

TRANSMITTED DEFIANCE: GENOCIDE RESISTANCE ACROSS GENERATIONS OF ARMENIAN WOMEN

Nikki Marczak

During and after the genocide, Armenian women resisted: silently, discreetly, but sometimes also loudly and overtly; and often in spiritual or cultural ways. A common thread through women's testimonies is a spirit of defiance - a sense of dignity, resilience and a refusal to allow their identity to be destroyed - that they have passed on to future generations. This article presents the concept of *transmitted defiance*, a gendered process that occurs transgenerationally. A hundred years after the genocide, women who are descended from survivors often view their relatives' actions as inspiration for their own lives. Further, many have inherited rebelliousness and an indelible sense of Armenian identity from their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, which manifests in their own contemporary acts of resistance.

Key-words: Armenian Women, Armenian Genocide, resistance, transgenerational trauma, resilience.

Introduction

In 1918, Aguline Dertazyan was volunteering at a Red Cross hospital in the town of her birth, Hadjin, when Turkish forces attacked. A bullet penetrated the hospital window, passed through the body of another nurse, killing her; and then lodged itself below Aguline's rib. She survived. After the war, Aguline, who had been educated at boarding school in Constantinople, staged a play called *The Valley of Tears* in an Adana theatre to raise relief funds for survivors of the genocide. Moving to Lebanon and eventually America, she continued to perform in the theatre until late in her seventies, the bullet still wedged in her flesh. In a characteristic act of rebellion, at the age of 86, Aguline told her family she refused to be buried with a Turkish bullet in her body.

"*She was very, very strong-willed, very stubborn,*" explains her granddaughter, Lory Tatoulian, a performer in Armenian theatre and film in Los Angeles. The admiration for her grandmother is palpable: "*She gave birth to children; she functioned with a bullet in her body!*"¹ Lory believes she has inherited some of Aguline: her love of performance and an artistic nature, a dedication to preserving Armenian culture and importantly, a characteristic she refers to in her grandmother as "tenacity": "*I see her story as a source of strength; when I face problems in my life I always think of my grandmother...and how she was so resilient.*" To honor Aguline's wishes, when she died her family arranged for the bullet to be surgically removed and donated to the Hadjin Museum in Armenia.²

1. Interview conducted with Lory Tatoulian, May 15, 2016.

2. Ibid.

During and after the genocide, Armenian women resisted: silently, discreetly, but sometimes also loudly and overtly; and often in spiritual or cultural ways. A common thread in women's testimonies (and unmistakable in the story of Aguline Dertazyan) is a spirit of defiance - a sense of dignity, resilience and a refusal to allow their identity to be destroyed - that they have passed on to future generations, in what I conceptualize as a process of *transmitted defiance*. A hundred years later, descendants of survivors view their relatives' actions as inspiration for their own lives and appear to have inherited elements of rebelliousness and resistance from them. The memories of mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers and great-aunts nurture their identity both as Armenians and as women.

In many cases, these have been passed directly from survivors to younger generations, especially from grandmothers to granddaughters. The USC Shoah Foundation's online collection contains video testimony of survivors being interviewed by their granddaughters, often with an emphasis on cultural tradition and continuity, which has provided descendants with a deeply-held Armenian identity and even perhaps, a capacity to transcend the trauma of the genocide. In one such video, Siranoush Boyajian follows her description of churches being burned down, with the memory of particular bread served at Mass. She says she has been making this type of bread for her church in America for over 20 years: "*We still have our customs... We try to teach our children... They're proud to be an Armenian, because they see what we went through to come this far.*"³

The relationships between family members, and the role descendants take on in preserving their relatives' memories, echo the historical importance of intergenerational relationships in pre-war Armenian families. Traditionally, many generations lived together, and cultural knowledge was transmitted between grandmothers, mothers and daughters. Survivor Bertha Nakshian Ketchian described her own grandmother, Mariam, who refused to give her away to a Turkish official, emphasizing her grandmother's courage and the importance of having been able to preserve her Armenian identity:

She was afraid of nothing and nobody. ... And now she was fighting with all her might and cleverness to protect what was left of her once thriving large family... You saved me from going to worse than death and staying in the house of the enemy to become a Turk. ... Dear Grandmother Mariam, I appreciate what you did with all my heart. Moreover, as the years go by, I realize more fully how very much it means to me to have lived as who I really am.⁴

Spiritual Resistance and Memory

Non-military forms of resistance, so often the only option of resistance available to women, have generally been sidelined in genocide historiography. An important exception is found in the work of scholar Yehuda Bauer, who developed the concept of *Amidah* or "standing up

3. Interview of Siranoush Boyajian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Armenian Film Foundation, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56452&returnIndex=0>.

4. Bertha Nakshian Ketchian, *The Zoryan Institute Survivors' Memoirs Number 1: In the Shadow of the Fortress: The Genocide Remembered* (Massachusetts: Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation, Inc., 1988), 15.

against” to describe acts of survival and spiritual resistance by Jews during the Holocaust.⁵ I assert that such acts were fundamental to Armenian women’s experiences of the genocide, firstly because it was predominantly women who endured the inhumanity of death marches across the desert, witnessing the murders of loved ones and attempting to survive and protect their children. Further, women’s spiritual resistance was significant because of the centrality of cultural destruction and forced assimilation in Turkish policy and practice. The very act of a woman maintaining her identity, if only in her heart, was embedded with resistance and carried the risk of punishment, even death.

