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# THE INSTITUTIONS OF TURKIFICATION AND ASSIMILATION IN THE EYES OF ARMENIAN ORPHANS WHO FLED THEM

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## **Abstract**

Although Armenian orphans are the focus of this paper, taken in a broader context, the treatment of Greek, Assyrian, and Armenian orphans—with all commonalities and differences— is a signifier of intent to destroy targeted groups of people as the Genocide Convention defines.

This paper addresses the methods the Ottoman government undertook and the supplementary measures necessary in the implementation process of dealing with the myriad of children within the policy of total extermination. This involved setting up Turkish orphanages, some euphemistically called *mektebs* (religious schools)—with their brutal methods of forced conversion—pushing them into Muslim households—with all the torture and molestations that came with it but also serving the ulterior motive of improving the race—as institutions of Turkification, and in addition, the abhorring treatment of these children, torturing, raping, killing, along the roads of deportation. It will shed light on the experiences of these children in defined categories of victimization, those who lost their lives in this machination, those who survived and reached the outside world or continued living in Turkey as Muslims, true or pretending, as well as Christians upholding their faith against all odds. Based on interviews and first-person accounts of these orphans and newer studies on the state of mind of their offspring, this paper will outline the short-term effects, having turned this generation mostly into one that is socially dead unable to fully contribute to the perpetuation of the Armenian nation, as well as the long-term, that is the transgenerational effects of the genocide, a psychological burden upon the nation aggravating the situation and blocking the process of healing to begin.

The Genocide Convention does not project the effects of these genocidal treatments which the Armenian nation still struggles to overcome.

**Keywords:** Technics of mass-killing, oral history interviews, survivors' memoirs, American, European, and Armenian orphanages, Turkish orphanages, Muslim households, technics of survival, orphan gathering, transgenerational effects, nightmares, iconic images.

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## Introduction

The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide recognizes “forcible transfer of children of the group to another group” (Article II, act e) as the only clause openly related to the children-specific acts. There is no mention of targeted genocidal policies against this group. It was not meant to project the effects of the traumatic experience of the surviving children, thereupon the survivor nations in their unending struggle to overcome and remediate. This paper will focus on Armenian children to further expound and explain the Armenian case. However, in its broader setting it can also shed some light on the treatment of Greek and Assyrian orphans—with all commonalities and differences—to substantiate the bigger picture as signifier of the Young Turks’ intent to destroy by way of genocide.

For a long time, Armenian scholars’ and historians’ main concern was to prove the veracity of the Armenian Genocide mainly focusing on historical documentation of the event. Incorporating memoirs and literary responses for better understanding the Calamity and the human aspect of it is a recent phenomenon. After all, the Armenian Genocide cannot be treated as a strictly historical event, since its repercussions in the present are undeniable; the nation lives in its consequences, which are not duly recognized and addressed.

This paper examines the methods the Ottoman government undertook and the supplementary measures necessary in the implementation process of dealing with the myriad of children within its policy of total extermination. It also explores the debilitating impact of the past, the never-healing wounds these orphans carried all their lives effecting their behavior, their outlook on life. But before that, I’d like to acknowledge the work of Prof. Vahakn Dadrian, the utmost scholar in Armenian Genocide studies, who initiated the discussion and laid the groundwork for the study of children as a distinct subcategory within the overall victim population.<sup>1</sup>

To provide a backdrop for this discourse on the children-specific government policies of extermination, I first sketch a general overview of better known and deeper studied methods (from Henry Morgenthau to Vahakn Dadrian), corroborated by examples extracted from memoirs of those who survived. Then I address the Turkish orphanages that are the least documented and scarcely addressed in survivor memoirs—the ostensible reason being the fact that very few escaped or were rescued from these establishments. Obviously, if children locked in these Turkish institutions were too young to remember their roots, they were totally absorbed in Turkish society and untraceable, and if they were old enough to remember, they lived struggling with an unreconciled painful memory of the distant reality but condemned to silence.

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<sup>1</sup> Vahakn Dadrian, “Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 5, no. 3 (2003): 421-437.

## Children as Part of Deportees on the Roads of Deportation

Orders of deportation initiated the first stage of the final solution. It is almost always preceded by the arrest and slaughter of the adult male population leaving mostly women, children, and old men to start off the death march. But evidently, deportation alone, even with deliberately intensified hardship on the road, did not result in an absolute and quick solution. Gendarmes accompanying the caravans would beat to death those old men and women who could not keep pace. Starvation, thirst, and disease raging and sweeping through the refugee camps, did not finish the job. The organized attacks by Turks and Kurds of nearby villages, looting, killing, snatching children and young women proved more effective.

Hovhannes Mugrditchian of Lapajle (a village in Amanus Mountains) attests: "... with hatchets, scythes, shovels, truncheons, and sickles. They slew nearly five hundred persons. Not content with that slaughter, they took with them as captives many of the younger men and women." Further down he describes, "A thirteen-year-old Armenian girl had been seized from a caravan by Salih, the village chief's son-in-law. He starved her, and when she stole an egg to satiate her hunger, he "punished her by throwing her into a forty-meter-deep dry well. Inhumanity knows no limits!"<sup>2</sup>

While on the subject, these testimonies and many others like them show a reality contrary to the government's claim that gendarmes accompanied the caravans for their protection. Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas of Konia refuses the Turkish notion that gendarmes protected the caravans, and bandits and terrorists were the ones to blame for the crimes against Armenians. "I am living witness to these outrageous lies and attest to the fact that they did *not* protect us; that *they* were indeed the originators and the perpetrators..."<sup>3</sup>

The sporadic attacks and random shootings did not suffice either. Still, thousands of deportees, surviving all the hardships, affliction, and anguish on the road, reached the end of the line in the Syrian Desert, albeit in the most dreadful condition. Many local officials used mass killing with different methods as a tactic to get rid of the large groups of refugees gathered on their territories. Garo Poladian depicts in his memoirs the method applied by newly appointed "the bestial Ahmed Bey," in the Syrian Desert, dispatched from Constantinople to replace the more lenient one. Ahmed Bey recruited Chechens (the most ferocious tribe in the Desert), promised them booty, distributed rifles, and put them in charge of the final liquidation. "Rifles in hand on horseback, they smashed people underfoot, they shot

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<sup>2</sup> Hovhannes Mugrditchian, *To Armenians with Love: The Memoirs of a Patriot* (Hobe Sound, FL: Paul Mart, 1996), 56, 71. For further analysis of this memoir, see Rubina Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature, Perceptions of those who Lived through the Years of Calamity* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2014), 260-268 and elsewhere in the book.

<sup>3</sup> Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl* (Watertown, MA: Baikar, 1985), from the "Prologue." Further analysis in Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 253-259 and elsewhere in the book.

randomly killing some and injuring others.” They raped young girls and left them to die. “Then the few survivors of the carnage were lined up.”<sup>4</sup>

More often than not the surviving deportees reaching the desert were scattered in that wasteland and abandoned to perish with no shelter, no food and water.

## **Children as Part of the Victims of Mass-Killings**

Another method of mass-killing that was applied as an alternative to deportation was locking people in churches and burning them alive by setting the church on fire. Kostan Zarian depicts one instance in the *Voices in the Church*.<sup>5</sup>

Hripsimé Zeneyan (Ajemian) of Malgara remembers another incident of burning the deportees alive. The remnants of their caravan had reached Deir Zor when the gendarmes began collecting and separating children. Eight-year-old Hripsimé’s mother, only survivor of their large family, could not stand the agony of this separation and in front of Hripsimé’s eyes ran to the river and threw herself in it. A group of the remaining refugees were burned alive, and the rest were pushed into the Euphrates to drown. Children could see the blaze, smell the burning bodies, and hear the screams.<sup>6</sup>

Shogher Tonayan depicts the day when the Turkish askyars invaded their village, Vartenise near Mush, gathered all the villagers into two large stables and set them on fire. Shogher was fourteen. In that interview by Verjiné Svazlian, Shogher tries to depict the tragedy that went on inside the smoke-filled flaming stable. Some had survived this inferno only because before the flames consuming everyone, the roof had collapsed. She and her sister were able to climb up the ruins and escape. But she keeps saying during the interview, “I wish I did not survive. Oh, the hardship that I went through.”<sup>7</sup> So many years later, the memories are still alive, still making her life miserable.

