

REPRINT

Regina Galustyan, Robert Tatoyan, “Introduction,” in *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide*, 7. Aram Mantashyan, *Aram Could Not be Seito*.¹ Sokrat Mkrtychyan, *Memoirs*, eds. Regina Galustyan and Robert Tatoyan, Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, 2022, 163 pp.

In 2020, the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation launched the series of books titled *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide*, with the symbolic volume *Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl who lived through the Great Massacres*, as one of the first memories on the Armenian Genocide. The aim of the series is to publish handwritten memories kept in the archive of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute.

The two memoirs that were combined in one book and presented in volume 7 of this series were first published in Armenian (volume 4 of the series) and then translated into English by Ara Stepan Melkonian and are the second English language memories in the series. Volume 7 represents the two survivors’ eyewitness accounts of the Armenian Genocide. Footnotes were added by the editors to detail and clarify geographical and place names in Western Armenia quoted in the text, as well to clarify dialect and word usage. Use has been made of the appropriate volumes of “Dictionary of Toponymy of Armenia and Adjacent Territories” (in Armenian).² The population figures for Armenian settlements have been collated from Raymond Kevorkian and Paul Paboudjian’s book, “The Armenians in the Ottoman Empire on the Eve of the Genocide” (in French).³

Aram Mantashyan’s story, which is the first memoirs in the book, is a narrative of a boy who, with his family, was deported from the village of Mshaknots in the district of Shabin-Karahisar. Young Aram shared the fate of the children who, during the genocide, were converted and made into slaves but who later re-established their former Armenian identities. Through this narrative he transfers his and thousands of others’ experiences to future generations.

The memoir *Aram could not be Seito* was written by Aram Misak Mantashyan (1906-1981) who was born in the village of Mshaknots in the Sushehir (Entires or Andreas) sub-district of Shabin-Karahisar district, province of Sebastia of the Ottoman Empire. The

1 The manuscript is held in the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute’s scientific archives, section 8, collection 69, file 56. The title of the original manuscript is *1915 հայկական կոտորածներից* [From the Massacres of 1915]. The editor, Regina Galustyan, felt it was better titled with a phrase from the author’s text, considering that it suits Aram Mantashyan’s narrative more closely.

2 T. Kh. Hakobyan, St. T. Melik-Bakhshyan, H. Kh. Barsegyan, *Հայաստանի և հարակից շրջանների տեղանունների բառարան* [Dictionary of Toponymy of Armenia and Adjacent Territories], Vol. 1, Ա-Դ [A-D] (Yerevan: Yerevan State University, 1986), Vol. 2, Դ-Կ [D-K] (1988), Vol. 3, Կ-Ն [K-N] (1991), Vol. 4, Ն-Վ [N-V] (1998), Vol. 5, Տ-Ֆ [T-F] (2001).

3 Raymond H. Kevorkian, Paul B. Paboudjian, *Lés Arméniens dans l’Empire Ottoman à la vielle du Génocide* (Paris: ARHIS, 1992).

village was mostly inhabited by Armenians and, in about 1910, had approximately 300 Armenian houses.⁴ The population's occupations consisted of farming, animal husbandry and various trades. It had two churches and one school with 55 pupils.

The historian Raymond Kevorkian states that in 1915 the village of Mshaknots had a population of 844, noting that it was one of the most densely-populated villages in the district.⁵ According to the report prepared on 28th October 1920 by Sahak Sarkisian, the overseer of the Shabin-Karahisar region who worked for the Armenian National Relief agency under the Constantinople patriarchate's aegis, Mshaknots village was made up of 350 houses, from which only 15-18 houses were stable in 1919.⁶

The population of the Sushehir sub-district was either killed on the spot or deported during the second half of June 1915, the actions being led by the local governor Ahmed Hilmi. The caravan of deported Armenians followed the Akn – Malatya route.⁷ Aram was exiled with his mother and sister. Providing valuable insights into village life prior to the genocide and the family's deportation, the main narrative begins with the crossing of the Kirkgyoz bridge over the River Euphrates near Malatya. Aram went ahead of his mother: "I tried to get even a small amount of bread and get it to my mother." He got lost and wasn't able to find any bread. Thus, began the wandering of nine-year old boy, with all its consequences, in the Kurdish-populated villages of Malatya region.

