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FOOD PROCUREMENT METHODS DURING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE AS EXPRESSIONS OF “UNARMED RESISTANCE”: CHILDREN’S EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

The main objective of the article is to discuss whether food procurement methods during the Armenian Genocide could be considered as unarmed resistance. For this purpose, the first part of the article touched upon some scientific questions and the formation of the concept of unarmed resistance in the context of the Holocaust.

Such scientific interest was inspired by the fact that though there had been instances of armed resistance during the Armenian Genocide, fights in self-defense, including those with victorious outcomes, as in Van, nonetheless there existed an opinion that the Armenians were to be blamed, to some extent, to have been “slaughtered like sheep,” i.e. without resistance. For that very reason, the purpose of this article was to offer a scholarly assessment of the concept of “resistance” by suggesting its subcategories as subjects for separate research. Indeed, it is impossible to cover all the viewpoints on the problem and all the forms of resistance within one article; however, this article was an attempt to formulate new queries.

In the second section of the article, an attempt is made to group food procurement methods during the Armenian Genocide and consider them in the context of the concept of unarmed resistance. Special attention is paid to the experiences of children, trying also to identify the types of activities that the social groups were involved in and the extent of involvement. Food acquisition methods that were part of the daily life during the Armenian Genocide are discussed as expressions of conscious and unconscious struggle against the genocidal policy of condemning people to starvation.

The article is based on published memoirs and oral histories of the Armenian Genocide survivors.¹ Although food procurement methods were diverse, the article offers the most common forms: *feeding on wild grass, collecting fruits, berries, and nuts, begging*, often referred to by the survivors as life and death struggle.

Keywords: Armenian Genocide, Holocaust, children, unarmed resistance, food, memoirs, oral histories.

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¹ Predominantly the Oral History Project materials were used in the article, which were collected since 1978. For more details about the Project at <https://umdearborn.edu/casl/centers-institutes/center-armenian-research/armenian-assembly-oral-history-project>, accessed 04.04.2019.

Unarmed Resistance: Some Scientific Queries

*Bread in my mind is associated with the contentment of being sated and the anguish of hunger. One centuries-long black summer my people and I were made destitute, starving. From that day on bread has been sacred to me, and my love for it comes close to veneration.*²

Aram Haigaz (Chekemean),

Survivor of the Armenian Genocide

The Jewish resistance with its diverse manifestations has been actively elucidated for more than half a century both in the historiography of the Holocaust as well as in public discourse.³ Whereas in the context of the Armenian Genocide the issue of *unarmed resistance* has been hardly studied.⁴ That is why, before moving to the main topic and considering food procurement methods during the Armenian Genocide as unarmed resistance let us briefly discuss some methodological issues based on the Jewish experience.

Holocaust historian Dan Michman wrote that the issue of resistance to the Nazis by the Jews and non-Jews came to the forefront of scientific and public attention still during WWII, as underground movements received a strong emotional and moral response. This interest particularly grew in European countries liberated immediately after the fall of Nazi Germany. In late 1960's the semantic scope of the term "resistance" had already expanded in Holocaust historiography, and a new concept was formed called "Kiddush Hahayim" ("the sanctification of God's Name").⁵ Two Hebrew terms started to circulate in academic

2 Aram Haigaz, *Չորս տարի Քիւրտիստանի լեռներում մէջ* [Four Years in the Mountains of Kurdistan] (Lebanon, Printing House of the Armenian Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 1972), 282.

3 For literature dedicated to the Jewish resistance see: *Jewish Resistance, A Working Bibliography* (Washington: Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, USHMM, 2003). The first exhibits of the monument/museum in memory of the Holocaust victims built in 1957 in Israel presented the Jewish resistance in the Warsaw ghetto, uprisings in Sobibor and Treblinka extermination camps and the struggle of the survivors to get to Israel. Ten years later, in the spring of 1968, the first scientific gathering at the institute was also dedicated to the topic of resistance of the Jews. For the collection of the reports see *Jewish Resistance during the Holocaust: Proceeding of the Conference on Manifestations of Jewish Resistance, Jerusalem, April 7-11, 1968*, ed. Grubsztajn Meir (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 1971).

