

COMMUNICATIONS

THE IMPACT OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE ON THE OFFSPRING OF OTTOMAN ARMENIAN SURVIVORS*

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The genocide perpetrated by the Young Turk regime against its Ottoman Armenian citizens during World War I had a lasting and debilitating effect on the survivors of that horrendous calamity, as documented by many oral histories conducted during the 1970s and 1980s with survivors as well as by written accounts by the survivors themselves.¹ What is less known is how the genocide affected the offspring of these survivors. From my own interviews with members of the Armenian-American “second generation,” many of whom are now in their 80s and 90s (those born in the 1920s and 1930s), and my examination of the few scholarly articles that have delved into this issue, I argue that there was indeed a transfer of trauma from one generation to the next. In addition, I argue that the extensive scholarship within the Jewish community, both in Israel and in the Jewish diaspora, on how the Holocaust has impacted the offspring of that genocide, can teach us much about the trans-generational passing of trauma with regard to the Armenian Genocide. Finally, I examine how the issue of genocide denial has also impacted the second generation.

Survivors of the Armenian Genocide were generally women and children, as men were the first to be killed (either while they were conscripts in the Ottoman Army or in their ancestral villages in the Armenian Plateau or in other parts of Anatolia). Survivors, particularly those who endured the forced exile march to the Syrian Desert, endured beatings and rape, witnessed family members brutally killed by gendarmes or “chetes”—criminals set loose on the caravans—and saw remaining family members die of starvation or dehydration.² Those who survived these death marches were able to settle in the Arab countries, or emigrate chiefly to France, the United States, or various countries in South America after the end of World War I.

Tens of thousands of such survivors were able to come to the shores of America between the end of the war in 1918 and 1924, at which time discriminatory immigration laws were imposed on people coming from certain “undesirable” regions like Southern and Eastern Europe and the Middle East. Through Armenian compatriotic societies and other associations, many marriages took place during this time between Armenian bachelors who had come to America before World War I to work in the factories and the women refugees. These Armenian societies often paired

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¹ See, for example, Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, “An Oral History Perspective on Responses to the Armenian Genocide,” in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New Brunswick: Transaction Press, 1986), 187-203.

² For a comprehensive history of the genocide see Vahakn Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide* (Providence; Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1995).

males and females from the same provinces of historic Armenia, so a Kharperetts'i man (originally from the Kharpert or Harpoot province) would be married to a Kharperetts'i woman, for example, easing the effects of dislocation. Of course, there were other unions between spouses who hailed from different provinces, as well as between some male and female survivors.

These marriages, post-World War I, formed the basis of a new and growing Armenian-American community, but it was a highly traumatized one. Women and orphaned children survivors bore painful emotional and sometime physical scars from their ordeals.³ Even the Armenian bachelors who had come to America before World War I (being spared by the genocide directly) suffered from the guilt of living in safety while their families back in the *yerkir* (old country) were being slaughtered.⁴ Women survivors often had to recount stories about what happened to this or that person from a particular village to these people's relatives living in America because of the dearth of information flows, and the news was almost always bad.⁵ In addition, Armenian newspapers often ran small ads of refugees announcing they were alive and looking for relatives, and vice versa.

Compounding the ordeals of the survivors was the poor socio-economic conditions in which they found themselves, even in America. Most Armenian-Americans in the 1920s were factory laborers or small farmers, eking out a meager living to the best of their abilities. They often faced discrimination as "foreigners," spoke little or broken English, and generally lived in ethnic ghettos in industrial cities of the East Coast or Midwest, or in ghettoized neighborhoods like "Armenian Town" in Fresno, California.

Yet despite these hardships and obstacles, the survivors were determined to perpetuate Armenian identity in the United States, as if to defy their Ottoman Turkish tormentors. By Armenian identity, I mean not only their ethnic identity as part of the larger Armenian race but their regional identity, emanating from the Ottoman Armenian provinces. As several scholars have pointed out, these provincial identities were very strong among the survivor generation, and immigration patterns generally reflected this settlement behavior. For example, Kharperetts'i-s were numerous in Worcester, Massachusetts, Vanets'i-s in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, Dikranagertts'i-s in Patterson, New Jersey, and Sebastiat's'i-s in Detroit, Michigan.⁶

TRANSMISSION OF GENOCIDAL TRAUMA: THE SECOND GENERATION

The American-born children of the survivors, for the most part, grew up in this closed, ghettoized world. Many of them spoke only Armenian until they started to attend elementary school, had an Armenian identity in addition to an Armenian provincial identity (or even a village identity) tracing back to the Ottoman Empire,

³ Interview with David Bournazian, Washington, D.C. on February 3, 2005. Bournazian grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts.