Survivor testimonies highlight countless examples of Armenian women clandestinely maintaining their language and traditional customs on deportation marches, and for those women who were abducted, in the homes of their captors. While acknowledging post-genocide attempts to find meaning in tragedy - an issue I will return to - it is important to note that women’s testimonies, in particular, do frequently refer to examples of “sisterhood”. Some testimonies describe women helping each other during childbirth or working together to dig shallow graves for family members who had perished, in order to maintain a semblance of humanity in inhuman conditions. Some child survivors describe how their mothers tried to instill a sense of pride, and urged them to remember their Armenianness. In the early stages of the genocide, women faced the brutal searches for weapons in their homes, frequently alone after husbands had been arrested. Occasionally women yelled at and cursed the gendarmes and other perpetrators. Many women stood up to pressure to convert or alternatively feigned conversion, speaking only to one another of their continuing Christian prayers. Others kept their will to survive with small acts of disobedience, seemingly minor, yet significant in the context of dehumanization and genocide. In her memoir, *Rebirth*, Elise Hagopian Taft describes a young abducted girl, regularly forced to search through the hair of the woman of the house for lice: “Instead of destroying those loathe-some parasites, mischievous Beatrice would add to the woman’s colony the lice from her own head.”⁶

There is a risk of retrospectively reading resistance into the actions of survivors,⁷ yet testimonies are replete with examples of women’s defiance; and while such examples are generally omitted from official history, they tend to occupy a prominent place in the memory of descendants. It is possible that descendants’ reverence for women’s resistance is influenced by the desire to transcend the legacy of trauma and dehumanization. As Arlene Avakian asserts, “the impulse to impute agency is very strong because we don’t want to see people as merely victims, and resistance is the part of the story that is not told, especially regarding women. We want to see that part of the story, or maybe we need to see it.”⁸ Avakian’s own grandmother told her story of fighting back against her son’s

5. Yehuda Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001).

6. Elise Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth: The Story of an Armenian Girl Who Survived the Genocide and Found Rebirth in America* (New York: New Age Publishers, 1981), 83.

7. For instance, in relation to the Holocaust, Shirli Gilbert has noted the “tendency towards unsophisticated narratives of redemption and consolation,” in *Music in the Holocaust: Confronting Life in the Nazi Ghettos and Camps* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 2.

8. Arlene Avakian and Hourig Attarian, *Imagining our Foremothers: Memory and Evidence of Women*

abduction only once, yet it “*had a profound impact on my life ...My grandmother’s story, even with its silences, constructs women as agents in their own survival.*”⁹

The way survivors remember and describe events requires some analysis by contextualizing survivors’ stories in a time of post-genocide healing and meaning-making. In the aftermath of tragedy, survivors attempted to understand their experiences and this sometimes entailed the projection of meaning onto survival or death of loved ones, or onto particular events they had endured. Meaning can take the form of viewing the experiences through the prism of heroism and constructing narratives that align. The creation of a narrative contains its own biases, even in the choice of what to include or omit.

As Vahe Tachjian writes in his 2017 book, *Daily Life in the Abyss: Genocide Diaries, 1915-1918*, “*In the case of the Armenian Genocide, eyewitness testimony can take the form of retrospective narration, in which a survivor attempts to reconstitute his or her lived experience and transform it into common knowledge, whether in the guise of memoirs, correspondence, interviews, or art. When that happens, the narrative - apart from already being personal testimony with its own inherent value - simultaneously becomes subject to the influence of its present, that is, post-catastrophic times, and displays the traces of historical reconstruction.*”¹⁰

In addition, in post-genocide times, when a community is rebuilding both physically and emotionally, the need for “heroes” or “champions” to look up to is particularly strong. The “heroism” in stories told by survivors can become mythologized and then passed down from one generation to the next. One question that is addressed in this paper is how stories of women’s defiance affect the identity of future generations.

More broadly, it is important to frame this discussion of transmitted defiance within existing scholarly debates about heroism and resistance during genocide. In his 1946 book, *Man’s Search for Meaning*,¹¹ Viktor E. Frankl explores how and why some Holocaust victims survived and others did not, attributing to survivors, at least partially, some notion of having controlled their own fate by refusing to succumb to hopelessness and despair. In contrast, some Holocaust survivors viewed survival purely as a matter of luck and timing. Arguably implicit in Frankl’s concept is the notion that those who did not survive may have been themselves spiritually or psychologically responsible by “giving up hope.”

Further, it has been asserted that part of surviving the harsh conditions of ghettos, camps or deportation marches involved compromising one’s moral code, by behaving in ways one would not normally consider acceptable, such as stealing, smuggling or in some way collaborating with the perpetrators. This is what Primo Levi refers to as the moral

Victims and Survivors of the Armenian Genocide A Dialogue, https://www.academia.edu/13700380/Imagining_our_Foremothers_Memory_and_Evidence_of_Women_Victims_and_Survivors_of_the_Armenian_Genocide_A_Dialogue_Arlene_Avakian_and_Hourig_Attarian .

9. Ibid.

10. Vahe Tachjian, *Daily Life in the Abyss: Genocide Diaries, 1915-1918* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 3.

11. Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006).

“grey zone.”¹² In Levi’s analysis, “*Survival without renunciation of any part of one’s own moral world - apart from powerful and direct interventions by fortune - was conceded only to very few superior individuals, made of the stuff of martyrs and saints.*”¹³

We cannot know what combination of factors contributed to the survival of the women whose testimonies are examined here; what their testimonies tell us is that they emphasize particular themes like endurance and fortitude, which in turn, their descendants admire and attempt to mirror.

Gender has an impact on how women not only experience genocide, but how they remember and retell their experiences.¹⁴ For example, in analyses of Holocaust survivor testimony, it has been found that men tend to emphasize independence and autonomy while women, who have been “socialized to value relationships and interdependence,”¹⁵ often highlight their relationships with others. This could partly account for the many examples in women’s testimonies of protecting others, working together to find food or water, or collective acts of physical or emotional survival. It is also likely that as women, the survivors were influenced by entrenched historical and cultural tropes of self-sacrifice and gendered concepts of morality.

The small, daily acts of resistance or defiance described by survivors, whether overtly directed towards perpetrators or subtly performed as spiritual resistance, are part of the story of genocide that has been transmitted to Armenian descendants today. While taking a critical approach to the narratives, they undoubtedly contain a “truth” of human experience during genocide that tells us something about women’s experiences and the way in which they perceive those experiences in the aftermath. Such accounts also present the diverse forms resistance can take, that is, not only military or physical resistance mostly performed by men, but also emotional, cultural and spiritual. These stories resonate with current generations and influence their own conception of post-genocide identity.

