

# **ECHOES OF LOSS: EXAMINING GENDERED VIOLENCE AND LEGACY IN THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the intergenerational transmission of memories among descendants of Armenian Genocide survivors, focusing on perspectives from both males and females. Using an oral history methodology in three provinces– Erzinka (modern-day Erzincan), Malatya, and Dersim – the study investigates how narratives of the genocide have been passed down and changed within families. The research emphasizes the gender-specific tactics of the genocide, where Armenian men were often targeted for extermination, while women and children endured forced marches, sexual violence, abductions and forced marriages. By connecting with descendants who carry the post-memory of these events, the study reveals the deep and lasting impact of these atrocities on the Armenian community. Their stories unveil the intricate layers of trauma and resilience that define the Armenian experience and contribute to a broader understanding of genocide and its enduring effects on future generations.

**Key Words:** Armenian Genocide, women, children, post-memory, sexual violence, orphans, forced marriage.

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## Introduction

“If you ask about the past, sadness is always at the door.”

This excerpt is from one of the interviews I conducted as part of an oral history study that covered the following three provinces: Erzinka (modern-day Erzincan), Malatya, and Dersim. I selected these provinces referencing Sevan Nishanyan’s *Turkish Dictionary of Place Names*,<sup>1</sup> which thoroughly examines the names of all locations in the country, including the smallest and most forgotten or unidentified settlements. This resource aided me in identifying regions with significant Armenian population densities in the past and historical Armenian village names. The goal of this project was to examine the aftermath of violence against Armenians during the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Republic, in order to illuminate historical events and their lasting effects. Furthermore, the research aimed to delve into events that had been transmitted as a post-memory<sup>2</sup> of the Armenian Genocide from older generations to Armenians who did not personally witness these events.

The term “genocide” was ultimately coined to describe a systematic effort to annihilate an entire ethnic group.<sup>3</sup> The Armenian Genocide of 1915 stands as the most historically and psychologically significant event in Armenian history, profoundly shaping the development of the Armenian collective identity.<sup>4</sup> It resulted in the deaths of approximately 1.5 million Armenians, nearly half of the ethnic population at the time.<sup>5</sup> Armenian women bore a unique burden of the genocide during this period.<sup>6</sup> They witnessed the murder of male community members, mourned their children, and took on the responsibility of sustaining their families by smuggling weapons, providing for jailed relatives, negotiating with oppressors, and nurturing distressed offspring, all while the Ottoman government systematically orchestrated the destruction of their community.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, this policy of annihilation involved significant

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<sup>1</sup> Sevan Nishanyan, *Türkiye Yer Adları Sözlüğü Index Anaticus* (Istanbul: Liberus Yayınları, 2020), 521.

<sup>2</sup> I adopt Marianne Hirsch’s term “post-memory” to refer to a hybrid form of memory that stands apart from personal memory due to generational distance, and from history due to its profound personal connection. For further reference, see Marianne Hirsch, “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory,” *Discourse* 15, no. 2 (1992): 3-29.

<sup>3</sup> George S. Yacoubian, “The Artsakh Conflict as a Violation of the Genocide Convention: Toward a Referral to the International Criminal Court,” *Advances in Applied Sociology* 13 (2023): 172.

<sup>4</sup> Selina L. Mangassarian, “100 Years of Trauma: The Armenian Genocide and Intergenerational Cultural Trauma,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 25, no. 4 (2016): 373.

<sup>5</sup> Max Schaub, “Demographic and Attitudinal Legacies of the Armenian Genocide,” *Post Soviet Affairs* 39, no. 3 (2023): 155.

<sup>6</sup> Nikki Marczak, “The Early Days: Illuminating Armenian Women’s Experiences,” in *Genocide Perspectives V: A Global Crime, Australian Voices*, ed. Nikki Marczak and Kirril Shields (Sydney: UTS ePRESS, 2017), 115.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

gender-based violence. Men often faced immediate execution, while women, spared from instant death, were subjected to sexual violence, kidnapping, and forced into marriages or servitude. This illustrates a strategy of targeting victims based on gender.<sup>8</sup>

In order to gain a better understanding of the Armenian Genocide and how its traumas were experienced by victims and survivors, I conducted research using the oral history method. This method allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals in the past shaped their environments, including their beliefs, imaginations, and values by focusing on descendants spanning three generations – the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of survivors.<sup>9</sup> It also enables an examination of how memories of violence are passed down through generations and the silence that often accompanies these memories, leading to their eventual fading. Furthermore, this approach facilitates a detailed analysis of how memories of traumatic events persist over time and space and how they are shared within communities and among groups of victims.<sup>10</sup>

In this project, my primary approach was to obtain interviewees through reliable personal networks. Each interviewer reached out to their own network to identify potential people. Additionally, it was crucial to document the stories of Turkish Muslim intermediaries who were encountered while connecting with individuals of Armenian descent. Their perspectives and narratives were deemed valuable and were therefore included in the research.

The Armenians interviewed, with the exception of one, stated that they adhere to a religious belief, while the rest identified themselves as Alevi Armenians with Armenian heritage. One mentioned that in the region where they live, nobody recognizes them as Armenians anymore, so they do not encounter any issues.

Avedis Hadjian conducted a similar analysis of the descendants of survivors of the 1915 Genocide who chose to remain in Turkey after being forcibly converted to Islam. Many of them continue to keep their true identity hidden.<sup>11</sup> Within this group, there are devout Muslims, followers of Alevi beliefs, and a small number who still practice Christianity in secret. Additionally, there are many individuals within this community who identify as agnostics or atheists. This diverse cohort, often called “secret Armenians” or “hidden Armenians,”

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<sup>8</sup> Stefan Ionescu, “Perpetrators, Bystanders, and Rescuers: Popular Attitudes Towards Ottoman Christians during the Armenian Genocide,” *Studia Politica: Romanian Political Science Review* 11, no. 2 (2011): 336.

<sup>9</sup> Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (United Kingdom: AltaMira Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Avedis Hadjian, *Secret Nation: The Hidden Armenians of Turkey* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 32.

represents a wide range of religious and ideological beliefs found in Turkey, although some within this group find these labels offensive.