⁴ Diane Kupelian, Annie Sanentz Kalayjian, and Alice Kassabian, "The Turkish Genocide of the Armenians. Continuing Effects on Survivors and Their Families Eight Decades after Massive Trauma," in *International Handbook of Multigenerational Legacies of Trauma*, ed. Yael Danieli (New York: Plenum Press, 1998), 205.

⁵ Elizabeth Baronian, who was a young girl in Worcester, Massachusetts in the 1920s, conveyed to me stories about listening to her genocide survivor mother being asked by Armenians in the neighborhood about the fate of their loved ones who were on the death march with her. Interview with Elizabeth Baronian, Medford, Massachusetts, October 4, 2007.

⁶ For settlement behavior of Armenian immigrants to the United States, see Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

and were “forced” by their parents to attend Armenian school (usually on the weekends and held in an Armenian political club) and Armenian plays and *hantes*’s (educational and social events) usually at the Armenian church. Hence, they were conscious of not only belonging to a persecuted ethnic group, they also carried on, sometimes subliminally and sometimes overtly, their parents’ provincial identity.⁷ For example, the famous Armenian-American writer William Saroyan often identified himself as a “Bitlists’i,” as his parents came from the province of Ottoman Armenian province of Bitlis.⁸

Ghettoization, of course, was not just confined to the Armenians. In many American cities at the time, ethnic groups would be congregated in certain neighborhoods with similar emphasis was placed on perpetuating ethnic identities. For example, in the city of Worcester, Massachusetts, there would be Polish, Italian, Greek, Albanian, Irish, Jewish neighborhoods, etc.

On the one hand, Armenian-American children were very similar to the children from these other ethnic neighborhoods. For example, they would speak their ancestral language to their parents and their parents’ friends, but English amongst themselves. The foods that they ate at home or in relatives’ homes reflected the diets of the “old country.” Moreover, at times, they faced similar discrimination from the more established “Americans,” including even teachers.⁹

On the other hand, Armenian-American children of the survivors had differences even with other ethnic children that became more and more apparent as they grew older. First was the general absence of grandparents. Very few of the parents of the survivors were able to survive the genocide, as they were either killed in their villages or succumbed to exhaustion or starvation during the death marches. Hence, the American-born children of the survivors could not relate to other children taking about spending time with their grandparents because so few of them existed in their world. Some felt they were “cheated” by not having grandparents.¹⁰ Second, was the extent of over-protectiveness that was prevalent in Armenian families. Armenian survivor parents were extremely anxious about their children facing “danger,” even undertaking such mundane activities as riding a bicycle in the street, as several interlocutors told me.¹¹ Another second generation Armenian-American told Boyajian and Grigorian that he had the feeling growing up that his bodily integrity had to be maintained at all costs; that he was such a precious item to his parents that he could not take the ordinary risks other children did at play, and he had to make sure he stayed whole and healthy.”¹²

⁷ Interview with John Baronian, Medford, Massachusetts, May 24, 2005.

⁸ Saroyan even took a trip to Bitlis in the 1960s and wrote about his experiences in a short story titled “Bitlis” in the 1970s that was eventually published after his death in 1981. The story is in Dickran Kouymjian, ed., *William Saroyan: An Armenian Trilogy* (Fresno: California State University Press, 1986). In his introduction, Kouymjian, who knew Saroyan personally, called “Bitlis” a “personal psycho-drama, a coming to terms with one of Saroyan’s self-definition.”

⁹ Interview with Henry Haroian, Lincoln, Massachusetts, March 30, 2005. Haroian, who grew up in Watertown, Massachusetts, recalled a teacher referring to the Armenian-American students as the “foreign element.” See also William Saroyan, “The Foreigner,” *Armenian Review* 1.2 (Spring, 1948), 17-22.

¹⁰ Interview with Stella Baronian Aftandilian, Vienna, Virginia, December 4, 2004.