Building on testimonial literature with primary interviews, I aim to highlight the unbreakable thread of resilience and identity between Armenian women today and their relatives who survived the genocide. I also rely on the extensive collections and archives housed at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan, including unpublished testimonies which are not available elsewhere. The small numbers of in-depth interviews were conducted with Armenians living in Australia, America and Armenia, individuals whose mothers, grandmothers or great-grandmothers were genocide survivors. Oral histories can give scholars access to intimate aspects of genocide and its aftermath, aspects that are often omitted from written or official history. This is particularly important in accessing details of women’s lives, so frequently dismissed as domestic, private and hence insignificant.

12. Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved* (London: Sphere Books, 1989).

13. Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 92.

14. Pascale Rachel Bos, “Women and the Holocaust: Analysing Gender Difference,” in *Experience and Expression: Women, the Nazis, and the Holocaust*, eds. Elizabeth R. Baer and Myrna Goldenberg (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003), 31.

15. *Ibid*, 36.

This paper is not intended as a quantitative study, nor a psychological one, but rather an analysis of testimony and narrative, memory and identity. The concept of “transmitted defiance” captures how subsequent generations have been influenced by what they see as examples of resistance in the testimony of their relatives, whose stories remain sacred and fundamental to their identity. Remembering and honoring women’s stories not only helps to counterbalance the legacy of trauma for descendants, but also to confront Turkish denial today. As Rubina Perroomian writes, “These survivors have transmitted their memory to the next generation. Armenians know that remembering is a tool to resist the Genocide. Remembrance is a form of resistance that outlasted Genocide.”¹⁶

Transgenerational Transmission

The analysis in this paper is grounded in established theory of transgenerational transmission of genocidal legacies, though much of that scholarship focuses on trauma and has developed primarily in the context of the Holocaust. The theory of transgenerational trauma describes how survivors pass on trauma to their children (known as the second generation) and even to subsequent generations. Whether this occurs environmentally (via social and relational processes between parents and children) and/or genetically (epigenetics)¹⁷ is disputed, but regardless, academic research and psychological studies have found patterns of transmission and evidence of effects among the descendants of genocide survivors.¹⁸ Yet there is more to transgenerational transmission than trauma; this paper develops concepts of defiance, resistance and maintenance of cultural identity as elements that can be passed across generations. I locate the experiences of Armenian women in the framework of Marianne Hirsch’s theory of postmemory, and Uta Larkey’s notion of transmemory. Postmemory conveys the deep connection that the second generation has to their parents’ traumatic experiences, encompassing the idea that those experiences are felt by children of survivors like their own memories, although they were not themselves present.¹⁹ As psychologist Natan Kellermann has explained, “Offspring of trauma survivors often feel that they carry the memory of their parents. They were not alive at the time. They were not supposed to know. Often, they were not even told. But they know. They know it in their bodies, in every cell of their body. It’s almost as if they were born with that

16. Rubina Perroomian, *Armenian Resistance to Genocide: An Attempt to Assess Circumstances and Outcomes*, <http://asbarez.com/109615/armenian-resistance-to-genocide-an-attempt-to-assess-circumstances-and-outcomes/>.

17. Rachel Yehuda et. al, “Influences of Maternal and Paternal PTSD on Epigenetic Regulation of the Glucocorticoid Receptor Gene in Holocaust Survivor Offspring,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 171, no. 8 (2014): 872-880.

18. See the works of Natan Kellermann, including his book, *Holocaust Trauma: Psychological Effects and Treatment* (Indiana: iUniverse, Inc., 2009). For an Armenian study, see Anie Kalayjian and Marian Weisberg, “Generational Impact of Mass Trauma: The Post-Ottoman Turkish Genocide of the Armenians,” in *Jihad and Sacred Vengeance*, eds. J. S. Piven, C. Boyd, and H. W. Lawton (New York: Writers Club Press, 2002), 254-279.

19. Marianne Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” in *Poetics Today* 29, no.1 (2008): 103-128, <https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2007-019>.

knowledge.”²⁰ Hirsch’s postmemory concept is intended to apply to the second generation, yet it seems to extend beyond. I have found that granddaughters too sometimes describe a feeling of having inherited their grandmothers’ memories.

Marina Khachaturyan, who grew up in Tbilisi, Georgia, with her grandmother, says that during the 2016 Four-Day War in Nagorno-Karabakh, she was imagining soldiers entering her house, killing her family. “*But it wasn’t imagining, it was like genetic memory. I was already planning, if they take over Yerevan, where will we go? But I feel angry, I am ready to die for my homeland.*”²¹ Her words speak to some of the questions Hirsch has posed about manifestations and ramifications of postmemory, such as how descendants can carry these stories without appropriating them and importantly, whether “the memory of genocide [can] be transformed into action and resistance.”²²

In her 2017 article, “Transcending Memory in Multigenerational Holocaust Survivors’ Families,” Uta Larkey builds on Hirsch’s writing to explore a new notion – transmemory - which she applies specifically to the experiences of grandchildren of Jewish Holocaust survivors. Although transmemory, like postmemory, has been developed in the context of the Holocaust, it is relevant to Armenian descendants. As Larkey writes: “... *the grandchildren of the Holocaust survivors, the so-called third generation, have come of age and have begun their own inquiries and research. They have reflected on their family history and discovered their potential to act as ‘memory facilitators.’*”²³ Larkey’s theory explains why, for example, many members of the third generation view the maintenance of Armenian identity, as a sacred legacy that honors their grandmothers, whereas second generation survivors have frequently written of their rejection of genocide stories and of an unwanted obligation to maintain Armenian culture. Further, Larkey identifies a less loaded relationship between survivors and their grandchildren. Where there was once a “wall of silence” or gaps that children of survivors perceived as secrets (and thus contributed to their sense of trauma), grandparents exhibit a willingness to share their memories, and many grandchildren actively invite them to do so. “*It’s so important to me to remember that you survived,*” said one Armenian granddaughter to her grandmother, while encouraging her to share her story on video.²⁴

Women in particular have taken on the role as “memorial candles,”²⁵ the responsibility of remembering and passing on survivors’ stories. Armenian granddaughters like Lory Tatouljian, who recounts her grandmother’s story in an attempt to honor Aguline and their

20. Natan Kellermann, *Hereditary Memory: Can a Child Remember What the Parent Has Forgotten?*, <http://pro.psychcentral.com/hereditary-memory-can-a-child-remember-what-the-parent-has-forgotten/0010428.html?all=1#> .

