

THE BATTLE OF AVARAYR AND ST. VARTAN THE BRAVE

Every year, on the Thursday preceding Lent (this year, that's February 19), Armenians throughout the world celebrate the anniversary of an important event in their history. This is the religious war waged between pagan Persia and Christian Armenia in the year 451 A.D. The hero of this war was St. Vartan the Brave. All those who gave their lives in this war are called collectively the Vartanians.

The cause of the battle was religious. Armenia, the first country in the world to proclaim Christianity as its state religion (301 A.D.), lived peacefully, first under its own kings, and then under Persian rule. She developed her culture with great zeal during the first half of the fifth century. During this period the Bible was translated into Armenian and Christianity flourished in the country.

Armenians who formerly had almost the same religion as the Persians, showed signs of alienation from them after becoming Christians. In order to force the Armenians to revert back to the Persian religion, the king of Persia decreed that all Christians under his rule should abandon their new religion and accept Mazdeism, the distinctive feature of which was the worship of the sun and fire. The Armenians, in a mass meeting of the clergy and ruling princes, gave a bold answer to this royal decree, insisting that they had not the slightest intention of altering their Christian beliefs. They wrote a letter to the Persian king in which they said: *"Our religion is not like a garment that we might change according to the circumstances; it is part and parcel of our bones and blood and personality. . . . We will serve you loyally in your army and pay you taxes faithfully if you leave us alone in the matter of religion. If you try to force your will upon us we are ready to suffer, and to be tortured and even to die. However, you should know in advance that there is no power on earth which can force us to change our religion because our covenant is not with man but with Almighty God."* That was the conclusion of the letter.

The Persians countered this boldness with a heavy hand. They sent to Armenia a huge army of some 220,000 strong to crush the resistance and to convert the country



to paganism by force. In 451 A.D. on the field of Avarayr, near Mount Ararat, a band of 66,000 semi-trained and poorly-equipped Armenian fighters, under the leadership of Vartan Mamigonian, their Commander-in-Chief, stood waiting for the invading army of Persians.

Vartan Mamigonian was the descendent of a noble Armenian family. From his mother's side he was the grandson of Sahag the Catholicos, the chief translator of the Bible from the Greek into Armenian. Vartan was, at that time, the head of the Mamigonian House, a very influential and renowned ruling family in Armenia. Vartan knew full well that the Persians outnumbered his men, that they were well-equipped and that they were going to use

their hordes of elephants against him, but he put his trust in God and preferred honorable death to servility.

The day before the battle, the Armenian soldiers spent the night in prayer and devotion. The entire army prayed and took Holy Communion. The head of the church, Catholicos Hovsep, was there together with his clergy. One priest, Fr. Ghevont, the most zealous among the clergy (whose memory we commemorate this year on February 17), together with Vartan Mamigonian, encouraged the soldiers with inspiring words.

Towards the morning of that Saturday they heard, and dimly saw, the approaching Persian army. The clash of the two armies was fierce, with swords glittering and blood running profusely. The Armenians inflicted great losses on the enemy. In the battle which lasted only one day, and in the subsequent guerilla wars, 1,036 Armenians fell, against the Persian loss of 3,544 soldiers. The battle of Avarayr came to an end with the fall of Vartan the Brave. The Armenians, seeing that they were left without a commander, withdrew to their homes and inaccessible mountains to carry on a guerilla war.

Vartan and his comrades suffered a military defeat but in reality the victory was theirs. They lost the battle but won the war and attained the aim for which they were fighting. The Persians eventually stopped trying to convert the country to their religion when they realized how steadfast the Armenians were in their faith and convictions. The Armenian defeat became a moral victory.