4 Professor at Columbia University, USA, Khatchig Mouradian is studying the topic of unarmed resistance in the context of the Armenian Genocide. See Khatchig Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1918* (Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2021); "The Meskeneh Concentration Camp, 1915-1917: A Case Study of Power, Collaboration, and Humanitarian Resistance During the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 24 (2015): 44-55; "Genocide and Humanitarian Resistance in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1916," *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines* 7 (2016): 87-103, <https://doi.org/10.4000/eac.1023>; "The Role of Armenian Women During the Genocide," filmed 04 April 2017 at YouTube, AGBU, video, 08:06, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHjPzHsf1j4>, accessed 10.02.2019; "Not Like a Lamb to the Slaughter: Humanitarian Resistance during the Armenian Genocide," filmed 11 February 2017 at YouTube, Program of Armenian Studies, video, 01:41:17, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UPTztY-7LHc>, accessed 10.02.2019. Still in 2011, the importance of studying the issue was touched upon also by ethnographer, chief researcher at the Institute of Archeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of Armenia Dr. Harutyun Marutyan, "Trauma and Identity: On Structural Particularities of Armenian Genocide and Jewish Holocaust," *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 1, no.1 (2014): 53-69.

5 For detailed comments on the term see Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet, "The 'Kedoshim' Status of the Holocaust

literature: “Amidah” (הדימעה תליפת) and “Hitnagdut” (התנגדות). The first covered all the aspects of resistance, including armed resistance – Hitnagdut.⁶

So, what called forth the semantic expansion of “resistance”? Generally, in the historiography of the Holocaust, the following key queries had been circulating: Was the history of the Holocaust only about violence, annihilation, and suffering, was there no spirit of heroism during the Holocaust, or did everyone go to die “like sheep to the slaughter” (חבטלן אצכ)? What should be described as resistance in general, what did people resist and how?

After the Armenian Genocide and Jewish Holocaust both the Armenians and the Jews had developed the stereotype that people were “slaughtered like sheep,” without resistance. Although in the case of the Jews, this expression was considered as “old-testamentary” and had a long story,⁷ the historiography of Holocaust had been tackling Vilna ghetto underground fighter Abba Kovner’s appeal.⁸ On 1 January 1942 Kovner announced: “We will not be led like sheep to slaughter. True we are weak and helpless, but the only response to the murders is revolt. Brethren, it is better to die fighting like free men than to live at the mercy of the murderers. Arise, Arise with last breath. Take Courage!”⁹

During one of his interviews Holocaust historiographer Yehuda Bauer noted: “... by using that metaphor, he tried to cause a rebellion against the very use of that term.”¹⁰ According to Y. Bauer, the using of the phrase after the Holocaust differed greatly, as it had acquired an accusatory content.¹¹ A facilitating circumstance to the latter was that in 1960’s some Jewish intellectuals, including Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt suggested the approach, according to which, the Jews were partially to blame for their extermination, as they did not resist. Raul Hilberg noted that the Jews did not have any plans for fighting: neither by taking up arms, nor even by choosing psychological warfare tactics,¹² while in Hannah Arendt’s assessment the behavior of the Jews during the Holocaust was more obedient than heroic.¹³

Victims,” *Hirhurim Musings Torah Journal* 7 (2010): 185-198.

6 Dan Michman, *Историография катастрофы. Еврейский взгляд: Концептуализация, терминология, подходы и фундаментальные вопросы* [Holocaust Historiography: A Jewish Perspective: Conceptualizations, Terminology, Approaches and Fundamental Issues], trans. M. Guba et al. (Dnepropetrovsk: Central Ukrainian Foundation for the History of the Holocaust “Tkuma,” 2005), 242.

7 Reference has been made to the Psalms and Isaiah’s prophecy: “Yea, for thy sake are we killed all day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.” (Psalm 44:22) and “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7). See *Աստուածաշունչ մասնաւն չին ևս Նոր Կտակարանների* [The Holy Bible] (Yerevan: Bible League International, 2010).

8 For details, see Yael Feldman, “Not as Sheep Led to Slaughter?” *Jewish Social Studies* 19, no. 3 (2013): 139-169.

9 Richard Middleton-Kaplan, “The Myth of Jewish Passivity,” in *Jewish Resistance against the Nazis*, ed. Patrick Henry (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 6.

