

VARIATIONS ON A DIRGE OF EXTERMINATION: “DER ZOR ÇÖLÜNDE” AND THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Abstract

In one of his lectures at Northwestern University, Eli Wiesel (1977) stressed that “if the Greeks invented tragedy, the Romans the epistle, and the Renaissance the sonnet, our generation invented a new literature, that of testimony.” However, Wiesel suggested the generation of the Holocaust and most likely have forgotten the eyewitness survivors of the Armenian Genocide. In this article, I focus on a specific kind of testimony that emerged amongst the survivors of the Armenian Genocide: the song-testimony.

Thinking about music and sound is important as the experience of genocide stretches far beyond the visual-oriented notions of such tragedy. It is in this spirit that I write this essay to investigate “Der Zor Çölünde,” a series of song-testimonies that musically charts the experience of Armenians during the Genocide of 1915–1923. I primarily argue that Armenian deportees appropriated the musical and lyrical template of “Der Zor Çölünde” by creating new verses. In doing so, Armenians illustrated and immortalized what they saw, felt, and experienced during the deportations and forced marches. Considering the multifaceted nature of “Der Zor Çölünde,” this essay reimagines the Armenian Genocide experience through the voice(s) of its protagonists. Furthermore, I emphasize the importance and implication of listening to the performances of “Der Zor Çölünde” *against* the official narratives of genocide denial.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, testimony, song, music, performance, counterlistening

This article was submitted on 09.08.2023 and accepted for publication on 22.11.2023.

How to cite: James Carl L. Osorio, “Variations on a Dirge of Extermination: “Der Zor Çölünde” and the Armenian Genocide,” *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 8, no. 2 (2023): 35-55.

Introduction

We left Harpoot on a Thursday, went to Merdin and from there to Tigranakert, to Rasul-Ayn – walking the entire way – most of the time on our bare feet ... We were kept in this area for a week ... When the week was up, the army officer returned and asked us to prepare to leave, and we were marched to the Der Zor wilderness. We suddenly realized it was nearly eight months since we left our homeland. Once again, we came upon a body of water, and again, our fears and suspicions were aroused ... We would be put to death by drowning. Some of us were crying contemplating death, some were laughing hysterically, some were even singing.¹

Johar Aslanian-Mamigonian's sonic triptych – crying, laughing, singing – inscribed in her 1978 survivor testimony letter, explicitly unveils the harrowing cacophony she heard as a deportee during the unspeakable events of 1915 to 1923. Arguably, the first major genocide of the 20th century, the Armenian Genocide, was the Ottoman state's barbaric act to eliminate the Armenians of the Empire and establish the foundations for a Pan-Turkic empire.² When the Great War ended, statistics indicated that the Young Turks uprooted, deported, and murdered nearly ninety per cent of Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire.³ The engraved memories of the sheer inhumanity and tragedy empowered survivors to affront Turkey's continuous denial and narrate their experiences through oral testimonies, narratives, and memoirs. In this essay, I focus on another form of testimony – the song testimony.

Visual and documentary materials (e.g., photographs, documents, and monuments) dominate the representations of the Armenian Genocide. As historical evidence, oral testimonies of traumatic events have received criticism from the history profession due to their subjectivity and inaccuracy.⁴ However, Omer Bartov conversely argues that testimonies not only “provide insight into the lives and minds of men, women, and children who experienced the events” but also, beyond any official documents, illuminate our understanding of the “mental landscape, the psychology of the protagonists, and the views and perceptions of others.”⁵

Thinking about music and sound as testimonies is essential, for the experience in any genocidal event transcends far beyond the visual realm. Consider this: a song reveals

1 Verjine Svazlian, “Johar Aslanian-Mamigonian's Testimony,” in *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitoutyoum Publishing House, 2011), 254–255.

2 Ronald Grigor Suny, “Religion, Ethnicity, and Nationalism: Armenians, Turks, and the End of the Ottoman Empire,” in *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 50.

3 Suny, “Religion Ethnicity, and Nationalism,” 54; Taner Akçam, “The Young Turks and the Plans for the Ethnic Homogenization of Anatolia,” in *Shatterzones of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, edited by Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 269.

4 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Oxford: Taylor and Francis, 2016), 5.

5 Omer Bartov, *Genocide, the Holocaust, and Israel-Palestine: First-Person History in Times of Crisis* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 62.

intimate and complex relationships between people and places. Historians Alun Howkins and Shirli Gilbert reason that, in the context of the British Isles and the Holocaust, respectively, songs from ordinary people stand as an exceptional historical source, orally capturing collective ideas and interpretations within these communities.⁶ Furthermore, studying songs also calls on us to contemplate the act of singing. These essential elements make songs vital and relatively rare records of the Armenian Genocide experience. Inspired by these unique attributes of songs, this essay investigates “Der Zor Çölünde” a song testimony about the Armenian Genocide.

The sui generis nature of “Der Zor Çölünde” – bearing rich literary, archival, cultural, and affective material; its numerous versicle variants, and its embodiment through a survivor’s voice – compels us to reconsider and reimagine the overlooked significance of song testimonies as repositories of historical information on the Armenian Genocide. I reflect on the implications of renewing the voice and sound of “Der Zor Çölünde” a century after the Genocide’s conclusion in order to ask what themes and realities within these verses can we unearth further to illuminate our understanding of the Armenian Genocide experience. Specifically, what role did “Der Zor Çölünde” play in the everyday lives of Armenian deportees? In what ways does a performance of “Der Zor Çölünde” affect a survivor’s singing body?