21. Interview with Marina Khachaturyan, June 18, 2016.

22. Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory,” 104.

23. Uta Larkey, “Transcending Memory in Multigenerational Holocaust Survivors’ Families,” in *Jewish Families in Europe, 1939-Present: History, Representation, and Memory*, ed. Joanna Beata Michlic (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2017), 209.

24. Interview of Siranoush Danielian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Armenian Film Foundation, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56619&returnIndex=0>.

25. Larkey, “Transcending Memory,” 221.

close bond, are deeply impacted in their own lives by these transmitted memories but tend to focus as much, if not more, on the resilience, fortitude and tenacity of their relatives. This emphasis may be viewed as an attempt to break down traditional images of women as helpless victims or to balance the disturbing aspects of the history with images of heroism. In this paper, I explore some of these gendered aspects of trans- and postmemory, conscious of Hirsch's statement that "Using feminist critical strategies to connect past and present, words and images, and memory and gender, allows me to understand different roles that gender plays to mediate which stories are remembered and which are forgotten, how stories are told, which tropes make traumatic histories bearable for the next generation."²⁶

Women's Resistance

The historiography and collective memory of resistance during the Armenian Genocide has tended to focus on acts of physical defense and although some women did participate in military resistance, most of their stories have been forgotten or sidelined.²⁷ Moreover, women's testimonies contain common themes relating to *spiritual and cultural resistance* but these have not been integrated into the historiography of the Armenian Genocide, except as one-dimensional archetypes, such as the image of the woman who taught her children the Armenian alphabet in the desert sands.²⁸ Yet the concept of spiritual resistance, which Yad Vashem describes as the preservation of dignity, identity and humanity in spite of unthinkable circumstances,²⁹ permeates Armenian women's stories. In *Rethinking the Holocaust*, Bauer includes both armed and unarmed acts in his concept of *Amidah*, as well as strategies for survival such as smuggling food and acts of self-sacrifice to protect or save family members. Indeed, these are common themes in Armenian accounts. In adapting Bauer's theory to the context of women's experiences during the Armenian Genocide, I focus primarily on what he refers to as "cultural, religious, and political activities taken to strengthen morale" as well as the concept of "sanctification of life" or "meaningful" survival.³⁰ This is partly in order to focus on acts of rebellion that survivors and their descendants highlight, and partly to contain the scope of the paper, since not all of the myriad forms of resistance by women can be discussed in depth here.

26. Online interview with Marianne Hirsch, Author of "The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust," Columbia University Press Blog, October 10, 2012, <http://www.cupblog.org/?p=8066>.

27. With a few exceptions, such as Mariam Chilingirian (Urfa Resistance), Peroomian, *Armenian Resistance to Genocide*; and Vardouhi Nashalian (Moussa Dagh Resistance), see "The Heroine Vardouhi," in Verjine Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: Gitutyun Publishing House, 2011), 600, and testimony of Moses Panossian in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 463-465. Also, interview of Shooshanig Shahinian, USC Shoah Foundation Visual History Archive, Armenian Film Foundation, <http://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56458&returnIndex=0>.

28. Vahé Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 76.

29. Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center, Jerusalem, http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/lesson_plans/spiritual_resistance.asp; http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/education/newsletter/13/main_article.asp#!prettyPhoto.

30. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 120.

Frequently, survivor and descendant testimony highlights the ways women developed innovative survival strategies and adapted to new challenges. Daily survival and protection of children were imbued with the desire to live and overcome attempts at their destruction. Early on, Armenian women negotiated with authorities for the release of arrested relatives and hid weapons during searches. When preparing for deportation, they packed bedding and other essentials, organized donkeys and carts, and prepared bread and dried fruit for the journey. Many sewed valuables into the lining of their clothes or buried them in their gardens to prevent looting by Turks or perhaps in the hope they would one day return.³¹ On the deportation marches, they tied pieces of clothing together with a tin can on the end to pull water out of wells or used other makeshift vessels, and washed seeds from animal waste to fry in cans.³² Protection of children was paramount, and mothers hid their sons and daughters under blankets and mattresses, wrapped their feet in pieces of cloth, and repeatedly rescued them from peril.³³

In *Rebirth*, Taft emphasizes the resilience of the women, their practical resourcefulness and their stoicism: “The women proved more resourceful and adaptable, and made do with the situation at hand. They put together what there was of bread and food... And it was the women who kept up morale by singing *Der Voghormya* (Lord Be Merciful) “a religious chant.”³⁴ Spiritual resistance manifested in mothers and grandmothers imploring children to remember their Armenian identity regardless of what the future might hold, and instilling a sense of dignity, as in the case of child survivor Dirouhi Highgas, who felt ashamed of having become a refugee. Her mother told her, “*You know what a diamond is, Dirouhi? Sometimes you put the diamond in the mud. But when you take it out, it’s a diamond. Nothing will happen to it. So that’s what it’s going to be like for you and all the rest of the Armenians. They think we’re just mud, but we’re not!*”³⁵

Acts of resistance can be seen in survivors’ descriptions of women’s relationships and sisterhood, such as when unrelated women helped those unfortunate enough to endure

31. Serpouhji Tavoukdjian wrote: “I was only a little girl ten years old, but how vividly I remember those four sad days of preparation. My mother was ill from grief and sorrow, and my sisters sewed frantically on garments which we would wear on our long journey. Into the seams of the wide bloomers we were to wear they sewed money and our few precious pieces of jewelry, which might be bartered along the wayside for food when the little supply we could carry was gone,” Serpouhji Tavoukdjian, *Exiled: Story of an Armenian Girl* (Washington D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1933), 24; see also Margaret Ajemian Ahnert, *The Knock at the Door: A Mother’s Survival of the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2012), 78-79.

