The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917

The Nation, May 28, 1990

Last fall, while covering Bob Dole's unsuccessful effort to have Congress commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the initiation of the Armenian genocide in Turkey, I called Morris Amitay, a former head of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, who was working against Dole's bill as a lobbyist for Turkey. "Genocide, what is genocide?" Amitay asked rhetorically. "Most people look at genocide as a concerted, determined attempt to eliminate a race of people. And some, presented with the facts-I don't know if they're true-say that the Armenians ... were not singled out. So was it genocide? It's difficult to determine."

It's only difficult to determine when one is distracted by factors other than the historical record. And in the ongoing debate about the Armenian genocide, as in the one over the defeated Dole bill, many participants have been quite distracted. Ankara has consistently claimed that the deaths of Armenians occurred as the unfortunate result of civil war, famine and epidemics, and Turkey's allies are not about to let history get in the way of their own agendas. So the Israeli Embassy, which maintains close ties to Turkey, lobbied against Dole's measure; the Bush Administration first argued that the commemoration would hurt U.S.-Turkish relations and weaken NATO, but then agreed to a compromise; and U.S. weapons manufacturers who sell arms to Turkey fought the Dole bill with the silly claim that the deaths of both Armenians and Turks were actually the result of Russian manipulation.

The best answer to the question of genocide is the report written by Leslie Davis, who was U.S. consul in Harput in eastern Turkey from 1914 to 1917. The 132-page account was only recently found in the National Archives by Susan Blair, a researcher obsessed with compiling proof of the Armenian genocide. Davis's report, written upon his return to the United States, makes up the bulk of this book, which has an enthusiastic introduction and informative annotation by Blair, who received bomb threats after the book's publication was announced.

The Davis report is a find, the first unearthed eyewitness account from a neutral party, and we should all be grateful for Blair's sleuthing. Davis was a keen observer in a remote outpost. He was a good reporter, cautious in his estimates, and wrote only of things about which he had personal knowledge. Davis readily admitted to not liking the Armenian race," but he could scarcely believe the brutality he saw. His gracefully written report is not the work of your average bureaucrat. Davis arrived at Harput on May 31, 1914, following a thirteen-day journey by wagon, and noted that at that time Turks and Armenians "appeared to be on friendly terms." He saw little sign that within a year he would become the only foreign official to witness "probably the most terrible tragedy that has ever befallen any people in the history of the world." He first occupied himself with writing reports on local commerce and industries-but the work soon became pointless. In the spring of 1915, the local Ottoman Empire authorities, citing the activities of Armenian revolutionary societies, implemented a crackdown on Armenians. But Davis suspected that many of the bombs found in the backyards of Armenians were
actually planted by the police. Hundreds of Armenians, including prominent academicians, church officials and merchants, were sent away from Harput on oxcarts to an unknown destination. Only later did Davis learn that nearly all had been massacred.

On June 26, 1915, the Turkish government ordered the deportation of every Armenian in Harput, its sister city Mamouret-ul-Aziz and adjacent villages. "Realizing so well the fate of most of those who were to be thus sent away," Davis wrote, "I felt that I must interfere on the ground of humanity." He won reprieves for many Armenians who had American citizenship. But when he cabled the U.S. Embassy at Constantinople, hoping it would be able to persuade the Turkish government to withdraw or modify the deportation orders, his superiors found the situation he described "so appalling that it was not believed."

At first, Davis recalled, no one knew what deportation' really meant." Some Armenians went away smiling and full of hope, anticipating they would be allowed to resettle elsewhere. They left without resistance. But soon reports came in that the Armenian men had been taken into the mountains and killed by Turkish guards. In one episode, on July 5, 1915, about 800 Armenian men were arrested, marched out of town into the mountains and slaughtered. Turkish gendarmes, who began the massacre using their rifles, were ordered not to waste bullets and to employ their bayonets instead. Armenian children, Davis reported, were drowned in a nearby lake.

Davis did the best he could, offering the protection of his consulate to many Armenians, holding the property of "deportees," trying to determine the whereabouts of Armenian citizens. He investigated reports of massacres and helped some Armenians to escape, when aiding Armenians was a crime punishable by death. His account covered these endeavors in a matter-of-fact tone, but clearly he was a brave man.

Even though the anti-Armenian campaign was conducted by the Ottoman Empire, as distinct from the current regime, Davis's account shows why it would be painful for Ankara to acknowledge the misdeeds of the past. Turkish society is not well acquitted in his report. He described Turks holding prayer meetings in front of the consulate, where he hid Armenians. "We could all hear them piously calling upon Allah to bless them in their efforts to kill the hated Christians:' When Armenians were "deported" and had to get rid of their possessions, their Turkish neighbors gladly bought their valuable property at bargain rates.

Armenians rounded up in other areas of the country were marched through Davis's region, and the consul investigated the camps outside Harput, where the deportees were kept: All of them were in rags and many of them were almost naked. They were emaciated, sick, diseased, filthy, covered with dirt and vermin, resembling animals far more than human beings." When Davis first saw one of these camps he found it "the most horrible scene I have ever witnessed, one not surpassed by any in Dante's Inferno" The vilayet, or province, where his consulate was based came to be known as the "Slaughterhouse Vilayet."

Davis's description of his trips to the countryside, littered with thousands of bodies, is harrowing. At the shore of Lake Goeljuk, he saw the remains of hundreds who had been killed and buried in loose sand that had then been washed away. On one daylong trip, he surveyed more than 10,000 dead
Armenians, some discarded in valleys that stank their whole length. For Davis, this was obviously genocide: "The Mohammedans in their fanaticism seemed determined not only to exterminate the Christian population but to remove all traces of their religion."

Numbers, unfortunately, tend to be at the center of many historical disputes. Armenian activists maintain that one to one-and-a-half million Armenians were killed by the Turks—a claim hardly inconsistent with Davis's calculations. Davis reported that in his vilayet alone there lived 150,000 Armenians prior to 1915; at the end of that year only 8,000 to 10,000 remained. The parallels between the anti-Armenian operations of the Ottoman Empire and the anti-Jewish campaign of the Nazis three decades later are striking. Apparently, there are not too many different ways to commit mass murder, even allowing for improvements in technology. Any arms-maker, geopolitical or lobbyist who denies the Armenian genocide ought to be forced to read this book. For the rest of us, Davis's work is an important reminder of what can happen when we choose not to watch.