10 Amos Goldberg, “Like Sheep to the Slaughter?” Excerpt from Interview with Yehuda Bauer, Director of the International Center for Holocaust Studies of Yad Vashem, 18 January 1998, Yad Vashem, Jerusalem, at http://www.yadvashem.org/odot_pdf/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20203667.pdf, accessed 23.07.2017.

11 *Ibid.*, 1-2.

12 Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews*, vol. 3 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 1104.

13 Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), 11.

Although there have been many publications to date dedicated to the Jewish resistance that criticize the “myth of passivity” of the Jews during the Holocaust, nevertheless it still persists in popular thinking and is frequently circulated in the media.¹⁴ The stereotype of passivity of the Jews and “being slaughtered like sheep” left a deep imprint not only on the survivors, but also on the post-war Jewish community, developing perceptions of incapacity, passivity, obedience and lack of courage.¹⁵

It is due to fighting the very stereotype that the term “resistance” expanded semantically to include the armed and unarmed forms of resistance formulated as the “Jewish response to the Holocaust.” The process was greatly facilitated by the fact that the studies centered on everyday life of the Jews and simple, routine actions of people.

Various formulations of unarmed resistance emerged in European historiography, some of which pointed out certain actions like falsifying documents, supporting the family members of the arrested, hiding the evaders of compulsory labor, etc. In Dutch literature such actions are primarily known as “nonviolent self-defense” (*geweldloze verdediging*), in French literature as “benevolent resistance activities” (*activites caritatives*), “cultural resistance” (*resistance culturelle*), in Danish literature and that of other countries as “passive resistance” and “symbolic resistance,”¹⁶ there are also “spiritual resistance” and/or “moral resistance” expressions covering spiritual and cultural activities.¹⁷

In the context of the Armenian Genocide, the image of a “defenseless victim” was created in mid 1950s by the Soviet leadership. Harutyun Marutyan writes about the policy of the Soviet Union in this period: “In fact, the Soviet leadership, particularly from the second half of the 1950s, did not so much forbid discussion of the Genocide, as it did foster the retention of memories in which Armenians were exclusively presented as innocent victims who had lost the greater part of their historical homeland and therefore needed sympathy.”¹⁸ According to the author, the situation started to change since the 50th anniversary¹⁹ of

14 Patrick Henry, “Introduction,” in *Jewish Resistance against the Nazis*, ed. Patrick Henry (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014), xiii.

15 Feldman, “Not as Sheep,” 143.

16 Michman, *Holocaust Historiography*, 248.

17 “Moral and Spiritual Resistance,” at <https://www.holocaust.com.au/resources/moral-and-spiritual-resistance/>, accessed 10.02.2019; “Spiritual Resistance in the Ghettos,” at <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/spiritual-resistance-in-the-ghettos>, accessed 10.02.2019; For more details about spiritual resistance see *Spiritual Resistance: Art from Concentration Camps, 1940-1945*, ed. Miriam Novitch (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1981); Rachile Kostanian, *Spiritual Resistance in the Vilna Ghetto* (Vilnius: Vilna Gaon Jewish State Museum, 2002); Joseph Rudavsky, *To Live With Hope, To Die With Dignity: Spiritual Resistance in the Ghettos and Camps* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1997).

18 Marutyan, “Trauma and Identity,” 59.

19 In 1965 the Armenian people in Soviet Armenia and entire Diaspora universally commemorated the victims of the Armenian Genocide and celebrated the day of their remembrance. See “50th Anniversary of the Armenian Genocide 1965 USA,” filmed 17 February 2017 at YouTube, Eboni Coursey, video, 16:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laLB9yb3B64&fbclid=IwAR3x10Scr9v4EW7rWzKCrFi2Vh3DW8aCuyH1YrO31rVfFT7sODfQY2xEoTw>, accessed 05.11.2018; “Armenian Genocide 50th anniversary UN debate, 1965,” filmed 31 October 2014, at YouTube, The Genocide Education Project, video, 18:12, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h02U7pfMOfg&fbclid=IwAR2t2NC9I54JV1kAqwa_cq1fbNq9X98OJijnXnKUC1uICxCHNzi05www2lec, accessed 05.11.2018; Maike Lehmann, “Apricot Socialism: The National Past, the Soviet Project, and the Imagining of Community in Late Soviet Armenia,” *Slavic Review* 74, no. 1 (2015): 10-31; Avag Harutyunyan, *Հայոց ցեղասպանության 50-րդ տարեկիրը և Երկրորդ հսկրասպանությունը* [50th Anniversary of the Armenian