Using the questions above as points of departure, I engage with the verses of “Der Zor Çölünde” as lyrical relics of collective memory and introduce a musical turn in understanding the complexity of the Armenian Genocide. First, I seek to imagine how we can intertwine these verses with narrative and audiovisual testimonies of survivors from the Armenian diaspora and exhume overlapping genocidal motifs. These themes, textually concealed under the guise of suggestive metaphors, include sexual violence, religion, abduction, suicide, and thirst. In addition, they serve as connecting fulcrum between the different kinds of oral testimonies of the Armenian Genocide.

Further, the abundance of “Der Zor Çölünde” verses demonstrates that Armenian victims orally and repeatedly created lyrical variations along a prescribed template. When examining how victims immortalized a shared experience of the Genocide through these verses, I am grateful to Michel de Certeau’s idea of everyday life and the role of *tactics* as a way for Armenian victims to musically navigate their surroundings despite not having significant control over these environments.⁷ Simply put, I posit that composing verses along a familiar pattern is a form of tactic in everyday deportation life. This musicalized tactic represents a form of musicking – or the communal and inclusive act of engaging with music, including music-making and listening – that accentuates the shared experience of the Genocide.⁸

6 Alun Howkins, “The Voice of the People: The Social Meaning and Context of Country Song,” *Oral History* 3, no. 1 (1975): 50; Shirli Gilbert, *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghetto Camps* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

7 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 37.

8 Christopher G. Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 9.

Engaging with songs as testimonies means considering them content-driven sources and crucial artifacts rooted in singing. To ethically analyze survivors' singing performances of "Der Zor Çölünde" in their audiovisual testimonies, I adopted Dominick LaCapra's orientation of "empathic unsettlement," previously adopted in viewing Holocaust testimonies, to afford myself the ability to participate and connect with the experience of Armenian Genocide survivors while also recognizing that their experiences are different.⁹ This desirable position combines emotional engagement and an awareness of the limits of that relationship due to the temporal and experiential gap between the past and the present. In a vocal performance or "Der Zor Çölünde", the verses act as temporal bridges that allow the survivors and their traumatized bodies to be both in the past and in the present. I propose that these vocalized verses become embodied memories of the Armenian Genocide. Thus, "Der Zor Çölünde" verses trigger the unique power of song testimonies to allow survivors to work out their trauma. For a secondary witness, listening to a singing survivor and the musical traces of the past can be an act of *listening against* powerful nation-states that continue to deny the Armenian Genocide.¹⁰

My principal source for the numerous lyrical variations of "Der Zor Çölünde" is the English edition of Armenian folklorist and ethnologist Verjine Svazlian's anthology *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors*. Svazlian's massive collection results from her fifty-year fieldwork, which began in 1955, when discussing the Genocide publicly was forbidden in Soviet Armenia.¹¹ Moreover, I found traces of "Der Zor Çölünde" within audiovisual survivor testimonies from the University of Southern California Shoah Foundation's *Visual History Archive*.

This paper integrates three sections: the first part involves a historical and literary reading of "Der Zor Çölünde" verses recorded in Svazlian's compendium. The second part provides further context by comparing these verses alongside other testimonies to establish "Der Zor Çölünde" as a component of everyday deportation life. In this section, I also introduce a verse from the audiovisual testimony of a Genocide survivor descendant. Finally, the last section delves into the performance aspect of "Der Zor Çölünde." In this study, I consider all testimonies – song, narrative, and audiovisual – sacrosanct sites of historical, sensory, cultural, and affective knowledge. This attention reinforces the importance of recognizing and acknowledging how survivors preserve and embody the historical horror and pain ingrained in the verses of "Der Zor Çölünde."

Musical Memories of Violence in the Borderlands

The Armenian Genocide was the Ottoman government's campaign to expel Armenians from their homelands and subject them to unimaginable forms of abuse.¹² During these

9 Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2001), 41–42.

10 Gascia Ouzounian, "Counterlistening," *English Studies in Canada* 46, no. 2–4 (2023): 311.

11 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 568–577. In my analysis, I utilized Svazlian's translation of "Der Zor Çölünde" verses unless specified.

12 Richard G. Hovannisian, *Armenia on the Road to Independence* (Berkeley: University of California Press,

deportations, Armenians found meaning and solace in the verses of “Der Zor Çölünde”. Svazlian asserts that “Der Zor Çölünde” verses are connected through similar topics and portray Ottoman Turkey’s violence against Armenians.¹³ Therefore, I analyzed the sixty-nine distinct lyrical variations of “Der Zor Çölünde” recorded in Svazlian’s anthology and identified recurring motifs among each verse.¹⁴ Although the original creators of these verses remain unknown, it is essential to consider that these songs emerged in the borderlands – geographical locations cradling diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic composition.

In the Ottoman Empire, religious minorities – Christians and Jews – held an inferior status.¹⁵ The Armenian populations experienced the Ottoman Empire’s sadistic genocidal acts, including sexual assault, violence, looting, and murder.¹⁶ Armenians were forcibly uprooted from their homes and deported to the Syrian deserts, mainly Der Zor,¹⁷ where special killing units of convicted criminals massacred the arriving Armenians.¹⁸

Scholars like Omer Bartov and Eric Weitz insist that sociopolitical memories in the borderlands linger in mind as mementos and vestiges – resonances of once thriving communities, now lost to history.¹⁹ Correspondingly, the verses of “Der Zor Çölünde” set to an unornamented and simple melodic template, serve as music-lyrical memories that offer us traces of the barbarisms in these borderlands.



Figure 1. Melodic template of “Der Zor Çölünde”.²⁰

The tuneful and octave-encompassing melody of “Der Zor Çölünde” is syllabic and declamatory, exhibiting a conversational character (Figure 1). This melodic frame adheres to the symmetrical scheme of its text using two four-bar phrases. The two-note slurs that permeate the song signal a lachrymose quality, reminiscent of medieval

1967), 50–51.

13 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 41.