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Gale Document Number: GALEIA9040845
nothing to reduce the incalculable impact of these massacres on individual Armenians. For example, a survivor from Misis, whose mother had lost her father in 1909, said that she never remembered her mother laughing. Perhaps the strongest effect of these massacres on surviving Armenians was the overarching sense that many developed about the precariousness of life.

**IMPRISONMENT AND TORTURE**

In the weeks and months prior to the deportations of 1915, the leaders of Armenian towns and villages were imprisoned in many parts of Turkey. At the time, the motive underlying the imprisonments was not apparent to many Armenians, and in fact men reported without protest to the police when solicited. Our information regarding the torture and imprisonment of leaders comes from children who observed actions against their fathers, uncles, and friends. 11

A survivor from Sivas described some of the methods of torture:

“They would take them to jail and beat them up, and such torturous acts as bastinado, as they called it, were done—they would raise the feet above the body, tie them and beat under the foot until it bled. They also used to boil eggs and put them in their armpits.” Other techniques included pulling out fingernails (mentioned by a survivor from Chemeshgezak, who said this happened to their mailman who was accused of transporting secret letters); pulling out teeth (stated by a survivor from Zeitun); pulling out beards (reported by a survivor who said that this was done to their priest in Marash); branding on the chest with a hot horseshoe (reportedly done to a survivor’s uncle from Kharpert); and hanging prisoners upside down by one foot and beating them back and forth (stated by a survivor from Mezre).

After the men were tortured, many were killed, as we were told repeatedly in our interviews. Perhaps this account by a survivor from a village near Kharpert can—because of its poignancy—represent the other examples of the atrocities that followed imprisonment: “First they handcuffed my father and took him to jail. They had beaten him so much there that he looked pathetic. When my mother realized that my father could not escape imprisonment, she took lots of gold pieces, a whole handful, and took it to a high official and brought him [the father] home. For a month, we kept him in cotton to lighten the pain of his wounds.” Then a month later, reported this survivor, his father was taken away again:

Life Before the Deportations

My younger brother, Boghos, who was only three years old, was yelling after him, saying, “Daddy, let me come with you.” [But he did not return.] They took him [his father and other prisoners] near the River Euphrates, made them sit down as though to eat. The person who had seen this said that my father first bowed his head to pray, and when he was done, the Turks attacked him. I cannot even tell you what brutalities they committed. It’s unbelievable and almost cannot be repeated. They used whatever they could [to kill them], from bottles on. He died there and was thrown in the river along with everyone else.

On the basis of survivor testimony, it appears that many men were arrested without any advance warning—they believed that they were going to the police station or government building to answer a few questions. Clearly, most of them were unaware of the underlying plan of annihilation; otherwise, they might have resisted arrest, rather than being compliant citizens.

**CONFISCATION OF WEAPONS**

As mentioned earlier, before deportation orders were given in 1915, Turkish officials demanded that all guns and weapons owned by Armenians be brought to government offices and relinquished. 12 In some instances, specific quotas were given, and Armenians had to buy weapons if they did not own enough within their community. Guns of all kinds were seized, from sporting arms to those that some of the Armenian political groups had stockpiled for defense of their communities.

When the demand for weapons was issued, memories of the 1894–96 and 1909 massacres were still fresh. Although Armenians could not know of the upcoming genocide, some were nevertheless hesitant to relinquish their only means of self-defense and, instead, buried guns in the ground, stored them in dry wells, or hid them in their houses or barns. 13 This led to house-to-house searches in some communities, with Armenians being tortured until they revealed whether they possessed weapons. A survivor from Mezre described the situation in her town: “So they gathered up all the guns and took them away. And there had been so many beatings while collecting the guns. If a man did not have a gun, he would have to go and buy one so that he wouldn’t get beaten up. What beatings! I have seen it with my own eyes.” Similar events took place in Yozgat:

Now they searched all the houses for guns. If they didn’t find one, then they would take the men of that family and imprison them. Now some had them
[guns], but others did not. My uncle apparently was beaten and tortured badly; they did not take my father. They placed my uncle on the floor and put nails through his toenails. So finally my father bought guns [presumably from Turks or Kurds] and took them in so they would release my uncle. He brought him home, killed a goat, and placed his tortured body in that skin; this used to help the sores.

DEPORTATION ORDERS

On May 27, 1915, an official Edict of Deportation was issued. For most Armenians, the deportation orders that followed were a complete surprise. The experience of Sarkis, a survivor from Chemeshgezak, is typical of the stories told in our interviews.

Sarkis said that he was in school having physical education when the wife of his coach came and told her husband that Pastor Arshag, the principal, had just been arrested:

You see, they [Turks] first took the educated, the intellectuals. They took these people to a home, which they had converted into a prison, and tortured them in order to get them to talk. So upon the news that Pastor Arshag was arrested, we were dismissed from school and asked to go home. We went home. My father was not there. My uncle had run away. They had put a dress on my uncle's son, even though he was not young, to disguise him. My father's uncle was also in prison, for after taking the younger educated men, they also took the elderly.

Because Sarkis was so young that there was little danger he would be imprisoned, his family would send him to take food to his uncle in prison. It was in prison that Sarkis first suspected something disastrous would happen to the Armenians:

I would go and sit with him [the uncle in prison]. One day when I was taking him food, I met a lot of police who were saying that on that day we could not deliver food, that all the prisoners were going to leave. I saw them in twos, all chained together. I could not take the food, so I returned home and gave the news. I told them that they were chained and that they were coming this way and would pass by our house, there being no other way to leave town toward Harpert. By now, all the families had heard, so they were all on the streets to see their loved ones. I got on the top of the roof and was yelling, "Uncle."

There was a doctor in this procession, and when his wife saw him, she ran out to greet him, but with the butt of the rifle the police pushed her away, even though he was an elderly man. So the men marched on, leaving all the women and families crying and grieving. There was a place about twenty minutes outside of town with trees and water. There they took their names to see if anyone was missing. They marched them to the edge of the Euphrates and killed them.

Sarkis continued his account by saying that after all the men were gone, deportation orders were issued for the women and children. His town was deported in two groups, fifteen days apart. He was in the second group to leave, but lamented, "I wish we had been in the first group, because they made it all the way to Aleppo." Just before leaving, Sarkis's family gave their bedding and other belongings to their Turkish landlord for safekeeping and gave their rugs to people at the public bath next door to their house. "We said that we would get them when we returned, but we are yet to return."

