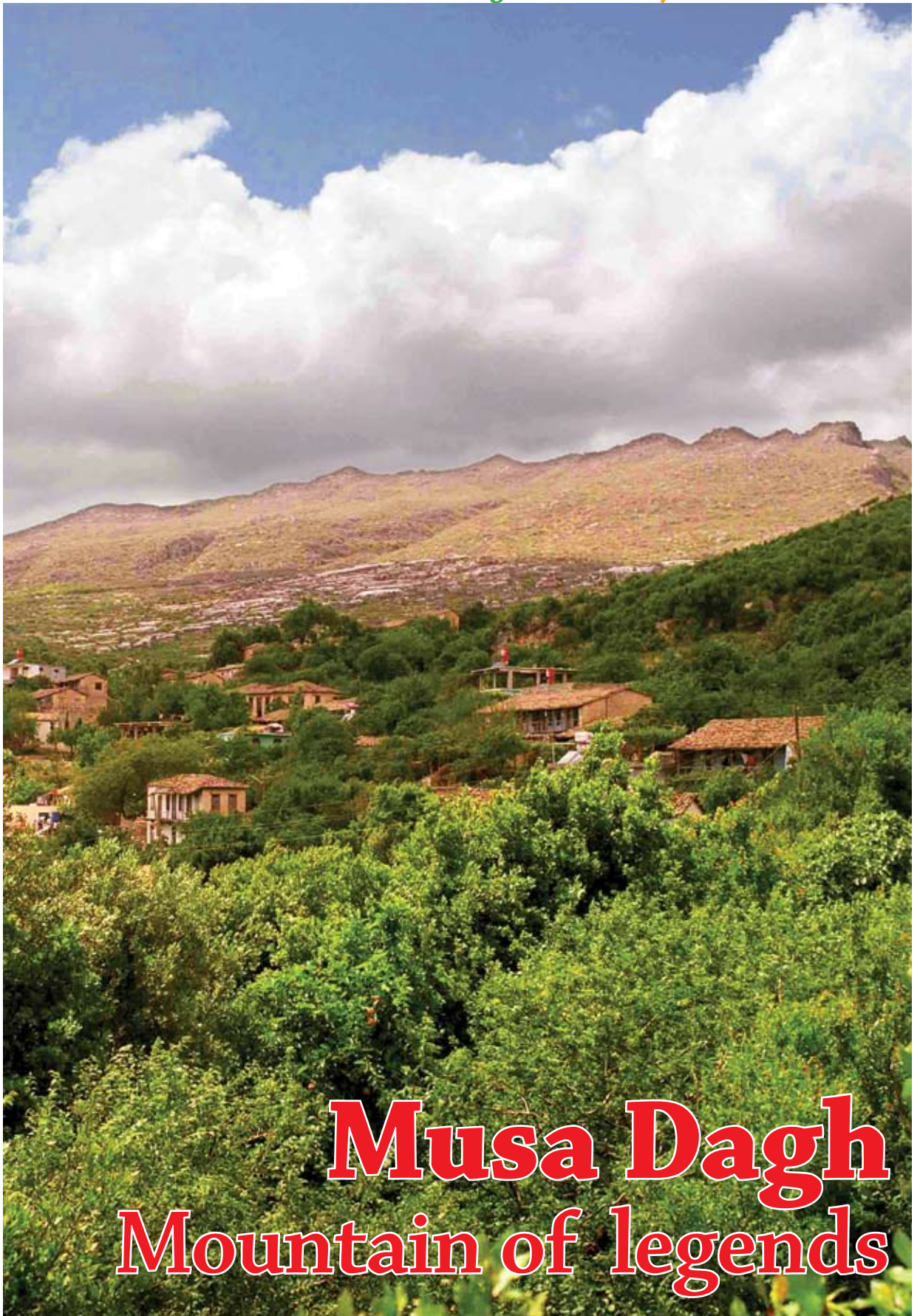


Reinventing the aura Tekeyan's brilliant darkness

the armenian  
reporter

August 25, 2007

arts &  
culture



# Musa Dagh Mountain of legends

***Armenian Reporter / Arts & Culture***

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**On page C1:**

Hrair Hawk Khatcherian's photo of Vakifli, one of the villages of historic Musa Dagh.

*Special coverage begins on page C3.*

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# The 74 years of Musa Dagh

by Michelle Ekizian

*Musa Dagh: A chronicle of the Armenian Genocide factor in the subsequent suppression, by the intervention of the United States government, of the movie based on Franz Werfel's The Forty Days of Musa Dagh, by Edward Minasian*

Cold Tree Press: Nashville, Tennessee, 2007. 385 pp. Illustrated.