It is important to refer to the Ottoman Turkish government's actions regarding children during the Armenian Genocide and to put Aram Mantashyan's experiences into context.

The forced Islamisation and Turkification of Armenian children (and women) during the Armenian Genocide was one of the methods used to destroy the Armenian nation as such. The forced transfer of Armenian children to the Turkish community was the classic case of the forcible child transfer from a victim's group to a perpetrator's.⁸ The act of the "forcibly transferring children of the group to another group" with intent to destroy in whole or in part any national, ethnic, racial or religious group is enshrined in the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Accordingly, the criminal aim of destroying a group by pre-meditated actions, with individual children being forcibly transferred to another environment is seen as a component of the general action which is to destroy the child's previous, in this case Armenian, identity and to Turkify him/her. Therefore, the singular reasoning of "aiding,"

4 T. Kh. Hakobyan, St. T. Melik-Bakhshyan, H. Kh. Barsegyan, *Հայաստանի և հարակից շրջանների տեղանունների բառարան* [Dictionary of Toponymy of Armenia and Adjacent Territories], Vol. 3, Կ-Ն [K-N], edited by T. Kh. Hakobyan (Yerevan: Yerevan State University, 1991), 847.

5 Kévorkian, Paboudjian, *Les Arméniens dans l'Empire Ottoman*, 249.

6 Matteos Eplighatian, *Ազգային խնամատարություն, Ընդհանուր տեղեկագիր, առաջին վեցամսեայ, 1 մայիս 1919 – 31 հոկտեմբեր 1919* [National Relief Organisation, General Report, first six months, 1 May – 31 October 1919] (Antelias: The Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 1985), 489.

7 Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London-New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 459.

8 Edita Gzoyan, «Երեխաների բռնի տեղափոխումը որպես ցեղասպանական գործողություն. ձևավորումից դեպի քրեականացում» [Forcible Child Transfer as a Genocidal Act: from Conceptualization to Criminalization], *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes*, no. 1 (2020): 104.

“saving” or “protecting” children are not seen as mitigating circumstances in legal terms, although genocide denialists continue to present them as such.⁹

The forcible transfer and further assimilation of Armenian children into the Turkish environment during the Armenian Genocide was premeditated and organised by the nationalist ideologists and high-ranking politicians, thus becoming one of the methods of genocide. The government enacted orders and laws to ensure that it was organised and ran smoothly. Historian Ara Sarafian determined four methods of child transfer:

1. The “voluntary conversion” at the beginning of the genocide to avoid persecution;
2. The placing of children in special government orphanages having the aim of assimilating them;
3. The distribution of Armenian children to Turkish families by Turkish organisations;
4. The selection of individual children by Muslims.¹⁰

In the last case, the Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire was permitted to select and take children of deported Armenians. The Muslim masters sometimes treated the children as adoptees, but in most of the cases Armenian children were given to Turkish, Kurdish and Arab households as slaves, forcing them to work for their daily food, subjecting them to rough treatment and sexual violence. They died of hunger and beatings. The forced conversion of Armenian children to Islam was a precondition of their Turkification,¹¹ being followed by changing names and forbidding the use of spoken Armenian.¹² In the case of boys, this was accompanied by obligatory circumcision. Left without friends and relatives, many, amongst whom was the author of this memoir Aram-Seito, adapted to the conditions of this new way of life and cultural environment.

It should be noted that the transfer of Armenian children was not a general policy. The aim of the government was not to Turkify every child of the Armenian community. Children were eliminated, like all segments of the Armenian population during the genocide. The Armenian orphans’ incineration in the orphanage in Mush, the medical experiments conducted on them in the Trabzon province, their drowning in the Black Sea and their suffocation by smoke by the thousand in caves of Der Zor are the proved

9 Ibid., 101.

10 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 20th Century*, eds. Omer Bartov, Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 210.

11 Here “Turkification” is used as a commonly known term in academic circles. In a broader sense it is the government’s efforts to Turkify the multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire, in a narrower sense it refers to the forcible change of Armenian children’s identity within the course of the genocide. Although in the memoir itself Aram was taken by different Turkish, but mostly Kurdish masters, this also falls under the “Turkification” category, as the whole process was planned by the Turkish government and implemented by state laws, orders from the Interior Ministry and served to the final aim of the destruction of the Armenian nation and homogenization of the country.