Several survivors indicated that Turkish neighbors used physical coercion for economic gain before the deportations began. For example, a survivor from Jibin reported the following:

The next day they gathered up other influential men in the church, including my father and his brothers, and began beating them in the churchyard. We were young; I was only about six years old. We used to go and see our fathers get beaten, and we would cry. One of my father's best [Turkish] friends, who used to come to our house several times a week, was now beating my dad and saying to him that he wanted all of his belongings. My poor father, being exhausted, said that he would do that. So right there in the courtyard, this man brought the papers, and my father signed, saying that he had indeed sold all his belongings to Ismail Beg.

Women whose husbands were in prison or had already been killed took the full responsibility of preparing their families for the deportation. They had to pack whatever family belongings could be carried, prepare food for the journey, and arrange for carts or other transportation. Often, these preparations were hampered by complications. For example, a survivor from Sivas recalled that his mother wanted to kill one of their five hundred sheep to take as food, but the Turks had already stolen them. Another survivor said that her mother had to bribe a soldier with five gold pieces in order to get her daughter a good pair of shoes. Other mothers sold household goods to obtain money for the journey. But survivors from both Harpert and Kaiseri recalled that Armenians were not allowed to sell any of their possessions, perhaps because their belongings were destined to end up in the hands of Turks, anyway. Many told us that their mothers buried possessions before being deported in the hope that they could recover them on their return. Indeed, several survivors commented that if they were to go to their village
today, they could still find the place where family jewelry or gold had been buried.

In preparing for the deportation journey, Armenians faced anguishing decisions about what to take with them, as is illustrated by one survivor’s comments:

When they came to tell us to leave, they took us by surprise. Just three days before, we had gone to see the grapes to see if they were ripe enough to be blessed [this was a ritual performed by the Apostolic priests]. Everything was so peaceful then. Only three days later, the town crier called out that we had to leave the town and that on August sixth, they were going to bring us wagons to help transport us. They said they would bring a wagon or cart in front of each house. In those three days, we had to get ready and sell whatever we could. Oh, all those beautiful things, antiques, rugs; we could not carry them with us. We had one cart, but my parents had six children, and with them we were eight people.

Other decisions were even more painful. For example, one young woman had to choose whether to stay with her parents or be deported with her fiancé:

My future sister-in-law came and talked to my parents. My father would not think of it [i.e., allowing her to go with her fiancé]. But as my parents reasoned between them, they realized that they already had four girls, and that it would not be too easy to protect each, and possibly my fiancé could better watch over me and protect me than they could. We cried and cried. My grandmother gave me rings and gave me her wedding earrings. She gave them to me because they could not do a wedding for me.

Parents were sometimes faced with the terrible dilemma of whether to leave a child behind, especially if there was a Turkish family willing to keep him or her. For example, Nartouhi, a survivor from Palu, recalled that she had gone with her mother to a church for protection when one of the Turkish officials, the kaimakan of their village, entered the church:

His daughter was my age and was learning Armenian, too. In fact, after school, when our servant used to pick me up from school, he used to stop and pick up his girl, too, and we would come home together. Many times she would spend the night at our house. The kaimakan used to like me a lot. He would often make me sit on his lap! [So] when he saw me [in the church with my mother], he said, “Nartou, are you here, too? Come and sit on my knees.” When I did, he asked me what I was doing there. I told him that some Turks brought us here, telling us that they were going to save us. He asked me where my mother was. And then he said to me that he was going to take me so that I could play with Saide [his daughter]. Meanwhile, my mother kept signaling to me to go with him. “No, No,” I said. I told him that if he took my mother as well, then I would go with him. So he left, and I stayed behind.

In another instance, Khoren, a survivor from Jibin, recounted that his father resisted letting him remain with a Turkish neighbor who wanted to keep him. He said that the deportation caravan had barely started moving when someone called out his father’s name:

It was Yashar, a partner to my father in the fields. He told my father that since we were all marching to our death, his dad asked if Khoren would stay with us and help us with the fields. I remember my father’s answer very well: “If we all die and Khoren is alive, what is the good of that for the family or the nation? He will become a Turk like you. I won’t give him,” he said. But the gendarmerie hit my dad with the butt of his rifle; they snatched me and placed me on Yashar’s horse, who then took me to his house.

It is unclear from this account whether Khoren’s rescuer was motivated by altruism or by the desire to add another servant to the work force.

Some Armenians faced another moral dilemma: they were given the option of converting to Islam and remaining in their homes while their neighbors were deported. Our interviews indicate that very few Armenians elected this option—in fact, only one survivor’s family did so out of our sample of one hundred interviews. More characteristic was the following statement made by a survivor from Eskişehir: “Turkish officials came [to my father] and said that he need not be deported, but he must become a Turk [by converting to Islam]. But he refused and said that since they had already drafted his sons and brought them to that condition, he would not give up his Armenian identity. He also said that he would not give his daughters to Turks. On this, they made us leave.”

The individual who survived because his mother converted to Islam began to weep during the interview as he told how his neighbors left their town. Very few Armenians from his city survived the deportations, although his entire family lived.

Occasionally, Armenians avoided deportation for reasons other than conversion to Islam. For example, a survivor from Konia said that her eldest sister was allowed to remain because her husband was a tailor who sewed clothes for one of the pashas. Another woman told a similar story—her family remained because her mother was an expert seamstress who was needed to sew uniforms in the local factory for Turkish soldiers. Yet another survivor’s uncle was a specialist in making paint and, therefore, was not deported. Also, on occasion, a father might be excused from deportation if his son was serving in the Turkish army, although apparently this was not the regular practice.
was filled with sick people as well as corpses of Armenians who had recently died.

Those who were still ambulatory were allowed to leave the barn, and as Anaguel was exiting from the place, a Turkish man approached and asked if she would like to go home with him. Weak from dysentery and lack of food, she readily agreed to his offer. However, when Anaguel arrived at his house, the wife rejected her, realizing that she was sick. One of the sons then took this young child to a desolate place, removed her jacket, and left her there. Anaguel was completely alone, not just orphaned but also separated from the caravan of deported Armenians. What was she to do?