¹¹ Interview with Norma Kennian Mugerdichian, Dedham, Massachusetts, February 23, 2013. After the author gave a lecture in Fresno, California on April 4, 2013 on “Trans-Generational Trauma: The Impact of the Armenian Genocide on the Second Generation,” several audience members, themselves part of the second generation, told him stories of their childhood that emphasized “being safe” at all costs.

¹² Levon Boyajian and Haigaz Grigorian, “Psychological Sequelae of the Armenian Genocide,” in *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, ed. Richard Hovannisian (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 181.

In addition, many of these American-born Armenian children were named after lost or murdered relatives, placing a special burden on them. Boyajian and Grigorian note that, along with the names, some carried a sense of shame and guilt for having survived while those less fortunate perished in unspeakable ways. This sense of burden emerges in several stories by William Saroyan. In his kind of semi-biographical novel, *Rock Wagram*, the Armenian-American protagonist and his cousin discuss why someone would want to put such a “burden” on their children, meaning to teach the offspring about their Armenian heritage, which includes the sufferings of the Armenian people.¹³

Children of Armenian Genocide survivors were also taught that life “was serious business” because of what their parents had endured. Some have said that because of this past and the sufferings of their parents, they were required to be serious and in some sense, almost sad.¹⁴

In many cases, survivor parents tried to shield their children as best as they could from their own painful ordeals. They wanted their children to grow up in safety and did not want to inflict sadness onto them.¹⁵ However, even in such households where the genocide was not discussed, the children would be exposed to the stories anyway (often hearing them from an adjacent room) when relatives would gather or survivor women would meet and share stories. In such meetings, the mood would swing from emotional pain and crying to giggles and even laughter as the woman survivors would recount some humorous episode as a way of therapeutic coping with their grief.¹⁶

Some children would also see one of their parents exhibiting highly depressive states, such as staring off into space as they remembered a particularly horrifying episode from the genocide. One interviewee from Chicago stated that her survivor mother often recalled the death of her father (the interviewee’s grandfather), witnessing him being decapitated by a Turkish gendarme in their village. This image left such an indelible mark on the daughter that she recounted this same scene to me, becoming very emotional in the process, as if she were there herself.¹⁷ In other cases, children would remember one of their parents having nightmares, while in other cases, children would remember their mother being very silent at times. When some children would try to find out what took place during the *aksor* (forced exile and death march), they soon discovered that it was too devastating for their mother to speak about it.¹⁸ The only utterance one interviewee remembered her mother (who was the only survivor out of eight family members) saying was “it is not easy being the only one.”¹⁹

¹³ William Saroyan, *Rock Wagram* (New York: Doubleday, 1951).

¹⁴ Boyajian and Grigorian, “Psychological Sequelae,” 181.

¹⁵ Interview with Ralph Talanian, Milton, Massachusetts, March 31, 2005.

¹⁶ Interview with Elizabeth Baronian. One story that would always elicit laughter was of Elsa Kalenian, Elizabeth’s aunt, urinating on a sleeping Turkish gendarme on the march to the Syrian desert. Despite such light-hearted moments, survivors like Elsa suffered from the trauma of the genocide for the rest of their lives. When John Baronian (her nephew) brought a relative, Sarkis Manuelian, to visit her in New Hampshire in the 1950s, she broke down in tears because this relative’s brother, who was killed in the genocide, was her classmate and they used to play together. Interview with John Baronian. In addition, the author remembers that toward the end of her life in the 1970s, Elsa would keep repeating stories of the genocide.

¹⁷ Interview with Julia Ishkhanian, Chicago, Illinois, March 4, 2005.

¹⁸ Interview with Ralph Talanian.

¹⁹ Interview with Norma Kennian Mugerdichian..

In the case of my own grandmother, who lost two children in the genocide due to dehydration and starvation, she had to be left alone in a room in her home in America every day for a half hour or so while she prayed for her dead children. Her American-born children knew that this was her “private time” and that no one was to disturb her.²⁰ Although after her prayers, she tried to carry on as best she could, her son would witness her crying at times as she remembered her dead children.²¹ From this behavior it was quite apparent that she suffered what psychologists today would describe as “survivor’s guilt,” and she never got over it.