14 Ibid., 568–577, 628–629. In the introductory essay of this source, Svazlian claims that there are up to 80 verses associated to the “Der Zor Çölünde” song series.

15 Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz, “Introduction: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands,” in *Shatterzones of Empires: Coexistence and Violence in the German, Habsburg, Russian, and Ottoman Borderlands*, edited by Omer Bartov and Eric D. Weitz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 10.

16 Donald Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 41–42.

17 Norman Naimark, *Genocide: A World History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 73.

18 George Shirinian, “Deportations,” in *The Armenian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide*, edited by Alan Whitehorn (Santa Barbara: ABC-Clio, 2015), 107–109.

19 Bartov and Weitz, “Introduction: Coexistence and Violence,” 12.

20 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 629. This is my own engravement adapted from Svazlian’s transcription of the melody.

Armenian folksongs and funeral chants, in contrast to the rigid structure of poetry and the ambiguity surrounding how memory functions in recalling poems, the synergies between a song's melodic and rhythmic patterns operate as effective mnemonic aids.²¹ They facilitate not only the recall of words and images but also of emotions. In performing "Der Zor Çölünde" the simple yet plaintive nature of its tune and the tragedy embedded in the text caused Genocide survivors to sing with crying sobs. The interactions between music and verse further stimulate survivors to recall as many verses as they can. Due to the numerous permutations of "Der Zor Çölünde" and her lack of formal musical training, Svazlian confesses that she needed the assistance of a trained musician to approximate and represent all the survivors' performances into singular notation.²²

Svazlian first encountered verses of "Der Zor Çölünde" from survivor Yeghissabet Kalashian, who imparted four verses in Turkish. Empathically, Svazlian writes that as Kalashian performed these verses, "tears ran down incessantly from her eyes, her voice coarsened, and she could not speak and sing; she took a breath, started to narrate anew and cry again."²³ Women deportees were the primary authors of these songs. Throughout these deportations, exiles, and massacres, Armenian women shouldered the entire burden of suffering and pain on their frail shoulders.²⁴ As I will show later, Armenian women used songs and their voices as a means of emotional release and self-reclamation. Defenseless during the deportations, Armenian women were the subject of constant terror and agony, particularly of sexual abuse, from Turkish soldiers and Kurdish looters.

Experiences of women, particularly of physical and sexual assaults saturate the verses of "Der Zor Çölünde". Scholars of international law concur that sexual violence is more prevalent during a genocide than any other wartime consequences. This is because sexual aggression achieves a specific political and militaristic goal through opportunistic or strategic means.²⁵ Moreover, perpetrators of genocide perceive women as the representations of a particular culture or nation-state.²⁶ Hence, rape and other forms of abuse during the Armenian Genocide were not only physical acts of dominance against Armenian women but also symbolic acts of aggression and degradation to the Armenian community.²⁷ I posit that the Turkish soldiers' acts of sexual assault against Armenian women are beyond gratuitous or irrational. Instead, their malevolence constituted an intricately planned, meticulously executed, and profoundly symbolic violence in the form of sexual violence. To put it even further, sexual violence against Armenian deportees is

21 Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 43.

22 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 617. Svazlian confesses that she required the help of musicologist Alina Pahlevanian to translate her fieldwork recordings of "Der Zor Çölünde" to notation.

23 *Ibid.*, 465.

24 *Ibid.*, 18.

25 Doris E. Buss, "Rethinking Rape as a Weapon," *Feminist Legal Studies* 17, no. 2 (2009): 150; Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Variations of Sexual Violence During War," *Politics and Society* 34, no. 3 (2006): 327.

26 Buss, "Rethinking," 148.

27 Sukanya Banerjee, Angana Chatterji, Lubna Nazir Chaudry, and Manali Desai, "Engendering Violence: Boundaries, Histories, and the Everyday," *Cultural Dynamics* 16, no. 2 (2004): 129.

intrinsically entwined with Turkish soldiers' pathological fixation on identity. "Der Zor Çölünde" carries verses that illustrate the experience of women, specifically young girls, during the deportations and death marches:

The place called Der Zor is a large locality,
With uncountable ravished young girls,
Oh, mother! Oh, mother! Our condition is lamentable.
As the time we were in the desert of Der Zor.

The Turks started to kidnap children,
Before mothers had time to kiss their cheeks,
I saw them crying bitterly in secret
Armenians, dying for the sake of faith!

Khabur, make way for me, let me cross the desert,
My child is in the Arab village, bare and naked
Oh, mother! Oh, mother! Our condition was lamentable,
At the time, we were in the desert of Der Zor.²⁸

The verses above also show how themes of religion and abduction accompany the motif of sexual assault. The line, "Armenians dying for the sake of faith" suggests the enduring role of religion as an indicator of Armenians' incompatibility with the Ottoman government.²⁹ A French missionary eyewitness in 1921 stressed the centrality of religion in the atrocities of the Ottoman Empire. He recounted that the situation of Armenians "is intolerable and can be summed up with two terms: systematic plunder and extermination of the Christians."³⁰ Moreover, the Turkish oppressors' custom of assembling and assassinating Armenian women (mostly from deportation caravans) inside Armenian churches gestured a symbolic performance of power.³¹ On the other hand, ordinary men forcibly kidnapped Armenians and subsequently put them up for auction.³² After each purchase, wealthy Turkish men coerced these Armenian children and women – most of whom are of childbearing age – to adopt Turkish names, convert to Islam, undergo Turkification, and enter marriages or sexual slavery under Muslim noblemen.³³

28 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 572–573. Svazlian enumerates these verses as 495, 496, and 499. In the English edition of her collection, Svazlian provides both the original Turkish lyrics and English translation.

29 Suny, "Religion Ethnicity, and Nationalism," 53.

30 "La Situation des Chrétiens à l'intérieur," December 17, 1921, file 371/7873-E2762/18/44, Foreign Office Archives, Public Record Office, London.