ISBN: 9781583851593



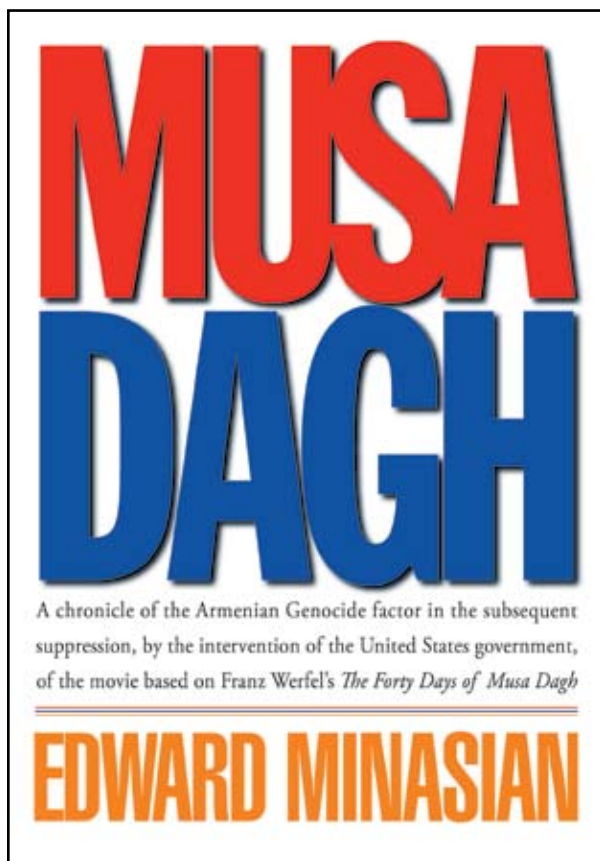
The world of the 1930s had all but forgotten the Armenian massacres of 1915, and their one and a half million victims annihilated by the Ottoman Turkish government. It was the time of the Great Depression, and most people had problems of a more recent vintage to worry about. But the year 1935 held out a glimmer of hope for those who did remember: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) announced it was preparing to make a movie of Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. The epic novel published a year earlier was based on a true-life incident of re-

Michelle Ekizian is resident composer for the Interfaith Committee of Remembrance at New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Her current projects include an opera on the life of Arshile Gorky, and a multi-media concert presentation "Songs of Light and Peace: a cross-over opera for a world divided." She lives in Mamaroneck, N.Y.



The "Mountain of Moses," or Musa Dagh: setting for Franz Werfel's novel and for the planned epic movie that has never quite been made. A new book by Edward Minasian, *Musa Dagh*, documents the tumultuous history of the film project. Photo: Hrair Hawk Khatcherian. Left: Ed Minasian, historian and author of *Musa Dagh*. Photo: Charlie Kezerian.

history



The cover of Minasian's book.

sistance during what would come to be known as the Armenian Genocide.

That movie was never made. The reason it wasn't made has become the emblematic tale of the numerous frustrated attempts to portray and acknowledge the Genocide in a high-profile, public way. The cause-and-effect narrative of threatening protestations from the Turkish government, appeasement from U.S. officials, and pressure exerted on an American industry, has become all too familiar to Armenian-Americans, and resonates to the present day. The "Hollywood factor" has made the Musa Dagh episode the stuff of legend: most Armenians know of it, refer to it, feel outrage over it. Until now, however, there hasn't been a definitive telling of the story.

Edward Minasian's recently published book, *Musa Dagh*, fills that deficiency. Minasian delves into the documentary evidence – the MGM archives, U.S. State De-

partment records, Franz Werfel's official papers – and tracks down surviving players in the story for their first-hand insights, to show how the ambitious plans for a 1930s motion picture version of *Musa Dagh* were aborted. He also reveals the continuing collusion of the Turkish government, the U.S. State Department, and Hollywood studio executives to thwart successive attempts to mount the film, up through the 1960s. The twisting, turning odyssey of hopeful starts (often championed by major Hollywood figures) and crushing terminations (invariably orchestrated from the behind the scenes) would itself make for an intriguing movie plot.

While censorship of Hollywood products has long since ceased to be a threat – these days movies actually thrive on controversial points of view – Edward Minasian's book reminds us that the U.S. State Department and its willingness to succumb to Turkey's bullying has *not* changed since the 1930s. What *has* changed – and what deserves credit for some of the recent advances we have seen in Genocide recognition – is the presence in Washington of a resourceful and active voice for the Armenian-American community, and the rise in Turkey of a new generation willing (at least in some quarters) to question its government and the prevailing "official" history.

Other constants of the last 70 years are the deep desire among Armenians to commit the dramatic story of Musa Dagh to film in the way it was originally intended, and the continuing hope that such a project would convey the truth of the Armenian Genocide to the public on a scale as yet unachieved.

### ***Musa Dagh* revelations**

Werfel divided his novel into three main sections, which he titled "books," each annotated with quotes from the biblical Book of

Revelations. Minasian also faintly echoes Revelations in each of his six books: an example is Minasian's Book III, "Babylon on the Pacific and on the Potomac," which sets the stage for the "revelations" culled from Minasian's research.

Minasian's writing style combines an historian's eye for detail with a dash of showmanship. A World War II veteran who came of age during the era of the great Hollywood moguls of the 1930s and '40s, he's able to give a first hand perspective on some of the figures and events he chronicles. Perhaps because he is a product of that less cynical time, Minasian takes to heart the acts of deception and trickery he relates involving the entertainment and political arenas; a writer nourished on the scandals of our own day might dismiss these as simply par for the course.

He portrays the first generation of Armenian-Americans emerging from the Depression as a closely-knit group, whose pride in their ancestral heritage is overshadowed by a dutiful desire to move forward in America. (One wonders whether, had Armenian-Americans been less impressionable, they could have formed a coalition to combat the internal politicking against the movie – in the way Jewish groups in the 1960s quelled dissenting voices during the making of *Exodus*, about the founding of Israel.)