Because of this sense that their parents had endured great pain, the children of the survivors were conscious about not doing anything that would cause grief to their parents. Some of the interviewees complained that they couldn’t do things that other American teenagers did like dating, staying out late, going to dances, or even going to a bowling alley. Not wanting to cause pain and anxiety to their parents, “made me more cautious” than other teenagers, in the words of one interviewee.²² Of course, part of this sentiment can be explained by the fact that Armenians, as a people from the Middle East, have a “shame” culture that is prevalent among other Middle Eastern peoples, and thus, children of the immigrants were taught not to bring shame to the family by behaving in a non-conservative way. At the same time, they knew that their parents were always worrying about their safety, and the Armenian-American teenagers did their best not to upset their parents. The only outlet many of them had was in joining an Armenian youth group because they knew their parents would approve their association with such groups because they would be in a “safe” environment and would be fulfilling one of their parents’ goals, that is, perpetuating Armenian culture in the diaspora. In such settings, they could interact with the opposite sex, go to dances, and “have fun.”²³

RESURFACING OF GENOCIDE TRAUMA WITH THE ADVENT OF WORLD WAR II

Anxiety and worrying about the safety of their children reached new heights during a momentous event a few years later that was outside of the survivor parents’ control, that is, the advent of World War II. With America’s entry into the war, such parents now had to confront the reality that their sons, especially the ones born in the early to mid-1920s, would soon be in the fighting. Having lived through their own horrors of World War I, the survivor parents were extremely anxious during this whole period. By contrast, the young Armenian-American men were caught up in the great patriotic wave that swept through the United States and were eager to defend their country and erase the stereotype that they were somehow “foreigners.” A generational conflict of sorts took place during this period in the Armenian-American community. Some young people complained that their parents “did not have the proper attitude.”²⁴ One interviewee, an Armenian-American veteran,

²⁰ Interview with Helen Baronian, Falmouth, Massachusetts, February 17, 2009.

²¹ Interview with John Baronian. See also the story of his upbringing remembering his mother’s grief: Joe Fitzgerald, “Genocide forced mother into lifetime of anguish,” *Boston Herald*, October 29, 2005.

²² Interview with Norma Kennian Mugerdichian.

²³ It seems in retrospect that one of the reasons why second generation members recall with fondness their time in Armenian youth organizations was because they could act as normal teenagers therein, albeit in a closed and protected environment.

²⁴ There were several rather cryptic references in the *Hairenik Weekly* of 1941 and 1942, written by the younger generation, of parents “not having the right attitude” about the enlistment of their sons into the armed services.

admitted to me in candor that his father loved America, “but not to the point of having his son die for it.”²⁵ Another interlocutor told me that there was an Armenian on the draft board of Watertown, Massachusetts (home of a substantial Armenian community), and that this official “caught holy hell” from Armenian mothers whose sons received a draft notice.²⁶ Some Armenian mothers kept repeating the phrase “*chojokh e*” when their sons were entering the armed services, using a mixed Turkish-Armenian phrase that translates roughly as “he is just a child.”²⁷ Other Armenian parents tried as best they could to put up a brave face when their sons entered the service, and a few Armenian fathers instructed their sons “not to bring shame on the family name” while in the war.²⁸ By and large, however, this was a very emotional period for Armenian families. Reflecting back on this period, one Armenian-American veteran wrote: “it was traumatic for many [parents] to fathom this new crisis after having lived through their own war experiences which had devastated their lives.”²⁹

The survivor parents’ worries had a direct impact on the soldiers themselves. Many of the interviewees told me about highly emotional family farewells as they left to go off to war.³⁰ In two instances, such veterans broke down in tears to me, not about what they witnessed and endured in the war, but of their mothers chasing after their troop train or troop bus as it was leaving the station.³¹ And while such soldiers were overseas they were often worried about how their parents were coping back home. In a diary he kept while he was a prisoner of war in Germany, Kenneth Kazanjian of Watertown, Massachusetts wrote in one entry:

We wrote post cards home today. It’ll probably take three months to reach my folks but I am sure they’ll be glad to hear from me anyway. Gosh, I hope they know by now that I’m a P.O.W. I can just imagine that how tough they must have taken that “Missing in Action” telegram. And I can also imagine how happy they’ll be when they find out that I’m alright” [though Kazanjian was sometimes beaten by the prison guards and lost more than 40 pounds because of malnutrition].³²

In the last diary entry, Kazanjian, back home in Watertown after the war, wrote: “My family is in good health now and God only knows how much I worried about that while I was a Prisoner of War.”³³ When I asked him about this diary entry some 60

²⁵ Interview with Kenneth Kazanjian, Bedford, Massachusetts, March 29, 2005.