32. Story of Sion Abajian, <https://genocideeducation.org/resources/survivor-accounts/>; also several examples in Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999); and in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*.

33. There are countless examples of women taking action to protect their children, including in Serpouhji Tavoukdjian, *Exiled*; Shahan Derderian, *Death March: An Armenian survivor’s memoir of the Genocide of 1915* (California: H. and K. Manjikian Publications, 2008); Arusiag Manuelian, *The Secret Exile and Extermination of Armenians* (unpublished memoir, Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Collection); testimonies of Kadjouni Toros Gharagyozyan and Angel Srapian in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 234, 400.

34. Taft, *Rebirth*, 40.

35. Interview with Dirouhi Kouymjian Highgas in William S. Parsons, “Everyone’s Not Here: Families of the Armenian Genocide: A Study Guide” (Cambridge: Intersection Associates, 1989).

childbirth while on the deportation marches (even continuing the tradition of burying the afterbirth),³⁶ or assisted mothers to bury their dead children. Carrying out traditions associated with death are a strong mechanism for retaining a sense of humanity during genocide. Vartuhi Boyajian recalled that when her sister starved to death, her mother's friends collectively dug a hole in the sand and placed the baby in it.³⁷ Similarly, when a twelve year old girl died after being raped, a group of women helped her mother bury her and then wrote on the wall, "Shushan buried here."³⁸

Cultural preservation and clandestine maintenance of religious practices represent perhaps the most pertinent forms of resistance against perpetrators who, in both policy and implementation, attempted to erase Armenian heritage and prevent its transmission to future generations. Maritza Chopoorian Depoyan recalled survivors in Der Zor marking a bittersweet Easter in 1916, noting both the gendered nature of the event and the Turkish response to Armenian survival. Having been invited by the Armenian women of Salihieh village an hour from Der Zor, the survivors held a church service in the desert - praying, crying, kneeling, crossing themselves. She remembered the Turks saying to one another: "No matter what we do, we won't be able to destroy the Armenian nation - these people who have such a strong faith."³⁹ Even prior to the deportations, prohibitions on customs and language were ordered by the Turkish authorities, including the burning of books and razing of churches and historical sites, restrictions on Armenian language or writing, and the closure of Armenian schools. Despite this, one survivor's grandmother led her students through a secret passage to the basement where she taught them classical Armenian, reading and writing, and traditional songs.⁴⁰ This account is echoed in a well-known Armenian song about a school mistress 'daring' to teach Armenian to her students. Her tongue was cut out as punishment.⁴¹ Here we can see how examples of resistance and martyrdom became part of post-genocide collective memory, with narratives of defiance and cultural maintenance leaving a lasting influence on descendants.

Perroomian has identified a shift during the 1800s, when Armenian women transformed their traditional responses to persecution and war. She argues that in the context of increasing Armenian desire for liberation from Ottoman rule, acts of resistance were encouraged.

36. Ajemian Ahnert, *The Knock at the Door*, 96.

37. Vartuhi Boyajian, *My autobiography – Written in Constantinople 1922: This is the story of the Black Days of my life* (unpublished memoir, Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Collection).

38. Takouhi Levonian, cited in Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, "Women and Children of the Armenian Genocide," in *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New York: St Martin's, 1992), 160.

39. Maritza Chopoorian Depoyan, "The Easter of 1916 in the Desert of Deir-El-Zor," in Marderos Deranian, *Hussenig: The origin, history, and destruction of an Armenian town*, trans., revised and with additions by Hagop Martin Deranian (Belmont: Armenian Heritage Press, 1994), 110; also Armen Anush writes of survivors in the desert marking Christmas with special food, Armen Anush, *Passage Through Hell: A Memoir* (California: H. and K. Manjikian Publications, 2007), 53-54.

40. The story of Goussineh Basmadjian, <http://www.spiritofchange.org/Winter-2009/Survivors-For-All-Time-Stories-of-the-Armenian-Genocide>.

41. Armenian song "Ah Alas!" in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 565, also available at http://www.cilicia.com/armo_genosongs.html.

The deaths of husbands and sons were not to be grieved but treated as a source of pride. In this context, women's reactions shifted from sadness and grief to a focus on heroism. Peroomian refers to a poem about a woman whose son is murdered in a Turkish prison: "*Her lamentations... embody a rebellious spirit against the Turk and against the God of the Armenians... The mournful mother points to the enemy and calls for revenge...*"⁴² In another poem, she explains, a dying son encourages his mother not to weep but to be proud of his sacrifice for Armenian freedom. In an indication of how pervasive this became in Armenian culture, even lullabies encouraged heroism on behalf of Armenia.⁴³

The rebellious spirit is clear in a host of survivor testimonies which reveal that women defied the gendarmes' rules at great risk, and even questioned the perpetrators' cruel acts. Some refused to let go of their children's hands on the marches despite orders and beatings;⁴⁴ others chastised the gendarmes or questioned the perpetrators' religious faith. One survivor's grandmother persisted in cursing a gendarme as he stabbed her.⁴⁵

A witness reported hearing a woman yell at a group of gendarmes who were trying to extort money from her: "*Ever since leaving the city, all we do is give you money... Where am I supposed to get more coins for you? You took everything we had... You snatched all our families... What's next? All we're left with is the breath of life. Go ahead, take that away, too.*"⁴⁶ When a mother managed to buy vegetables and began cooking them, a group of soldiers kicked over the pan and stepped on the food. She asked them: "*Aren't you afraid of God? It has been months since we have had a decent meal, so why can't you give us a chance to have this?*"⁴⁷ In her unpublished memoir, Arusyag Manuelian described the "mischievous" defiance of her sister, Arshaluys, in refusing to allow her home and belongings to be taken by the Turks, thereby resisting the expropriation of Armenian property:

Arshaluys said, "Mother, I will go and shut the inside doors and windows of the house..." We waited for a while, but Arshaluys did not come out of the house. Being worried my mother went back into the house and to her surprise she saw that Arshaluys had broken all the twelve glass windows which faced the back garden, poured petroleum on the carpets and furniture, and tried to set the house on fire.⁴⁸

In cases where Turkish men would proposition women or try to convince them to marry or give away their children, some Armenian women not only refused but spoke back or

42. Rubina Peroomian, "When Death is a Blessing and Life a Prolonged Agony: Women Victims of Genocide," in *Genocide Perspectives II: Essays on Holocaust and Genocide*, eds. Colin Tatz, Peter Arnold and Sandra Tatz, (Blackheath, Nsw: Brandl & Schlesinger Pty Ltd, 2003), 314-332. For more on resistance as part of Armenian identity, see Harutyun Marutyan, "Trauma and Identity: On Structural Particularities of Armenian Genocide and Jewish Holocaust," in *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014): 53-69.