The story of the Musa Dagh film begins in 1933, when Louis B. Mayer, general manager of MGM's studio in Culver City and first vice-president of Loew's Inc. (the studio's headquarters in New York), found himself so moved by Werfel's book that he opened negotiations to acquire the screen rights. These were eventually purchased for \$20,000. The project gained an enthusiastic supporter in the person of MGM's supervisor of production and Loew's second vice-president, Irving Thalberg, who would remain the project's



strongest advocate until his own early death.

In Armenian circles, grapevine talk championed Hollywood's sole director of Armenian heritage, Rouben Mamoulian, as the candidate to helm the movie.

MGM studio producer and Mayor's son-in-law David O. Selznick recommended in a memo that the picture be made with Clark Gable in the central role of Gabriel, and suggested placing the burden of complicity on one representative Turk rather than on an entire nation. Then, in a spirit of true American magnanimity, Selznick further suggested that the Turkish ambassador in Washington should be informed of the movie plans, as a matter of courtesy.

But opposition from that front had started earlier, when Turkey's Ambassador Mehmet Munir Ertegun Bey noted a brief news item on the possibility of the film production, and expressed his concern to the U.S. State Department's Near Eastern Affairs Division.

As a result, Major Frederick L. Herron, foreign manager of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA, better known as the Hays Office) became the point man for matters concerning *Musa Dagh*. In defense of the project, Herron reassured the State Department by describing the story as a domestic love triangle that would not contain anything offensive to the Turkish ambassador or his countrymen.

However, the Turkish ambassador's objections were only temporarily eased. Ertegun saw red when an in-depth article appeared in the *Washington Herald* describing Hollywood's plans to portray "Christians who combined against Turkish massacres in Armenia." From that point on a flurry of communications ensued with the State Department – and Minasian wonderfully conveys the chain of officials all aflutter, full of vacillating and paranoid judgments.



**Above:** Freedom fighters of the real life incident at Musa Dagh. The leader of the resistance, Movses Der Kaloustian, is in the second row, sixth from the left (wearing a white cap). Photo: courtesy of Vazken Der Kaloustian, from Minasian's *Musa Dagh*.

**Left:** The Musa Dagh Red Cross flag, Port Said, Egypt, 1915. Photo: courtesy of Vahram Shemmashian, *Musa Dagh Photo Archives*, from Minasian's book.

Lost in all this back-and-forth correspondence, it becomes clear, is the true content of Werfel's book and its broader humanitarian meaning, which Werfel himself described as a "search for humanity everywhere, and to avoid barbarism."

Minasian's chapter on the "Cabal of Conspirators" takes readers to the year 1935 and an unprecedented development in Hollywood history. Though it had been common practice for studios to obtain permission from a foreign government to permit filming in its country, never before had permission

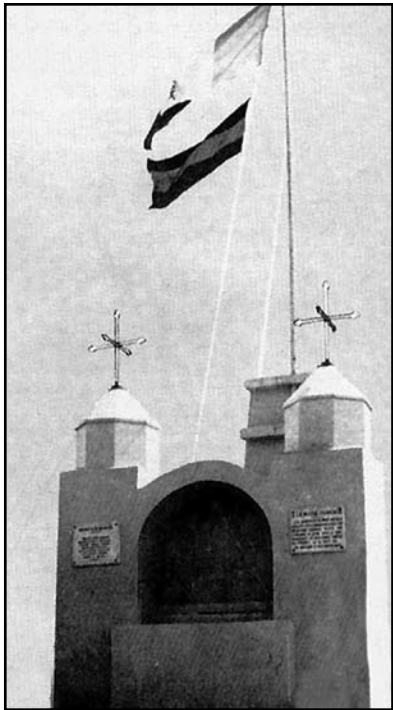
been sought for the initiation of an American film project. But the stakes seemed grave. Eventually, Turkey threatened to cut off not only the distribution in Turkey of the *Musa Dagh* movie itself, and not only of all MGM movies, but of all Hollywood-produced films if the project went ahead.

In different contexts, such threats have become a familiar refrain in our own era: part of the background noise accompanying any assertion about the Armenian Genocide. But in the 1930s they were new, seemed credible, and were not so easily dismissed.

Right: Power-house producer Pandro Berman was MGM's ray of hope for bringing the story of *Musa Dagh* to the silver-screen. Photo: Bison Productions, from Minasian's book.



The *Musa Dagh* memorial, dedicated Sept. 1932. Photo: courtesy of Mousa Ler Association of California, from Minasian's book.



## A cadaver in anatomy class

From 1934 through 1966, MGM initiated numerous failed attempts to make the movie; at least 12 screenwriters had created scripts and synopses of *Musa Dagh* – amounting to more than 100 submissions to the studio. Minasian uncovers an MGM office memo from the end of the studio's tenure on the *Musa Dagh* project which reads: "This book has been worked on and reworked more than a cadaver in an anatomy class."

Speculating on the long on-

again, off-again history of the movie, Minasian wonders whether Loews/MGM was periodically bribed to keep any *Musa Dagh* project from advancing beyond the pre-production phase. However, in the two decades following World War II, two political developments ensured the American government's support for any issue that Turkey found troublesome. The Truman Doctrine in 1947 and the alliance against the Communist bloc marked the start of this "insurance policy," and Turkey's leverage increased in 1959 when its government agreed to allow an American ballistic missile base on Turkish soil.