She started walking, and after a while encountered some extremely poor Turkish women who were living in caves. She approached one, kissed her on the hand, and was eventually taken in by a woman who was childless. Anaguel recovered her health while living among these women and was instructed to go beg for her portion of food. This was so contrary to Armenian custom that she found it extremely difficult at first, but hunger overcame her reluctance. Later, the only problem was that she often consumed the food she obtained from begging before returning home.

The women with whom Anaguel was living were barely able to eke out an existence, and after a while her adoptive mother died. Once again, Anaguel was on her own. She continued to beg for food as well as to cope with a recurrent eye problem that had troubled her even before the deportation. As she struggled for survival, she told us how she used to fantasize that her mother was rocking her in a cradle and comforting her, especially from the pain in her eye. But Anaguel could not dwell on these thoughts for long—she had to concentrate on feeding herself.

One day she went to a large khan where food was being distributed, and a woman singled her out and gave her a whole loaf of bread, saying to her, “You are a gavar.” She denied the statement and insisted that she was a Turk. But this Turkish woman continued to give her a generous portion of food whenever she came and also offered her a quilt on which to sleep. But this woman was not the only one to single her out for special treatment.

Another time, as Anaguel was sitting on a rock trying to warm her feet, a well-dressed Turkish woman saw her, realized that she was an Armenian orphan, and offered to take her home. Food was plentiful in the woman’s home, but it was also so rich that at first she couldn’t digest it. The woman treated her extremely well and gave Anaguel to her daughter, who had recently married. She lived with the daughter until an older Armenian orphan in the household persuaded her to run away to an orphanage that had been established.

Our interviews are filled with stories like Anaguel’s. The feelings of utter aloneness and abandonment that survivors had experienced during childhood marked them for life. As an adult, Anaguel was distinguished by two characteristics, both rooted in her childhood experience. She was a very fearful woman, always worried about being attacked. But another characteristic was at least as prominent: she was constantly feeding people or taking them food. She undoubtedly had little control over her fears, given the insecurity of her childhood; but her generosity in feeding others was volitional, and a wonderful symbol of her attempt to overcome her own childhood deprivations.

A CHILD’S VIEW OF ABANDONMENT

A number of the survivor-children we interviewed spent months and sometimes years nearly completely alone, without parents or other significant adults to nurture them. The feelings of loneliness and loss that survivors reported are very poignant; some of the most emotional moments in our interviews occurred when survivors described the death of, or separation from, their parents. For example, a survivor told us that a Turkish man was volunteering to take Armenian boys, and his mother decided that this was best for him:

That night, I and two other boys slept at this Turkish agha’s house. In the morning my mother brought a bundle of clothes for me and left it with a Turkish woman whose husband had worked in my father’s bakery and who had lived with this agha for years. I was there when she came to the house to leave my clothes. I was sitting there and I saw her, but it was as though I was in a trance. We never talked, and she never kissed me. I don’t know if it was because she could not bear it from sadness. I never saw again any of those clothes or anything that my mother might have left in them for me. The deportation caravan now went on without me; they still had two hours to make it to the River Euphrates. When they got there, [we heard] they were all killed.

Such moments are never forgotten, and survivors frequently wept when they told us about their final memories of a father or mother.

Before telling us how her own mother had given her up, a survivor offered an account of an infant who had been abandoned by its mother.
Their caravan had stopped to rest, and an aunt had taken her by the hand to investigate the remains of belongings left behind by previous caravans. They noticed a little tent, and inside of it was a hammock holding a crying infant, who had obviously been abandoned. Nearby, they also saw a bundle in a blanket; it was the tightly wrapped body of an old woman. After recounting these desolate images, the child-survivor told us of her own separation from her mother:

About this time, Turkish or Kurdish women would come and take children away. They approached my mother, too. Realizing that there was nothing but death facing us at that point, she gave me to them... She said to me that we will come later and join you. So these two women held my hand and took me away... I kept looking back and wondering how I could let go of their hands and run back. So I kept walking—with my eyes and heart behind me.

This survivor remembered being taken to a room where there were children speaking Turkish, which she didn’t understand. She sat and watched the children play, feeling utterly alone. At the end of the day, the children left and she was truly alone, with no one coming to take her home—so she simply fell asleep on the floor. Experiences such as this are burned into the conscious and unconscious life of the child-survivors we interviewed.

Sadly, similar stories of separation are repeated again and again, although each has its uniqueness and poignancy. For example, a young Armenian girl was being watched over by her grandmother when a Turkish man told the grandmother that he wanted her. She remembered the man telling her grandmother that all of these children were going to die and that at least she would have a chance to survive if she went with him. So the next morning the man returned: “When he came, I remember my grandmother sitting like a dead person, crying and crying. The man took me and another Armenian girl away. He gave me to another person, a young woman who did not have a child.”

She remembered sobbing and sobbing, and she could not be comforted. Her adoptive mother told the girl that she would take her to her grandmother the next day, but the woman was merely deceiving her to quiet her, because “day after day no one took me to her.” She stayed with this family for about three years, during which time she forgot the Armenian language, and in her words, “I became a Turk.”

Not all of these partings were resisted by children, however. A survivor from Marash recalled that they were very hungry when they observed some Turks nearby selling madzoon (yogurt). She described the trade that was made: “So they said that if my mother would give us girls

to them, they would give them madzoon. So my aunt does, in the absence of my mother and grandmother who were away grinding wheat. It was my older sister and myself. My aunt said to us that we would be fed well and that they would bring us with them once a week and give them more madzoon. We were hungry, so it sounded good to us.”

Shortly after they arrived at the home of the new family, she began to cry, “I won’t stay here.” Meanwhile, her mother had returned and was furious when she discovered that the aunt had sold the children for a serving of madzoon. Fortunately, the children’s discontent with their new Turkish household provoked the wife to tell her husband to return them. As they arrived back with the other deportees, they found their mother praying for their return. Describing their reunion, this survivor began to weep.

Children who were abducted, abandoned, or sold to Turks or Kurds had many conflicting feelings. For example, a survivor told us of his disappointment that, when a group of Kurds took children away, he was overlooked: “I remember standing by the wall and crying that I did not get to go with them.” On the other hand, another survivor said that he asked himself what was wrong with him that his mother had kept his brother but had abandoned him. But even as he uttered these words, as if he had spoken heresy, he immediately countered his question with the comment, “But what could we do? Everyone had to fend for himself.” And another survivor described her emotions after she was nearly abducted but struggled free, only to see another girl taken in her place. She said that she felt very bad and, upon revealing her feelings to her father, was told “to be quiet and to look after my own self, because they may still come after us.”