The project began in Istanbul, the starting point of the canvas where mass deportations of hundreds of thousands of Armenians took place, stretching to the eastern ends of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>12</sup>

### **Kemaliye- Erzuka**

The first stop on the journey was Armidan, a village located in the Erzuka province of Turkey. Historically known as Garin in Armenian, this village was part of the *Kuruchay* District during the Ottoman Empire era. Today, it is referred to as Buyuk (*Medz*) *Armutlu*, and is situated in the Ilich district. The village is made up of two settlements, Buyuk [big] and Kuchuk [small] Armidan, nestled amidst mountains. The villagers primarily rely on agriculture for their livelihoods. During our visit, we were graciously hosted by a local resident named Musa, who provided us with lunch and shared valuable insights about the Armenians who once inhabited the village.

#### *Musa S. – a Window with a View of Armidan*<sup>13</sup>

Musa S. clarified that he had Kurdish heritage and shared how his family sought refuge in Armidan after fleeing from their village's *agha*.<sup>14</sup> He gestured towards a house a short distance from his balcony, explaining that it was once the residence of an old Armenian woman who lived there until her passing. While her family used to be the only inhabitants of the village, they now seem to have vanished, leaving no trace of their presence. Nevertheless, Musa kindly offered to guide us to the Armenian Church of Armidan after lunch. As we walked among the church's ruins, Musa informed us that treasure seekers had excavated pits in the church grounds. These treasure hunters, aware of the village's Armenian history, speculated that Armenians may have buried their valuables before their exile. Musa also mentioned that a

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<sup>12</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, "Empire and Nation: Armenians, Turks, and the End of the Ottoman Empire," *Armenian Forum* 1, no. 2 (1998): 46.

<sup>13</sup> Musa, interviewed by author, Armidan village, June 23, 2021, 3:00 pm, one-hour duration; first half-hour at his house, second half-hour guided by him through the village.

<sup>14</sup> The Turkish word *ağa* (*agha*) means "ruler, elder brother," and in Ottoman times also "master, leader." The term can also refer to a landowner or a butler in a household.

significant number of villagers had willingly assisted these treasure seekers in the hopes of sharing their findings.

Bedross Der Matossian's scholarship addresses diverse perspectives from American and European sources, offering an alternative narrative to what official records present. A significant amount of movable Armenian property was stolen, and parts of immovable properties were sold in auctions for much less than their original value.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, some immovable properties were given to Kurdish tribes as rewards to incentivize their involvement in the conflict. During episodes of mass violence, there is a consistent trend of property being seized and transferred by those responsible for the violence,<sup>16</sup> often for their own financial gain. The confiscation of Armenian properties during the genocide was meticulously regulated by the Unionist government, which issued numerous decrees, laws, orders, and decisions to manage the process.<sup>17</sup> Commissions were tasked with confiscating all money, goods, and belongings taken into government protection from the deportees.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, these commissions demanded that banks, other institutions, and individuals provide accounts of the money and properties left behind by the Armenians. Those asked were required to promptly submit the accounts, along with any necessary documents, receipts, and letters for verification. This allowed the government to also seize belongings that deported Armenians had entrusted to others. These confiscated items were later sold by Liquidation Commissions at public auctions.<sup>19</sup>

In this village, while the valuable contents of this grand church were stolen, and the base of its walls were excavated by treasure seekers, the environment still exuded a sense of peaceful nostalgia. Musa pointed out visible signs of digging on the church walls and concluded the conversation with a notable remark: *"If you know Armenians from Armıdan, feel free to share my phone number with them. If they are interested in coming here to unearth the buried treasure, I will assist them in exchange for a small share."*

He viewed Armenian heritage as a valuable asset that could be uncovered to yield wealth.

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<sup>15</sup> Bedross Der Matossian, "The Taboo within the Taboo: The Fate of 'Armenian Capital' at the End of the Ottoman Empire," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* (2011): 10. <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.4411>

<sup>16</sup> Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration: Perpetration and Genocide* (Chicago: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 110.

<sup>17</sup> Mehmet Polatel, "A Historiographical Review of the Literature on Armenian Properties and New Prospects," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 53 (2015): 181.

<sup>18</sup> Umit Kurt, "The Political Micro-Economy of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1922," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 20, no. 6 (2018): 622.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

*Huseyin M. - the Unfortunate Women in his Family*<sup>20</sup>

My first interview took place in a remote village surrounded by mountains. The elderly men of the village gathered at a local spot to play cards together. One of the elders mentioned that their village had historical ties to the Armenian community, pointing out that harmonious relations had traditionally existed between the villagers and their Armenian neighbors.

Afterwards, I was directed to Huseyin M.'s house, which was located a distance away from the village. Hüseyin identified himself as being half Kurdish from his father's side and half Armenian from his mother's side. He made a living through beekeeping in the village during the summer months. Huseyin seemed like a cheerful person who enjoyed making jokes. He mentioned that he and his wife preferred to spend the summers in the village and the winters in their house in Istanbul. His first wife, an Armenian woman, who suffered from breast cancer, passed away ten years ago. He told me that their daughter was pursuing a master's degree in Ankara, while their son was self-employed in Istanbul. After his first wife's death, Huseyin got married again. His second wife, a middle-aged Alevi woman, informed me that her family did not approve of Huseyin's Armenian background. Ultimately, they treated him as if he were not Armenian.

Before our conversation started, Huseyin expressed his willingness to show me the handcrafted pillows that held sentimental value and a legacy from his mother. He believed artisanship was a heritage passed down from generation to generation among Armenians. When I asked him to elaborate on this, he shared the story of his grandfather, who was a master tailor known for sewing the governor's clothes: *"His skill was such that the buttons on the jackets he sewed aligned perfectly with the buttonholes. Despite working closely with a government governor, neither he nor his family received any assistance during the deportations."*

It was evident that Huseyin believed his grandfather and family might have survived the genocide if they had received support from the governor. However, his grandfather and two sons were among the Armenian men forcibly removed from their village and never returned.