Despite official trepidation to pursue the project, some artistic souls ventured to crack the opposition hovering around *Musa Dagh* during the 1950s Cold War era. Minasian mentions Stanley Kubrick, Carlo Ponti, Elia Kazan, Henri Verneuil, and Elliot Kastner as among the luminaries who threw down gauntlets in support of the project.

But a bright ray of hope for producing a blockbuster movie came in 1962, thanks to the celebrated MGM producer Pandro Berman, who remarked: "the project was announced by MGM 40 times in 40 years ... And each and every time aroused Turkish indignation to the point it had become routine."

Berman had real credibility, and with his assistant Hank Moonjean (Henry Momjian) he envisioned a star-studded, epic treatment for the film, along the lines of other movies of the day, with Guy Green as director and writer, Omar Sharif as the hero Gabriel, Audrey Hepburn or Leslie Caron as his French wife, Dahlia Lavi or Julie Christie as the young Armenian girl, and Ralph Richardson or Alec Guinness as the village priest. But Berman's dreams ended in 1965, when the MGM hierarchy described *Musa Dagh* as "irrelevant."

It was in response to this attitude that Armenian community

activism at long last reared its head. In 1969, Archbishop Torkom Manoogian, at the time Primate of the Eastern Diocese of the Armenian Church of America in New York, telegrammed MGM on behalf of major Armenian organizations with an offer to rally the Armenian community to counter Turkish protests: "If the movie had been made as planned in the 1930s," he wrote, "who knows, it may have deterred Hitler and the Jewish Holocaust." The message did receive a serious reply from the studio, but no promises, and despite a fresh screenplay the project remained on the shelf.

Armenians, however, were about to become significantly more influential in the destiny of the film.

## Armenians at the helm

The year 1970 saw the purchase of MGM by Armenian-American industrialist Kerk Kerkorian, and shortly thereafter, the sale of the *Musa Dagh* screen rights to John Kurkjian, a retired Armenian-American real estate businessman in Los Angeles. With two Armenians at the helm, it seemed as though the movie would finally receive its just due.

Unfortunately, Kurkjian proved a novice at filmmaking. His inability to raise the funds for the movie's projected budget of \$7 million from the Armenian community further weakened the production, and his partnership with MGM ended in 1976. Kurkjian *did* eventually make his film – the low-budget *40 Days of Musa Dagh* that one can still see kicking around the dusty video racks of Armenian bookstores – but it was hardly an auspicious affair.

Minasian's canny eye catches a change in the political and bureaucratic assault on the picture around this time. From the 1930s through '60s *Musa Dagh* had been the Turkish government's *bête noire*, suppressed with the collusion of the U.S. State Department. But in light of the Kurkjian pro-



duction, Minasian suggests that Turkey's fears about the project may have been motivated at least in part because of the association with MGM: a film produced by such a dynamic and powerful entity could certainly be expected to have an impact on the general public. But the political risk would be much less with a cash-strapped independent production. When Kukjian was abandoned by MGM to venture alone into the realm of low-budget movie-making, the veil of Turkish threats lifted.

Ironically, at the same time MGM was severing its association with *Musa Dagh*, an outspoken generation of filmmakers more sympathetic to causes of human justice, was emerging. The 1970s saw the popular success of *Midnight Express*, a movie about the drug world set against the backdrop of the brutal Turkish penal system. Turkish protests ensued – but proved ineffective in the Hollywood of the time.

It is deeply regrettable that during this more “open” period, a suitable motion picture version of *Musa Dagh* could not be made – either as a big budget studio blockbuster or as a finely made independent film. Irony piles on irony in this phase of the story: MGM was actually owned by an Armenian at the time; the Armenian-American community, so proud and eager at the prospect of seeing this story made into an epic movie, proved unwilling to invest its financial resources in the venture. All of which regrettably left John Kurkjian to pick up the pieces and proceed with the production on his own, as everyone around him – the studio honchos, fellow Armenians, and (one can only imagine) Turkish officialdom – all stood by and watched him founder.

### Curse or blessing?

Minasian traces the saga to recent years – by which time the present author became caught in *Musa Dagh's* tribulations. In 1989 a Ger-

man television producer became involved with the book's screen rights. Now a man in his 80s, he continues to cycle in and out of Armenian communities – partnering occasionally with Hollywood-based producers – always on the lookout for potential funders. But like so many proposals over the years, nothing substantial has come to light.

As one reaches the end of Minasian's account, one can't help but wonder whether the entire *Musa Dagh* project lives under some kind of curse. Or perhaps – in some twisted, paradoxical way – its tumultuous history has merely been a prologue for the realization of the dream in *our own* era: an era more receptive to issues of genocide, an era of greater Armenian prominence in the surrounding culture, and an era of unparalleled technical capability in film. Providentially, today's mainstream Hollywood is also home to an astonishing number of accomplished Armenians in fields like screenwriting, producing, studio administration, and casting, who are eager to tell their people's stories. Werfel himself had the village priest in his novel say, when the villagers were rescued after surviving their ordeal: “The evil only happened ... to enable God to show us His goodness.”