There is no special treatment of little children in all the above testimonies. Children are part of the targeted general population subjected to liquidation along the road of deportation.

## **Children-Specific Methods**

Vahakn Dadrian enumerates and documents the monstrous methods by which the Turkish government, or its local representatives implemented to get rid of thousands of little children,

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<sup>4</sup> Garo Poladian, *Արծիւները անապատին սէջ* [Eagles in the Desert] (Paris: Araxes, 1958). For page references, see Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 111-115.

<sup>5</sup> Kostan Zarian, *Չայներ եկեղեցում* [Voices in the Church], in Arby Ovanessian ed., *Մէկ արար Հայկական թատերկաշար* [Anthology of Armenian One-act Plays] (Paris, Yerevan: Spiurk, 2001), 11-27.

<sup>6</sup> I interviewed Hripsimé Zeneyan, Ajemian on April 30, 1980, as part of my oral history coursework at UCLA with Prof. Richard G. Hovannisian. The audiotapes were kept at UCLA and later trusted to the USC Shoah Foundation in Los Angeles for indexing and digitization. The collection is accessible on their website.

<sup>7</sup> Verjiné Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide, Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitoutyoum, 2011), 97, Testimony # 9.

the surplus orphan population in the process of massacres and deportations.<sup>8</sup> He speaks of mass poisonings and “the steam bath”—killing babies by hot steam—drowning, raping girls and even young boys, burning or burying children alive, and the children picked out and carried by the Turks, Kurds, and Arabs to keep or sell them in the slave market.

In the “Thematic Indexing” of her monumental collection of hundreds of interviews of survivors, mostly in Soviet Armenia, in *The Armenian Genocide Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors*, Verjiné Svazlian lists 131 interviews with those who either witnessed a sibling being raped or they were raped themselves; 32 accounts of attacks on the caravans of deportees by Chechens and Circassians, with purpose of separating children to slaughter, kidnaping older children to use them as sex slaves and forced laborers, or sell them; among those are 126 accounts of forced Turkification/Islamization of those victims who later escaped and returned to their original faith; 74 accounts of children and infants burned, buried alive, thrown down a cliff, thrown in a pit, drowned, or raped and killed; 78 accounts of survivors who somehow escaped from the schools, churches, houses, stables, barns, pits, caves filled with Armenians and set on fire.

**Poisoning** - Gevorg Chiftchian was six when soldiers raided their village Kabousieh and drove the villagers out before they had a chance to climb up the Musa Mountain and defend themselves. He remembers the caravan reaching Hama where 55 children of 5-6 years were locked in a cave to die of starvation and insect bites. A Turkish pasha, as the little boys remember, took Gevorg to his house to sweep the floors, then beat him until he fell unconscious. Gevorg managed to run away and later heard that the same pasha had poisoned the children in the cave to expedite their death.<sup>9</sup>

Eight-year-old Levonti Azadian describes the hardship of the deportation and how the gendarmes killed the refugees to reduce the numbers. She remembers a Turkish orphanage where she lived a short time. One day they gathered all the Armenian orphans in the orphanage as if to give them food. She did not know what was in the food that children went blind eating. They then threw these blind children out to die. How did she survive this atrocity, or whether she was among these children and survived by a miracle, it is not clear.<sup>10</sup>

**Drowning** - Nargiz Zhamkochian of Kutora (Kotyora, modern Ordu), by the Black Sea, recounts. All the townsmen were driven out of the town and slaughtered before the deportation began. Her grandmother trusted four-year old Nargiz and her two-year-old brother, Hagop, to a Greek neighbor. The children were sheltered until the government’s decree to execute anyone harboring or hiding Armenians. The children were thrown in the street. Nargiz was too young to remember all these, but the story was trusted to her much later by her mother and grandmother. What has been fatefully imprinted in her mind though, and what she can never forget is the moment when with an animal instinct to survive, she abandoned her sick brother in the pile of children that the gendarmes had rounded up on the seashore and crawled away.

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<sup>8</sup> Dadrian, “Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case.”

<sup>9</sup> Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 488-89, Testimony #295.

<sup>10</sup> Interviewed by Michael Hagopian on July 17, 1985, in Detroit, Michigan. The interview is a part of Michael Hagopian’s Armenian Film Foundation collection at the Shoah Foundation, Interview code: AFF288.

From behind the bushes, she saw how the *zaptiehs* drove away the Turkish women, who were gathered there to help the children with a piece of bread and a mug of water. She heard the *zaptiehs* shouting, “don’t worry about them going thirsty, pretty soon they will have plenty of water to drink.” With horror she watched how the *zaptiehs* pushed the crying and moaning children into the sea to drown. That was the last she saw her brother, but she lived all her life with the memory of that scene and the terrified look on her brother’s face visiting her in her waking hours and in her sleep.

Although Nargiz spent all her adult life in Sukhumi on the beautiful shore of the Black Sea, she was never able to reconcile herself to the sight of the sea. To her, “its seemingly indifferent waters held the bodies and souls of the perished Armenians, the drowned and unborn, their tears and cries felt through the salt and bitterness of the dark water and nightly laments of its waves, and their pains and fears which still drive me mad if I dare to come close to the sea after so many years!”<sup>11</sup>

Mass drowning was not limited to the Trapizon Province. Vahakn Dadrian presented examples of mass drownings that occurred in different areas of the Euphrates River.<sup>12</sup> Citing an Armenian survivor, Dadrian describes the drowning of 2000 Armenian children by the order of Mustafa Sidki, Deir Zor’s police chief, on October 24, 1916. “They were thrown into the river two by two to the visible enjoyment of the police chief who took special pleasure at the site of the drama of drowning.”<sup>13</sup>

In a most poignant narrative of her harrowing experience, written after she reached the United States in 1917, Arshaluys Mardigian (Changed to Aurora Mardiganian in the U.S.) describes in graphic details the incredible brutality, barbarism, and inhumane torture she went through or witnessed.<sup>14</sup> The brutal execution of little boys by drowning them in the river is one. The caravan had reached Malatia, she recounts, and camped outside the city like others who had arrived earlier. There

[S]oldiers visited all the camps and took children more than five years old. I think there must have been eight or nine thousand of these. The soldiers came even to the house in which I was with ‘turned’ [apostate] Armenians, and despite the promises of the mayor they took our boys and girls. ... They took the children to the edge of the city where a band of Aghja Daghi Kurds was waiting. ... The Kurds drove them off toward the Tokma River ... like a flock of sheep. At the River banks the boys were thrown into the river. The girls were taken to Kurdish cities to be raised as Mohammedans”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Vitali Ianko, *The Promise at the Sea* (New York: Vintage Press, 2004), 221. For further analysis of her memoir, see Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 282-292, 382-387.

<sup>12</sup> Dadrian, “Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case,” 427.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl Who Lived through the Great Massacres*, interpreted by H. L. Gates (New York: Kingfield, 1918).

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Slide, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1997), 121. All subsequent references to Mardiganian’s memoir are from this publication. See also Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 314-324 and elsewhere in the book.

**Selling in the slave market** - The slave markets were always a scene of torturous experience for the boys and girls exhibited by such humiliating, dehumanizing way. Aurora Mardiganian remembers her terror in the house of Bekran Agha the notorious slave dealer of Mush. “Ten thousand Armenian girls, delicate and refined daughters of Christian homes, college girls, young school-teachers, daughters of the rich and the poor, have experienced the terror of the same feeling that came over me that day when I realized I was a captive in the house of this notorious slave dealer” (179). And she describes the disgusting process and the pitiful girls subjected to it. The market was full of this merchandise, so the price was very low. Arshaluys was bought for one medjidie (approximately 85 cents) and taken to the house occupied by Jevdet Bey, Vali of Van, and afterwards commander of the Turkish army operating against Russians (181).