12 Narine Margaryan, «Հայ երեխաների թրքացման գործընթացն Օսմանյան կայսրության պետական որբանոցներում (1915-1918 թթ.)» [Turkification of Armenian Children in the Ottoman Empire’s State Orphanages (1915-1918)], *Ts’eghaspanagitakan handes* 4, no. 1 (2016), 26.

examples of this.¹³ The policy of transfer was considered by the Turkish government and ideologists as the means to inject some age and gender-specified groups of Armenians, who were considered as easily transformable, into the Turkish nation. Among the aims of the forcible transfer, the idea of enrichment of the Turkish genetic character, appropriation of children's inheritance and mitigation of human losses suffered by the population during WWI were singled out by contemporary researchers.¹⁴

Aram Mantashyan was one of the enslaved, converted and renamed Armenian children. Determined to live, the nine-year-old boy struggled to survive each day, led by the hope of returning to his birthplace and finding his relatives.

The memoir describes, in detail, his forced religious conversion, first by flattery and persuasion, then by death threats. It acquaints the reader with how renamed Armenian boys Tribon-Omar, Khachik-Heyto, Hayrapet-Mustafa, Vahan-Khalil, Arakel-Suleiman and others worked for Turkish and Kurdish masters in the Malatya region for their daily bread. Parallel to this, the physical and psychological state of the Armenian children and the moral dilemmas which they faced are also described. The memoir clearly demonstrates the attitude of the Muslim community towards the converted Armenian children, the regular beatings they received accompanied by the derogatory epithet "gavur oğlu" (the son of an infidel) long used in Ottoman society towards Christians, while their lives were worth nothing. If their masters killed them for any mistake they made, they were not brought to justice. Aram also testifies how gendarmes regularly collected converted boys. The aim, perhaps, was to reduce even the numbers of converts in the Ottoman Empire.

There are several specific incidents in this memoir that are worthy of special attention, such as Aram's attitude towards Turkish doctors. The doctors had a special role in destroying Armenians during the genocide, even using Red Crescent hospitals for that purpose.¹⁵ The gendarmes, advised Aram, as he was ill, to go to the hospital in Malatya. He spent his time wandering and returned, recording, in his memoir, "what had I, an Armenian boy, to do with a hospital? They would probably finish me off."

The moral choices that Armenian children were forced to face are worthy of attention as well. Using this memoir as an example it could be proved that even kept in servitude, the converted Armenian children retained their altruism and were psychologically inclined towards helping and saving each other.¹⁶ The typical behaviour for Armenian children living in Muslim households was to escape at the first opportunity in search of relatives

13 Vahakn Dadrian, "Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case," *Hayots' ts'eghaspanutyan patmutyan ev patmagrutyan harts'er* 7 (2003): 8-9.

14 Vahakn Dadrian, "The Role of Turkish Physicians in the World War I Genocide of Ottoman Armenians," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 1, no. 2 (1986): 184; Lerna Ekmekcioğlu, "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): 526.

15 Dadrian, "The Role of Turkish Physicians," 177.

16 Donald E. Miller, Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 186-187.

and other Armenians, even when the house was relatively safe.¹⁷ Aram Mantashyan followed the same behavioural pattern.

The other specific thing was that most of the children, from a very early age, had to earn their living. Survivor children were clever, made decisions easily and took risks that could, in many cases, end in death.¹⁸ This was mostly associated with the struggle with hunger. Aram was not an exception to this: “I felt I wanted to eat everything, but who would give me what I wanted? No one. *But I’d found the way through my cleverness.*”

The many incidents of stealing food recorded in this memoir must be seen in this context and not as the result of the lowering of survivor’s moral standards. Aram did steal at the behest of his Muslim masters for their benefit. It is obvious that masters’ influence concerning such things would, over a long period, have negative effects on the moral perception of converted children.