²⁶ Telephone interview with Aram (Sonny) Gavoor, originally from Watertown, Massachusetts, August 10, 2012.

²⁷ Interview with Ralph Talanian.

²⁸ Interview with Ed Herosian, Falmouth, Massachusetts, February 17, 2009.

²⁹ Varoujan Karentz, *Mitchnapert (The Citadel): A Short History of the Armenians of Rhode Island* (New York and Lincoln: University Press, 2004), 185.

³⁰ Interview with John Baronian. His sister Stella recalled how emotional it was for the entire family on the day John was going to be inducted into the Army during World War II. Surprisingly, after he said his goodbyes, he returned home that evening because the Army decided to take him the following week. While the family was happy that he would be with them for another week, they dreaded going through another farewell day because the first one was so emotionally draining. Interview with Stella Baronian Aftandilian.

³¹ Interview with Haig Tashjian, Laguna-Niguel, California, April 18, 2006; interview with Vahan Aghajanian, Tewksbury, Massachusetts, February 7, 2007. Tashjian witnessed his mother chasing after his troop train as it was leaving the Springfield, Massachusetts station, while Aghajanian witnessed an almost identical scene, of his mother chasing after his troop bus as it was leaving the station in Boston.

³² As reprinted in *Hairenik Weekly*, October 4, 1945.

³³ As reprinted in James H. Tashjian, *The Armenian-American in World War II* (Boston: Hairenik Press, 1952), 443.

years later, he confirmed that he was referring to his parents' mental health stemming from their worries and anxieties.³⁴

Of course, all parents, regardless of ethnicity, worried about their sons in the war, but the level of intensity among Armenian parents may have been higher than other groups because of the impact of the genocide just two and a half decades earlier. Moreover, the sisters of the soldiers were also deeply affected by the situation. Because many of their parents could not read or write English well, it was the daughters of such parents who would verbally translate the letters from their brothers to their parents and they would then write letters back to their brothers translating into English what the parents would dictate to them in Armenian.³⁵ These reading and writing efforts also proved to be highly emotional and anxiety-driven.³⁶

For the Armenian-American soldiers who liberated the concentration camps in Germany and Austria, the war brought home to them in a very graphic way what their own parents had gone through. One such soldier wrote to his parents: "I wouldn't believe this [stories of utmost cruelty] had I not seen all this and more. I wouldn't believe that such people could live upon the earth if I hadn't seen the bodies along the roadsides and the ones found in the concentration camps.... I keep remembering that this was what the Turks did to the Armenians, only the Armenians never had a chance to let the world know; actually nobody cared or probably wouldn't believe them. *Now I know, because I have seen this*" (emphasis added).³⁷

Moreover, the sheer violence of the war gave some of the offspring of the genocide survivors a greater appreciation of their parents' ordeals and sufferings. Max Boudakian, who fought in France and Germany, said many years after the war that "[a]s an 18-19 year old, I was fortunate to count on the tremendous resources of the U.S. military. In my mother's case [she was a genocide survivor] there was no support system to protect her."³⁸ When he returned home from the war, Ralph Talanian, a soldier in General George Patton's 3rd Army, told his parents about the atrocities against the Jews and the concentration camps that he helped to liberate. His parents, both genocide survivors, became so visibly distraught from hearing his stories because of their own personal experiences that he stopped talking about them.³⁹

Even some of the sisters of these Armenian-American veterans, to this day, cannot bear to watch documentaries of World War II in which scenes of the Holocaust, particularly the emaciated bodies in the concentration camp, are shown. To them, such scenes remind them of what their parents had to endure during the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians, and they have been known to walk out of their television rooms or even lecture halls when such documentary footage has been shown.⁴⁰

³⁴ Interview with Kenneth Kazanjian.

³⁵ Interview with Norma Kennian Mugerdichian.

³⁶ Interview with Helen Baronian.

³⁷ Letter from Walter Basmajian to his parents in Massena, New York, dated April 19, 1945, as reprinted in *Hairenik Weekly*, June 28, 1945.

³⁸ Boudakian's story is in Richard Demirjian, *The Faces of Courage: Armenian World War II, Korea, and Vietnam Heroes* (Moraga: Ararat Heritage Press, 2003), 226-46.

³⁹ Interview with Ralph Talanian.