Huseyin continued with his grandmother's story, recounting how after the men in the family were killed, the grandmother, her daughter, and her brother were deported to the Syrian desert. Despite all their struggles and efforts to survive, his grandmother unfortunately succumbed to an epidemic. She entrusted her little daughter to her older son, hoping that if they

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<sup>20</sup> Huseyin, interviewed by author, Gozaydin village, June 25, 2021, 10:25 am, 40-minute duration.

survived, they would one day return to their homeland. The “settlement policy” enforced by the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) did not guarantee better conditions or prevent deaths for refugees in Syria.<sup>21</sup> In these sparsely populated desert areas, deportees faced a different approach, being placed in numerous concentration camps, where many perished from exhaustion, starvation, and disease.<sup>22</sup>

Huseyin also shared another intriguing story with me about the eldest daughter of his grandparents. She owed her survival to an unfortunate event that occurred before the gendarmes reached their village. He heard this story from his uncle fifteen years ago:

My uncle described my aunt as a beautiful and talented young woman. She was preparing to marry an Armenian blacksmith when the agha from a distant village abducted her. Despite all the pleas and cries from her family, that man did not return my aunt to her own family. To cut the long word short, he forcibly took possession of her against her will.

After some time, Huseyin’s family learned that that village *agha* changed his aunt’s name and forced her to convert to Islam. Even if the aghas allowed the girls they had forcibly taken to return home the next day, the girls no longer had the courage to go back to their father’s house. In addition to fear, many women also refused to return to their family homes and villages due to the shame associated with losing their virginity.<sup>23</sup> Under these circumstances, losing their virginity would subject them to enduring social disgrace and terminate their chances of marriage. Hence, forced conversion inflicted even more distress on women, as it encompassed systematic rape disguised as a “marital” union with their captors.

Huseyin expressed that he was deeply saddened by all the pain that has been experienced, but he emphasized his strong connection to the land of his birth.

*Mustafa A. – Armenian Lullaby*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 269.

<sup>22</sup> Raymond Kevorkian, “Earth, Fire, Water: Or How to Make the Armenian Corpses Disappear,” in *Destruction and Human Remains: Disposal and Concealment in Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. Elisabeth Anstett and Jean-Marc Dreyfus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 96.

<sup>23</sup> Katherine Derderian, “Common Fate, Different Experience: Gender-Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005): 3.

<sup>24</sup> Mustafa, interviewed by author, Agil village, June 25, 2021, 1:40 pm, one-hour duration.

Before leaving the Erzrnka province, I arranged another interview with Mustafa A., who had been previous governor of the village close to Huseyin M.'s.

Mustafa A., a middle-aged farmer, lived in the same village all his life. He mentioned having five sons and three daughters, but only two of them were currently living with the family, while the others were working in Istanbul. Their main source of income came from selling dairy products made from their livestock. His wife also helped by working in the fields and garden. Mustafa was proud of their good relationship with their neighbors, regardless of differences in language, religion, or ethnicity. He also said that they shared similar political view with the local villagers, often meeting at the village coffee house to discuss the country's political situation.

He admitted that despite his Armenian roots from his grandparents, he was raised far from that identity. Mustafa did not know how to be Armenian or feel Armenian, but he remembered his grandmother's story well. He heard it often from his mother:

My grandmother was a young girl abandoned by the Euphrates River, beaten severely by the gendarmes. They left her there to die, but a man named Ismail from a different village found her. Ismail and his wife raised my grandmother as their own child ...and they called my grandmother by a Turkish name: Hacer.

Ismail's family kept his grandmother with them until she reached old age and later forced her to marry a Muslim boy. This practice of forcing Armenian women into marriages with partners chosen by others was a deliberate strategy to erase their identities. As Tachjian argued, integrating young Armenian women and children into Muslim society was intended to ensure that these individuals would lose their 'national identity.'<sup>25</sup>

In an attempt to erase the footprints of their past, they tried to forget who they were. They believed forgetting the notion of being an Armenian, language and traditions could make life easier. According to Anna Aleksanyan, in cases of forced marriages, Armenian women were given Muslim names and made to abandon their Christianity.<sup>26</sup> They were not allowed to communicate in their mother tongue and also there was no one present to speak with them in

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<sup>25</sup> Vahe Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 65.

<sup>26</sup> Anna Aleksanyan, "Between Love, Pain and Identity: Armenian Women after WWI," in *Women's Everyday Life and Politics in the South Caucasus*, ed. Ulrike Ziemer (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 105.



their native language. Aleksanyan also argues that these women had to let go of memories of their Armenian heritage.<sup>27</sup>

Mustafa shared that his grandmother preferred to hide her Armenian identity and concentrate on caring for her three children. Her husband neglected his parental and household duties, so she found herself shouldering the responsibilities alone. She would softly sing Armenian lullabies to her daughters; however, she avoided teaching them the language. Mustafa recalled some of those lullabies while going to sleep: “*Nothing is ever truly lost. When my mother cradled me in her arms, she would sing one of those lullabies. Her voice was so beautiful that it brought me a sense of indescribable peace.*”

In her article, Melissa Bilal referenced Hirsch and Spitzer to explain how a lullaby can serve as a connection between the survivor generation’s memory and the present.<sup>28</sup> What we typically refer to as memory is not just memory, but rather a reflection of the past.<sup>29</sup> Our memories are essentially a culmination of those memories within the larger context of history. The search for memory involves exploring one's own personal history. The lullabies were the heritage that he inherited from his grandmother.

### *The Old Shepherd without Sheep*

As the second stop of the project, I visited Arapgir, a town located in the larger Malatya region. Historically Arapgir is known for its significant Armenian population and its proximity to several former Armenian villages. On a hot summer day, the town seemed empty. Eventually, I came across an elderly shepherd on the roadside, watching over a lone sheep. I stopped to inquire if he had any knowledge of Armenians who had previously lived in the area. At first, he was suspicious, much like Musa had been, but he eventually shared some details about two Armenian brothers who took care of the local Armenian cemetery and lived in the town center. He also mentioned an elderly Armenian man in a nearby village called Shepik could potentially contribute to the study. The shepherd gave me his home address and promised to take me to the brothers’ house the following day. When I visited him as planned, I noticed a change in dynamics. The shepherd seemed more assertive with anxious behaviors. It was clear that he talked about me with his family members, who looked at me with a sense of recognition. His

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Melissa Bilal, “Lullabies and the Memory of Pain: Armenian Women’s Remembrance of the Past in Turkey,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 43, no. 2 (2019): 190.