Eight-year-old Hripsimé Zeneyan (Ajemian), as we saw before, was among the group of children separated from their mothers in the Deir Zor refugee camp. She relates that the children gathered in the nearby canyon were screaming and crying. That night, they kept the children with no food and water. Children were thirsty. It was dark. Finding a stream of water, they fell on it and drank. The next morning with terror they saw each other’s face stained with blood. The stream they had drunk from was bringing the blood of their relatives. The children were taken away and sold to the Bedouins. Hripsimé’s name was changed to Hamdé, and she was tattooed on her face and arms, as all Bedouin tribeswomen were. She lived in that Arab house until she was rescued by Ardranik and his troop in 1919.<sup>16</sup>

**Raping** - Raping girls and women young and old and even boys was rampant. According to Dadrian, in some areas “Armenian churches [were used] as temporary brothels.”<sup>17</sup>

Henry Morgenthau attests to the widespread practice of rape without using the word: “Behind was left a small army of girls who had been sold as slaves – frequently for a medjidie, or about eighty cents – and who, after serving the brutal purposes of their purchasers, were forced to lead lives of prostitution.”<sup>18</sup>

Kerop Bedoukian, the nine-year-old boy from Sivaz on the deportation road remembers the terrible shock he experienced when he stood witness to an ugly violation against a pretty girl by six Turkish boys. They ripped her clothes off, molested her, ordered her to stand up and dance naked; then he saw how she frantically ran to the river (Euphrates) and drowned herself.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See ft. #8 for reference.

<sup>17</sup> Dadrian, “Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case,” 424-425.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau’s Story* (New York: Garden City, 1918), 317.

<sup>19</sup> Kerop Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived: The Story of an Armenian Boy* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), 49-50. Further analysis in Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 232-237 and elsewhere in the book.

By writing her life story, Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas, made it her mission to speak up for thousands of Armenian girls and women who “were left ravaged, forever, by Turkish rapists.”<sup>20</sup>

Margaret Anherst Ajemian’s mother, Ester/Gezeer Kateejeh had begun a new life in America but lived tormented by the memory of her dreadful experience: “The only thing I brought with me to America was my memory—the thing I most wanted to leave behind.”<sup>21</sup> Even before she entrusted her story to her daughter, she had inadvertently transmitted to her the psychological impact of that harrowing experience. Margaret grew up fearing the Turks and the evil of an ominous shadow hovering over their home. At the age of 98, Ester decided to tell her story, “When I die, the truth will die with me. You must know and your children must know what I lived through” (10). Ester and her family started off from Amasia, she was thirteen years old. Succumbing to the hardship of the deportation road the family dwindled, and Ester found herself alone, sick, emaciated, almost dying of hunger. She was rescued and cared by a Turkified Armenian woman, who then gave her to a Turkish childless elderly couple. In that Turkish house her name was changed to Gezeer Kateejeh, and she was treated as a daughter but also raped by her “father,” Yousouf Bey, a retired military officer. The horrible irony is that Hanum, Yousouf’s wife, who had promised to take care of her as the daughter she never had and always wanted, “took me as a whore for her husband” (111–117). Ester ran away to an orphanage where every week the surrounding Turks and Kurds would come to get a helper, a child, or a wife. A young Turkish man picked Ester and took her home as a wife, but after he found out she was not a virgin, he beat her regularly and cursed her religion, “*dinini siktir*” (138). She endured the beatings and the cursing and the insults to her religion and her ancestors with the hope and the determination to flee to freedom one day. She was a sex slave in that house, but fortunately, she did not bear children. She had stopped menstruating since she experienced the shock of the horrors of the death march. In spite of the brutalities against her, she confesses, she grew to love that crude and cruel man (144). Is there a psychological explanation to this type of relationship which is not uncommon among abducted women during the Genocide?

Maltreated, battered, and sexually abused, Ester dragged her life in that house for three years until she found an opportunity to escape to her birthplace. And when she finally did escape and returned to her hometown, she was chastised and insulted by those who had avoided deportation by converting to Islam and who wanted to forget the dark years. “*Mortseer* (forget!) became the word they all used” (173). Ester was scorned because she “fell in ‘black dye’ [an Armenian euphemism for someone who had slept with the enemy] and will never be

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<sup>20</sup> See ft. #5 and Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 254.

<sup>21</sup> Margaret Ajemian Ahnert, *The Knock at the Door: A Journey through the Darkness of the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2007), 177. The subsequent page numbers in parenthesis refer to this publication. Further analysis of the author’s rendering of her mother’s story in Rubina Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature, The Second Generation Responds* (Yerevan: An Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute publication, 2015), 128-133 and elsewhere in the book.

pure again” (167). She was finally harbored by an Armenian family and taken to the United States.

At the beginning of her autobiography written by Mae M. Derdarian<sup>22</sup> Vergeen declares to the world, “I was THERE! I was an EYEWITNESS! I was a VICTIM!” (1) And what she witnessed and endured is beyond imagination. Vergeen takes the reader to the killing fields to hear the cries of pain, the supplication for mercy, and the helpless call, “*Allah nerdehseen?*” (God, where are you?). Vergeen lost her innocence, her spirit, and her faith to the atrocities: “My faith in religion destroyed, I hadn’t prayed or gone to church since fleeing from my Arab captors; and my aversion to prayer has continued since then” (213).

Vergeen was thirteen years old when she started on the deportation route from her childhood home in Kayseri with her widowed mother, who had rejected the option of being spared by conversion to Islam. They passed Qatma, then Aleppo, and finally reached Ras el-Ayn in the Syrian desert where the surviving refugees were cramped in a camp to die of starvation and disease. Four months later, soldiers raided the camp and rounded up the remaining refugees for liquidation. Vergeen was at death’s door when a Bedouin offered to take her in. She agreed, on condition he also take her mother and a few other women, and for a while she was spared. Her name was changed to Noura and her face was tattooed. But the Bedouin had other plans. He killed Vergeen’s companions, lured her away from the tribal encampment and raped her. The wretched thirteen-year-old tried to run away and was caught several times. She finally managed to escape to Aleppo. Vergeen began writing her memoir more than half a century after coming to America: the horrible images were still gnawing on her soul. It would have been inconceivable to forget them, and the tattoos on her face were a constant reminder and a source of embarrassment and depression. She finally got rid of them through a lengthy series of surgical procedures, but she never got rid of the burden of her memories of the past.

Leonardo Alishan’s grandmother, Gayané was not raped, but the incident that saved her honor and her life tortured her all the time. She “stopped being a girl and became the statue of Guilt,” Leonardo writes. She cried when she was alone, or she thought she was alone, as Leonardo remembers, and was periodically taken to a mental clinic for rehabilitation. Leonardo was only nine years old when she chose to tell him why she was so miserable and why she cried all the time:

One day the Turkish captain rode past her on a dappled horse. She was wearing a red scarf which was her most cherished possession. The captain said, ‘Tonight I will come for you.’ An old woman told Granny to throw her scarf away. She did. That evening she saw the captain ride away with a girl who had picked up Granny’s red scarf and had worn

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<sup>22</sup> Mae M. Derdarian, *Vergeen: A Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (Los Angeles: Atmus Press, 1997). The page numbers in parenthesis refer to this publication. Further analysis of the author’s rending of Vergeen Meghruni’s story in Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature, The Second Generation Responds*, 119-122 and elsewhere in the book.

it. The captain returned without the girl. Granny cried tears of relief on that night for which she paid with tears of remorse for the rest of her life.<sup>23</sup>

Gayané became the omnipotent face of the nation's suffering, appearing in Leonardo's poetry as a mad woman who sees Turkish horsemen around her deathbed in a mental hospital in London. Leonardo Alishan, a third-generation survivor of the Armenian Genocide, lived in the grip of the nightmare of the Catastrophe. He shared his grandmother's agony; he was part of it. "I try to be the spectator of that tragedy which culminated in a London hospital room in 1978 where Granny saw Turkish horsemen around her bed before she died. But, alas, I am not the spectator. I am a character caught in that play which never, never, never reaches its equilibrium."<sup>24</sup> The pernicious psychological effect of the past not only ruins the life of the subject but continues to affect the generations to come.