So maybe we're on the verge – finally – of seeing this movie done right.

If that's so, Edward Minasian has some advice to offer: “The history of *Musa Dagh* in Hollywood serves as a lesson for future attempts at the movie,” he writes, and goes on to lay these out in his book. Prospective filmmakers should (a) be prepared to deal with Turkish pressure; (b) provide a budget worthy of an epic film; and (c) counteract any protests with a publicity campaign that will not only diminish the opposition, but create an enthusiastic audience for the film. He also advises that the Armenian Caucus in Congress and



Hollywood mogul Louis B. Mayer had MGM purchase the screen rights to Werfel's book, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, in 1934. Photo: Bison Productions, from Minasian's book.

Armenian political action groups need to stay alert throughout the filmmaking process.

Minasian's research into the attempts at making a motion picture based on the story of Musa Dagh is truly meticulous – his extensive reference notes testify to the sea of documentation he waded through – and his treatment surely settles all the matters of fact that have long since passed into hazy legend in Armenian circles. Now, thanks to Edward Minasian's *Musa Dagh*, we know exactly what transpired between Hollywood, Washington, and Ankara that caused the film project to be aborted time and again over the course of four decades.

And with that knowledge in hand, maybe we can all move forward and *make* this picture. ■■■

A pile of rubble is all that remains of the monument at Musa Dagh in honor of the survivors. It was torn down by the Turks in 1939. Photo courtesy of Rev. G. Haroutunian and Varack Haroutunian, from Minasian's book.



# More than the truth

## About Werfel's epic

by Michelle Ekizian

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*,  
by Franz Werfel

(Reprint of the 1934 Viking Press edition; English translation from the German by Geoffrey Dunlop.) Carroll and Graf, New York: 2003. 842 pages.

ISBN: 9780786711383

Of his novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Franz Werfel said: "Everything I have written is the truth – more than the truth, because an epic represents the truth colored by imagination."

Werfel's seminal literary account of what would eventually come to be known as the Armenian Genocide is actually based on one of the few "happily ending" episodes of that human catastrophe. The historical incident at Musa Dagh – a thwarted attempt at ethnic cleansing – was already heavily documented in the writings of a survivor, Rev. Dickran

Andreassian, upon which Werfel drew. His task as a novelist was to flesh out the facts contained in this already dramatic source material, and convey the human story of a self-contained community that fell victim to the evacuation of its homeland by the Turks in the summer of 1915.

An Austrian Jew with an uncanny premonitory vision of the disaster awaiting his own people, Werfel set out in 1929 to depict the dramatic events at Musa Dagh. His own service in the Austrian army from 1914 to 1917 gave him a critical perspective on the tragedies of the First World War.

But what compelled him to write the book was the sight of maimed orphaned children working in a carpet factory, which he saw during a 1929 visit to Damascus with his wife, Alma Mahler.

The children, survivors of the Armenian Genocide, left an indelible impression on Werfel's compassionate soul. They symbolized the "incomprehensible destiny of the Armenian nation," Werfel wrote, and he became consumed by thoughts of the Ar-

menian holocaust. He researched the Armenian heritage at the Mekhitarist monastery in Vienna, and drew maps of Musa Dagh and its terrain. From articles by Andreassian, Werfel encountered eyewitness accounts of the actual survivors and the leader of the resistance at Musa Dagh, Movses Der Kaloustian (who settled in Anjar, Lebanon, and later became a member of the Lebanese Parliament).

His creative genius percolating with a plot worthy of an action thriller, and an Everyman hero who would guarantee salvation for his compatriots, Werfel began to write his novel in 1932, and finished in less than a year.

The book was first published in German in 1933; an English translation published the following year by Viking Press reached a record-breaking sale of 85,000 copies in 1934, and was designated as a December choice for the Book-of-the-Month Club. *The New York Times* called the novel "a story which must rouse the emotions of all human beings." In Germany, Werfel found himself labeled an "undesireable" under Hitler's regime; but his novel continued to be sold in secret. During the Nazi invasion of Poland in 1939-40, the book helped to inspire uprisings in the Warsaw ghetto.

The novel includes among its characters good-willed Turks as well as belligerent ones; Armenians motivated by love and virtue, but sometimes motivated by darker passions, as well. All and all, as William Saroyan so astutely observed in his 1934 review of the book for the *Saturday Review*, Werfel created a novel "full of the breath, the flesh and blood and bone and spirit of life."



Author Franz Werfel with his wife Alma Mahler (widow of the composer Gustav Mahler) arrive in America in 1935. Photo: UCLA Special Collections Library, from Minasian's book.