31 Anthonie Holslag, "Exposed Bodies: A Conceptual Approach to Sexual Violence During the Armenian Genocide," in *Genocide and Gender in the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Survey*, edited by Amy E. Randall (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 96–97.

32 Miller and Miller, *Survivors*, 101.

33 Ara Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide," in *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, edited by Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 210.

While converted Armenian women and children avoided the terrible experience of the deportations, they still suffered from corporeal colonization and cleansing of their Armenian identities.

Survivor Ovsanna Shavarshoon's audiovisual testimony recounted how other Armenians used the song to warn deportees, her brother's tragic death, and her near abduction:

I had a newborn baby brother, 40 days old. He was in my mother's arms, and then the Turks, Kurds, and Arabs came, I don't know how. They told my mom, "Give us this girl." Before this incident, my mom had given my little baby brother to me, so I could tell them I am not a girl, but a woman. The baby was in my arms. There were Armenian laborers, who broke stones nearby, who let us know through singing, that Armenian girls and women were being kidnapped there: "be careful" ... They took away the baby and threw him on the ground ... Then they pulled me by the hair and took me to a giant wall, a garden wall. They took me to this garden and locked me in there. Then they left me alone and began joking with each other. They thought that I was definitely theirs. But my mom had advised me that, when I see a body of water that I throw myself into the water, choke and to end my life. When they noticed that I was in the water, it was a shallow river, you had to lay flat to drown yourself. When they saw me in the water ... they ran down trying to save me. I gathered some stones and began throwing at them.... But she [mother] had given this watch to the gendarme [police] to save my life.... My mom had taken the baby boy, the caravan donkeys had trampled him, and he had died.³⁴

During the Armenian Genocide, perpetrators often intentionally inflicted psychological damages and inhumane abuses upon Armenian women. Still, Shavarshoon's testimony provides a harrowing detail that augments our understanding of the experiences of Armenian women during the Genocide: her attempted suicide. According to Miller and Miller, suicides were a frequent occurrence in the deportations. Typically, Armenian women held onto each other's arms and leaped from a bridge into the waters of the Euphrates River. The combination of physical fatigue, mental exhaustion, multiple forms of violence, loss of family, and hopelessness drove these women to take their own lives.

Nevertheless, Svazlian collected two songs outside of "Der Zor Çölünde" that capture this scenario. For example, the song "We Are Driven from the Mountains of Armenia" goes:

Hand in hand, Armenian girls threw themselves
Into the Euphrates River,

34 Ovsanna Shavarshoon, "Interview 53308," interview by Jacob Michael Hagopian, *Visual History Archive*, Armenian Film Foundation, August 14, 1977, <https://vha-usc-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/testimony/53308>. I transcribed this testimony from the Shoah Foundation's subtitles.

Two days later, they notified their poor mothers
And made them cry inconsolably.³⁵

An untitled song follows:

The river Euphrates, too,
Became a grave for Armenians, mother!
Armenian girls threw themselves
Into the water, mother!
Blood flowed in [the] “Valley of Blood” mother!
Mountains and valleys!
Were filled with corpses, mother!³⁶

Based on their interviews with Armenian Genocide survivors in California, Miller and Miller categorize suicides into three distinct categories: altruistic suicide, despairing suicide, and defiant suicide. Picture the following scenarios: in an altruistic suicide, a mother neglects her own needs, such as food or water, for the survival of her child.³⁷ Alternatively, despairing suicides can be categorized as either passive, where one is still capable of moving but chooses to give up and die simply; or active, when one intentionally takes their own life.³⁸ Lastly, a defiant suicide means merely taking one’s own life as an act of rebellion against an aggressor. Rather than succumbing at the hands of Turkish soldiers, Armenian women often chose to end their lives as a final act of defiance.³⁹ You might wonder that interlacing motifs of religion and suicide between these song testimonies engender a cognitive dissonance, as the latter goes against the doctrines of Armenian Christianity. However, Armenian women took their own lives in response to the inhuman policies of Ottoman Turkey, rendering the reductive lens of Christian morality inapplicable to the victims of the Genocide.

In any case, several quatrains of “Der Zor Çölünde” speak of the aftermath of these suicides. The daily agonies of thirst that Armenians experienced in these deportations underscore this recurring suicide theme. Three variations on this motif go as follows:

The bridge over the Euphrates River is narrow, impassable.
The water is bloody, you can’t drink a single cup.
Water mixed with the blood of Armenians is undrinkable!
Armenians, dying for the sake of faith!

35 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 567.

36 Ibid. This song has no title.

37 Donald Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, “Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide,” in *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, edited by Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), 170.

38 Ibid., 171.

39 Ibid.

The deserts of Der Zor are thorny, impassable,
The waters of the river Euphrates are bitter and not potable
Water mixed with the blood of Armenians is undrinkable!
Armenians, dying for the sake of faith!

The deserts of Der Zor are stony, impassable
The waters of the river Euphrates are bitter, not potable
Water mixed with the blood of Armenians is undrinkable!
Armenians, dying for the sake of faith!⁴⁰

These verses, depicting how Ottoman soldiers strategically used thirst as a means of dehumanizing the deportees, heighten our understanding of the Armenian Genocide. Ottoman soldiers deliberately deprived Armenians of water as a means of psychological warfare – to break the spirit and will of the deportees to live. This course of action serves as a chilling reminder of the extent to which basic human needs are cynically exploited as part of genocidal campaigns.⁴¹

Weaving the verses of “Der Zor Çölünde” with narrative and audiovisual testimonies establishes an intimate relationship between these genres of oral history. In addition to their storytelling prowess, the recurring motifs – of sexual violence, religion, abduction, and thirst – serve as connective tissues between these oral artifacts. Through this thematic convergence, historical and cultural realities about the Genocide emerge.⁴² First and foremost, the striking similarities in content among song testimonies, narrative testimonies, and audiovisual testimonies attest to the historical fact of the many tortures that happened during the Armenian Genocide. These overlaps become even more significant when we consider that Svazlian collected these songs after the events of 1915–1923. Like diary entries, these verses have remained unaltered from their original construction and endured under the safekeeping of the survivors. From here, a significant layer of cultural reality materializes the shared language, religion, heritage, and experience of a nearly exterminated group of people.