FEELINGS OF LOSS AND LONELINESS

Albert was born in the village of Ailanji, near the city of Yozgat. He remembered it as being filled with orchards and trees, and this area was known especially for the wheat grown there. His house was on a hill, with a river flowing in front of it. His father was a farmer, but a progressive man, and in 1912 had gone to the United States with the intention of bringing his family as soon as he was established in business. The deportations, however, interrupted these plans.

Albert’s earliest foreboding of the impending disaster came when a number of Armenian soldiers were murdered in a valley near their village. His mother went to investigate but was told to return or she, also,
children and mother-in-law. Together, the mother-in-law and Aghavni alternated carrying her three-year-old on their backs, while the baby was carried in one of their arms.  

For seven months they walked. Her grandmother was drowned by gendarmes in the River Euphrates. Along the route, two of her aunts were also killed. Her uncle and a neighbor had their throats slit by Turks. Her brother fled from the caravan and was presumably killed; she never saw him again. Food and water were extremely scarce. In fact, Aghavni remembered wetting a little gown her infant son was wearing and wringing water into his mouth. When telling us this story, she asked rhetorically, "Can you forget that? Every day that I drink water that [image] comes before my eyes." At night they slept in the open, without any protective covering. She remembered women in the caravan being raped by gendarmes at night. But her mother-in-law kept comforting her by saying, "My son was good, and no one will enter his bed."

While being deported, Aghavni observed hundreds of young women commit suicide by drowning themselves in the Euphrates. She said the rivers were awash with bodies of people who had been killed by the Turks, as well as those who had drowned themselves. At one point, in despair, she left her children on the riverbank and threw herself in the river, but a relative saw her and solicited the assistance of a kind gendarme who pulled her out of the water. As she had lapsed into unconsciousness, the next thing she remembered was the gendarme slapping her on the back trying to revive her, and her young daughter crying in a thin voice, "Gendarme, don't hit Aghavni. Don't hit Aghavni." This gendarme was an older man with a real conscience, she said. In fact, he gave Aghavni three gold pieces and instructed her, "Take it and don't throw yourself in again."

Her good fortune was short-lived, however. They had traveled for barely three hours the next day when the caravan was attacked by Kurds. The three gold pieces were stolen, as well as a shawl that she had folded inside of her son's diaper; it had been a prized wedding present. Stripped of everything but their lives, Aghavni and her mother-in-law continued to carry their children as they were herded toward Der-Zor: "We went by way of the mountains; we did not go on the correct routes from town to town. We went up and down mountains. Up and down. I had an apron and I used to wrap my baby in it and hold the other end with my teeth, and climb the mountains that way." Both of her children died on this journey, and perhaps because it was too painful, she did not give the details of their deaths. Her mother-in-law also died, but not until the two of them had almost reached Der-Zor.

All alone on the outskirts of Der-Zor, her resources—physical, mental, and spiritual—were spent. Exhausted, she lay down naked on the bank of the Euphrates River, ready to die. But as she lay there, two elderly Turks came upon her: "[One of the Turks] took his stick and poked me with it. You know, even when you're dead, you still don't want to die. So I turned when he poked me. When I moved, he said 'Tabour, take this girl home. She is a sweet one. Bring her up, and when your son returns from the army, give her to him.' ... I was lying down, dead. I got up, but I could not walk. ... Also, I was all naked. And I was embarrassed."

One of the men took Aghavni home. While his wife bathed her, he went out and bought her clothes. She lay in bed for three weeks, and after that, she was sent to live with a servant and his wife who continued to nurse her back to health. When she remarried several years later, she named her firstborn son Bedros in memory of her deceased husband, and her second son after her brother who had escaped the caravan and was presumed dead.

Aghavni's story exemplifies many themes that characterize the experience of women during the deportations. By the end of the deportation journey, all her support structures had completely disappeared. Her husband had been killed, her mother was shot, and her mother-in-law was dead from exhaustion. By the time she reached Der-Zor, she was completely alone. She had struggled against insuperable odds to care for her children, and after their deaths she lost all sense of meaning in her life. She survived, however, because someone cared for her. These themes reverberate throughout our interviews, with substantial variations.

CARING FOR CHILDREN

Children posed a substantial dilemma during the deportations. Whose life should be given priority: an infant who was being carried and nursed or a child who was older and strong enough to walk? Given the circumstances of the deportations, mothers continually faced the terrible question of whether to give their children to passing Turks or Kurds in the hope of enhancing their chance for survival or to struggle ahead together as a family unit, despite the probable outcome that both mother and children would die. Such are the tragic moral choices that genocide so often requires, although it is perhaps an overstatement to call them
“choices.” In these circumstances, people respond rather instinctively to what seems best given the requirements of the moment.

For example, a survivor from Aintab recalled that both of his parents were accompanying him on the deportation when it started to hail. For a while they continued to plod forward in spite of hail the size of walnuts. Hagop, however, said that he began to freeze and simply couldn’t walk any farther.

I said to my mother, “Please leave me here and go on.” She said, “How can I do that?” “I can’t [go farther],” I said. “My legs don’t move anymore.” So with tears, crying, they left. I cried and they cried. It was dark.

In the morning I woke up, and in the midst of all the water, the sun came up—a sweet sun came out and I stood up and now I am crying, saying, “Mommy, Mommy,” and eating whatever grass I can. All alone, with no one around in the desert, I am walking, calling for mother. Crying and eating grass.

At one point in his wandering, he heard his name being called. Years later, he learned that his mother had walked a little farther after their separation but then, unable to tolerate the thought of abandoning her son, had said, “If my son is going to die, let us stay here. We’ll die, too.”

According to Hagop: “They slept a little bit away from me and in the morning, they too got up and started my direction, while I went theirs. They called ‘Hagop,’ and I called ‘Mother,’ but we missed each other and lost each other.” Twelve years later, Hagop was reunited with his mother as a result of a newspaper advertisement that she read listing the names and birthplaces of hundreds of orphans.