43. Ibid, Peroomian, "When death is a blessing," 319.

44. Interview of Sinan Sinanian, in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 397.

45. Story of Haig Baronian, <https://genocideeducation.org/resources/survivor-accounts/>.

46. Derderian, *Death March*, 45-47. The woman was subsequently tortured and shot.

47. Florence M. Soghoian, *Portrait of a Survivor* (Hanover: Christopher Pub House, 1997), 25.

48. Manuelian, *The Secret Exile*.

insulted them, saying for example, “*I don’t exchange a horse for a donkey,*”⁴⁹ or “*I want neither your gold nor you.*”⁵⁰ While perhaps seemingly minor moments of women’s experiences of genocide, these capture something of their spirit of defiance, and are recalled vividly by survivors and their children. Haykouhi Azarian described her mother asking a gendarme for permission to sit in the shade; he agreed, if she would give him one of her daughters. “*My mother said, ‘I won’t give you any and I’ll sit in the sun.’ I remember this well.*”⁵¹

Both common and enlightening are the examples of women and girls who were forcibly converted, but who retained their Armenian identity over many years of captivity. In Margaret Ajemian Ahnert’s book, *The Knock at the Door*, survivor Ester’s comments to her daughter exemplify the kind of resistance that relies on an internal strength, knowing and holding onto one’s identity, and instilling this in the next generation: “*That’s what they all tried to do to me. They beat me to bend, but I fooled them. I never bent in my heart, only with my body... You know the Turks told me never to speak Armenian. I obeyed. But they couldn’t stop me from thinking in Armenian.*”⁵² There are cases of girls subconsciously recalling the correct way to cross oneself, or being able to recognize an Armenian lullaby their mother used to sing.⁵³ One survivor attributed her successful escape to her continued practice of the Armenian alphabet, as well as the memory she had retained of her name and birthplace, which proved to her rescuers that she was indeed a kidnapped Armenian.⁵⁴ Resistance was a clear motivation, as in the case of a girl overtly asserting her identity after she had escaped from a Turkish home: “*First of all, my name is not Ayshe. My name is Ovsanna. My father’s surname is Altoonian, my mother’s surname is Gyokbashian. I am an Armenian. I will stay with the Armenians.*”⁵⁵ Others revealed their Armenian identity to their children once their husbands had died,⁵⁶ or continued to carry physical symbols such as small crucifixes as a reminder of their religion.⁵⁷ Dirouhi Avedian recalled her escape from captivity in her memoir, *Defying Fate*:

49. Interview of Yeghsa Anton Khayadjanian in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 259-260.

50. Interview of Hermine Ter Voghormiajian in *Ibid*, 364-5.

51. Interview of Haykouhi Azarian in *Ibid*, 406.

52. Ajemian, *The Knock at the Door*, 81

53. E.g., Sirena Aram Alajajian in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 410-412; see also “Song Wins Babe from Turk,” in *The Red Cross Bulletin*, August 18, 1919, reprinted in Hayk Demoyan, *Armenian Genocide: Front Page Coverage in the World Press* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2015), 232-233.

54. Rouben P. Adalian, “The Armenian Genocide,” in *Century of Genocide: Eyewitness Accounts and Critical Views*, eds. Samuel Totten, William S. Parsons and Israel W. Charny (New York/London: Garland Publishing Inc, 1997), 73-77.

55. Tigranouhi Movsessian, “Ovsanna-Ayshe, Who Remained an Armenian,” in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 538-539.

56. Gevork Chiftchian in *Ibid*, 523.

57. “An aga from Diyarbekir ... took my mother-in-law on to his horse. Her name is Silva, he renamed her Zeynep. They had always called her ‘Gavur girl...’ She couldn’t bear this word. One day she had the cross in her pocket, the crucifix. The cross fell out when she was taking the key out. The lady of the house said, ‘Gavur girl, are you still carrying this?’ Then she ran away.” Leyla Neyzi and Hranush Kharatyan-Araqelyan, *Speaking to One Another: Personal Memories of the Past in Armenia and Turkey* (Institut für Internationale Zusammenarbeit Des Deutschen Volkshochschul-Verbandes, 2010), 63.

One day an Armenian shepherd (my future husband) came to visit us. My Arab mother asked after he left: “Who is that nesrani [Christian] boy?” “He is Sheikh Eyara’s nesrani son,” I said. “I’m Armenian; that’s why he came.” “So you’re still a gavur nesrani?” she asked. I replied, without any fear, “I was born a gavur, and even if I were to be washed with ten slabs of soap, I’ll still be a nesrani.” She lunged at me, gave me a fierce beating, and pulled my hair, which was very long. But that was the last time she could beat me.⁵⁸

Considering the post-genocide context of these memoirs and testimonies, survivors appear to have found meaning in particular themes and many embody Bauer’s concept of *Amidah*, or “standing up against.” In defying attempts to erase their identity and ensuring the continuity of Armenian culture, these women resisted genocide and directly contributed to the survival of the Armenian community. Moreover, in passing on their memories to future generations, they tried to ensure that Armenian identity would continue to thrive, and that the history of the genocide would not be forgotten.