⁴⁰ Both Stella Baronian Aftandilian and Norma Kennian Mugerdichian told me that seeing documentary footage of the Holocaust upsets them greatly because it reminds them of what their own mothers must have gone through. To this day, they cannot bear to watch such footage.

FINDINGS AMONG SCHOLARS WHO HAVE EXAMINED
THE TRANS-GENERATIONAL TRAUMA OF THE HOLOCAUST

There are about 500 articles and books written mostly by Jewish scholars in both Israel and the Jewish diaspora on how the Holocaust has affected the second generation. This writing generally started in the late 1970s with the landmark book by Helen Epstein titled *Children of the Holocaust*, although there were a few studies done beforehand. Epstein herself is a daughter of a Holocaust survivor, and part of the book seems to have been written to explore that has been called the “conspiracy of silence”—in other words, why survivors did not speak of their ordeals, especially to their children. In addition, the book explores how the Holocaust has affected the upbringing of the offspring of the survivors, which makes them different than other people. Based on her own interviews, Epstein found that there was a sense of overprotectiveness by such parents, of children feeling they had to be fathers and mothers to their parents, of parents making sure their bodily parts were whole, of offspring feeling cheated for not having grandparents.⁴¹ Based on my own interviews referenced earlier in this paper, as well as the scholarly works of Boyajian and Grigorian as well as Kupelian, Kalayjian and Kassabian, these findings indeed bear out within the Armenian context.

Other scholars have explored such issues more deeply. Lisa Katz, for example, has written that Holocaust survivor parents “have shown a tendency to be over involved in their children’s lives, even to the point of suffocation.” This may be because the survivors’ children “exist to replace what was so traumatically lost. This over-involvement may exhibit itself in feeling overly sensitive and anxious about their children’s behavior, forcing their children to fulfill certain roles or pushing their children to be high achievers.”⁴²

Katz goes on to write: “Similarly, many survivor parents were over-protective of their children, and they transmitted their distrust of the external environment to their children. Consequently, some Second Gens [Generational members] have found it difficult to become autonomous and to trust people outside their family.” Another difficulty, according to Katz, is

psychological separation-individuation from their parents. Often in families of survivors, ‘separation’ becomes associated with death. A child who does manage to separate may be seen as betraying or abandoning the family. And anyone who encourages a child to separate may be seen as a threat, or even a persecutor... a higher frequency of separation anxiety and guilt was [thus] found in children of survivors than in other children. It follows that many children of survivors have an intense need to act as protectors of their parents.⁴³

At the same time, there can be positive traits that are transmitted from the survivor generation to the offspring. Katz adds that “resilience traits—such as adaptability, initiative and tenacity—that enabled survivor-parents to survive the Holocaust may have been passed to their children... studies have shown that Holocaust survivors and their children have a tendency to be task-oriented and hard workers. They also know

⁴¹ Helen Epstein, *Children of the Holocaust. Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979).

⁴² Lisa Katz, “The Effects of the Holocaust on the Children of Survivors,” http://judaism.about.com/od/holocaust/a/hol_gens.htm?p=1.

⁴³ Ibid.

how to actively cope with and adapt to challenges. Strong family values is another positive characteristics displayed by many survivors and their children.”⁴⁴

Again, many of the characteristics that Katz assigns the offspring of the Holocaust can be applied almost exactly to the offspring of the Armenian Genocide, particularly the feelings of over-protectiveness, distrust of the outside world, problems with separation and individuation, and a high-rate of achievement. While it goes beyond the scope of this study to examine socio-economic progress of Armenian-Americans, the offspring of Armenian Genocide survivors were able to move from the working class to the middle and upper-middle class in just one generation, and they laid the foundations, post-World War II, for a thriving and much more prosperous Armenian-American community.

Other scholars, such as Dina Wardi, have found that among Holocaust survivor families, “children were given the role of lifesavers for the confused souls of their parents.” The children would “infuse content into their [the survivor parents’] empty lives and serve as compensation and a substitute for their relatives who had perished” and “communities that had been wiped out.” If the survivors could not consider their new children a continuation of the loved ones they had lost, “all their suffering and their efforts to survive would have seemed a worthless sacrifice.” This, then, placed a special burden on their children. One such second-generation member cited by Wardi stated: “I have no choice but to carry the dead on my back.”⁴⁵