I interviewed and read the testimonies of many survivors who were young girls during the Genocide. It was most painful for them to admit having been raped or forced into conjugal life with a Turk or a Kurd or an Arab, and very few did. That was a dark page in their life, they preferred to keep it a secret. Satenik Kenossian didn't mind admitting that out of great need in Mosul, the end of her torturous march from her hometown Kartzi (Nikomedia), she had to work in Turkish and Arab houses as a maid. Fifteen-year-old Satenik, however, had to escape these houses to save her honor. But one day, again out of an unsurmountable need, her brother sold her to Helmi Bey, a Turkish engineer. And she surrendered to him. In 1918, when the British army captured Mosul, Helmi Bey fled to Constantinople leaving Satenik behind. Satenik was able to return to her village, and there she married Samuel Spandararian, a member of the Armenian volunteer army.<sup>25</sup> Was this marriage out of pity like in many others? Did he know that his bride was violated? This was a dilemma for many girls rescued or run away from their Muslim captors.

These were a scant sampling of testimonies of those who endured and survived to tell their stories. and there are so many more untold stories of suffering, torture, rape, and then suicide to put an end to their disgraced existence.

Another loathsome method of disposing the mass of Armenian children as Dadrian documents, was **burning, or burying children alive**. "In the mass burning of Armenian orphans, plain sadistic fiendishness was mostly at work. After eliminating the rest of the Armenian population, these remnants had become a nuisance to the perpetrators. In several regards it was deemed most economical to end their misery by torching them *en masse*."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rubina Peroomian, "The Restless World of Leonardo Alishan (March 1951–January 2005), A Burnt Offering on the Altar of the Armenian Genocide" in *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 1, no. 3 (2006): 289-303. Citation from p. 291, from the story "The Lady-Bug and the Persian Rug."

<sup>24</sup> Leonardo Alishan, "An Exercise on a Genre for Genocide and Exorcism," in *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992), 340-54. Quotation from pp. 352-3.

<sup>25</sup> Interviewed Satenik Spandararian on May 28, 1980. See ft. # 8 for reference.

<sup>26</sup> Dadrian, "Children as Victims of Genocide," 429.

Garo Poladian depicts a scene in the Syrian Desert, as the Chechens are carrying out the carnage by Ahmed Bey's order, "An uproar of screams and cries! A big fire was in sight. Chechens were burning alive the children they had collected. The gendarmes' random shootings quieted the screams."<sup>27</sup>

Hayko Vardanian, a young boy in Sharur came home from the day's work in the fields to find a ghastly scene. His two hysterical sisters told him that the askyars entered their hut and raped them in front of the parents and two little brothers. They tortured and murdered their parents and threw the boys in the *tonir* [Middle Eastern type oven dug in the ground] to burn alive.<sup>28</sup>

Harutiun Grigorian, already a teenager in 1915, describes in detail the deportation route from Avrdnik village in Erzerum and the places they passed and the hardship they endured. Their caravan finally reached the outskirts of the town of Deir Zor. The new mayor, a true executioner, ordered the slaughter of the sick. Harutiun remembers "one day, they gathered 40 carts of children and a man named Ismayil Hakki took them and burned those innocent creatures."<sup>29</sup>

According to Dadrian **episodic massacres** is another method of liquidation of children:

Another sizable portion of Armenian children fell victim to the vast array of episodic massacres carried out in all corners of the Empire, massacres that were in and of themselves exceptionally atrocious. As American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau stated, to save "powder and shell," the Moslem peasant population in the countryside, acting as support groups to the criminal gangs recruited for massacre duty, used "clubs, hammers, axes, scythes, spades, and saws. Such instruments... caused more agonizing deaths than guns and pistols..."<sup>30</sup>

Aurora Mardiganian remembers:

There must have been 500 boys with us who were between eight and fifteen, and these all were gathered. ... soldiers marched them away, all the little ones crying and screaming. We heard the cries a long time. When we arrived at Arabkir, we were told by other refugees there that all the boys were killed as soon as they had crossed the hills into the valley just outside Hasan Chelebi. The soldiers tied them in groups of ten and fifteen and then slew them with swords and bayonets. Refugees passing that way from Sivaz saw their bodies on the road.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Poladian, *Eagles in the Desert*, 509.

<sup>28</sup> Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 501, testimony #308.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 213, testimony #87.

<sup>30</sup> Dadrian, "Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case," 423; Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story*, 312.

<sup>31</sup> *Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian*, 65.

Ohannes Akarakian of Egin (Aghen) describes his family's ordeal during the eight-day march from Egin to Furunjular near Malatia. He was already fifteen, a strong boy able to bear the hardship. Many died from starvation and disease. The road was covered with the dead bodies of earlier deportees; the water was infected by rotten corpses floating in it. In Furunjular the gendarmes gathered all the younger boys in the caravan and slaughtered them. Ohannes was saved by a mule owner, who took him back to Aghen. The rest of the family perished on the road to Aleppo.<sup>32</sup>

At the tail end of the years of calamity a significant campaign of gathering children and putting up orphanages by American and European, even German missionaries worked against the ongoing process, clashing with the government's intent of total annihilation. These orphanages operated on a scant budget and could not provide livable conditions to orphans crowding these institutions. But the major problem was that they could not provide safety against Turkish or Arab attacks. In many instances, especially amidst the post war uncertainty, these orphanages were raided by Turkish soldiers and the children were snatched away to be killed or to be sold in the slave market.

## **A Recap of the Experience of Children in Muslim Households**

Armenian children ended up in Muslim households in different ways. The children-specific treatments, discussed in this paper, pointed to 1) Turkish soldiers, or *zaptiehs* who accompanied the caravans, separating children along the routes of deportation, slaughtering especially very small ones outright and having others sold in the market by slave dealers; 2) Chechens and Circassians attacking the caravans, slaughtering small children, kidnaping older children to use them as sex slaves and forced laborers, or sell them; 3) Muslim villagers along the deportation routes having given the liberty to choose their booty from the passing caravans, working age children as helpers and slave-laborers and young women as wives, concubines, and sex slave; 4) parents, out of desperation, trusting their children to Muslim families, before the deportation or along the debilitating hazards of the road; 5) Turkish soldiers raiding Armenian and missionary orphanages and driving the children out and dealing with them as in point 1; 6) Turkish officials choosing their own booty to keep or send them as gifts to their superiors; 7) local Turks, or Kurds, or Arabs "visiting" the orphanages and taking home girls and boys as helpers, slave laborers, wives, concubines, and sex-slaves. These were only the major conduits leading children toward the final Golgotha where the suffering began with name change, insults to the child's religion and ancestors, in most cases recurring sexual violations on boys and girls, and of course coercion and torture of conversion, the latter because Sultan Abdul Hamid's Fetva prohibited the enslavement of Armenian and other Christians in Turkish households unless they were Islamized.

Pushing these children and young women into Muslim households was a calculated policy with the aim to absorb them into Turkish society. The government encouraged this

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<sup>32</sup> Interviewed Ohannes Akarakian on May 31, 1980. See ft. #8 for reference.

practice promulgating an order to that effect, even paid stipends through a special budget called the Refugee Fund to alleviate financial burden of such families. In some cases, the possession of the family of the kidnapped child was transferred to the Muslim family.

Judging from the experiences of Armenian children in Muslim households in testimonies discussed in this paper and the recap above, I would like to underline the evidence that these households were indeed each an institution of Islamization not very different from the Turkish orphanages examined below.

## **The Harrowing Experiences of Armenian Children in Turkish Orphanages**

Taking Armenian children in Turkish orphanages that operated as institutions of ruthless and unrelenting Turkification, was a later development, or an afterthought in anticipation of using the leftover orphans and producing a generation of Turks of which only some could have been old enough to remember their Armenian roots. And although these operations required organization, staff, and designated budget, albeit scant, they promised the government better results compared to outright killing with primitive methods that cost the war-torn government next to nothing. But as Poladian, Surmelian, and many others attest, the government was not equipped to set up orphanages in every corner and nook of the country and the mass-killings continued.