<sup>29</sup> Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire.” *Representations* 26 (1989): 13.

youngest son pulled his father aside and approached me to inquire my motivation for researching Armenians. Before showing me the way to the house of the Armenian brothers, he suggested accompanying me in exchange for some money. It became clear that the family expected a piece of compensation, viewing Armenians and their heritage solely in terms of potential material gain. I decided to find the address on my own and immediately left there.

### *Two Armenian Brothers*

Upon my arrival, I heard a song in an unfamiliar language, evoking the sense of a prayer from the house. Sarkis then greeted me in priestly robes. He explained that he was engaged in a peaceful prayer in his vestment that was given to him as a gift by the largest Armenian church in Istanbul. Then, he quickly called his brother to tell him that they had a guest. Unfortunately, his brother was occupied with too much work throughout the day, therefore we could not meet. During his phone conversation, I had a chance to glance around the living room, which resembled a small chapel decorated with icons of Jesus Christ and Mary. These religious images, along with family photographs reflected a blend of personal and religious heritage maintained by Sarkis and his brother.

### *Sarkis O. – Stigmatization with Tattoos<sup>30</sup>*

Sarkis O. was a 50-year-old Armenian man originally from Arapgir, who lived in a two-story house, with his brother. Before we started our conversation, he wanted to explain the source of their household income. His brother was frequently employed in woodcutting, while Sarkis received a salary from the Armenian community in Istanbul for his responsibilities such as maintaining the Armenian cemetery and managing funeral preparations. After losing their father at a young age, the two brothers, who took care of their widowed mother, never married.

He enthusiastically fetched his family album and showed the photographs of his parents. The black and white photographs not only had a sense of nostalgia but also conveyed a poignant narrative of the past. One particularly captivating element in one of the photos was the small, dark tattoo on Sarkis' grandmother's forehead and chin, which Elyse Semerdjian also

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<sup>30</sup> Sarkis, interviewed by author, Arapgir, June 27, 2021, 12:25 pm, one-hour duration.

discusses in her book.<sup>31</sup> Her investigation centers on the enduring imprints left in the memories and on the bodies of female survivors of the genocide. Among these survivors were Armenian women like Khanum, the grandmother of filmmaker Suzanne Khardalian, who silently lived with these marks all her life. On the other hand, women like Aghavni Kabakian sought surgical interventions to remove the lasting tattoos that had left an enduring imprint on their skin and memories. These images held curiosity-arousing life stories, and I asked Sarkis about the significance behind the tattoos on her face.

He briefly looked at the photograph and explained the meaning of the tattoos that had been marked on Armenian women. Sarkis' grandmother was entrusted to a wealthy family when their village was being pillaged. The family used her as a servant, while the women in the household put henna tattoos on his grandmother's face, serving as a symbol that she was distinct from them, namely an Armenian.

Ulrike Luise Glum shares accounts of several female victims who were tattooed on the face in the course of the Armenian Genocide.<sup>32</sup> She clarified that tattooing was a widespread practice in eastern parts of the Ottoman Empire and the northern Levant at that time. Many ethnic groups, including Kurds, Turks, Arabs and Yazidis adorned their bodies with tattoos. However, in Armenian culture, tattooing was not common. Armenians would only receive a cross tattoo on their arms when they undertook on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Although tattoos are typically a form of self-expression, during the genocide, they were used as a means of assimilation and exclusion.<sup>33</sup> Rebecca Jinks also describes tattooing as a form of “degrading slavery” that had lasting moral and racial effects on the women who were held captive.<sup>34</sup> It was also a method of stigmatizing Armenian women, as tattoos evoked a sense of sexual subjugation and corruption of innocence and purity. Many poor girls were often unable to return home due to the stigma they carried on their faces, unable to expose themselves to their countrymen's eyes.<sup>35</sup> The tattoo evolved to symbolize both a tangible injury and a metaphorical scar that remained perpetually unhealed.

Holding his grandmother's photograph, I waited for Sarkis to guide me to the Armenian cemetery. After he changed out of his priestly attire, we left his home. The cemetery was

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<sup>31</sup> Elyse Semerdjian, *Remnants Embodied Archives of the Armenian Genocide* (Redwood: Stanford University Press, 2023), 149.

<sup>32</sup> Ulrike Luise Glum, “The Tattoos of Armenian Genocide Survivors: Inscripting the Female Body as a Practice of Regulation,” *Journal for Religion, Film and Media* 7, no. 1 (2021): 124.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Rebecca Jinks, “‘Marks Hard to Erase’: The Troubled Reclamation of ‘Absorbed’ Armenian Women, 1919–1927,” *The American Historical Review* 123, no. 1 (2018): 105.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

conveniently close to his house and very clean. I read some Armenian names on the tombstones and asked Sarkis if he knew any nice stories about the Armenians who used to live in Arapgir. Since he did not understand my question, he whispered, *“they were our dear people.”* I looked at his face posing a question, *“What do people call you here?”* He replied with a smile, *“they call me Sarkis.”* My second question followed, *“Is Sarkis the name on your identity card?”* He nodded and showed his card to me with a vacant expression. Reading his Turkish name, “Lutfi,” on the card created a sense of dissonance and I asked, *“Sarkis, are you literate?”* or *“Can you read and write?”* He simply answered, *“No.”*

Soon after our visit to the cemetery, Sarkis agreed to accompany me to the village of Shepik. He cheered up like a child as *“Let’s go! Let’s go! I miss Uncle Papgen so much!”*.

### *Papgen Y. – A Life Beyond Words*<sup>36</sup>

Because Papgen was old and unable to get out of bed due to his illness, Sarkis opened the front door, and we entered together. Papgen seemed pleased to have visitors. After Sarkis introduced me to him, he asked, *“Is this girl a dajik?”*<sup>37</sup>

One hundred and two-year-old man, Papgen, introduced himself as the only second-generation Armenian alive. He stated that he had a son who was a well-known poet in the community. Despite living in the village away from his son and daughter in Istanbul, he said he called them almost every day. Following the unfortunate passing of his sister half a decade ago, Papgen remained completely alone in the village house.

He looked at me with a slightly shy expression and said, *“What can I tell you?”* I kindly detailed him the nature and purpose of the project. After that, I requested him to tell me some stories related to his family, relatives or neighbors as far as he remembered. While I initially had less expectations due to his age and, he unpacked a multiple of stories that his memory had preserved for many years. They flowed like a river during our deep conversation.