Survivors told us numerous stories about babies they had seen abandoned along the deportation routes. Sometimes they were put under the shade of a tree, and other times they were simply left along the roadside to die. On occasion, they were also left on rocks in streams, from which they would tumble into the water and drown—a merciful death, perhaps. One survivor justified these actions by saying that mothers simply could not carry their infants any longer. Furthermore, she explained, “They themselves had nothing to eat, so that they didn’t have milk for their infants [whom they were breast-feeding]. The child screams, so what is the mother to do? . . . They would simply set them down and go on.” Occasionally, mothers apparently acted collectively in deciding to part from their infants. Two survivors told us independently that in front of a khan (inn) in Urfa, perhaps dozens of mothers placed their infants under a tree and walked on.

The moral anguish experienced by women in circumstances that forced them to break the primal bond between mother and child is almost unimaginable. But in story after story we heard accounts of such extreme conditions. For example, a survivor from Belikesir offered this account of discovering an abandoned infant while they were camping one night during the deportation:

We were in the tent at night when we heard a baby crying and crying without stopping. My uncle said to my mother, “Mariam, let me go and see this baby.” He returned to tell us that he saw a little baby boy alone, who apparently had been left behind. We tried to feed him and tried to care for him a bit. My uncle had him in his lap and was walking with him. Then there was another woman on the way who kept crying and crying. We asked her why she was crying. And she said to us that she had an only child, a baby boy, and that she had left him behind. So my uncle’s wife asked her if she would recognize the baby if she saw him. [Upon seeing the infant] she answered that it was her child. So my uncle took the baby to her, and she fainted instantly. She finally revived and said that it was her baby. So she took him and began walking . . . My uncle had several babies, but they all died. He loved children. Many, many babies were left behind like that.

This survivor reported seeing many infants on the deportation routes that had dried up and turned to skeletons. She commented that these sights made her feel that she was going crazy, especially when she saw abandoned children who were still alive. She remembered these children crying as they passed them, “Mommy, a cup of water. Mommy, a piece of bread.”

A survivor from Chanakkale told us how they had left her eight-year-old brother behind on the deportation. The donkey on which she and her brother had been riding died along the way, and so she and the brother were walking when he finally declared:

“Leave me here. I can’t go on.” He said that his legs were bleeding from rubbing against each other. But how can a mother leave the child? My father said, “Leave him. We will be left behind, too. We will all be left. Armenian woman, leave him.”

Now my parents were arguing. My mother can’t part from him. Finally, they left him, sat him down, and left some food with him. But no water. We walked on, but my mother kept looking back to the child and kept crying. But my father kept saying, “Walk, woman. We will each stay behind too, one by one. We must. This is our fate.”

This survivor said that she remembers this event as clearly as if “it’s across from me now.” Her mother’s eyes, she said, continued to be “behind her,” looking back at her abandoned child.

It is clear that these images haunted survivors well into their adult lives. For example, one of the two survivors who told us about the babies left behind in Urfa pondered reflectively in our interview: “Did they kill
them, or did they die of hunger?” She finally said, “This scene is always in front of my eyes, you know.” She remembered, in particular, an abandoned infant whom she described as a “cute, chubby baby.” “What was his fate?” she wondered.

Because most of our respondents were young at the time of the genocide, we can document how these scenes of abandonment affected surviving children, but we have little firsthand evidence of the emotions of mothers who left their children. However, we do have one striking account of a mother’s tortured reflections after the deportation:

Our neighbor used to come over sometimes and say to my mother to come and listen to this poor Miriam Hanem. I, too, used to go to look. She would be sitting on the floor, crying and crying, pulling her hair. She would tell her story, over and over: “I killed two of them. I killed two of them,” she would repeat. Apparently, she was walking, holding one child’s hand and holding the other in her arms. On the way, they would eat grass or nothing at all. From all of this, they had diarrhea and, meanwhile, they could not stop because the gendarmes would beat them and make them walk. So she let go of one of the kids because he kept dragging her behind. She couldn’t walk on with him pulling her back. So he was left behind. Meanwhile, she walked on and on until the child in her lap died. She buried this one, but then would cry to us, “What happened to the one who was alive? The wolves ate him; the wolves ate him. One died, I know. The other one the wolves ate.”

For the mothers who abandoned children and survived themselves, we can only assume that, as with Miriam, tremendous guilt must have overshadowed their conscious and subterranean emotions, even though from a utilitarian standpoint, abandoning an infant might have been the only reasonable thing to do.

We heard several accounts of children being sold for a loaf or two of bread. Although the motives for these transactions are complex and not entirely clear, it is doubtful that parents sold children simply to assist their own survival. Indeed, the sister of one survivor protested when her father sold two orphan neighbor children who were accompanying them, because she, also, wanted to go (thinking that a surrogate family might at least have food to eat). Another survivor argued that his parents gave up his twelve-year-old sister and nine-year-old brother on the calculation that they would be better off than staying with them. However, his seventeen-year-old sister begged to be drowned rather than given away because she feared being sexually abused. She protested, “Brother, throw me in the river, but don’t give me away.” This survivor asked us rhetorically, “What could we do? If we resisted, they would shoot us on the spot.”

Other children were forcibly abducted. Local Turks and Kurds went among the deportees taking whomever they wanted. Sometimes girls were abducted at night; other times children and women were treated as if they were animals for auction, we were told repeatedly in our interviews. A survivor from Jibin said that there were about 150 people left in their caravan when they entered a Turkish city and were commanded to sit down under some trees: “While we sat to eat, the gendarmes came to take money from us. Also, the villagers began appearing and taking away young children. They would grab them, and holding them by the hand, lead them away. Someone came and took my hand, too. But my grandmother grabbed me and would not let me go.” A gendarme who was guarding the caravan saw this and hit this survivor’s grandmother with the butt of his rifle. She fell to the ground, and the boy was taken away, along with a number of other children.

On occasion, however, resistance was successful. For example, a survivor from Keghi described how her mother had taken her to the river to wash. Up to this point, her face had always been covered. However, a gendarme saw how pretty she was and grabbed her. Although her mother fainted in the scuffle, somehow the girl managed to break free and mingle with the rest of the people in the caravan.

