could be housed and taken care of. This was slightly better than their being left abandoned in the streets. Naturally, in those times there were a vast number of forsaken children.

Until Christ's unique love for children and his compassion for the little ones were actively demonstrated, the disturbing predicament of orphans did not draw extensive tenderheartedness. A person has to come to the New Testament to encounter and feel the anguishing pathos for helpless children. There was a period in history when abandoned children were placed with adult inmates, including insane, senile, crippled, diseased, drunkards and even criminals. We can only imagine the deplorable condition of helpless orphans living in such despicable circumstances.

By early 1550, orphanages were combined with educational reform centers in England, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland. The British colonies enforced the English "Poor Law" in 1601, which gave orphans and other needy persons a legal right to benefits from the state. Transplanted to the New World, the Elizabethan Social Welfare System relied on family and local government to take care of orphans. The young country of the United States pioneered in the taking care of its orphans. Colonial era orphans were typically apprenticed by the town selectmen (overseers for the poor) to draftsmen or farmers to learn a trade in welfare-oriented Christian families. With the explosion of the big cities and heterogeneous population not every homeless child could be easily apprenticed or farmed out to a capable family.

The first orphanage was opened in Georgia as a proprietary colony in 1732, as a refuge for orphans and indigents. Its founder was the well-known English philanthropist, James Edward Oglethorpe (1696-1785). Following the Revolutionary War, Christian women started establishing private institutions for orphans. The Boston Female Asylum opened in 1799 to shelter abandoned young girls. Its wide services are gratefully remembered. Similar homes in other major cities of the U. S. followed. It wasn't long until various Christian denominations were obliged to enter into this much-needed and worthwhile service. At the outset, the cooperation of public officials was valuable in assisting the orphans. It can be well understood how disturbing family life became during the Civil War. The war placed a heavy burden on private and public benevolence to countless orphan children. In 1864, Methodists in Boston founded the Northeastern Home for Little Wanderers. This regional orphanage cared for hundreds, if not thousands, of boys and girls. The Roman Catholics in the city of Boston noticing the absence of similar institutions of their own opened the Home for Destitute Catholic Children in 1865.

Adoption, foster care and smaller cottage-style child welfare institutions by and large replaced the established orphanages in several states. By the time of the Great Depression and the New Deal, with emphasis on social welfare programs, the period of traditional orphanages was waning. However, there were orphanages until after World War II. The subject cannot be concluded without mentioning Father Edward J. Flanagan's shelter for homeless and delinquents at Boys' Town in Omaha, Nebraska. It was compassion for desperate children around the world that resulted in the establishment of orphanages in many countries. This became a viable activity of Christian missions, both denominational and interfaith, everywhere. Until recent times, homes for parentless children have been recognized as an effective ministry to care for physical needs of children until they reach adulthood and also to introduce the love of Jesus Christ to them. In current times most countries do not allow such institutions to operate because of the apprehension that children will be drawn to the Christian faith. However, a thinking person can only speculate what the end result would have been had compassionate Christians been given permission to establish orphanages in lands where misery is the daily experience of too many children.

*Thomas Cosmades – 2009*