*“If you ask about the past, sadness is always at the door”* Papgen murmured with his raspy voice. Then continued, *“My father always questioned why God ignored evil during the Armenian Genocide. I wondered what the answer could be throughout my entire life.”* Afterwards, he shared his sadness about the diminishing number of Armenians in Turkey. He

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<sup>36</sup> Papgen, interviewed by author, Shepik village, June 27, 2021, 2:20 pm, two and a half hour duration with short breaks.

<sup>37</sup> A term used by Armenians in Turkey to refer to Turks.

assumed it was because of the ongoing oppression in the country. Since they lost their freedom long ago, they were in a climate of fear. Many Armenians changed their surnames to avoid revealing their true identity. Papgen also adopted a Turkish name to facilitate his bureaucratic processes in the city.

He articulated his interest in history and shared a somber personal experience with me:

Once, I had my mind to visit the large inn called as the “Arnaut Inn” in a nearby small district close to Kemaliye. The inn's name attracted my curiosity, particularly because, to the best of my knowledge, there were no Albanians residing in that area. It did not take me long time to realize the unsettling truth that the inn was converted from a magnificent Armenian church and named “Arnaut Inn.” Yet, I still don't understand, what have we done to deserve this? Even before 1915, the Sultan was taking actions to incite the people in the East against the Armenians. If the Sultan of the empire ordered it, what would the subjects do?

Aysenur Korkmaz explores the extent of violence targeted towards Armenians before the 1915 genocide, namely, during the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896.<sup>38</sup> She argues that these events represented a pivotal moment in late Ottoman history. A significant number of individuals lost their lives in the massacres carried out by the Ottoman army and Kurdish militia. Additionally, the Sultan imposed heavy taxes on Armenian peasants and turned a blind eye to the subsequent atrocities committed by Kurdish tribes. The outcome of these massacres was the death of at least one hundred thousand Armenians, leaving around fifty thousand children orphaned.<sup>39</sup>

Papgen's vast knowledge and strong memory were astonishing, prompting me to continue asking more questions about the fate of his family. Despite feeling weak, he was determined to share the narrative of his family's experience. “*Well,*” he continued:

When the earlier massacres ceased, the villagers who had been hiding in the mountains and caves returned to their homes. Unfortunately, they were unaware that the worst was yet to come. About twenty years later during the 1915 genocide,

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<sup>38</sup>Aysenur Korkmaz, “The Hamidian Massacres: Gendered Violence, Biopolitics and National Honour,” in *Collective and State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State*, ed. Stephan H. Astourian and Raymond H. Kevorkian (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2021), 97-121.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

the gendarmes rounded up eight hundred Armenians near our village, in the Agin region and marched them to the edge of the Euphrates.

He paused, took a deep breath as if reliving the moment, and described how the gendarmes had executed the captured Armenians, including his grandfather Kirkor, with firing squads. Meanwhile, a Muslim neighbor named Haci Effendi sheltered Papgen's father and uncle in his barn. However, when the gendarmes arrived in the village searching for more Armenians, a fellow villager reported Haci Effendi for hiding the two children. Shortly thereafter, the gendarmes swiftly raided Haci Effendi's house.

Haci Effendi brought the children to the gendarmes and defended himself against the rumors saying, "*Well, I pitied the boys because we shared each other's bread with their family.*" Papgen continued the story, his eyes lighting up, "*Fortunately, the gendarmes were in a hurry to catch up with the others, so they left my father and uncle with Haci Effendi*".

Papgen recounted the fate of his father and uncle as follows:

After my father and uncle sought shelter in that house for a while, a man from Pulkoy discovered that there were two Armenian boys in Haci's house. He then approached Haci Effendi and asked to take my father as a servant. Without hesitation, Haci Effendi greeted to the offer.

Richard Hovannisian investigates this incident in the context of Muslims who, for various reasons, played a role in rescuing Armenian lives during the genocide.<sup>40</sup> Hovannisian discusses that in rural societies, the families operated as economic units, and accounts of Armenian family life before the genocide suggest that children often helped with tasks like tend to livestock, farming, cooking, weaving, and other domestic duties. As a result, outsiders stood to benefit from the additional help provided by Armenian children's unpaid labor. Nazan Maksudyan argues that a significant number of Armenian boys and girls were placed in state-run orphanages, where they were mainly used as laborers. These labor roles were often assigned based on their gender.<sup>41</sup> In contrast to state orphanages for boys, the ones designed for girls were equipped with facilities for sewing, needlework, and various other handicrafts.

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<sup>40</sup> Richard Hovannisian, "Intervention and Shades of Altruism during the Armenian Genocide," in *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 176.

<sup>41</sup> Nazan Maksudyan, "The Armenian Genocide and Survival Narratives of Children," *Childhood Vulnerability Journal* 1, no. 1-3 (2018): 5.

Utilizing this gender-specific division of labor, converted Armenian girls were allocated to Muslim households, while converted boys were sent to work in factories, workshops, ranches, and small businesses across Istanbul and Anatolia. It was customary to assign Turkish names to these children, prohibit them from speaking Armenian, and perform circumcision on boys, all aimed at raising them as Muslim Turks within these institutions.<sup>42</sup> Thus, the distinct treatment of Armenian orphaned girls and boys in state institutions showcases how girls were taught domestic skills while boys were assigned to various industries. The process included a deliberate effort to assimilate them into Turkish Muslim culture by changing their names, language, and religious practices. As a consequence of forced transfers and marriages, thousands of Armenian women and children were absorbed into the perpetrating group. Young girls and boys were placed in government-run orphanages or Muslim households. Boys were mainly assigned to work in factories, workshops, farms, and small businesses, or were taken by Muslims from deportation caravans. Meanwhile, girls and young women were often forcibly married to Muslims.<sup>43</sup>

Umit Kurt emphasizes that genocide involves more than just the destruction of a specific group; it is a process that involves the rebuilding of society in place of the destroyed group.<sup>44</sup> He explains that the impact of is far-reaching, not only resulting in the destruction of a particular group but also triggering a complex process of societal reconstruction in its aftermath. This highlights the deep and lasting scars left on both the victims and the perpetrators. Also, it is characterized by the forced adoption of the lifestyle, culture, and institutions of a dominant and oppressive group by a targeted group, nation, or religious community.<sup>45</sup> During the Armenian Genocide, abducting children and assimilation were clearly convenient methods of achieving this goal. Similarly, Ekmekcioglu sheds light on Muslim households that usually used abducted boys as slaves or servants.<sup>46</sup> A typical way Armenians became assimilated was by changing their religion, names, and languages (Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic etc.). While narrating the fate of his family, Papgen also mentioned the Turkish name of his father, Bunyamin. It seemed as if he had experienced the events just yesterday as he continued to speak, “*Let me talk a little bit about women in my family. My mother, aunts,*

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Edita Gzoyan and Regina Galustyan, “Forced Marriages as a Tool of Genocide: the Armenian Case,” *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 10 (2021): 1730.