commemoration of the Armenian Genocide, after the Karabagh Movement in 1988 and the victory in Karabagh War.²⁰ Nevertheless, among some layers of the Armenian society, perhaps, mostly among the youth a belief has been shaped that “*enough has already been said concerning the genocide: it distorts the psychology of our children and youth, and contributes to increasing xenophobia, etc.*”²¹ According to the author, one of the factors shaping such thinking was that certain groups of the society held a perception that ostensibly “*the Armenians were slaughtered like sheep,*” almost without resistance.²²

In reality, neither the Armenians, not the Jews putting in resistance ever felt themselves as defenseless victims. On the contrary, they preferred to take up arms and die with dignity. Accepting Bauer’s viewpoint, we must note that in the context of the Armenian Genocide likewise armed self-defense seemed to be directed against that very perception. This is evidenced in particular by the fact that one of the heroes in the Austrian writer Franz Werfel’s novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a leader of the Musa Dagh self-defense, priest Aram Tomasian refused to die like a “defenseless sheep,” deciding to fight to the death: “*I know how I mean to die – not like a defenseless sheep, not on the road to Deir ez-Zor, not in the filth of a concentration camp, not of hunger, and not of the stinking plague – no! I mean to die on the threshold of my own house, with a gun in my hand....*”²³

The novel written on real facts became symbolic for the Zionist youth movement both in Palestine and in Europe, particularly in the ghettos.²⁴ The Holocaust historians considered that this perception was so widespread in the 1930s that when translating the book into Hebrew the author had translated the expression “defenseless sheep” into “not as a sheep led to slaughter.”²⁵ Jewish historian Yair Auron writes that the story of the defense of Musa Dagh was something like a parable, also a model and a source of inspiration for the members of the Jewish underground. They equated their fate to that of the Armenians. The author states: “*In both cases, the persecutor’s purpose was the uprooting, the exile, and the physical annihilation of entire communities, and in both cases, resistance embodied the idea of an honorable death as a nation, or a chance to be saved as individuals.*”²⁶

Another instance of this was that back then the press wrote about the self-defense of the Armenians in Cilicia in 1915 (according to the source, likely in Zeytun): “*The massacre started also in the region of Cilicia. The couriers were able to reach Van. It was they, who hoisted up the flag of rebellion. This time they do not want to be slaughtered like sheep (the underline is the author’s - H.G.). And that is the right decision. They are going to die as it comes, they might as well die fighting: it will do honor to them.*”²⁷ In May 1915, at the dinner held after the occupation of Van by the Russian Army and Armenian voluntary

Genocide and the Second Republic] (Yerevan, Noravank, 2015).

20 For details, see Harutyun Marutyan, *Iconography of Armenian Identity*. Volume 1: The Memory of Genocide and Karabagh Movement (Yerevan: Gitut’yun, 2009).

21 Marutyan, “Trauma and Identity,” 58.

22 Ibid., 58-59.

23 Franz Werfel, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (New York, the Viking Press, 1934), 205.

24 For details see Yair Auron, *The Banality of Indifference: Zionism and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2000), 293-311.

25 Feldman, “Not as Sheep,” 158.

26 Auron, *The Banality of Indifference*, 309.

27 «Ապստամբութիւնը Կիլիկիոյ մէջ» [The Uprising in Cilicia], *Arev* (Alexandria), № 19, 21 June 1915, 3.

groups, the leader of self-defense Aram Manukian addressed the Russian commander [A. Nikolaev] saying: “*When a month ago we declared an uprising, we did not expect that the Russians would come. Our situation was hopeless: we either had to surrender and allow to be **slaughtered like sheep** [underline is the author’s - H.G.] or perish, like the musicians of the Titanic, to the solemn sounds of music. We preferred the latter.*”²⁸ The antipode of the latter was “to be slaughtered like sheep,” being martyred, suffering, becoming a scapegoat.²⁹