Altogether, there is no evidence of the existence of orphanages or shelters even for Turkish orphans. This was a WWI phenomenon. The state saw the need to provide such facilities for children of Turkish soldiers who died or were seriously injured and handicapped in the War especially in the Russian front. These newly organized orphanages operated in many areas throughout the Empire, mostly set up in buildings confiscated from European establishments as the war began. There were about 80 orphanages,<sup>33</sup> some of which also took in Armenian children despite the government's objection at the beginning not to accept Armenian children and feed them.<sup>34</sup> Sadly, some Armenian mothers, in destitute, exhausted, and starving on the road of deportation, took their children to these institutions with a flicker of hope for their survival. Armenian children, once admitted, were immediately given a Turkish name, forced to convert to Islam and circumcised if boys. They were forced to learn the Kuran, do the Turkish *namaz* (prayers) multiple times every day and repeat "There is only one God and His prophet is Mohammad." They were prohibited to use any language but Turkish. The coercion worked. After a while these children, especially the very young ones, forgot their past and adopted the forced identity. This children-specific treatment took shape in time and became an official and encouraged method of total extermination.

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<sup>33</sup> Nazan Maksudyan, "For the Holy War and Motherland. Ottoman State Orphanages (Darüleytams) in the Context of the First World War and the Armenian Genocide," *L' Homme* 34, no. 1 (2023): 44.

<sup>34</sup> In her recent work Narine Margaryan has identified 30 orphanages where Armenian children were Turkified during the Armenian Genocide. See Narine Margaryan, "The Turkification of Armenian Children in the Ottoman Empire's State Orphanages (1915 -1918)," in *Silenced Crime: Forcible Child Transfer during the Armenian Genocide*, edited by Edita Gzoyan (Brill, 2025), forthcoming.

Obviously, testimonies about life in Turkish orphanages are not many. But they all speak of the horrendous physical and psychological tortures the Armenian orphans were put through to force them forget their name, their parents, their culture, language, and religion, evidently the first shock for all of them being the Turkish name they were given and the agonizing act of forced circumcision.<sup>35</sup>

In *Tantane*, Hagop Oshagan describes a five-year-old Armenian boy's escape from a Turkish orphanage in Constantinople.<sup>36</sup> The narrative echoes the child's psychological impairment experiencing the traumatizing separation from his mother—as he somehow lost her during the death march—and the terrible awe, horror, and disgust this orphanage aroused. According to Oshagan, a “benevolent Turk” had discovered the boy alive under a pile of massacred deportees and inspired by the “unique piety of his race and with the just gratification of having done a good deed,”<sup>37</sup> took the child to an orphanage established to raise Armenian children as Muslims. Oshagan's story is a powerful representation of the psychological predicament of all children of the same fate in their present situation and later in their adult life as they pace down the memory lane. In his memories the five-year-old walks in a caravan of death, barefoot and hungry, a white rag on his head. His brothers and sisters are all with him, all the children of the town ... and his sisters diminish day by day ... and his brothers lie scatter on the road one by one” (35). The child's memory has stored a confusion of scenes of horror and suffering, together with the familiar colors and sounds of his native village and his happy home. And one day he finds the small door of the large gate of this prison-like old palace left ajar, and the boy impulsively slips out. The surrounding buildings are alarmingly dark and empty, and he runs. Farther away, he meets a crowd of people with a priest leading the procession. He recognizes the chant and the man's long cloak. “Ter papa” (priest-father) (39) he shouts, but nobody hears him. He is upset but follows the crowd. And suddenly streets become livelier. He even hears familiar words spoken in the houses with open windows. Then he hears the ringing of bells, “tan, tan, tan” just like the bells of their village church. He runs in and straight toward the old man pulling the rope of the church bell. The narrative ends with a dramatic scene of discovery and a woman in black, whose children and her entire family have perished in the desert, taking the boy's hand and the two going away with a desperate hope to begin a new life.

Hampartzoum Chitjian too experienced all the fright and degradation that Turkish institutions could cause. He and his brothers were placed in a Turkish *mekteb* (school). The

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<sup>35</sup> Edita G. Gzoyan, Regina A. Galustyan, Shushan R. Khachatryan & Narine V. Margaryan, “In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in State Orphanages During the Armenian Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2024): 243-263. DOI: 10.1080/14623528.2023.2237700.

<sup>36</sup> *Tantane* [Տանտանը] was first published in *Chakatamart* newspaper (June 27 and July 4, 1920) in Constantinople and belonged to a collection of stories Hagop Oshagan intended to publish separately under the title *Կայսերական յաղթերգութիւն* (Imperial Song of Triumph) which, due to ominous political developments and his exodus from Constantinople, he never did. The book was later published in Beirut in 1983.

<sup>37</sup> Hagop Oshagan, *Կայսերական յաղթերգութիւն* [Imperial Song of Triumph] (Beirut: Altapress, 1983), 35.

four brothers, together with 150–200 boys between the ages of four and sixteen, remained in the *mekteb*, that “dreadful building,” as Hampartzoum recalls, with a Turkish soldier guarding the door. The first night they brought bulgur pilaf, from an abandoned Armenian house, but it was old and rotten. The pot was swarming with worms. The boys were hungry, but nobody touched it.

This Turkish school was certainly a center of Turkification by force, by any type of coercion. Hampartzoum’s name was changed to Rushti. The boys were given a piece of dry bread and allowed to drink water from the fountain. But the most devastating experience for these boys was not the uncertainty of their fate, or being away from their parents, but the shameful work they were forced to do for days on end. The older and stronger boys were sent out to pillage Armenian homes, all vacant now, and to bring items to the confiscated Armenian church where the booty was locked up as the property of the Turkish government. Of course, Turkish officers supervising the operation carried home what they liked. There was no law, no accountability. About a year later, during the Kurdish rebellion and assault on Perri, the Kurds set the town on fire. The vestiges of Hampartzoum’s childhood went up in smoke. As he watched from afar, the Armenian church too burned down, and he remembered all the Armenian treasures and valuables that the children in the Turkish school had been forced to haul in and store there. He felt the pain of losing forever what he had cherished, mixed with a feeling of vindication in knowing that the perpetrators would not enjoy the Armenian wealth either (122).

For days in the *mekteb* the teachers and the mullahs tried to teach the boys about Islam, but then, perhaps thinking that Turkifying the older boys would be too difficult, they separated them out. Hampartzoum and his twin brother Kaspar were among the ones destined to be killed. Hampartzoum miraculously escaped—he calls it “my first escape”—and was taken in by a Turk called Korr (blind) Mamoe. But his conscious tortured him. He had abandoned his little brothers and left them in the hands of those tyrant Turks. He would jump up at night and call his brothers names in his sleep (107). Korr Mamoe was kind. Seeing his grief, he even arranged for him to secretly meet his younger brothers still in the Turkish orphanage and give them food. The last time Hampartzoum saw his brothers, they told him that the Turks were going to take them to their fathers. He knew what that meant, but he had no choice other than to let them go.

Hambartsum’s ordeal continued with detailed description of the places and people he met, his deplorable life, the multiple times he came close to dying of starvation of injuries he received on the torturous road he paced as a fugitive in a constant fear of being caught and murdered.<sup>38</sup>

Chiftjian’s memoir is not unique, but only one of those that gives you a glimpse into that hellish world of Turkish atrocities. These are books, many in their original Armenian-language, few others translated into English, that we have to read. These are books that can leave us

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<sup>38</sup> For details of his “journey,” see Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 293-302 and elsewhere in the book.

depressed and bewildered for days. They ask more of us than we are willing to give if we want to comprehend the unremitting genocide of Armenians. Kafka said once: these books “come upon us like ill-fortune and distress us deeply, like the death of one we love better than ourselves, like suicide .... [they are] an ice-axe .... to break the sea frozen inside us.”<sup>39</sup>

The most infamous Turkish orphanage where a large number of Armenian orphans were housed was in Antoura, Mount Lebanon on a property previously owned by the French Lazarist Fathers who had established there a church, a college, and a dormitory all with their facilities and staff. After the War broke out the French left and the property was naturally confiscated by the Turkish government and converted to a Turkish orphanage. This institution of Turkification housed about one thousand Armenian orphans, mostly boys, gathered throughout the country, and about 400 Kurds. Apparently, Djemal Pasha took special interest in this orphanage and recruited Turkish feminist Halidé Edib to run the establishment with a large staff of teachers, guards, cooks, etc. Despite her fame as an educated, progressive thinker, Halidé Edib became instrumental in implementing the most inhumane means to break every trace of Armenianness in these children in order to produce the Turkish citizen Djemal Pasha desired.