<sup>44</sup> Umit Kurt, “Cultural Erasure: The Absorption and Forced Conversion of Armenian Women and Children, 1915-1916,” *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 7 (2016): 26.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Lerna Ekmekcioglu, “A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion during and after the Armenian Genocide,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 55, no. 3 (2013): 529.

*uncle and my grandmother survived the genocide by hiding in a secret room in their house.”* However, his uncle and one of his aunts were captured and deported to the Syrian desert. By a rather interesting coincidence, the man who took Papgen’s father from Haci later brought his mother into the house as a servant and, after some time, married her to Papgen’s father.

His father had a sister who also survived the Armenian Genocide and whose story was truly heartbreaking. When the Armenian men in the village were attacked, Kurdish men from the neighboring village of Horoch arrived with the intention of taking the remaining women.

In response to the women’s strong resistance, they forced them, including Papgen’s aunt, to march from the hill to the banks of the Euphrates River. Tragically, they undressed them and then cruelly threw them into the stream. Sexual violence played a central role in degrading and dehumanizing during the Armenian Genocide.<sup>47</sup> Rape, for instance, served as a means for perpetrators to display, communicate, produce or maintain dominance over Armenians, both as individuals and as communities.<sup>48</sup> It was also demonstrated by the common practice of making women undress before their execution to humiliate them and arouse perpetrators.<sup>49</sup> As the cruelty became unbearable for his aunt, she reacted more swiftly than the attackers, leaping into the river. Her suicide represented an act of resistance, symbolizing her refusal to let the perpetrators have power over her life and body. The concept of suicide in such cases is no longer regarded as a sinful death but rather as a heroic act.<sup>50</sup> Vahe Tachjian asserts that in Armenian culture, a conventional heroine was often seen as either the woman who instructed her child the Armenian alphabet in a desert setting or the woman who deliberately leaped from a steep cliff into the Euphrates to avoid being captured by the perpetrators.<sup>51</sup> In most cases, this was done out of desperation, fear or as a result of sexual abuse and having witnessed the murder of a close relative. To illustrate women’s feelings concerning sexual abuse, Tachjian provides a striking example about a young Korean girl who was captured by the Japanese army and forced into prostitution in WWII. After the Japanese defeat, at the end of her story, she explained her fear of returning to Korea as *“How can I go back home and meet my family with this dirty body?”*<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Matthias Bjornlund, “‘A Fate Worse Than Dying’: Sexual Violence During the Armenian Genocide,” in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 30.

<sup>48</sup> Toygun Altıntaş, “Violence, Armenian Women, and the ‘Armenian Question’ in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of Women’s History* 34, no. 3 (2022): 14.

<sup>49</sup> Williams, *The Complexity of Evil*, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Bjornlund, “‘A Fate Worse Than Dying,’” 27.

<sup>51</sup> Vahe Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion,” 76.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*



Papgen's aunt was swept ashore by the Euphrates River when the current pushed her into a hollow at the edge. Papgen continued:

My aunt felt very helpless and did not know what to do. At that moment, a man on horseback noticed her walking in her wet clothes. He approached her and asked what had happened. My aunt was so exhausted that she simply told him to kill her if he intended to harm her. The man turned out to be the Imam of a nearby village and he gazed at my aunt with compassion in his eyes.

The situation of Papgen's aunt, as mentioned in Hermann Cohen's statement "*man discovers his Mitmensch*<sup>53</sup> *not through suffering but in suffering,*"<sup>54</sup> highlights the profound nature of human empathy and connection. Often, it requires experiencing of hardships together to truly understand and appreciate one another. "*The Imam got my aunt on his horse and he said, 'God let you live; how can I kill you!'*" George N. Shirinian has uncovered instances of "humanity" amidst the genocide in his research, citing a report from a German public official involved with the Baghdad Railway.<sup>55</sup> In this report, Shirinian illustrates that even Muslims expressed their disapproval of the Armenian atrocities.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, Papgen concluded his narrative, "*you see, we can't generalize and say everyone is cruel; there are compassionate people among them,*" with his words conveying a mix of weariness and relief.

## Dersim

I set out towards the third city, Tunceli, that was formerly called Dersim. The Turkish Parliament issued a decree specifically for Dersim and officially renamed it Tunceli in 1935.<sup>57</sup> However, from the perspective of the wide population, it is of great importance to still refer to the city as "Dersim" as a matter of principle.

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<sup>53</sup> The German word *Mitmensch* means "fellow human being," see: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/de/worterbuch/deutsch-englisch/mitmensch>, accessed 04.10.2023.

<sup>54</sup> Hermann Cohen, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 147.

<sup>55</sup> George N. Shirinian, "Turks Who Saved Armenians: Righteous Muslims during the Armenian Genocide," *Genocide Studies International* 9, no. 2 (2015): 221.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Ulker Sozen, "Culture, Politics and Contested Identity among the 'Kurdish' Alevis of Dersim: The Case of the Munzur Culture and Nature Festival," *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2019): 65.