Resounding “Der Zor Çölünde”, a century after the Genocide, is not merely essential but a moral imperative. These songs testimonies echo not only historical and cultural realities but also human suffering, survival, and resilience. By tethering different kinds of testimonies, identifying thematic overlaps, and letting truths emerge, not only can we

40 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 575.

41 Moreover, it is crucial to recognize that the contamination and deprivation of water are also symbolic assaults against Christianity. In the Armenian Apostolic Church, water holds spiritual meaning particularly in traditions such as baptism, theophany/epiphany, and Zatik (Easter). Armenians also embrace the idea of “living water,” signifying Jesus Christ as the wellspring of eternal life. This belief finds its origins in the Gospel of John, where Christ referred to himself as the “living water” or the source that provides spiritual nourishment like the life-giving properties of water. For Armenians, water deprivation desecrated their sacred bodies, epitomizing an allegorical violation of their spirituality. This deliberate denial of a basic human necessity stresses the intersection between the genocidal motifs of thirst and religion.

42 Gascia Ouzounian, “‘Our voices reaches the sky:’ Sonic Memories of the Armenian Genocide,” in *Soundwalking: Through Time, Space, and Technologies*, edited by Jacek Smolicki (London: Focal Press, 2023), 170.

obtain an astute understanding of the Armenian Genocide, but also, more importantly, we can amplify the denied voices of survivors and the silenced voices of those who perished.

Tactical Dirges

“Der Zor Çölünde” is a collection of dirges – music-lyrical cartography that charts and immortalizes the deportation experience of Armenian individuals, particularly women, and children. Bearing the characteristics of oral poetry, dirges follow a specific structure, including repetitive and formulaic patterns that make them easier to remember and transmit to other people.⁴³ Furthermore, dirges serve various purposes, such as preserving memory, providing emotional support and catharsis for the grieving, and often conveying social and cultural values.⁴⁴ The dirge-like verses of “Der Zor Çölünde” communicate not only the experience but also the emotional and psychological gravity that Armenians carry behind their backs as they walk to the percussive beats of their funeral march.

Svazlian reports that the song-testimonies of the Armenian Genocide, including “Der Zor Çölünde”, are lyrical poems fashioned out of the injustice of oppressive and miserable tragedy, “in which the emotional world, the thoughts and the mood, the expectations and demands of the composers are expressed in a picturesque manner.”⁴⁵ Indeed, the number of lyrical permutations of “Der Zor Çölünde” substantiates that Armenians in these deportations and death marches were actively musicking – creating new texts situated on a common template to illustrate their situation at the exact moment of construction.⁴⁶ Since songs operate differently from other forms of communication, singing and listening facilitate an easy transmission and proliferation of songs from one person to another. The aurality of this exchange underscores the social process of this music-making. Taken altogether, these songs constitute a body of shared musical memories among the victims and, as I will show later, survivors of the Armenian Genocide.

Creating new lyrics and singing songs became a common practice in daily deportation life for Armenian victims. This kind of musicking, as part of everyday behavior and routine, helped deportees to navigate their existence within a structured and oppressive environment. In doing so, musicking – or the act of musicalizing the deportation experience – afforded Armenian victims to subtly assert some personal agency to their oppressors. Therefore, constructing lyrical variations of “Der Zor Çölünde” helped victims find meaning in their lives along the borderlands during the deportations. This practice also shaped the social, spatial, and cultural landscape of their journey to death. In turn, as part of Turkey’s margins, musicking in this context espoused a form of resistance against the Ottoman regime.⁴⁷

43 Vansina, *Oral Tradition*, 12.

44 Ibid.

45 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 17, 34.

46 Small, *Musicking*, 9.

47 De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 43.

Armenians were one of the several marginalized communities in Ottoman Empire. The othering of Armenians and other Christian minorities aimed to displace them away from Ottoman Turkey's larger political body.⁴⁸ The Genocide of 1915 to 1923, a cultural and optimal genocide, was a destruction of identity and all its forms.⁴⁹ Indicators of Armenian identity – including language, religion, institutions, churches, and businesses – were destroyed. As I virtually soundwalked through the audiovisual testimonies at the Shoah Foundation's *Visual History Archive*, I discovered a perplexing verse of "Der Zor Çölünde" from Juliet Avetisian-Minnassian. While this verse is not included in Svazlian's collection, it tells a vivid story of Armenians' cultural loss.

Minnassian, a descendant of genocide survivors who immigrated to Glendale, California, sang this verse in her audiovisual testimony. Before singing the song, she explained, "the song of exiled Armenians, my mother taught me this song... I don't know where she heard it, how she knows it, if her parents taught it to her if it was sung to her as a lullaby ... maybe that's why she sang it to us as a lullaby."⁵⁰ Minnassian sang the following verse:

Through the deadly desert of Der Zor
Everything I had – or didn't have – I gave up.
To try and save my life, I gave up my ethnicity and culture.
The children on the religious path, people of faith.⁵¹

Miniassian's verse thoroughly follows the lyrical and musical templates of "Der Zor Çölünde". In addition, the motif of religion is also present in its last line. That Miniassian is a descendant of genocide survivors and carried a lyrical variation of "Der Zor Çölünde" reinforces the potency of these verses as vessels to hold collective memories, ensure their survival, and relinquish the historical and cultural truths of a contested tragedy to the future generation.