Although during the past decade or so, a significant amount of information has been unearthed about this ferocious institution and the atrocities committed there, although the records of the orphanage with the names of all the orphans—Armenian names crossed out and Turkish names added—was discovered and a memorial was erected in 2010 to honor those orphans who perished succumbing to torture and starvation, I found only two memoirs by the former residents of this orphanage: Harutiun Alboyajian and Karnig Panian.

Harutiun Alboyajian’s testimony, very brief with very scant information and laconic descriptions, is recorded by Verjiné Svazlian.<sup>40</sup> In this testimony, Harutiun first describes the deportation of the entire village of Fendejak, near Zeitun, then, he begins with his experience in “Djemal Pasha’s Turkish orphanage,” without saying how he was taken there. His name was changed to Shukri with number 535 as his surname, and he was circumcised. He describes the punishment for children who dared to speak Armenian, or cried for their mother, or stole food because they were starving. The methods were abhorring, the lightest punishment being no food for days. Then there was having the sinners stand outside and look at the sun for hours until their sight was damaged, and they went blind albeit temporarily. Another bodily punishment was with *falakhka*, hitting the soles of the victim’s feet with steel wire or stick. The child would scream of unbearable pain, faint, but the punishment would continue.

He attests that children were always hungry, emaciated, and many of them fell ill with scurvy and died (a disease caused by malnutrition, lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and vitamin C). The secret of his survival was his skill in crafts he had learned from his father who was a blacksmith. He rendered small services to fellow orphans and the staff and earned an

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<sup>39</sup> Cited in Alvin Rosenfeld, *A Double Dying Reflections on Holocaust Literature* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1988), 18.

<sup>40</sup> Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 426-28, Testimony #247.

extra piece of bread or even money. He remembers a visit by Djemal Pasha, and how he was introduced to him as a gifted boy. Important information in his testimony is about the day the orphans woke up to see there was no one left. The Turkish army had retreated. Beirut was liberated and the entire staff, the guards, the director, were all gone, escaped, except for Ezra bey, the pharmacist. There was also a certain Kurd Silo left behind, who got a terrible beating from the older boys, because he used to say to Khoren, an orphan boy, that he had killed 99 Armenians and if he kills the boy, it will be a hundred. Harutiun remembers Ezra bey ordering orphans to gather in the mess hall and going from table to table, asking the orphans what their Armenian names was and then announcing, “from now on keep your Armenian names. You are Armenians.” He confided to children that he was instructed to poison the orphans, but he did not obey the orders. He knew that he would be punished for his past in the orphanage.

It was thanks to Karnig Panian and the posthumous publication of his memoirs in Armenian, *Անթուրայի որբանոցը* (The Orphanage of Antoura, 1992) that the Armenian community was let into that dark world of Djemal Pasha’s orphanage with its site still unknown.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, researcher Misak Kelechian pinned down the site of the orphanage. He continued his research, found the records and the graves of 300 orphans who died succumbing to torture and starvation. The Lazarist Fathers had discovered the bones when they began construction to add new classrooms in 1993. They buried the bones in unmarked graves in the compound’s cemetery. Kelechian was also instrumental in the fundraiser and erection of the memorial on the site of the orphanage and the burial ground.

Karnig Panian’s memoirs, like most in this genre, begins with a plush description of a happy childhood, in an idyllic atmosphere, a house full of love and joy, parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. And then the Calamity befell. Karnig Panian was only five when the disastrous deportation began. During the death march from his hometown Kyurin (Gurun) to Hama at the edge of the Syrian Desert, Karnig lost his mother, his brother and sister. And each one’s demise is a tragic account by itself (pp. 56-57). His father had been drafted in the Turkish army, and he never returned. Karnig was alone, an orphan in the care of his ailing grandparents. Life was unbearable at the refugee camp outside Hama. Hunger and disease took a heavy toll every day. To save the little boy, the grandparents reluctantly agreed to send him away to an orphanage in the town run by a protestant pastor. For him the orphanage was a heaven compared to his life of the last weeks in the camp. The children lived with half-full stomach because food was hard to find, but they were well-treated. Karnig was eventually placed in the orphanage, where he remembers the process beginning with changing children’s Armenian names, with heavy beatings to those who resisted and clung to their Armenian names, or those who still spoke Armenian. Many children were condemned to silence because they did not know a word of Turkish. It was Karnig’s turn. The schoolmaster slapped on Karnig’s face because he insisted that his name was Karnig. Then, he kicked the

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<sup>41</sup> The English translation with the addition of Chapter 9, left out in the Armenian publication, was published in 2015. See Karnig Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

sides of the poor boy fallen on the floor. Karnig passed out from the pain and was taken to the clinic with no doctors and no medication, and a daily ration of a piece of bread and a cup of water (80-81). He walked out with a Turkish name Mahmoud and a number, 551 for family name. Malnutrition was threatening. Many children fell ill. The “doctor” examined the patient and gave them medication. “Instead of recovering, many boys died” (84).

The boys were rebellious. They resisted any way they could against Djemal’s plans implemented by the most ferocious methods. “It was an unequal battle between the administration and the students. Clearly, Djemal Pasha’s plan was to Turkify us, but we were determined to resist—not out of rabid nationalism, for which we were too young, but simply because we wanted onto our identities, which were all we had left” (83).

Karnig remembers Djemal Pasha’s visit, an extraordinary event in the orphanage, and the lady in his entourage, who stayed behind and assumed the role of the director of the operation. She was Halidé Edib, whom Karnig remembered as a callous woman, uninterested toward the fate of the children and her job. She did not communicate with children but was always present at the sessions of evening punishments and torture. Rumors about her strange, inhuman, and diabolic behavior went on among the children (94-95).

Djemal Pasha’s visit did not go smoothly. As he was inspecting the ranks of the orphans, a few of the older boys stepped forward and boldly complained about the scant ration of food, “We were starving to death, and you rescued us. But Pasha, we are still starving! They give us only two tiny buns of bread per day. We are as hungry as we were before we came here, and soon we’ll die if you don’t help us!” (86). A pandemonium broke out. Children were shouting “we’re hungry,” then climbed on the trees and began picking the wild fruits and eat them. Amidst the ensuing chaos and confusion Djemal Pasha turned around and left the premise together with his entourage. Curiously, Harutiun Alboyajian does not talk about such a significant incident during Djemal Pasha’s visit. Of course, orphans were punished for their “rebellion.” No food, that is, no bread was served that day. Meanwhile the all-out war against speaking Armenian was continuing and those caught uttering an Armenian word were punished harshly, “pitiless beating and verbal abuse” (89). And then there was the most horrible one, the *falakha*,<sup>42</sup> as Harutiun remembers too. The episodes of barbaric treatment of children of six or eight or ten is despicable, just because they cried and called their mothers name or made the sign of the cross. The punishment with *falakha* went on with the child screaming from the excruciating pain and then losing consciousness which did not stop the procedure. Another horrible punishment was making the child stand in the direct sunlight for days without food or drink and a ferocious guard watching over him. This happened to Apraham, Karnig remembers, “After three days, the poor boy was utterly destroyed” (92). Instead of addressing the huge wave of discontent, the headmaster devised a new method of torture. Every evening, orphans were gathered in the courtyard and the names of those to

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<sup>42</sup> The translator of Panian’s memoirs explains in a footnote what *falakha* is: “A cane or strap used to strike the soles of the feet, also known as a bastinado, falanga, and falaka. In the modern world, its use is considered a form of torture.

receive the *falakha* that day was read. The number of strikes depended on the seriousness of the “crime,” up to two hundred, even three hundred... The headmaster usually delivered the first blows; then, the guards took over when he was tired. One day, Karnig’s name was called. He spent ten days in the clinic until his soles were healed and he could walk again.