When I arrived in Dersim, the owner of a bookstore in the city center gave me a piece of information about the socio-economic and cultural structure of the city. He mentioned that the majority of the people living in the city have Armenian ancestry, either through their mothers or fathers. However, he explained that gradually, the Armenians of Dersim embraced Alevism and nearly forgot their origins. Instead, Alevism became a defining identity for them, and the term “Armenian” or “Armenianness” remained merely a word or expression. In an interview with Yetvart Danzikyan for Agos newspaper, Kazim Gundogan, the author of a newly published book on this subject, focused that Armenians did not willingly welcome Alevism, but were instead compelled to do so.<sup>58</sup> Their religious leaders were exterminated, and the state intentionally destroyed their places of worship, including churches and monasteries where they could practice their faith. Furthermore, the local community did not protect the remaining churches and monasteries; rather they used stones from these religious sites in the construction of homes and schools: *“To the extent that when Armenians are mentioned in some parts of Dersim, the first thing that comes to mind is the “Armenian Gold,” which describes this situation. And in the quest to find and possess this gold, almost no church, monastery ruin, or Armenian grave was left untouched.”*<sup>59</sup>

Similar to the previous regions I visited for my interviews; Armenian heritage here also meant only the gold that was believed to have been buried before the exile. Then, the owner of the bookshop introduced me to a third-generation Armenian woman who was a teacher at the Fine Arts High School.

*Saadet E. – “The Cut” in her Family History*<sup>60</sup>

Saadet E. introduced herself as holding the unique status of being the eldest granddaughter in a family with Armenian origins on both her maternal and paternal sides. In addition to openly acknowledging her Armenian roots, she also expressed a deep sense of pride in her Armenian identity.

Saadet told me that her hometown was *Adiyaman*, but she had spent several years working as a teacher in Dersim. She unexpectedly discovered her being Armenian by

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<sup>58</sup> Yetvart Danzikyan, “Alevileş(tiril)miş Ermeniler konuşuyor” [“Alevised Armenians speak out”], *Agos*, December 17 2022, <https://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/27923/aleviles-tiril-mis-ermeniler-konusuyor>, accessed 04.11.2023.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Saadet, interviewed by author, Sharoglu Hotel cafe, June 29, 2021, 11:15 am, one and a half hour duration.

eavesdropping on a conversation between her aunt and mother. They spoke openly because Saadet was supposed to be asleep. There was a “conspiracy of silence”<sup>61</sup> in the family. This concept refers to an unspoken agreement within a family to avoid discussing certain traumatic experiences and keeping them separate from their daily lives.<sup>62</sup> After that, Saadet learned the full chronicle of her family's history from her father's elder sister. She was excited to share her family's record and expressed her desire to prioritize her grandfather's:

My grandfather was originally an Armenian man named Dikran from Malazgirt, a town in the city of Mush. His house was located on a hill just above the village, which allowed him to flee with his cousin when the village was set on fire during the events of 1915.

Her grandfather and his cousin embarked on a long and unfamiliar journey searching for shelter among the mountains and abandoned areas. However, they faced countless challenges, such as fear, bouts of hunger, and thirst as they made their way through these isolated paths.

She paused her narrative for a moment and suggested watching the movie “The Cut,” directed by Fatih Akin. Following her realization of her Armenian ancestry, the film held a much deeper significance for her. She recalled that one of the characters in the movie, named Dikran, was portrayed as a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Interestingly, her own grandfather shared the name Dikran. In the film, the character Dikran faced extreme hunger while escaping from those responsible for the genocide, resorting to consuming the bones of deceased animals found along the road or between the railroad tracks. Saadet was deeply moved upon witnessing a scene in the movie that closely mirrored her grandfather's ordeal. In a parallel to the film's character, her grandfather and his cousin also stumbled upon animal bones in the fields while in hiding. They crushed the bones into a powder using stones, just as depicted in the movie, to consume in the cave they had found. After emerging from the cave, they arrived in *Diyarbakir* in a miserable condition and were met with an unfortunate fate. Her grandfather's cousin went out to find food, but he never returned. When her grandfather searched in panic for his cousin, people suggested he had been taken to a missionary orphanage

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<sup>61</sup> Hadas Wiseman, Einat Metzler, and Jacques Barber, “Anger, Guilt, and Intergenerational Communication of Trauma in the Interpersonal Narratives of Second-Generation Holocaust Survivors,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 76, no. 2 (2006): 178.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

that cared for orphaned Armenian children. However, her grandfather could not call out his cousin's name in the streets for fear of revealing himself. Saadet also noted that the cousin was indeed found in the street and taken to the orphanage because, years later, they found traces of him in the United States.

Keith David Watenpaugh suggests that orphanages were present in every major urban center in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>63</sup> He also indicates that late Ottoman social policy involved converting orphans to Sunni Islam, the empire's official religion. Many Armenian orphans sought refuge with American missionaries,<sup>64</sup> showing how the state aimed to assimilate orphaned children into Sunni Islam and highlighting the influence of the state on its subjects' religious identity. Additionally, the significant presence and impact of American missionaries in caring for and supporting Armenian orphans may have provided a counterbalancing influence on the religious and cultural landscape of the era.

Saadet sighed and continued, "*I can't help but imagine how different our destinies would have been if the genocide never happened. I might have gone to a non-Muslim school and developed different skills.*" She envisioned a life where the genocide had not occurred, understanding how the devastation of a nation can completely alter the future and lifestyles of future generations. Despite the challenges, she was grateful for Dikran's survival, which allowed her to build a large family of her own. Similarly, in a newspaper interview, Fatih Akin explains that genocide does not end with the loss of human lives; rather, it marks the beginning of a new journey that includes both material and spiritual aspects.<sup>65</sup>

Saadet continued her story about her grandfather, Dikran. Despite surviving the genocide and making it safely to *Kahta*, a district of Adiyaman, his life was still plagued by misfortune. However, a ray of hope appeared when he met an Armenian merchant who brought astonishing news: there was a woman in Diyarbekir who looked like Dikran.

Saadet kept on, "*When my grandfather reached the location described by the Armenian merchant, he gently knocked on the door and found his uncle's daughter standing directly before him.*" However, the woman did not recognize Dikran, as she had lost her sanity after being abducted and forced into marriage with the son of a Kurdish tribal leader. As discussed in the research by Edita Gzoyan and Regina Galustyan, the prevalence of violence during

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<sup>63</sup> Keith David Watenpaugh, "'Are There any Children for Sale?': Genocide and the Transfer of Armenian Children (1915-1922)," *Journal of Human Rights* 12, no. 3 (2013): 283-295.

<sup>64</sup> Selim Deringil, "Your Religion is Worn and Outdated," *Études arméniennes contemporaines* 12 (2019): 33-65.