The memoir clearly, without artistic embellishment, also shows the feelings of a child bereft of care. Describing the visit of his master’s sister and her children, Aram writes: “There were all kinds of dried fruit in the house, such as raisins of mulberries and grapes, walnuts and kernels. She filled her children’s pockets with them every day, *but never gave me even one.*”

Salvation and return to the Armenian identity for Aram Mantashyan and thousands of children like him was a national cause. This was only possible after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War and the Mudros armistice of 30 October 1918, when national and international humanitarian organisations restarted their rescue work within the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹ Hearing that an orphanage had opened in Malatya which was accepting Armenian children, Aram decided to go there. Joining a group of boys from Shabin-Karahisar there, they asked for aid from the orphanage administration so they could return to their home villages. Going to Mshaknots, Aram found his mother’s sister and her daughter both of whom had survived by hiding in the nearby Greek village. Unfortunately, history repeated itself. The solution to stopping intimidation for Aram Mantashyan was to escape to Soviet Armenia. He was arrested several times, but his detention in the port of Giresun forever separated him from the members of his family that had survived – his aunt and cousin. He managed, alone and without a passport, to sneak aboard a ship going from Constantinople to Batumi in 1924, joining a repatriation group. Reaching Batumi, the survivor recorded: “The world is mine now, I’m very happy despite the fact that I’ve nothing – no food, a place to shelter and no money.”

Aram Mantashyan’s memoir could be generalised by the following points:

- It is a written testimony of an Armenian boy’s experience, who was Turkified on a private level. It provides material to compare with the experiences of those

¹⁷ Ibid., 112.

¹⁸ Ibid., 114.

¹⁹ Edita Gzoyan, «Փրկությունն այս որբերին. Առաքել Չաքրյանի հուշերը» [Saving Armenian Orphans: Memoirs of Arakel Chakirian], *Ts’eghaspanagitakan handes* 4, no. 2 (2016): 193.

In the second chapter, titled “My childhood,” the author continues to present the history of his family until 1914, the year when the First World War broke out. The ten-year-old boy’s memoirs turns the reader into participants of the quiet life of a Western Armenian village on the eve of the Metz Yeghern.²² A picture is put before us of the difficulties and privation of the daily life of a peasant. The author, from his early days, was involved in farm work, helping his father as a herdsman, as a boy who either sat on the oxen’s yoke or walked in front of them pulling them forward. One of the significant episodes described in one section of these memoirs is little Sokrat’s descriptions of the journeys made to the centre of the province, Bitlis, as well as to Bulanukh.

The First World War broke out and 1915 arrived. The first stage of the Armenian Genocide was the annihilation of Armenian men serving in the labour battalions. Sokrat’s father, with many men of Prkhus and the other villages in the province, were conscripted into the Turkish army to act as porters and never returned.

The third chapter, titled “The war” contains the description of the catastrophe that befell the village of Prkhus. The Russian army, advancing from Bayazet in April 1915, pushed the *Hasnatsi* (Hasananli) Kurdish tribe back; they, retreating, fell upon the village of Prkhus “like a pack of howling, hungry wolves,” put most of the village’s population to the sword, looting the defenceless Armenian villagers’ possessions: grain, animals and assets. The few villagers who survived – among whom was the author and his mother, baby brother and sister – escaped from the destroyed village.

The odyssey of Sokrat and his family’s wanderings is presented in the fourth (“Captivity”) and fifth (“Salvation”) chapters. Every step of their journey threatened them with death. The author’s mother, with the aim of saving her son’s life, gave him to a local Kurd, Binbo, as an apprentice shepherd. The author was forced to follow the Kurds who were retreating westward from the advancing Russians, leaving his mother and sister behind (his baby brother had died by that time). They crossed the Mush plain and it was only then that he was able to escape. After various incidents, the descriptions of which are fascinating reading, Sokrat was able to make his way to a place behind the Russian lines. He found only his sister alive on his return journey; his mother, unable withstand the things she had suffered, had died. Later he and his sister joined the thousands of refugee Armenians from Bitlis and Mush who retreated with the Russian army and went to Eastern Armenia. After reaching Echmiadzin, they initially settled in one of the orphanages there, then moved to the one in Ashtarak sponsored by the Moscow Armenian Committee.²³ This memoir ends with warm words about the teachers and teaching assistants in the orphanage.

²² An Armenian term for *Armenian Genocide* that translates as *Great Catastrophe* or *Great Calamity* with a legal connotation. The term used extensively in the memoirs of survivors, also in Sokrat Mkrchyan’s memoir. For more details see Vartan Matiossian, *The Politics of Naming the Armenian Genocide: Language, History, and ‘Medz Yeghern,’* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2022).