Children were constantly reminded that “being Armenian was a punishable crime” (93). Karnig attests that Turkish became the prevailing language, and gradually there were less children punished for violating that rule. But the terrible pangs of hunger drove children to steal, to eat anything they find, paper, ink, dead insects. Karnig joined a group of orphans who regularly raided the kitchen at night or slipped out of the compound and stole fruit and vegetables from nearby homes. They brought back the bounty, hid their findings, which helped them fight against hunger for a few days. They sometimes found bones of animals or dead orphans, which the jackals had dug up from shallow graves and eaten the flesh. They learned to grind the bones with stone and eat the powder with water. Karnig admits that “hunger made us desperate and dehumanized us. I didn’t feel much revulsion at the idea ... We had sunk that low” (105-106).

Efforts to Turkify Armenian orphans in Turkish orphanages were not successful, perhaps due to the methods implemented with absolute brutality. Karnig Panian rightly observed: “the administration’s attempt to Turkify us was a miserable failure” (118). He provides the reasons in rhetorical questions “Did our teachers realize that *they* were the ones who strengthened our resolve against them? How could we strive to be like our teachers when they were brutal, sadistic fiends? How could we accept our new Turkish identities when the Turks tasked with our care mercilessly insulted and beat us at the slightest provocation?” (119).

## **Problems in Post-war Efforts of Orphan Gathering**

The situation in the post-war Ottoman Empire, and especially the Allied-occupied Constantinople, lent a favorable atmosphere for surviving Armenians and re-established organizations to launch a massive campaign of recovering Armenian orphans from Muslim households and orphanages. That was not easy, even though the post-war Ottoman government was cooperative or pretending to be. After the escape of the Young Turk leaders and under the pressure of the Allies as a condition to the Armistice, the new government had ordered to release and surrender Armenian boys and girls held captive in Muslim households. Hampartzoum Chitjian records the fateful event when in 1918 the government ordered Turks and Kurds to bring the Armenian children in their possession to a square in Kharbert. “Frantically, relatives were searching for lost loved ones. Orphans were crying out their family names, if they still remembered them. But so many younger children could remember no more than ‘Mama, Papa.’” If no one claimed the orphan, the master could take him/her back. It is in this square that a relative had found Hambartzoum’s younger brother Kerop.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Chitjian, *A Hair’s Breadth*, 156.

Arch. Zaven Der Yeghiayan, the Armenian Patriarch in Constantinople, attests that many Turks “worried that they might be subjected to punishment by the Allies, immediately delivered these orphans to the Armenian church in their neighborhood or to Armenian neighbors”<sup>44</sup>. They were the minority. In most cases they threatened the Armenian orphans in their keeping that if they revealed their Armenian identity, they would be murdered. Arch. Der Yeghiayan attests that some orphans were “taken by force from Turkish homes, with the support of Allied police and at times even with Turkish police” (182). At the same time, though, the Turkish police claimed to have received many complaints that Armenian demands were false, and the orphans taken away were real Turks not Armenians. The “Neutral House,” established on behest of the British Embassy, was to keep children whose identity was contested. Meanwhile, rumors and accusation of corruption and misjudgment on the part of the staff and internal skirmishes among the leadership of governing bodies endangered the prestige, even the existence of the Neutral House. In any event, according to the Patriarch, 3000 orphans were liberated mainly from Constantinople.

Collecting orphans was a harder task in the interior of Turkey, where many thousands of orphans remained captive in Turkish households and orphanages. According to the Patriarch, the reason was the fact that the Allied armies did not penetrate the interior of the country (185). That may have been also the reason why the Kemalist movement proved successful in a short time and changed the course of the developing Armenian revival as well as the recovering Armenian children so crucial for the perpetuation of the Armenian nation.

Another difficulty against the campaign of orphan collection was the reluctance of orphans themselves to leave the Muslim family after years of getting used to the environment, having forgotten their mother tongue and their parents, and having become adapted to their Turkish identity, especially when they were treated well. Others were afraid of the uncertainty ahead of them in the Armenian community or were ashamed of having converted to Islam and accepted the identity forced upon them. Still others, mostly teenage girls raped and forced into a Muslim house, especially when they bore a child or children from their captors, would not want to leave them like the motherless orphans they were. Making this fateful decision was a trauma for some young women who were treated well, like Loosentag whose story Kerop Bedoukian recounts. She cried and cried because she did not know what to do: leave her Turkish “husband” who had been good to her, or return to her roots, her nation. Loosentag ultimately decided to stay.<sup>45</sup>

Kerop Bedoukian remembers how the Armenian volunteer groups, with the help of the European and American Missionaries and backed by the British army, collected orphans, sometimes forcibly taking them away from their adoptive parents, that is when the child wanted to go, and the “parents” would not let.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Zaven Der Yeghiayan, *My Patriarchal Memoirs* (Barrington, RI: Mayreni, 2002), 181.

<sup>45</sup> Bedoukian, *Some of Us Survived: The Story of an Armenian Boy*, 153–156.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

It is impossible to know how many of these children and young women stayed in Turkish or Kurdish or Arab households. Some grew up completely unaware of their origin, but those who were old enough to remember, psychological trauma must have accompanied them all their lives. In any case, they were both lost to the Armenian nation.

By the time these orphans finally reached the refugee receiving center in Aleppo, called the *keshla* (barracks), Bedoukian attests, they were already a miserable bunch being transferred from a place to another. When Kerop, newly reunited with his mother, two older sisters, and younger brother, began working there (only nine of the sixty members of his extended family had survived), about a thousand women and children were housed in the *keshla*. Kerop attests that orphans were brought in every day, registered, and sent on to the orphanages. Some children remembered their Armenian names; a few of them only gave their Turkish names. About a half of them knew where they had been born, but none knew the date... If they did not know their name, one was given them. If they did not know where they were born, the nearest city to where they had been picked up was recorded as their place of birth. More difficult was the date of birth almost none of them knew. The date was guessed by their size. Only the date—the day and the month – of their arrival in the *keshla* was precisely recorded.

John Minassian wistfully recalls his encounters with Armenian girls in Arab or Kurdish captivity in the desert. At Nissibin he met a pale, blonde, young Armenian woman who begged him to help her rejoin her people.<sup>47</sup> Another woman, younger and less attractive, named Makroohy, was desperate because her master had decided he did not want to feed another mouth, and had gone away leaving her behind. Minassian also remembers an Armenian boy, about nine years old, who appeared in the camp one day. He had been beaten for stealing bread. Hungry for days, he had fled the Arab household where he worked as a shepherd. He did not remember his parents and he did not speak Armenian, but he did remember his Armenian name, Kikor. Minassian took the orphan under his wing and grew attached to him. The boy called him “my Papa Habib” (John Minassian had adopted the name Habib to pass as an Arab). Now there were Kikor, Makroohy, and the blonde woman, the “strange flowers” of the desert, as he called them, and they all depended on him and his promise to get them out of that desolate place in the middle of nowhere.<sup>48</sup>

Makroohy was the least fortunate, Minassian had abandoned her in the desert camp after he found her in bed with an Australian POW. But he felt guilty about it. “[H]ad I been a friend or put the last stab in her back? Or... maybe from one tent to another, she had fallen lower and lower?”<sup>49</sup> But was Makroohy to blame? How many young Armenian women suffered the same fate, abandoned to die, or plunge ever deeper into the tainted life of a prostitute or concubine in the Kurdish and Arab towns and villages in that suffocating desert? How many of them, even in big cities like Aleppo, refused to return to their families not to embarrass and disgrace them? Vartouhy, whom Hovhannes Mugaritchian met in Aleppo, was one such “spring butterfly

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<sup>47</sup> *Many Hills Yet to Climb*, 158–163 and Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 249.