## Characters and plot of *Musa Dag* (spoilers ahead)

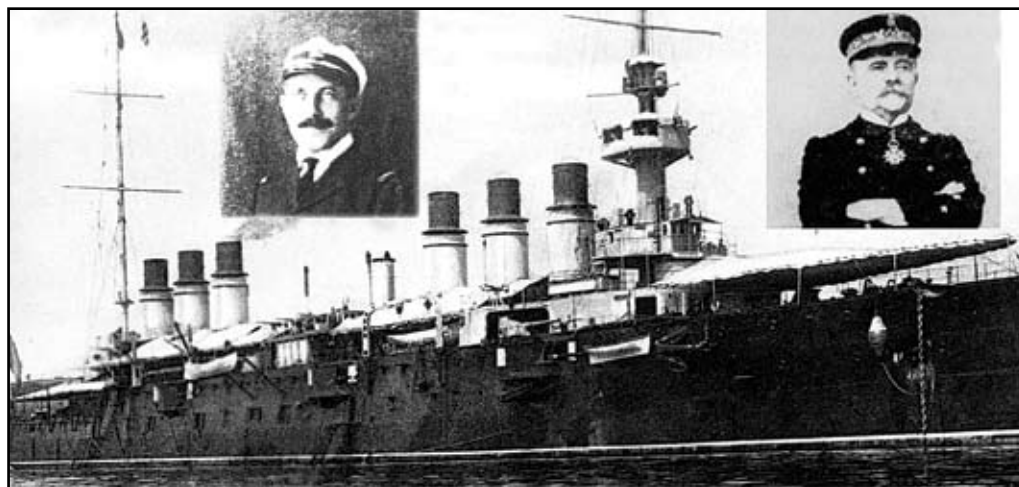
In an idyllic mountainside village along the Syrian coast inhabited by Armenians for thousands of years, a community of some 5,000 Armenians resisted the Turkish government's enforced death march into the Syrian desert by claiming the top of the mountain called Musa Dagh ("the mountain of Moses") as their refuge, from which they ward off the Turkish army. Out of desperation, the villagers created two huge white banners with red lettering to wave toward the Mediterranean Sea below. On the 40th day of the siege, a miraculous rescue appeared in the form of a French armored cruiser.

(In the real-life incident, the length of the siege was 53 days, but Werfel altered it to 40 days to strike a Biblical parallel.)

The story's protagonist, **Gabriel Bagradian**, had lost sight of his ancestral roots over the preceding 23 years; but by fate of circumstance he finds himself returning from Paris to his homeland, and protecting his re-discovered community from the government that has targeted it for extinction. In the process, Gabriel's newfound national fervor estranges him from his Parisian wife **Juliette**, while his 13-year-old son **Stephan** discovers his Armenian ancestry – only to lose his life at the hands of a band of Turks.

The backstory of the Armenian massacres is best captured in the figure of **Iskuhi**, a survivor of the death marches and of a sexual assault, who winds up at Musa Dagh, and becomes a source of inspiration for Gabriel. Another character, Greek-American journalist **Gonzague Maris**, is led to Musa Dagh as an adventurer, but finds there an attraction to Juliette.

The interplay of good and evil on both sides of the defense involves the compassionate intervention of



a Turkish benefactor, **Agha Rifaat Bereket**, his friend **Neizime Bey** (part of a secret Islamic order, the Thieves of Hearts), and kindly Turkish villagers who, in a heartwarming incident, embrace a lost Stephan.

Human beneficence is exemplified in the character **Krikor**, the wise apothecary of the Armenian village, and through two Armenian priests, **Ter Haigasoon** of the Armenian Apostolic church, and the Protestant pastor, **Fr. Nokhudian**, who chooses to lead his flock on the marches into the desert, in the hope that salvation will meet them.

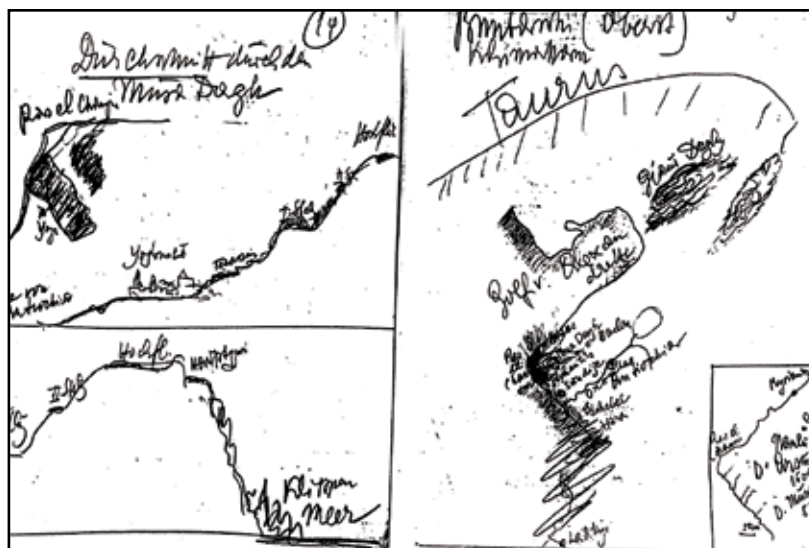
Likewise, humanity's dark side is portrayed not only by Turks, but through the troubled Armenian renegade **Sarkis Kilikian** and his disciples – who at the climax of the resistance attempt to

destroy their own people through a crazed torching of the mountain campsite. Their plans for a mass murder go awry, however, when the French cruiser spots the flaming mountain and its white banners flapping in the wind.

In the end, while Juliette, Iskuhi, and throngs of rescued villagers are taken on board the French naval vessel for passage to a safe haven, Gabriel remains atop Musa Dagh to commune with his native soil and his dead son buried beneath it. Alone, with a Turkish sniper stalking him, he comes upon his son's grave – and there becomes the final martyr of Musa Dagh. As the gunshot pierces his body, Gabriel falls over the grave, takes up his son's cross, and holds it to his heart.