Importantly, Minnassian's verse represented how Ottoman soldiers cold-bloodedly forced Armenians to denounce their identity. The banning of the *hayeren* (Armenian language) is the principal reason why the verses in "Der Zor Çölünde" are all in Turkish. In defiance, Armenians poached their oppressor's language and constructed subversive songs against Turkey. The verses of "Der Zor Çölünde" in Svazlian's collection show how songs became tools for deportees to rupture the Ottoman Empire and their heinous crimes against the Armenian nation:

48 The "Others" in Ottoman Turkey include Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, other minorities practicing Christian faith, and Jews.

49 Vahakn Dadrian, "A Typology of Genocide," *International Review of Modern Sociology* 5, no. 2 (1975): 205, 210–211.

50 Juliet Avetisian-Miniassian, "Interview 56588," interview by Monet Airian, *Visual History Archive*, Hovanisian Oral History Collection, date unknown, <https://vha-usc-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/testimony/56588>. The language of this interview was in Armenian. Meghrie Babikian, an Armenian-American based in Chicago, provided this translation.

51 Ibid. In the interview, Juliet sang the song in Turkish but also provided an Armenian translation. Meghrie Babikian translated the Armenian translation to English for this paper.

The trees I planted became laden with fruits,
Half of the deportees did not come back,
May the person who planned this exile
Be unworthy of paradise!

The fruitless trees became laden with fruits,
Half of the deportees did not come back
May the person who planned this exile
Be sacrificed on the road to hell!⁵²

Furthermore, the reappearance of the second line in both verses exhibits degrees of caution. Given the eight-year span of the Genocide, I imagine that Armenian victims intended these verses as cautionary warnings aimed to reach Christian communities that the Ottoman Turks have yet to victimize. In effect, we can establish solidarity between all Christian minorities in Turkey including Assyrians, Pontiac Greeks, and Aegean Greeks – whose genocides were also enacted during the same period by the same perpetrator.⁵³ George Shirinian further points out that “the experiences of these three peoples [Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks] took place in the same country, during the same period, as part of the same historical, social, economic, and political forces, involving a continuity of perpetrators with the same motive.”⁵⁴

I emphasize that crafting lyrical variations of “Der Zor Çölünde” is a form of nonviolent resistance, meaning the collective effort to delegitimize oppressive systems, undermine the oppressor’s authority, and mobilize people without resorting to violence.⁵⁵ Understood this way, the Armenian victims’ mundane practice of constructing verses demonstrates a form of subtle negotiation, through song, of their existence in everyday deportation life. Rather than a violent opposition, Armenian deportees silently but actively worked within the limits and constraints of the Ottoman Empire’s genocidal campaign. They subtly circumvented elements of the deportation experience to achieve their objectives. To put it even further, these limitations – sexual violence, deprivation of necessities, kidnapping, and forcing Armenians to denounce their identity markers (e.g., language, religion, etc.) – impaired the cognitive ability of Ottoman Turks to perceive these dirges. The surface acquiescence of Armenians and the coerced use of the Turkish language ironically made it difficult for Ottoman soldiers to recognize the oblique protests and resistance embedded in the verses of “Der Zor Çölünde”. In addition, victims created these verses at a personal level, rendering them invisible to their oppressors.

52 Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 577. Svazlian numbered these verses as 528 and 529. She also provided both the Turkish text and the English translation.

53 Naimark, *Genocide*, 76. Towards the conclusion of his historiography of the Armenian Genocide, Naimark gives visibility to the overlooked suffering of other Christian communities in Anatolia including the Assyrians, Aegean Greeks, and Pontic Greeks, all of whom suffered from Ottoman Turkey’s genocidal campaigns.

54 George Shirinian, “Introduction,” in *Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks 1913-1923*, edited by George Shirinian (New York: Berghahn Books, 2017), 8.

55 Gene Sharp, *How Nonviolent Struggle Works* (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2013), 18–20.

By locating the unique characteristics and functions of “Der Zor Çölünde” in the everyday life of Armenians, we gain profound insights into the shared Genocide experience – the pain, terror, emptiness, and trauma – and how victims exercised agency and construct identity through immortalizing these communal experiences as songs.

Voicing a Haunted History and Memory

I noted in the previous section that in the Shoah Foundation’s *Visual History Archive*, audiovisual testimonies from the diaspora contain performances of “Der Zor Çölünde”.⁵⁶ When performed and transposed along the keys of history and memory, these verses act as temporal bridges, granting the survivors’ bodies the ability to achieve liminality. In this acquired liminal condition, survivors can dip their toes and traverse the finite lines between the past and the present. Correspondingly, survivors transfigure the verses of “Der Zor Çölünde” from musical memories to embodied memories through their singing bodies. Singing further empowers the survivor to work through the protracted historical trauma ingrained in the Armenian identity and shatter the tyrannical silence of genocide denial. In addition, a performance innately creates a nuanced relationship between the survivor and the listener. In this setting, listening becomes a way of revealing the erasures of official histories, oppression, and marginalization.⁵⁷

The sheer number of verses that Hovsana Kumjian performed in her audiovisual testimony sets her apart from the other testimonies featuring recitations of “Der Zor Çölünde”. Kumjian, who resettled in Aleppo after the Genocide, opens her testimony with geographical details of the death march trail she endured during her deportation:

We moved from Intilli and went to Bahchesehir. Over there, they put us in an inn. There were 4,000 people. Then, we went to Marash ... to Aintab ... to Nizip ... to Birecik ... to Urfa ... to Siverek ... to Viransehir. Fourth Army was in Viransehir, and we were rescued there. We were saved from slaughters...Nothing happened on the road. But gendarmeries were on their horses. People without water died.⁵⁸

Along these barefooted death marches, Kumjian further describes that “many died out of hunger, thirst. There was no water. Many brave fellows fell begging ‘water, water, water.’ The gendarmerie [police] came, stabbed them with the bayonets, and they died.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ I engaged with 65 audiovisual testimonies of survivors who relocated to the United States and Syria. These are testimonies that the Shoah Foundation indicated to contain musical performances or singing. I observed and listened to each audiovisual testimony with no expectations regarding whether they would contain a verse of “Der Zor Çölünde” or not. In the end, I discovered that at least six testimonies contained traces of the song.