Generally, armed resistance could be viewed as an act of moral resistance also, as making such a decision by those who resort to self-defense takes deep morality, such as, for instance, the notion of honorable or mindful death.³⁰ Maybe that was why the Holocaust historians considered armed resistance as an expression of “resistance” in its broader perception. Based on this logic, Bauer defined *resistance* as follows: “*I would define Jewish resistance during the Holocaust as any group action consciously taken in opposition to known or surmised laws, actions, or intentions directed against the Jews by the Germans and their supporters.*”³¹

Thus, Holocaust historians considered as *resistance* any action aiming at the protection of physical existence and maintenance of “human face,” any action against the policy of extermination or the “logic of extermination,” even intentions, any action, which would have served as a barrier to reaching the ultimate goal of crime.

Unarmed Resistance during the Armenian Genocide

In accordance with one of the provisions of Article 2 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations Organization (UN) on 9 December 1948, deliberately inflicting on a group conditions of life calculating to bring about its full or partial physical destruction committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group as such, means genocide.³²

One of the tools of inflicting unfavorable conditions during the Armenian Genocide was condemning hundreds and thousands of people to starvation on the roads of deportation as well as in concentration camps. Considering starvation as a policy of committing genocide, George Shirinian points out the motives of such policy:

28 «Վանի մէջ» [In Van], *Armenia* (Sofia), № 25, 6 June 1915, 1.

29 “Be slaughtered like sheep, be a martyr, become a scapegoat” and similar expressions often are met both in the memoirs of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, oral histories and the press of the time. For instance, “James Pricey telegraphed from Tiflis that of 160,000 population of Sivaz only some 10,000 were left, and they are the elderly and the unable only. The person who telegraphed was an eyewitness who had managed to get over to Tiflis. He said that many were slaughtered like sheep and thousands threw themselves into the rivers.” See «Սվազի կոտորածը» [The Massacre of Sivaz], *Azg* (Boston), № 25, 31 January 1916, 1.

30 The concept of mindful death is best expressed in the following formula: *Mindless death is death; mindful death is immortality*. See Yeghishe, «Վասն Վարդանայ և Հայոց պատերազմին Դարձի երիցո Մամիկոնի հայցեալ» [About Vardan and the Armenian War by David elder Mamikonean], Chapter 2, 2.

31 Yehuda Bauer, *The Jewish Emergence from Powerlessness* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1979), 27.

32 *Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 9 December 1948*, 280, at <https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/unts/volume%2078/volume-78-i-1021-english.pdf>.

Finally we explored the motives of the Turks in using starvation as a tool of genocide, finding that it was partially to provide an excuse that the Armenians died of natural causes, but also to inflict maximum punishment by way of a slow, organizing death, in order to extract vengeance and exert their domination over the Armenians, who refused to stay in their subordinate position within the Ottoman social and political system.³³

Below are described the means by which the Armenians procured food on the roads of deportation or in concentration camps with a special focus on children's experiences. The procurement of food and prolongation of physical existence were resistance to the Armenian Genocide and a barrier to achieving the ultimate goal of the perpetrators.

The Armenian Genocide brought on times of trial for the children who often were wandering from place to place alone, passing through Muslim households, ending up in the hands of various "masters" and struggling consciously or unconsciously to stay alive by displaying agility and cunning.

As a rule, the memoirs of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, as well as their oral histories started with descriptions of their peaceful life. It is noteworthy that when talking about the deportation the survivors frequently referred to their "happy childhood" as a period that was "left behind" or was over. The children having lost their happy childhood were facing new challenges. The five-year-old inmate of Antoura Turkish orphanage Karnig Banyan referred to their home as a chapel and their garden as a paradise: "*Our house was a temple of prayer with murmur of prayers heard year-round.*"³⁴ Hitting the road of deportation, he understood that the world was wider. He states: "*We were leaving, but unexpectedly in my mind's eye I would go back to our town, our home, the warm ambience of our house, the fresh bread of our house, the delicious fruits in our garden, the trees casting shadow on our bench near the wall, the current of cool air gliding-passing through them ... They all were left behind ...*"³⁵