Descendants Remember

For some Armenian survivors, the need to tell their stories motivated them to try to endure the horrors of genocide;⁵⁹ for others, it represented a final act of resistance after the genocide. One scholar has suggested that descendants participate in resistance by listening to survivors’ testimony: “*The telling of the story is important in and of itself, but the transmission of the story to another transforms the telling into a collective act, which lends power to the voice by giving it agency.*”⁶⁰ Many descendants of survivors, particularly the third generation, not only seek out their relatives’ stories but view keeping those memories alive as both a sacred duty and a way to challenge ongoing Turkish denial.⁶¹ The profound need to remember their family stories combined with the emphasis on resistance and survival, and themes of heroism and ancient legends, emerges strongly in granddaughter Astrid Katcharyan’s *Affinity with Night Skies*:

I NEED to tell this story, for me, for all of them, but most of all, for Astra. Her story is our story and will not end with this book... I want to build a statue to her memory, for all our memories. I see her now, classic, heroic, noble, carved as a Greek caryatid carrying the temple of her family on alabaster shoulders...I need to tell this story because not to do so would be to deny her, deny me, and all of them...⁶²

58. Dirouhi Avedian (nee Cheomlekjian), *Defying Fate: The Memoirs of Aram and Dirouhi Avedian*, Genocide Library Volume 5 (California: H. and K. Manjikian Publications, 2014), 21.

59. E.g., Manuelian recounts her mother saying “Whoever survives must write down all the things which we have experienced on our endless road of exile,” in Manuelian, *The Secret Exile*.

60. Jennifer Rinaldi, *Survivor Song: The Voice of Trauma and Its Echoes* (University of Denver Digital Commons, Electronic Theses and Dissertations, Paper 552, 2011), 202.

61. For more details, see Rubina Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature: The Second Generation Responds* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2015).

62. Astrid Katcharyan, *Affinity with Night Skies: Astra Sabondjian’s Story* (London: Taderon Press, 2005), 9.

For descendants who are named after their relatives, as in Astrid Katcharyan's case, the connection is further intensified.⁶³ Yerevan-based Ani Dekirmenchyan was named after her great-grandmother, Aghavni: "*They took the middle [of the name] and named me Ani after her. I feel very proud to have her name. She was a very strong woman.*"⁶⁴ Ani explains that when the round ups of Armenians of Adana began, Aghavni protected her seven children by grabbing a skewer from the barbeque and killing the gendarme at her door. She says of her great-grandmother's role in the family in later years, "*Everyone was afraid of her. Even if her grandsons had problems with other boys, they would seek her help, not their father's help. She could catch mice with her hands and kill them.*"⁶⁵

Ani's own powerful sense of identity has been influenced by this perception of resilience, as well as the importance instilled in her of cultural maintenance. Although Aghavni had only been allowed to speak Turkish in Adana, later in life she asked her relatives to speak to her and each other in Armenian. Ani now works as a language teacher with the Armenian General Benevolent Union. She says: "*It is hard to realize that another nation ... wanted to kill you, to erase you, but you survived. And you have to live and talk about this, tell this to the world but not with tears in your eyes, like we are poor, we were killed. No, you have to tell the world... this happened to my people and I lived, my relatives lived, my people lived. We were strong and we are strong.*"⁶⁶

Testimonies of descendants highlight the cultural and religious preservation of their relatives and how this nurtured their own identity. Many survivors recall their own mothers and grandmothers consciously passing on Armenian heritage and imploring them never to forget it. Ajemian Ahnert recounts Ester's grandmother urging her to continue walking on the deportation march, pulling a small iron cross from her neck and handing it to her. Later, when Ester was discovered by her abductor secretly praying with her grandmother's cross, she was whipped every day for a week. Similarly, either refusing or feigning conversion are acts of resistance frequently retold by descendants, with women imagining themselves in their grandmother's place and wondering about the choices they may have made in the same circumstances.

Ilda Deryan, the Principal of an Armenian school in Melbourne, Australia, vividly recalls the night her grandmother Zarouhi shared with her - for the first and only time - the experiences she had endured during the genocide.⁶⁷ Ilda remembers that her grandmother was keeping her company while she nursed her newborn baby. This unique environment shared between grandmother, granddaughter and the next generation, proved conducive to opening up about tortures she had rarely revealed to anyone. Zarouhi spoke of being taken with her sister-in-law to a big hall and told that

63. Peroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 9-10; and Larkey writes of the bond created between grandchildren named after victims or survivors of the Holocaust in Larkey, "Transcending Memory," 216.

64. Interview with Ani Dekirmenchyan, June 26, 2016.

65. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

67. Interview with Ilda Deryan, May 20, 2016.

if they denounced Christianity and became Muslims, their lives may be saved. They were told to put their hands on a Quran and repeat words they didn't understand. Her name was changed to Zehra. Ilda remembers Zarouhi exclaiming, "*These people were stupid, how can you change what's in someone's heart? We did what we had to do to survive.*" Having lost several relatives on the march, Zarouhi and her sister in law were selling their remaining belongings when a Turkish woman warned them they would all be slaughtered and asked Zarouhi to hand over her baby to save her life. "*Grandma said a hundred thoughts raced through her mind... She says for a few seconds she was tempted but something made her say, 'I'll never give up my child, if I die she dies with me.'*"⁶⁸

Zarouhi lived to the age of 99. Her strength and ability to adapt to life's challenges with grace have left their mark on Ilda's own identity:

Her story and the story of other survivors make me simmer with rage. These people deserved recognition... I'm a proud Armenian with a love for our language and traditions... I will continue to live as Armenian and fight to teach our history, culture and traditions to the young generations as I feel I owe it to my grandparents and relatives whose choices were brutally taken away from them.

Those Turkish descendants who have discovered an Armenian relative have complicated legacies to manage. In her pioneering memoir, Fethiye Çetin tells of the secret bond that developed between her and her elderly Armenian grandmother, as Heranus revealed the story of her abduction.⁶⁹ In an effort to eliminate her Armenianness, her captors converted her, forbade her from speaking her language, and gave her a Turkish name. Transmitting her history to her granddaughter - her birth name, her parents' names, her religion and culture - was her final act of resistance in old age.