<sup>65</sup> Ovgu Gokce, Fatih Akin'la 'Kesik' Üzerine: "Öfkeyi Azaltmak," [Fatih Akin on 'The Cut': 'Reducing Anger'], *Altyazi*, December 5 1914, <https://altyazi.net/soylesiler/tarihimizde-bir-kesik-fatih-akinla-cut-uzerine/> accessed 19.12.2022.

abductions made young women and girls particularly susceptible to forced marriages.<sup>66</sup> They experienced severe mental trauma from coerced into marriage, leading to lasting effects on their sanity. This highlights how the pervasive violence surrounding their abductions made them vulnerable to forced marriages, revealing the significant mental trauma they endured in such coercive environments, resulting in lasting and harmful effects on their mental health. In her concluding remarks, Saadet underlined her deep satisfaction in discovering her Armenian roots.

*Enver D. – Sorrow in the Tales*<sup>67</sup>

Saadet led me to Enver's house, where he was hosting a family get-together with his brothers and their families. Enver began the gathering by introducing himself and his family, noting that he is the second oldest among his three brothers. His younger brother lived next door to Enver's house. Their elder brother, on the other hand, revealed that he had immigrated to a foreign country many years ago. Unlike Enver and their younger brother, he had an Armenian name. He shared that after discovering his true identity, he was baptized in an Armenian church. On the other hand, Enver expressed his frustration, highlighting that the existing political oppression and cultural conditions in the country created substantial obstacles for Armenians to come together as a cohesive community. From his perspective, Enver believed that the Armenian community was predominantly concentrated in Istanbul, unaware of the substantial Armenian population residing in various other regions. His deepest regret was reserved for his own homeland. He also emphasized the importance of teaching the languages and religions of minority groups in schools to ensure the preservation of their cultures.

Enver's response to my inquiry about the discovery of his Armenian heritage was a poignant narrative. He recalled:

I was around six or seven years old when I first learned about my Armenian identity. The kids I played with outside would call me 'son of gavur (infidel)' and warn me not to cheat in our games, using that term. So, I approached my mother and asked

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<sup>66</sup> Gzoyan, Galustyan, "Forced Marriages," 1729.

<sup>67</sup> Enver, interviewed by author, in the garden of his house, June 29, 2021, 1:50 pm, two and a half hours total with a coffee break.

her what 'gavur' meant. She explained it to me in a way that a child could understand.

In his narrative, Enver depicted his family as quite large, with numerous members. When his family escaped the Hamidian massacres, the *aghas* from the Dersim region of their village provided protection. Gradually, his family assimilated into the Alevi community, adopting the Alevi faith while also preserving some enduring Armenian traditions. He illustrated this by sharing a story from his wife's family: “*My wife and her family followed the Alevi faith, but my wife always believed that her mother was an Armenian who embraced the Alevi faith. This belief may have stemmed from the fact that her mother would make the sign of the cross before baking bread.*”

In her memoir *My Grandmother*, Fethiye Cetin recounted a similar story. Years later, Cetin obtained information about her grandmother Seher's identity and learned that her real name was Hranush. Her grandmother was one of the thousands of children who were converted and made to forget their identities. Cetin also mentioned that after her grandmother's passing, she discovered that her grandmother had quietly maintained Armenian traditions in her home, including the tradition of baking *choreg*<sup>68</sup> at Easter,<sup>69</sup> without openly revealing them to anyone.

When I asked Enver about his definition of identity and belonging in either the Alevi or Armenian community, he stated that in Dersim, Armenians primarily shaped their traditions, rituals or social roles through their Alevi beliefs, not intending the denial of their origins.

Contrary to this, both identities added unique values and colors to their lives. Moreover, he acknowledged his deepest respect for the women who struggled with several problems in his family. As we were about to leave their house, he wanted to share a tale that was passed to him through generations:

Let me tell you a story that I have heard from my elders. When an Armenian mother and her daughter finally arrived at the Syrian desert, Deir-er Zor, they were extremely hungry. As they sat among the crowd in a corner, they witnessed another Armenian mother plucking and eating the flesh of her deceased child. Overwhelmed by their own hunger, the starving mother mustered the courage to approach the grieving mother and ask for a small portion of the dead child's flesh.

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<sup>68</sup> “Çöreg” is defined here as a round loaf of bread. This definition is based on the author’s interpretation and understanding of the term as used in the local context.

<sup>69</sup> Fethiye Cetin, *My Grandmother: A Memoir* (New York: Verso Books, 2021), 75.

To her dismay, the other mother vehemently refused, reacting with anger. The little girl, sensing her mother's disappointment, turned to her and said, "Don't be sad, mommy. When I die, don't give her my flesh!".

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the journey undertaken in the pursuit of understanding the past, as recounted in this article, has shed light on the enduring legacy of the Armenian Genocide in the collective memory of individuals residing in Turkey. The choice of Erzinka, Malatya, and Dersim provinces as research locations, guided by the meticulous investigation of place names, revealed not only the geographical markers of Armenian presence but also the depth of historical connections.

The study focused on exploring post-memories, which are stories and accounts passed down through generations, related to the Armenian Genocide. These stories included persecution not only of Armenian men and children, but also the cultural, physical or sexual violence against women that contributed to the destruction of the community as a whole. The narratives shared by Armenian interviewees, rooted in their family histories, vividly portrayed of the suffering endured by Armenian women during that tragic period. These stories served as a poignant reminder of the importance of preserving historical memory and acknowledging the pain experienced by past generations. The stories of Turkish Muslim intermediaries encountered along the way were also included, providing insight into the complex layers of memory surrounding Armenian heritage.

Therefore, it is crucial to understand that this type of violence against women is an integral element of genocide while feeling the depth in the words of Fethiye Cetin's grandmother, "*Let those days go and never come back.*"<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Cetin, *My Grandmother*, 76.

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### **About the Author:**

Ozlem Karakus is a researcher from Istanbul with a strong interest in conflict and the intersections of identity and philosophy. She previously conducted research on Armenian laments as part of the shared cultural memory between Turks and Armenians, supported by the Hrant Dink Foundation. Ozlem completed her master's studies in the Weiss-Livnat International MA Program in Holocaust Studies at Haifa University. She is currently pursuing her PhD at the University of Potsdam, Germany. Her research focuses on philosophical and theological discussions surrounding freedom, particularly in relation to authoritarianism, conflict, and dogmas.

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