Leaving behind a happy childhood the children seemed to grow up prematurely, sometimes also assuming the role of the "head of the household." They were involved in the responsibilities of decision-making and securing the necessities of life, sometimes taking care of the members of the family alone. In fact, they were assuming these functions right from the beginning of deportation. The survivors themselves explained this by the fact that they were the eldest of the kids or even if they were not the eldest of the kids, they still perceived themselves as already mature. Nicholas Berberian born in 1902 in Caesarea tells: "*So they said in seven days you've got to get out, so we put our stuff on the wagon and the whole family went out. My father was gone, so I was the head of the family, I was the oldest.*"³⁶

33 George N. Shirinian, "Starvation and Its Political Use in the Armenian Genocide," *Genocide Studies International* 11, no. 1 (2017): 29-30.

34 Karnig Banyan, *Յուշեր մանկությանն և որբությունն* [Memoirs of Childhood and Orphanhood] (Antelias-Lebanon: Printing House of the Catholicosate of the Great House of Cilicia, 1992), 17.

35 Ibid., 84.

36 Nicholas Berberian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project, <https://umdearborn.edu/casl/centers-institutes/center-armenian-research/armenian-assembly-oral-history-project>, watched 08.08.2016.

The Armenian children not only took part in the preparations for the exile, but also assumed the task of comforting and encouraging the adults on the roads of deportation. Survivor Ashkhen Poghikian³⁷ tells about what happened with their caravan in the autumn of 1915 in Tigranakert: *“The next day Levonik died. I remained with mother; I was comforting and consoling her.”*³⁸

Siranoush Boyajian (maiden name Ghazarian) born in 1907 in Marash remembers with bemusement how she could have taken care of the family, including the new-born baby, at seven and run the entire household after her mother’s death. They reached Homs with the caravan set out from Marash then moved to Mardin and settled there. She describes in detail the domestic overload that she had to manage after her mother’s death: *“I’m the oldest. And then we buried my mother, and we came home there was a [newborn - H.G.] baby, we do not now what to do. There’s nobody that we can say, give some milk, so I had to take care of that baby for a month. ...How did God give me the strength to do it all?”*³⁹

The survivors speaking about their behavior, employed cunning and versatility inappropriate for their age, noted that hunger, death and witnessing the murder of their relatives had numbed their senses; they no longer felt fear and were aware that the alternative was death. As described by one of the survivors, eleven-year-old Hamparsoum Berberian, they had become “cruel” and “insensitive” as they realized that they might be the next victim.⁴⁰

Food Procurement as a Life or Death Struggle

Noteworthy is the fact that on the roads of deportation the behavior of the children often was controversial: much as they had resigned themselves to death, they sought for everything that would enable to survive. Nine-year-old Hovakim Dishdishian tells:

...having spent bit by bit the supply of water that we had, we again were standing very close to death as the day before, and I must tell you, we have come to reconcile with it eventually... The more we made headway in the night, the thinner our ranks became, everyone lived with their own pains solely, the road became covered with the corpses of our fellow man sharing the same fate with us, but in the light of the moon and by its power my sister and I were proceeding to the stop over of the unspeakably excruciating caravan, that is the water that we craved...⁴¹

Taguhi Antonian born in 1900 in Bitlis speaks of the ways of feeding as a battle between life and death: *“My aunt cooked the blood of a dead cow in a pot, we ate it. Either we were going to die, or live. The horse hoof prints were full of urine, rain; we drank that as water; what could we do, we were thirsty.”*⁴²

37 Was born in 1908 in Erzurum. The memoir was written down in 1978.

38 Verjiné Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan, Gitut’yun, 2011), 223.

39 Siranoush Boyajian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

40 Hamparsoum Berberian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

41 Hovakim Dishdishian, *Դեր-Չորի անսպասում: Հիշողություններ* [In the Desert of Deir ez-Zor: Memoires] (Yerevan, Gitut’yun, 2006), 123-127.