The emotional, physical, and spiritual stamina required to attend to children day after day was extraordinary. A survivor from Hadjin stated that every morning on the deportation journey, her mother would start the day with prayer and read a passage of scripture from the Bible. Her Christian faith played an important role in giving her strength and confidence. And at night, she remembered her mother sitting between her and a younger sister, covering the three of them with a comforter or blanket. She wondered when her mother slept, commenting: “When I used to open my eyes, I saw that my mother was awake and not sleeping. She used to be afraid, because they used to kidnap girls—many.” Describing her mother’s strategy for preserving her daughters, she said: “My mother used to keep us dirty intentionally—in the face especially—and would wrap rags on our heads. She did such things. She used to put dirty clothes on us, two or three sets of clothing at once.”

Women also had to cope with childbirth on the deportations. A survivor who had been raped by a gendarme said that months later, after the child was born, she still had to find food while living as a vagrant refugee. Revealing her conflicting emotions toward this child, she recalled that she would lay the baby on a rock, unattended, and go off to gather grass to eat. When she came back hours later, the baby would be
there crying. The child lived only about a week, and when he died, there was no burial—they simply put the child aside and went on. The survival rate of newborns appears very low, based on references made to childbirth in our interviews. Typical of the comments we heard, a survivor from Aintab stated rather matter-of-factly: “My mother was pregnant on the way. So a little sister, Mary, was born. But since there was no food to eat, the baby died.”

One of the most difficult tasks for parents must have been coping with the deaths of their offspring, and more specifically, what were they to do with children who died? Were they simply to cast them aside? If not, how were they to bury them? We were told a poignant story of a father who held his dead daughter throughout the day, wrapped in a blanket on a horse that she had been riding, refusing until they stopped for the night to tell his wife that their daughter had died. When they reached their destination at the end of the day, he took the child down from the horse and laid her on the ground: “My mother threw herself on her body. After all, it was her daughter. We had to leave the next day. We only had a knife and nothing else to dig with to bury her. So we wrapped her in cloth and left her that way. The rest of the way, my mother used to weep and weep. My dad used to try to comfort her and used to say that we were all going to die.”

All of the structures that normally give support in times of birth and death had been stripped away from these deportees. Yet something deep in the human spirit continued to crave for rituals of closure and transition, such as burial. A survivor who was a young boy during the deportations told us how he and several friends had buried eight small infants who had washed up on the shore of the Euphrates. They dug shallow graves with whatever implements they could find, faced east and crossed themselves, and then drew a cross in the sand next to each grave. Another survivor told us that, lacking any implements for digging, they placed a cloth over the face of a child who had died, as an act of burial.

RAPE

References to sexual abuse abound in our interviews, but one of the most graphic accounts was of a young girl who was raped by one of the Turkish leaders of a town through which their caravan passed. Gendarmes went through the caravan and found an especially pretty twelve-year-old girl. They dragged her away from her mother, telling the weeping woman that they would return her. And, in fact, the child was returned, but she had been terribly abused and died. The witness to this event said that the women gathered around the mother, attempting to comfort her. Several of them dug a hole near the wall of the city of Dikranagerd. They put the girl’s body in this shallow grave and on the wall of the city wrote, “Shushawn buried here.” This event made an indelible impression on the survivor who offered this account not only because of the violence of the rape but also because of the attempt of the women to comfort one of their own.

Another survivor told us that he and his Turkish agha happened on a soldier who was raping a young Armenian girl along the roadside. He said that “she was bleeding, beaten up, [and was] in bad shape.” However, what is distinctive in this account is the fact that the survivor’s adoptive Turkish father, who was a leader in the community, challenged the soldier, saying that such acts were against the Koran, and threatened to take him to court. Meanwhile, the girl kept crying through this exchange, saying that the soldier had thrown her mother in a well, and she begged the agha to dispose of her, likewise.

One woman told us that she had been forcibly taken as a wife by a Turk and against her will had borne a child. However, when the orphanages opened after the war, she ran away from her “husband”—which also meant abandoning her child. Such decisions obviously involve profoundly conflicting feelings: on the one hand, the child was “tainted” by the rape; yet on the other hand, it was her child, born of her womb. Although this survivor decided to abandon her child and flee to the orphanage, we will never know the number of Armenian women who had been forced into marriages yet did not leave their Turkish husbands.

SUICIDE

Echoing through our interviews are recurring references—sometimes only a sentence or two—to young Armenian women committing suicide. Although we obviously could not interview those who had died, we speculate that many of these young women killed themselves out of fear of being abducted as wives and/or raped. The method of suicide in most instances was drowning in the Euphrates River. In fact, this practice was common enough that several survivors told us the words of a song which was sung in the orphanages that included the phrase “Virgin girls holding each others’ hands, threw themselves into the River Euphrates.”
Davis also described specific events, such as this massacre on July 7, 1915, for which there were eyewitness accounts.

On Monday many men were arrested both at Harput and Mezreh and put in prison. At daybreak Tuesday morning they were taken out and made to march towards an almost uninhabited mountain. There were about eight hundred in all and they were tied together in groups of fourteen each. That afternoon they arrived in a small Kurdish village where they were kept over night in the mosque and other buildings. During all this time they were without food or water. All their money and much of their clothing had been taken from them. On Wednesday morning they were taken to a valley a few hours’ distance where they were all made to sit down. Then the gendarmes began shooting them until they had killed nearly all of them. Some who had not been killed by bullets were then disposed of with knives and bayonets.  

The State Department files also contain correspondence from other consuls, such as Oscar S. Heizer in Trebizond, Edward I. Nathan in Mersina, and others, and their accounts are similar to those we have quoted.

THE BRYCE/TOYNBEE REPORT

Shortly after reports of the spring 1915 deportations began to appear in the Western press, Viscount James Bryce, a member of the British Parliament and former ambassador to the United States, secured the services of a young historian, Arnold Toynbee, to collect and organize eyewitness accounts by missionaries, doctors and nurses, travelers, and Armenian survivors themselves. Toynbee organized 149 separate statements by region so that it was possible to compare accounts from one city or village with another.

One of the accounts was written by Rev. Haroutioun Essayan, the Vicar of the Apostolic Church at Aleppo, and was smuggled out in the sole of a shoe by a refugee who gave it to the Armenian Apostolic Bishop of Cairo, who then had the handwriting authenticated. In his letter, Father Essayan describes a group of ten thousand deported women and children that he had observed:

They had been on the road for from three to five months; they had been plundered several times over, and have marched along naked and starving; the Government gave them on one single occasion a morsel of bread—a few had it twice. It is said that the number of these deported widows will reach 60,000; they are so exhausted that they cannot stand upright; the majority have great sores on their feet, through having to march barefoot.