⁵⁷ Ouzounian, “Counterlistening,” 312.

⁵⁸ Hovsana Kumjian, “Interview 53338,” interview by Jacob Michael Hagopian, *Visual History Archive*, Armenian Film Foundation, May 17, 1988, <https://vha-usc-edu.ezproxy.library.wisc.edu/testimony/53338>.

⁵⁹ Kumjian, Interview.

When asked how she learned “Der Zor Çölünde,” Kumjian replies: “He was a child, nearby Siverek. We sat down to rest. The kid sang from there [pointing across her]. Since I was a child, when I heard something, I used to write it into my head and heart. My mind was always open. He sang it, and I learned it. I sing it every 24th [April 24] in memory of the people who died.”⁶⁰

In sound studies, walking often means an embodied exploration of a space. For example, Hildegard Westerkamp writes that soundwalking refers to concentrated and focused listening to the environment. It is an activity where one deliberately opens one’s ears to one’s surroundings.⁶¹ As an artistic and heightened form of communication, the child’s act of singing amplified the unique ability of “Der Zor Çölünde” verses to fluidly travel across deportation convoys. I imagine that Kumjian’s acquisition of “Der Zor Çölünde” is an early form of soundwalking, given that Armenian deportees are traveling towards their extermination. Additionally, Kumjian and the singing child, both victims of Ottoman Turkey’s tyranny, shared an unspoken affinity that facilitated the ease of song transmission. This connection and focused listening allowed Kumjian to grasp the song quickly. It also attests to how collective music-making fosters the survival and continuity of the Armenian identity despite Turkey’s genocidal intentions.

With great precision to the melodic frame of “Der Zor Çölünde”, Kumjian sings the following verses in her audiovisual testimony:

I woke up in the morning, the sun is shining,
Chechens are seated, polishing their daggers
Helpless innocents are egregiously crying
Oh, Armenian – dying for your religion’s sake!

I fell wounded in the deserts of Der Zor
I was left so thirsty that I drunk red blood
I fell and was separated from my mom and dad
Oh, Armenian – dying for your religion’s sake!

There are many wounded in Der Zor deserts,
Don’t come doctor, don’t, there is no cure,
We have no one, except for God
Oh, Armenian – dying for your religion’s sake!

I reached the barrack, its gate was closed
Kaymakam (Governor) is coming with a club in his hand
He led the lame and blind
Oh, Armenian – dying for your religion’s sake!⁶²

60 Ibid.

61 Hildegard Westerkamp, “Soundwalking,” in *Autumn Leaves, Sound and the Environment in Artistic Practice*, edited by Angus Carlyle (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007), 49.

62 Kumjian, Interview. This is the Shoah Foundation’s translation.

Without pause, Kumjian continues to sing, infusing a touch of melismatic improvisation with more verses that vividly illustrate the deportation experience.

They took us up to mountain to rob us
Rich are crying for their wealth
Brides are crying for their husband
Girls are crying for their honor

Mothers started to sell their children
If you ask the price, it's half a bread
Leave us, go gendarmeries, we will be on our way
We will die in Der Zor deserts.⁶³

Kumjian's verses overflow with the recurring genocidal motifs I mentioned earlier – sexual violence, religion, abduction, and thirst. This interconnectedness between different verses in “Der Zor Çölünde” reaffirms their capability as vessels of historical and cultural realities and collective and shared memories. Further, including audiovisual testimonies from survivors who carry these verses with them can help us sonically and musically cartograph the movement of survivors along the diaspora.

Yet, a survivor singing “Der Zor Çölünde” shows how the voice is a paramount site of embodying the Armenian Genocide after its occurrence. In the first place, Kumjian connected and engaged in a meaningful relationship with “Der Zor Çölünde” through a child singing voice. When a Genocide survivor sings, multiple performing forces come into play, such as location, the text, the musical structure, and the voice – including tone, quality of sound, and intonation.⁶⁴ A survivor's physical condition, mental state, and emotional well-being also influence the subtleties of their voice in performance. In her performance, Kumjian started with enthusiasm that waned as a palpable transformation overcame her. The initial vigor gave way to a stoicism clouded with sadness. As she cadenced towards the song's final words, she held up her hand, signaling a plea for a silent pause. Her body hunched forward, and her voice became wearied and hoarse as she uttered, “Oh God... Let God not bring those days back. I was 14 years old then.”⁶⁵

Vocal practices take place in the flesh. The voice inhabits a corporeal vessel which influences and manipulates its production. Therefore, when a voice vocalizes, whether in singing or speech, the body and the vocal system operate together.⁶⁶ Going further, the voice is a sound that one creates with the mind and the body. During a vocal performance, an indissoluble connection exists between memory and flesh. A performance of “Der Zor

63 Ibid. Kumjian sang an improvised version of the “Der Zor Çölünde” melody.

64 Abrams, *Oral Tradition*, 140.

65 Kumjian, Interview.

66 Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 11.