Wardi also notes that some siblings are more culturally sensitive to their parents’ ordeals than their other siblings. These “Memorial Candles,” have a “hard time separating themselves from the intensive dependency in the mother-father-child triangle.” By contrast, the non-Memorial Candles are “liberated, at least on the conscious level, from the emotional burden weighing down on the family...” Wardi goes on to state that for the Memorial Candles, “who sense their special place in their family and their value for their parents, also find it very difficult in the end to separate from their parents and to liberate themselves from their difficult task.” And in many respects, the burden for such children goes beyond the family. Wardi says that the overt and covert message from the parents to such children can be summarized as follows: “you are the continuing generation. Behind us are ruin and death and infinite emotional emptiness. It is you obligation and your privilege to maintain the nation, to reestablish the vanished family and to fill the enormous physical and emotional void left by the Holocaust in our surroundings and in our hearts.”⁴⁶ Some of my interviewees expressed very similar sentiments to me, that they were perhaps more affected by the genocide than their siblings, and that their survivor parents instilled in them the necessity of serving the “Azk” or nation.⁴⁷ Boyajian and Grigorian noted that some members of the second generation they have treated for psychological problems have a feeling of being “special,” by which they mean an obligation is placed on them directly or indirectly “to be the bearers of hopes and aspirations, not only of a given family but of a whole people.”⁴⁸

There is disagreement among scholars examining the impact of the Holocaust on the second generation as to whether this generation has common psychopathological features. Some clinicians have concluded that some members of this generation

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Dina Wardi, *Memorial Candles: Children of the Holocaust* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), 27-28.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 30-34.

⁴⁷ Telephone interview with Vahram Sookikian, January 28, 2010.

⁴⁸ Boyajian and Grigorian, “Psychological Sequelae,” 181.

exhibit no serious psychological consequences, while other members of this generation manifest “Holocaust-derived behaviors.”⁴⁹ Kellerman notes in the course of his own research on the children of Holocaust survivors that some offspring are more likely to be affected by their parents’ trauma than those in other families. The offspring who are most vulnerable to the transmission of trauma have one or more of the following characteristics in common:

- 1) offspring were born early after the Holocaust
- 2) offspring were the only, or the first born child
- 3) both parents were survivors
- 4) offspring were “replacement” children to the children who had perished
- 5) parents had endured extraordinary mental suffering and significant loss and were highly disturbed as a result
- 6) symbiotic relations were dominant between parents and children, and family relations were characterized by enmeshment
- 7) the trauma was talked about too little or too much⁵⁰

Although more clinical work within the Armenian context would need to be done to compare second-generation psychopathological features with those of Holocaust survivor offspring, anecdotal evidence suggests that Armenians of the second generation who are the most traumatized by the genocide share at least one or more of the characteristics mentioned above.⁵¹

THE ISSUE OF GENOCIDE DENIAL

The one area where there is significance difference between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust vis-à-vis the impact on the second generation is the issue of genocide denial. The Holocaust has not only been acknowledged by Germany (which has also paid reparations to the survivors) but by the vast majority of countries in the world, and it is widely taught in schools, especially in the United States and Europe. By and large, only anti-Semitic pseudo-scholars and neo-Nazi groups continue to put out the line that the Holocaust was an exaggeration or a fabrication. The Armenian Genocide, by contrast, has not been acknowledged by Turkey, the successor state to the Ottoman Empire, and the Turkish government continues to spend millions of dollars each year to carry out a denial campaign worldwide. Moreover, because of the close ties between the United States and Turkey, the former (chiefly the executive branch of government) has avoided using the term “genocide” when describing the massacres and deportations of the Ottoman Armenian population during World War I. Hence, there is no “closure” on the Armenian case in contrast to that of the Holocaust.

⁴⁹ Natan P. F. Kellerman, “Psychopathology in Children of Holocaust Survivors: A Review of the Research Literature,” *The Israeli Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 38.1 (2001):36-46.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵¹ The author’s mother and her siblings (two aunts and an uncle of the author) seemed to have been more affected by the trauma of the Armenian genocide than some other second-generation Armenian-Americans, based on the author’s personal observations. This may be because they shared at least two of the characteristics that Kellerman outlines: 1) that they were, in a way, “replacement children” for the children their parents’ lost in the genocide; and 2) “symbiotic relations were dominant between parents and children and family relations were characterized by enmeshment.”