In this group, Father Essayan saw no men or boys over eleven years old, the latter having all been slaughtered on the way. His letter also states, “one does not see a single pretty face among the survivors,” implying that all such women had been abducted. In addition, Father Essayan offered estimates of survivors from the various caravans. For example, he said that one thousand Armenians were deported from one city, and only four hundred arrived in Aleppo. Of these survivors, he estimated that 60 percent were sick, and all were suffering from serious malnutrition.

Lest one assume that Father Essayan’s report is biased because it was written by an Armenian, we can also cite similar evidence from a German missionary’s account. Because Germany and Turkey were allies during the war, this document was particularly incriminating, and the German censor immediately moved to confiscate the publication:

Between the 10th and the 30th May [1915], 1,200 of the most prominent Armenians and other Christians, without distinction of confession, were arrested in the Vilayets of Diyarbekir and Mamouret-ul-Aziz [Kharpert]...

On the 30th May, 674 of them were embarked on thirteen Tigris barges, under the pretext that they were to be taken to Mosul. The Vali’s aide-de-camp, assisted by fifty gendarmes, was in charge of the convoy. Half the gendarmes started off on the barges, while the other half rode along the bank. A short time after the start the prisoners were stripped of all their money (about £6,000 Turkish) and then of their clothes; after that they were thrown into the river. The gendarmes on the bank were ordered to let none of them escape.

Continuing his account, the author describes other atrocities he had observed or heard of:

For a whole month corpses were observed floating down the River Euphrates nearly every day, often in batches of from two to six corpses bound together. The male corpses are in many cases hideously mutilated (sexual organs cut off, and so on), the female corpses are ripped open. . . . The corpses stranded on the bank are devoured by dogs and vultures. To this fact there are many German eyewitnesses. An employee of the Baghdad Railway has brought the information that the prisons of Birecik are filled regularly every day and emptied every night—into the Euphrates. Between Diyarbekir and Ourfa a German cavalry captain saw innumerable corpses lying unburied all along the road.

In addition to reporting incidents of mass slaughter, this statement also gives examples of individual suffering. For example, a woman who gave birth to twins while being deported was allowed no time for recovery and was forced to start walking the next day. In despair, she placed the newborns under a bush and collapsed herself a short time later.

Among the 149 documents contained in the Bryce/Toynbee volume, it is possible to find, almost at random, equally graphic passages detailing
the deportations. Two final examples will suffice, both describing events in the city of Moush:

The leading Armenians of the town and the headmen of the villages were subjected to revolting tortures. Their finger nails and then their toenails were forcibly extracted; their teeth were knocked out, and in some cases their noses were whittled down. . . . The female relatives of the victims who came to the rescue were outraged in public before the very eyes of their mutilated husbands and brothers. . . .

The shortest method for disposing of the women and children concentrated in the various camps was to burn them. Fire was set to large wooden sheds in Aldjan, Megrakom, Khaskeg, and other Armenian villages, and these absolutely helpless women and children were roasted to death.

The above account, offered by an Armenian, is substantiated by Alma Johanssen, a German missionary eyewitness to events in Moush: "When there was no one left in Bitlis to massacre, their attention was diverted to Moush. Cruelties had already been committed, but so far not too publicly; now, however, they started to shoot people down without any cause, and to beat them to death simply for the pleasure of doing so." She then describes how Moush was burned:

We all had to take refuge in the cellar for fear of our orphanage catching fire. It was heartrending to hear the cries of the people and children who were being burned to death in their houses. The soldiers took great delight in hearing them, and when people who were out in the street during the bombardment fell dead, the soldiers merely laughed at them. . . .

I went to the Mutessarif and begged him to have mercy on the children at least, but in vain. He replied that the Armenian children must perish with their nation. All our people were taken from our hospital and orphanage; they left us three female servants. Under these atrocious circumstances, Moush was burned to the ground.

This German missionary left Moush for Kharpert, where, she reported, conditions were no better: "In Harput and Mezré the people have had to endure terrible tortures. They have had their eyebrows plucked out, their breasts cut off, their nails torn off; their torturers hew off their feet or else hammer nails into them just as they do in shoeing horses." These selected accounts are representative of the statements contained in the Bryce/Toynbee volume presented to the British Parliament. Because they are arranged by city, it is possible to corroborate statements by witnesses who did not know one another and could not have collaborated in concocting a story. This volume is extremely important not only because it provides detailed information but also because it was published within months of the time eyewitnesses wrote their accounts. Additionally, the report concludes with a summary of the genocide written by Arnold Toynbee, which continues to be a valuable overview of the events that occurred in 1915 and 1916.

OTHER SOURCES

U.S. State Department files and the blue book compiled by Bryce and Toynbee are but two examples of eyewitness testimony on the Armenian Genocide. In subsequent chapters we will quote from the autobiography of Henry Morgenthau, the American ambassador to Turkey from 1913 to 1916. He had regular contact with the Young Turk leaders and kept the State Department informed of the atrocities that were reported to him by eyewitnesses to the deportations. Morgenthau's autobiography includes passages from his diary, in which he reflects on conversations with Enver Pasha (Minister of War), Talat Pasha (Minister of the Interior), and other Young Turk leaders, as well as with the German ambassador to Turkey, Hans von Wangenheim, to gain insight into the centralized nature of the Armenian Genocide.

Other informants include Dr. Johannes Lepsius, who as head of the Deutsche Orient-Mission until 1917, was an important German advocate for addressing the plight of the Armenians. He became interested in the Armenians during the 1894–96 massacres and published a compilation of eyewitness accounts of the slaughter of more than one hundred thousand Armenians. In response to the deportations, he published a report in 1916 that once again cited extensively from eyewitnesses to those events. It was printed in an expanded form in 1919 and included an interview that he had with Enver Bey in August 1915. The document went into multiple printings, but not without difficulty. Copies were confiscated by the Berlin police, and Lepsius was considered politically subversive for documenting the atrocities of Germany's Turkish ally. A third important publication by Lepsius was Deutschland und Armenien 1914–1918, which reprinted 444 documents, many of them reports by German consuls in provincial capitals such as Adana, Aleppo, Erzerum, and elsewhere.

In addition to these compilations, many individual accounts of the genocide have also been printed. For example, Dr. Martin Niepage, a German teacher in Aleppo, wrote a compelling account of what he and