Çetin's response to her grandmother's story is relevant to the notion of transmitted defiance because of the emphasis she places on her grandmother's agency. Çetin notes her grandmother would never participate in the singing of Turkish folksongs, and even more tellingly, she cites the clandestine practice of baking and sharing *corek* (braided sweet bread) at Easter by Armenian converts, even into their old age. She herself feels compelled to an act of resistance on behalf of her grandmother, an attempt to assert Heranus' identity and preserve the memory of her Armenianness. At her funeral, Çetin cried out: "*But that's not true! Her mother's name wasn't Eσμα, it was Isguhi! And her father's name wasn't Huseyin, but Hovannes!*"⁷⁰

The secret continuity of Armenian cultural tradition, such as marking the sign of the cross on dough before baking,⁷¹ represents ongoing resistance to forced assimilation. Many survivors even attribute their survival to the retention of identity, as Taft writes: "...I

68. Ibid.

69. Fethiye Çetin, *My Grandmother: A Memoir* (London/New York: Verso, 2008).

70. Ibid, 3.

71. Vardouhi Voskian, "The Muslim Armenians of Hamshen," in Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 536; see also Armen Anush, *Passage through Hell*, when she came across converted Armenians in Raqqa and Der Zor "they spoke the language of their fathers to describe the age-old virtues of their mothers. They were proud of their mothers."

survived by remaining Armenian in a world which had sought to devour me. *I would not let it destroy me* [original emphasis]. And it was only my ‘Armenian-ism’ - and all that it implies in terms of survival — that saved me as a human being.”⁷²

Even in cases where granddaughters did not experience a positive relationship with their grandmother, the influence of resilience and temerity is striking. Marina Khachaturyan describes her grandmother’s negative, quarrelsome attitude, her constant singing of sad songs: “*Everyone in the building called her a witch. I was ashamed of her. I didn’t understand then, as a child, what she had experienced.*” As an adult, however, she values the act of remembering and retelling the history of the genocide, saying, “*If you shoot your past with a gun, the future will shoot you with cannon. One should never forget!*”⁷³

Marina’s inherited spirit of defiance manifests partly in her choice of work teaching Armenian language and culture, but further, in specific acts of assertiveness and resistance in her own life. She recounts an episode in Tbilisi, when her Azerbaijani taxi driver took an unexpected route through a forest. He asked her, “*Aren’t you afraid? I could do anything to you here in the forest and no one would know.*” Marina says, “*So I took my umbrella, a very large umbrella, and I looked at him with this umbrella. I wouldn’t be afraid to kill him. At the end of the trip, he said, “Because you are Armenian, I am going to charge you ten Lari” [instead of four] and I got out of the car and said, “And I am going to pay you nothing.”*”⁷⁴

Conclusion

In 2013, Lory Tatoulian’s mother read Aguline Dertazyian’s memoirs out loud, as Lory roughly translated them into English. Lory describes with enormous pride how Aguline was the only woman to participate in physical defense with the *fedayis* of Hadjin, hiding in caves and shooting if any Turks approached. When one of the group was shot, “*Aguline took his fatigues and gun ... she chopped off all her hair so that she could look like a man... she didn’t want to be raped, or taken in ... ‘I’d rather die like this than like that.’*”⁷⁵ But perhaps even more than physical resistance, Lory admires her grandmother’s will to survive, describing how she took an eight-year old boy under her wing and “*they walked – every time I say this I want to cry - from Hadjin to Adana which is about 90 miles... and they ate whatever they could find - animals, plants, cats, anything.*” Further, she emphasizes that Aguline raised five children alone after her husband died, at the same time as working as a school teacher and performing in the theatre. Lory is one of many of the third generation who has channeled their interest in the stories of their grandparents into political activism or artistic endeavors.⁷⁶ Her work as an actor has been inspired by her grandmother yet it is also influenced by contemporary Armenian identity: “*So I have a playbill where there are all these young people, their head shots, and then it’s [my grandmother], in her sixties! I*

72. Taft, *Rebirth*, 141.

73. Interview with Marina Khachaturyan, Yerevan, June 2016.

74. *Ibid.*

75. Interview with Lory Tatoulian, May 15, 2016.

76. Peroomian notes this is a frequent response by members of the third generation, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature*, 310.

*do this sketch comedy in English about the Armenian community. In a way it is cathartic... making sense of who we are as diaspora Armenians.”*⁷⁷

The act of transcending memory - not by forgetting it but by remembering and retelling it - aligns with Larkey’s notion of transmemory, where the third generation honors their grandparents’ memories by transforming them into positive action. The focus of women descendants on the concepts of survival, resilience and resistance described in survivors’ stories is critical to this transformation. It has also developed from a longstanding culture of reverence for self-defense and resistance in the Armenian community. Where their relatives fought back against deliberate and gendered strategies to destroy family bonds and cultural heritage, Armenian women today remember and celebrate such acts, from small moments of refusal to cooperate to continuous efforts to secretly maintain their identity. Some descendants see themselves as resisting current attempts to silence the Armenian community and distort or deny the history of the genocide.

In writing of Jewish spiritual resistance, Bauer says, *“It is wrong to demand, in retrospect, that these tortured individuals and communities should have behaved as mythical heroes. The fact that so many of them did is a matter of wonderment.”*⁷⁸ Yet, whether they live in Armenia or the diaspora, Armenian women today are awed by their relatives’ endurance and honor it by efforts to speak the language with their children and send them to Armenian schools, to perform in Armenian theatre or write their family’s stories. The way the genocide is remembered and retold across the generations is as crucial to our understanding as the original experiences themselves. Significantly, the culture of Armenian women’s defiance as portrayed in memoirs and testimonies seems to have filtered down the generations. Today, many Armenian women embody an attitude that their grandmothers and other women either intentionally or unconsciously transmitted, perhaps best summed up by Lory Tatoulian as *“nothing’s gonna bring me down.”*⁷⁹

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77. Ibid.

78. Bauer, *Rethinking the Holocaust*, 149.

79. Interview with Lory Tatoulian, May 15, 2016.