Boyajian and Grigorian underscore that genocide denial plays an important role in Armenian identity, particularly among the second and third generations. They note: “Because of the historical differences between the public recognition of the events of the Jewish Holocaust and the denial of the Armenian genocide by the Turks, the impact upon subsequent generations is very different. The issue of Armenian identity and insistence upon the recognition of that event by the world plays a central role in the identity formation of subsequent generations of Armenians. How do you explain who you are to others as well as to yourself when no one acknowledges the reality and validity of your past?” They go on to note that a second generation member, once he had children of his own, felt obligated to “let them know what an Armenian is and what the truth is because of the lack of recognition and acceptance in the historical sense of what transpired.” The denial, and the general lack of knowledge and acceptance of the truth about the genocide, led Boyajian and Grigorian to conclude that “the psychological genocide continues.”⁵²

Kupelian, Kalayjian and Kassabian, in their study, note that “the rage and stress created by Turkey’s denial, and the widespread acquiescence to that denial, has interfered with the ability of the survivors, their children, and grandchildren to mourn, process and integrate their deeply painful history. They then quote two scholars who stated that validation of a traumatic experience is an essential step toward resolution and closure, and a perpetrator’s explicit expression of acknowledgement and remorse has enormous value in healing the victim.”⁵³ In their sample of Armenians over three generations, Kupelian, Kalyajian and Kassabian found that, in response to the open-ended question, “Do you feel different from other people because of the genocide experience of your parents/grandparents?” both the second and third generation answered “yes.” They found that the second generation’s responses lacked insistence on Turkish accountability (in contrast to the third generation). Instead, the second generation members expressed feelings of anger, loss for their homeland and family, immense pride that Armenian culture not be extinguished, and determination to perpetuate Armenian heritage and culture.⁵⁴ However, later in the same study, the authors describe an Armenian-American woman of the second generation and noted that “a critical motivating theme that ran through [her] family was the painful issue of coping with Turkish denial,” implying that she, herself, was also angered by this denial.⁵⁵ From my own interviews with Armenian-Americans of the second generation, I found that the issue of denial was indeed an issue that this generation felt very angry about. Interestingly, some of the World War II veterans within this group that I interviewed were also angry at the United States for “kowtowing” to the Turkish government on Armenian genocide denial. From their perspective, a great power like the United States should not be taking orders from a lesser power.⁵⁶

It appears, then, that Armenian genocide denial has added to the trauma of the second generation, or at least a significant segment of this generation. Not only did

⁵² Boyajian and Grigorian, “Psychological Sequelae,” 182-83.

⁵³ Kupelian, Kalayjian, and Kassabian, “The Turkish Genocide,” 206. The authors they cite in this section of their study are Harry S. Sullivan, *The Interpersonal theory of psychiatry* (New York: Norton, 1953), and Joseph V. Montville, “Psychoanalytical enlightenment and the greening of diplomacy,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 37.2 (1989): 297-318.

⁵⁴ Kupelian, Kalayjian, and Kassabian, “The Turkish Genocide,” 200.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 205.

⁵⁶ Interviews with John Baronian and Ed Herosian. Interview with Ashot Jelalian, Vienna, Virginia, April 6, 2005. All three served in the U.S. Army during World War II.

they have to cope with their parents' suffering growing up, but the lack of closure on the issue—in terms of genocide acknowledgement—has made them feel that their parents' suffering (and their own subliminal suffering) has not been given its proper recognition. The fact that the Armenian-American lobby groups came into being in the 1970s, as the second generation reached middle age, and that Armenian Genocide recognition was their main focus, underscores the importance of genocide denial in the Armenian psyche.⁵⁷

One interesting development since the above-mentioned scholarly articles appeared dealing with trans-generational trauma on the Armenian Genocide is the growing recognition of the Genocide among some Turkish intellectuals. It is possible that the process taking place within Turkish civil society will begin to heal some wounds, but from my own research interviewing Armenian-Americans of the second generation, I would conjecture that closure in the minds of these offspring of Ottoman Armenian genocide survivors will not come about until the Turkish government recognizes the genocide and the United States government follows suit.

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⁵⁷ For example, the Armenian Assembly of America, which was initially an umbrella group of representatives of different Armenian organizations in the United States, was founded in 1972 and mainly consisted of second-generation Armenian-Americans, offspring of the Armenian genocide. Their main concern was to form an effective lobby in Washington, D.C. to advocate for recognition of the genocide.