Colunde,” encompassing both linguistic and musical elements, depends on the deep-seated memories residing not just in the mind but also within the mouth, larynx, vocal folds, tongue, tissues, ligaments, and musculatures. The act of singing becomes anchored in the physical and the mental, that when employed as a means of communication, they take on a meaning that can either harmonize with or contrast against their surroundings.⁶⁷

Furthermore, the voice functions as a conduit that holds a survivor’s power to express their right to exist. A singing survivor – embodying resistance through nonviolent means – participates in a physical expression aimed at communicating an array of meanings to a broader audience.⁶⁸ This makes singing naturally dialectical as it fosters an interactive exchange of emotions, ideas, and interpretations, often encouraging discussions among performers and listeners. Therefore, singing song testimonies can be an integral component of a larger dialogue of the Genocide. Because singing is deeply rooted in the body and memory, survivors like Kumjian use “Der Zor Çölünde” and their earthly voices to express their being, existence, and work through a collective trauma in a post-Genocide world.

Trauma represents a shattering caesura that exceeds an individual’s capacity to fully comprehend and cope with it during its occurrence.⁶⁹ The Armenian Genocide, a historical and collective trauma, continues to deeply disturb the shared identity of the Armenian community. This disruption often shapes and influences their worldview and sociocultural dynamics. Thus, working through trauma suggests a cathartic process that involves an instantaneous engagement with the traumatic past and the present, allowing Armenian Genocide survivors to negotiate these two realms without creating an outright dichotomy between them.⁷⁰ When survivors sing “Der Zor Çölünde” verses, they are ephemerally extended to the past allowing their bodies to exist between two temporal zones. Their evanescent singing voices not only express the pain of their suffering but also mourn and retrieve the silenced voices of those who perished from the Genocide.

Mourning is an active, reflective, and transformative process.⁷¹ It affords survivors of violent events to engage deeply with the traumas of the past and integrate their experience into the collective memory. Here, Armenian Genocide survivors confront the horrific realities of the past, coming to terms with the trauma and its overwhelming impact on their identities. Yet, Turkey’s relentless denial hampers the efforts of Genocide survivors to grieve completely. This denial engendered a collective debility that hindered the Armenian nation from mourning. Furthermore, Armenians’ loss of ancestral lands and forced displacement across the diaspora prevent a unified mourning process.⁷²

67 Angela Impey, “Sound, Memory, and Dis/placement: Exploring Sound, Song, and Performance as Oral History in the Southern African Borderlands,” *Oral History* 36, no. 1 (2008): 38.

68 Louise Du Toit and Jana Vosloo, “When Bodies Speak Differently: Putting Judith Butler in Conversation with Mahatma Gandhi on Nonviolent Resistance,” *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 10.

69 LaCapra, *Writing History*, 186.

70 *Ibid.*, 66.

71 *Ibid.*

72 Falyn Stempler, “104 Years of ‘Incomplete Mourning:’ Students Reflect on House Recognition of Arme-

Incomplete mourning is the Turkish state's continued violence against Armenians. This incompleteness explains how the trauma of the Armenian Genocide continues to haunt survivors and their descendants.

Still, attending to audiovisual testimonies, particularly those that feature performances of “Der Zor Çölünde”, can break the silence of denial through a survivor's incisive voice and performance. In addition, a survivor singing voice fills in the spaces and gaps in the archives and representations of the Armenian Genocide. Listening can, therefore, attune secondary witnesses to the muted and lost voices of Armenian Genocide survivors and victims. It becomes an act of listening along the edges and the margins and *against* the tyranny of state and empire.⁷³ This reverberation – shared between the verses, survivors, and the listeners – underscores the transformative power of song and the human voice to create a connection that binds us all.

Epilogue: Listening to Genocide

Writing a conclusion for a subject as complex as the Armenian Genocide presents significant challenges. A conclusion indicates a closure and resolution, elusive concepts when dealing with an enormous tragedy deeply contested by powerful nation-states. As I observed earlier, the trauma of the Genocide and Turkey's persistent denial – escalating to a point where discussing it in present-day Turkey can lead to severe punishments and even death – continues to afflict the identity of Armenians.⁷⁴ Thus, the descendants of the perpetrators continue to commit violence against the descendants of Genocide victims and survivors, ensuring that the latter dance a perpetual pas de deux of plight and pain.

Recapitulating Bartov's fervent assertion on testimonies, it is an ethical obligation that no history of genocide should be written and taught without hearing the voices of its protagonists. These individuals wanted not only to preserve and entrust these tragic memories to future generations but also to ensure that the voices of those who perished are not relegated to collective amnesia or the dehumanizing tendencies of academic scholarship, which often reduce them to numerical figures and footnotes of their history.⁷⁵ Song testimonies of the Armenian Genocide, such as “Der Zor Çölünde” reveal a horrifying yet poignant reality: the Armenian people continued to sing and compose songs even as they marched towards their annihilation. These songs are compelling musical memories, persistently shattering the stillness of genocide denial. Listening to a singing survivor ensures that the spectral melodies of the Armenian Genocide continue to resonate.

nian Genocide,” *Ithaca Week*, November 18, 2019, <https://www.ithacaweek-ic.com/104-years-of-incomplete-mourning-students-reflect-on-house-recognition-of-armenian-genocide>.

73 Ouzounian, “Counterlistening,” 312.

74 Maureen Freely, “Why They Killed Hrant Dink,” *Index on Censorship* 36, no. 2 (2007): 28–29.

75 Bartov, *Genocide, the Holocaust, and Israel-Palestine*, 79–80.

Acknowledgments: I would like to express my appreciation to my friend and colleague Meghrie Babikian for sharing this history of her ancestry and helping with necessary translations. I am also grateful to my mentors – Dr. Teryl Dobbs, Dr. David Crook, Dr. Nadia Chana, Dr. John Walsh, and Dr. Ilana Schroeder – who inspired and helped me with this article. I also thank the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation for giving me the privilege of presenting an earlier form of this research during the 2023 AGMI International Conference.

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