²³ It should be noted that the names of 13-year-old Sokrat and his 9-year-old sister Margarit are listed in the register of orphans who were in the Ashtarak orphanage sponsored by the Moscow Armenian Committee dated May 14th 1916, published in the appendix to the Caucasian Benevolent Society’s socio-political weekly journal *Hambavaber* dated December 4th 1916. There were a further 28 orphans from Prkhus village in the same orphanage at that time (*Hambavaber* (Tiflis), no. 49, 4 December 1916, Appendix).

The author's subsequent fate is revealed through the few laconic autobiographical sentences he added at the end of his memoir. He received a basic secondary education in the orphanage and after completing his studies, got married and, with his sister, left the establishment. He served in the Red Army for seven years, leaving it in 1930. He was accepted, in the same year, as a student in the all-union veterinary-animal husbandry institute, graduating in 1934 having received a technical education in animal husbandry. He accepted a position as the leader of political-mass radio broadcasting attached to the Soviet Armenian government in 1935. He moved to become the responsible editor for political broadcasting in 1937. He was appointed chief editor of the *Latest News* broadcasts from June 1940. After the beginning of the Great Patriotic War he was sent to the battlefield in 1941 then demobilized in 1943 due to sickness. He worked in the Social Security ministry from 1943 until 1946 then, from 1947 until 1954 as the local correspondent for the newspaper "Communist" for the Martuni, Kamo and Vardenis regions. In about 1960 he worked as a censor in the Kurdish-language newspaper "Rya Taza." After that he retired due to illness and died in February 1968.

Sokrat Mkrtychyan's memoir is valuable for a number of reasons. Firstly, it is a singular primary source concerning the destruction of one of Western Armenia's settlements – Prkhus – and of other Armenian populated villages in the Khlat sub-district; secondly, the role of the Kurds, the mechanics of the implementation of the Armenian Genocide, in other words the concrete means aimed at killing specific groups of Armenians (men and young women), other violent methods used (rape, torture, forced labour) and testimony concerning the despoiling of the Armenians.

The memoir is also enriched with a certain literary-artistic value, bringing also the customs of local Armenians, several examples of songs from Mush, etc. It also has a firm structure, its narrative style is clear and absorbing, the language is simple but, at the same time, is bright and figurative.

Sokrat Hake Mkrtychyan's memoir was brought together by his eldest daughter, Lena Mkrtychyan. It was she who, in 1998, gave the five notebooks containing the original manuscript to the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute and she prepared the final text that is based on them. When preparing the manuscript for publication, the editor considered her final text as its basis, referring back to the notebooks to make any corrections necessary.

Editing was carried out based on the principle that there should only be minimum intervention. In the main, only grammatical and punctuation corrections have been made, bringing the manuscript up to present-day standards and evening out most obvious grammatical problems.

It is also important to note that the Armenian researcher, ethnographer and folklorist, Verjine Svazlian, used certain excerpts taken from Sokrat Mkrtychyan's memoir manuscript in her book "The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors."²⁴

24 Verjine Svazlian, *Հայոց ցեղասպանություն. Ականատես վերասպրողների վկայություններ* [The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors] (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2011), 105-108.

The book contains two appendices. The first is the editor, Robert Tatoyan's article titled "Genocide on the Example of one Settlement: The Destruction of the village Prkhus in 1915." The second is the testimony by Sokrat Hake Mkrtychyan, probably on August 9th, 1916, when he was in the Moscow Armenian Committee's orphanage, the original of which is kept in the National Archive of Armenia.²⁵

Those two memoirs are very different in style and narrative. Simply told and without embellishment, they are penned enriched with words taken from Turkish and Russian, but the language is clear and they tell their stories almost dispassionately, although with an underlying sense of anger, loathing, horror and loss. Both are vivid, concrete testimonies of genocide and the men's successful efforts to survive and rebuild their individual lives.

25 Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը օսմանյան Թուրքիայում: Վերասպրածների վկայություններ: Փաստաթղթերի ժողովածու [Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey. Testimonies of Survivors. Collection of Documents], Amatuni Virabyan, Gohar Avagyan (compilers), ed. by Amatuni Virabyan, vol II, Բիթլիսի նահանգ [Bitlis province] (Yerevan: National Archive of Armenia, 2012), 50-51.