Now wouldn't that make a great movie?

The French Mediterranean fleet flagship, *Jeanne d'Arc*, which came to the rescue of the Armenians at Musa Dagh in Sept. 1915. Vice Admiral Dartigue du Fournet (inset, right), commanded the 3rd Squadron. Lt. Charles Diran Tekeyan (inset, left), serving aboard the *Desaix*, acted as interpreter and intermediary. Photos: courtesy of: Dr. V. Shemmassian; Dr. V. Der Kaloustian and Red Mountain Committee; all from Minasian's book.



Werfel's sketch of the terrain around Musa Dagh. Photo: UCLA Special Collections Library, from Minasian's book.

# Q & A with Ed Minasian, author of *Musa Dagh*

by Michelle Ekizian

**Q:** What got you interested in researching the history of the thwarted attempts to make a movie of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*?

**Minasian:** In 1976 I met my half-sister Peprone for the first time. She told me about Haig, my three-year-old half-brother who had died of typhus on the death march in 1915. I was shocked. I decided to translate my anger and frustration into something more constructive. Having read Werfel's novel and being a movie buff, I was always curious as to its history in Hollywood and Washington.

**Q:** What was the most surprising fact you uncovered in your research?

**Minasian:** Most surprising of all was to discover that there had been so many attempts to make a movie of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*.

Another surprise was to learn of the many prominent producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors who very much desired to be in the production.

I should mention that I was initially overwhelmed by the four "grocery carts" of *Musa Dagh* documents contained in the archives at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer; I had expected just a bookshelf full. And to go through Werfel's handwritten notes was also surprising – and one of the most thrilling moments during my research.

**Q:** You are obviously a great fan of Werfel's novel. Why is the book still important today?

**Minasian:** The fate of Werfel's novel in Hollywood and

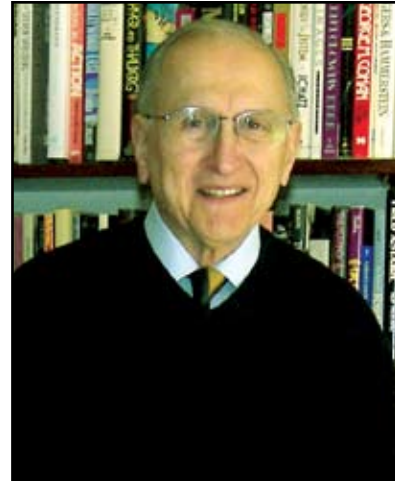
Washington is a case of our own government's intervention in the movie business to appease a foreign government – in this case one that was guilty of genocide. It should be the concern of every American citizen when a celebrated novel is subjected to censorship as a motion picture, due to the prejudice of a foreign government.

As for the novel itself: Just as *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* restored my ethnic soul, I believe if every young Armenian earnestly read it, they would appreciate their ancestral heritage. I look to the next generation of Armenian-Americans to pick up the gauntlet and fight the good fight in honor of our Genocide martyrs, by never resting until Werfel's masterpiece reaches the silver screen as the Academy Award-winner it deserves to be.

Furthermore, the historical victory at Musa Dagh was made possible due to the unity of the Armenians – transcending partisan politics, religious denominations, and economic differences.

**Q:** Tell us about your background as an historian and an Armenian-American.

**Minasian:** I was a history major at the University of California, and it was in History 101 where I learned the fundamentals of research. I taught history and government for 13 years on the high school level, and for 29 years at Laney Community College. My master's thesis was about Armenian immigration to the United States. I served for five years as president of a faculty association, and have served in many Armenian organizations. In my younger



As a youth, first-generation Armenian-American Ed Minasian read Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*; he credits the novel with inspiring him to discover his Armenian heritage.  
Photo: Charlie Kezerian.

days, I was active in American political campaigns.

**Q:** How did you gather the information for your book? How long did it take you to see it come to publication?

**Minasian:** It took a lot of legwork and travel, phone calls, letters, interviews, "vacation" time, taping, note-taking, filing, and much editing. My basic research, off and on, took many years while I was teaching and engaged in organizational activities. I began to write my manuscript after I retired.

**Q:** And all of this at a time when there was no help from computers or the Internet! Thanks Ed; you have written an amazing chronicle that will serve as a source of information and inspiration for future generations.

✻

connect:  
Edward Minasian will be present for a book-signing and presentation titled "Ed Minasian's *Musa Dagh* Day" at Borders Bookstore, 120 Crescent Dr., in Pleasant Hill, Calif., on Sunday, Sept. 9, at 4:00 p.m. For information, call the store at (925) 686-4835.



# A Musa Dagh dialogue with Michelle Ekizian

by Chris Zakian

**Armenian Reporter:** Michelle, you've been involved for several years in an ongoing attempt to revive the Musa Dagh movie project. What do you think it'll take to make it a reality, after all these years?

**Ekizian:** There's a quote I'm fond of in the Werfel novel. In the early chapters, when the plans for the resistance are underway, the village priest Ter Haigasoon says to the story's protagonist, Gabriel: "This is the time for people to come together."

That should be the motto for this project. If the Armenian-American community wants see the epic story of the resistance at Musa Dagh materialize in the form of a major motion picture, we're going to have to bring together all our influence, all our pull, all our talent – and of course some significant resources. But it'll be worth it.