<sup>48</sup> *Many Hills yet to Climb*, 165-168.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 193 and Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 250.

caught in a net, a broken bud never to bloom, handled by many admirers, soiled and cruelly crushed, and thrown into the gutter.”<sup>50</sup>

The post-war orphanages, run by Armenian organizations or the missionaries as well as the “Neutral house,” were operating on a scant budget and in very poor conditions. The management made a special effort to find relatives of these orphans and send the children out to live with them. The problem was with the young women who had been violated in their life with their captor as his wife or concubine. Some of these women had escaped carrying their child; some were pregnant and gave birth in the orphanage; others had left their children and run away. In her memoirs, titled *Refugee Girl*, Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas assumes the mission to speak up for the “thousands of Armenian girls and women [who] ran away from enforced ‘marriages’ with Turkish husbands,” some “with their half-Turkish babies in their arms, leaving behind the children they could not carry,” and for the many “who were left ravaged, forever, by Turkish rapists.”<sup>51</sup>

In all cases, these poor creatures faced a psychological trauma that was never healed. As Hagop Oshagan observed, this was the generation “released from the orphanages directly into life outside, only to become orphans once more among life’s deprivations,”<sup>52</sup> deprivations indeed and psychological hang-ups. And on top of their own pain, the Armenian society, especially in Constantinople, that had not experienced the massacres and deportations, looked down to these victims.

The management in post-war orphanages tried to marry these women off to Armenian male survivors and send them off in the world to manage on their own. But most of these men resented the tattooed women knowing that they had been used, literally used as sex slaves in Muslim households. It was a big surprise for me to learn about an Armenian doctor performing, one can say, the first plastic surgery to remove tattoos on Armenian women. This good doctor removed the tattoos, but he did something more incredible and unusual for that time. He performed hymenoplasty, patching up the hymen to restore virginity. The violated Armenian girl was given a chance to claim virginity with the man who agreed to marry her.

Clearly, children, be it girls or boys, who survived rapes and sexual molestations, carried the guilt and shame throughout their lives.

## **The Unhealed Scars of the Past**

The wretched orphans, survivors of the Armenian Genocide, tried hard to forget, or as psychologists would have it, reconcile the thoughts, images, and memories associated with the traumatic experience with their existing cognitive-world models of schemata. However, as Mardi Jon Horowitz maintains, and as was discussed throughout this paper, this trauma-related

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<sup>50</sup> *To Armenians with Love*, 196 and Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 251.

<sup>51</sup> Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 254.

<sup>52</sup> Hagop Oshagan, *Վկայություններ* (A testimony) (Aleppo: Nairi Press, 1946), 36.

information is capable of breaking through the victim's defenses and intruding into consciousness in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and unwanted thoughts. The terrifying, debilitating images of their parents being tortured and murdered, their sisters being raped or dragged away, or their own experience, rape and sexual molestations, visited them at night, and they jumped up screaming in horror. The mental picture of the traumatic experience would pop up unbidden with the smell, the sound, the sight, or the touch of something; the subconscious would begin to override the conscious taking the victim back to the traumatic experience.

Hampartzoum Chitjian's nightmares were recurrent. He was never able to absorb and deal with the harrowing and sometimes despicable experiences he endured. They remained alive, buried in the deep layers of his mind and, significantly, resurfaced in the form of horrifying nightmares when he was free and in a safe environment. Those "tightly stored images begin to emerge and unravel. To this day they reoccur in my nightmares.... I never learned to cope with those images. *They haunt me eternally* (italics by the author)" (115).

Nightmares were not the only threatening occurrences in these wretched survivors' lives. As psychologists, Marian MacCurdy among them, describe, trauma creates an iconic image, "a mental picture that is stored deep within the brain in the limbic system and is not easily available to the cerebral cortex," but "pop[s] up sometimes unbidden when we smell, hear, see, or touch something that takes us back to the time the traumatic event occurred."<sup>53</sup> Often a particular sound, a place, or a smell is enough to trigger the resurfacing of a memory, happy or sad, associated with a past experience. All the survivors speak of such sensations linked to their harrowing ordeal during the Genocide. Hampartzoum Chitjian was startled by the sight of the frozen corpse of an Armenian boy with whom he had worked in a Kurdish house. He and an Armenian woman were trying to give the boy a Christian burial, digging with their hands in the ice-covered earth. Sixty-five years later, on January 6, 1980, observing his wife handling a frozen chicken to prepare for dinner on the Armenian Epiphany, Hampartzoum experienced the same feelings all over again; his suffering was renewed, and he felt the same pain in his soul. "Akh, akh try to forget.... Generation of Armenians. Children of grief" (136). With no reason at all and with nothing to trigger the horrifying memory to resurface, Hampartzoum often heard voices in his ears. "Even today, my body trembles." He hears shouting from the minarets, "Whoever harbors an Armenian will be jailed for five years with a chain around his neck!" And he feels the same fear he felt as a fugitive, wandering aimlessly, what would happen if he got caught.

Financially successful but psychologically tainted, this man carried the wounds with him never able to reconcile with the memory of the calamity he endured and the atrocities he witnessed. He defines himself not as a *survivor* but a *victim*, and expounds, "One never survives from a Genocide. You may escape *physically*, but your mind and soul are tormented forever. If you have been in an inferno, you are *scarred* for life" (xvi). And the scar he transmitted to his children, unknowingly, unwillingly. "I soon began to empathize about the

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<sup>53</sup> Marian MacCurdy, "From Trauma to Writing," in *Writing and Healing, Toward an Informed Practice*, ed. C. M. Anderson and M. MacCurdy (Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000), 162.

horror of being left alone, an orphan—a terrifying fear that still lurks in my psyche...” Sara, Hampartzoum’s daughter confesses (xii). By the time she was ten years old, Sara was let into the incomprehensible world of tears and sadness her parents shared. She was the second generation to inherit the pain. “What I do remember most about my mother were the many times I found her alone with tears flowing down her face. I knew she was reliving the atrocious moments when her mother, brothers and she witnessed the barbaric Turks viciously beheaded her beloved, innocent father.... The pain of that wretched moment was etched in her soul forever. *Her tears never stopped...*” (4).

Leonardo Alishan was only nine-years-old when his grandmother chose to let him into her dark world of agony. A third-generation survivor of the Armenian Genocide, he lived in the grip of the nightmare of the Catastrophe. He shared his grandmother’s agony; he was part of it.

Aurora Mardiganian’s suffering continued even after she reached the United States. She had bravely committed to playing the part of her own character in the movie, “Ravished Armenia” (1919), based on her memoirs. Relived her ordeal during two years of telling her story and playing it took an extra toll of her health. She cannot forget a particular night in her long journey through the hell. Outside the house Chechens were guarding their booty of Armenian women, and the mass murder of the refugees was going on all night. She could hear the piercing shrieks and hoofbeats of horses. “Sometimes even now I cannot sleep, although I am safe forever. Those screams come to me in the nighttime, and even with my friends all about me I cannot shut them out of my ears” (125). The impact was indelible, and although she was married to an Armenian and bore a son, she isolated herself from the society and lived a life of a recluse, imagining the Turks behind her door ready to storm in, until she died alone. Her body was picked up by the government and was buried in an unmarked grave.

The Armenian survivors never had access to psychological therapy to bring the accumulated harmful information to the active memory and make the reconciliation possible. It was impossible to forget. The orphans of the Genocide remained tainted for good. Life was not for them to enjoy, even if the New World provided them with new opportunities and a comfortable family life. So even though I am safe in America, my nights are not peaceful, one admitted. Another one was affected so badly that she chose never to marry, to live alone, to suffer alone, without fear of leaving an orphan child behind.

And the effects of the traumatic experience were passed on to the next generation, even through genetic transmission<sup>54</sup> in the absence of testimonies and family stories told.

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<sup>54</sup> See the discussion of Kellermann Nathan’s theory of genetic transmission of trauma applied to the experiences of the offspring of Armenian Genocide survivors throughout Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature, The Second Generation Responds*.

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