**AR:** The Musa Dagh story has inspired you as a composer, as well, hasn't it. Can you tell us about that? And what kind of response does the story get from audiences?

**Ekizian:** Few stories have the emotional intensity of Musa Dagh. I think this "gravitas" is something audiences in our post 9/11 world can find solace in. The story works as an action-adventure vehicle – but it's not just quick-cutting and pounding drum tracks. Musa Dagh asks an audience to realize the value of the human spirit. In my musical explorations I've attempted to capture the story's

spiritual essence – but imagine how powerful it would be using all the elements of cinema.

Whenever my compositions devoted to Musa Dagh have been performed, I've witnessed audiences embrace its drama, its epic sweep, its emotional depth. My symphonic suite with texts – narrated by Eric Bogosian – saw its premiere at last season's Interfaith Concert of Remembrance in New York's Cathedral of St. John the Divine.

This spring, my new 40-minute music video, *The Place of Beginnings: Songs of Peace* (a musical meditation on the story of the resistance at Musa Dagh) was shown as part of the Scarsdale public school system's Human Rights Day curriculum – and the kids really caught on.


**AR:** How can someone view that video?

**Ekizian:** Sponsor a screening – just contact me at mekizian@optonline.net.

**AR:** From a video or concert to a blockbuster movie is a giant step. Do you think it's really in the cards?




**Ekizian:** Considering the past history, sure, it remains to be seen. But believe me: this story resonates with today's public consciousness. Most importantly, it resonates with the youth. There is a real interest out there for stories like this – a real thirst. And for a certain segment of the population, "Musa Dagh" is almost like a brand name. So with all that going for it, can a movie be far behind?

**AR:** Can't wait to see it.   
connect:  
mekizian@optonline.net

The story of the resistance at Musa Dagh finds resonance in today's world of genocide and violence. Photo: H. Khatcherian.

## Musa Ler oral traditions now in print in English and Armenian

A newly published bilingual book of the folktale *Grateful Animals* has just been released by Abril Books. The book, based on the oral traditions of the villagers of Musa Ler, was written by educator Sona Zeitlian, who has published five volumes of children's books. *Grateful Animals* was illustrated by art teacher Alik Arzoumanian. Zeitlian's book is based on re-

cordings she made of the story as told by Musa Ler natives, who were relocated to Ainjar, Lebanon. *Grateful Animals* is about woodcutter who rescues a snake, a monkey, a lion and a rich merchant, who are all trapped in the same pit. 

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# Rocky's next battle: The making of *Musa Dagh*?

by Chris Zakian

PARAMUS, N.J. – With the theatrical release last December of *Rocky Balboa*, the sixth installment in the inspiring series about the perpetual-underdog Philadelphia boxer, it was hardly surprising to see filmmaker Sylvester Stallone spotlighted in newspapers across the country.

What was surprising was an announcement elicited from Stallone by *Denver Post* writer Michael Booth, regarding the star's dream project.

Acknowledging that his action-hero days are likely behind him, the 60-year-old Stallone said that he would like to devote more of his career to writing and directing: "less in the public eye, but providing something for the public," is the way he put it.

Then Booth wrote: "So what is the Stallone Surprise, the project he's always wanted to write or direct?"

Here's the answer he got – which certainly set Armenian hearts aflutter.

"For years Stallone's wanted to create an epic, and the book that intrigues him is Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, detailing the Turkish genocide of its Armenian community in 1915. (After futile attempts to turn the novel into a movie, filmmakers finally succeeded in 1982, but it was a low-profile production.)

"French ships eventually rescued some Armenians, and Stallone has his favorite scene memorized: 'The French ships come, and they've dropped the ladders and everybody has climbed up

the side. The ships sail.

The hero, the one who set up the rescue, has fallen asleep, exhausted, behind a rock on the slope above. The camera pulls back, and the ships and the sea are on one side, and there's one lonely figure at the top of the mountain, and the Turks are coming up the mountain by the thousands on the far side."

**"Talk about a political hot potato. The Turks have been killing that subject for 85 years."**

—Sylvester Stallone

Fittingly for *Rocky Balboa*, the interview ended with a punch.

"The movie would be 'an epic about the complete destruction of a civilization,' Stallone said. Then he laughed at the ambition. 'Talk about a political hot potato. The Turks have been killing that subject for 85 years.'"

It was a small irony, appreciated only by Armenians, that this news came to light in the same week that newspapers ran obituaries for music impresario Ahmet Ertegun, whose father, Turkey's ambassador to the U.S. in the 1930s, had used his influence to have the plug pulled on the earlier motion picture treatments of *Musa Dagh*.

Of course, there's a long road separating a filmmaker's quip about a dream project, on the one hand, from an actual theatrical release, on the other. Who knows whether Stallone's ambition will ever see the light of day?

But Armenians – like Rocky – are used to the underdog role. They suffer setbacks, but always come back swinging. If not Stallone, then surely someone else will fulfill the long-held Armenian dream of putting *Musa Dagh* on film in the way it deserves.

Regrettably, there will be no "Hollywood ending" to lift our spirits at the story's conclusion. ■



Stallone sets up a shot on the *Rocky Balboa* set. Photo: © Sony Pictures Digital Inc.