42 Svazyan, *Armenian Genocide*, 104.

Feeding on Wild Grass

The children survivors of the Armenian Genocide were describing the road of deportation as a never-ending march controlled by armed police officers. Despite the fact that many of them have witnessed the murder of their relatives and compatriots, nevertheless many youngsters frequently identified the road of deportation with the sense of hunger interpreting it first as absence of water and food. Abraham Aghbashian born in 1912 in one of the villages near Tomarza recalls that on the road of deportation they were worried by nothing than food, even the armed police officers. As they were deported in summer, the survivor said that they fed on wild dandelions and rainwater: “*For year, year and a half, we had nothing to eat but wild dandelion.*”⁴³ Abraham Aghbashian says that wherever they saw green grass “*they ate like a cow*” and “*lap like a dog, the rainwater on the ground.*”⁴⁴

Nvard Aytinian from Sivrihisar who was a kid during the Armenian Genocide testifies:

Our wayfarers of the divided train waited for some time in Gonia as well and then we hit the road to Mersin on foot loading our belongings on donkeys. ...When we reached Mersin, we started to gather grass in the fields and eat it. But even so, we would have been happy with it, had the swarms of locusts not attacked and destroyed the grass. We stayed in Mersin for about two-three weeks. Finally, after manifold and indescribable suffering we reached Raqqa ...⁴⁵

The problem of foraging was constantly present not only on the roads of deportation, where people fed on wild grass, which often led to poisoning and death.⁴⁶ The Armenian deportees who took refuge in the mountains also lived on grass. “Aravot” newspaper of 12 May 1919 published an article about seven orphans who were found by British soldiers and handed over to deportees from Adana to be sent to Constantinople. They were placed in Haydar Pasha orphanage. After living in the mountains for years, the small children had lost the ability to speak and only by making the sign of the cross did they manage to make people understand that they were Armenians. The paper writes: “*When they got to another station, they were given bread, they rejected it sternly, jumped down, gathered grass and ate it inside the car. Having been used to herbivory for years they had forgotten about bread.*”⁴⁷

Father Vahan, a priest from Caesarea, tells the following about feeding on wild grass and surviving: “*All the men of our village were axed in the canyons by the criminals of Ittihad, most of the women were thrown into the river or raped and Islamized, so far of 570 people only 25 have been left who escaped the dreadful genocide by finding refuge in the mountains and feeding on grass.*”⁴⁸

43 Abraham Aghbashian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

44 Ibid.

45 Աղէտէն վերապրողներ, *Տէր-Զօր* [Survivors of the Disaster. Deir ez-Zor] (Paris: P. Elekean, 1955), 62.

46 Haykanush Melkonean, *Կեանք և մահ* [Life and Death], Series of Books on the April Genocide, No. 9 (Antelias-Lebanon, Printing House of the Armenian Great House of Cilicia, 1960), 26.

47 «Լեռը գտնուած եօթը որբեր» [Seven Orphans on the Mountain], *Aravot* (Constantinople), № 3, 12 May 1919.

48 “Of 570 persons only 25 women were left,” *Ariamart* (Constantinople), № 17 (1832), 11 December 1918.

Five-year-old Andreas Garamanian⁴⁹ recalls about hunger, thirst and foraging on the roads of deportation: “*The caravan would stop from time to time to rest, [people] would run to the rain water collected in potholes to quench their thirst elbowing one another, and hunt for wild plants to eat ...*”⁵⁰

Babken Incheapean, an Urfa orphanage inmate, tells:

The next day, Monday, the war would resume. And hunger with it. Light soup and very little bread were the food ration. We were compelled to feed on grass. We would run from the orphanage through a hole to gather grass and eat it. We could even hardly find grass in those places. Sometimes we would run away from the orphanage in the nights together with some orphans and go far away to get enough grass. So, we ate grass every day ...⁵¹

Gathering fruits, berries and nuts

Another way of foraging was to gather fruits, berries and nuts. Seven-year-old Arshaluys Boyajian tells that she did not even remember for how many months they had walked, without socks and shoes, to get to Aintab after leaving Sebastia. She recalls that when their caravan was passing by small villages local people sold food to them; however, upon reaching Aintab, they ate whatever they could gather from the orchards outside the city.⁵² This was actively practiced by the kids who had run away from Kurdish, Turkish or Arabic families and were returning to their localities or hitting the road to Aleppo alone. Hambarsoum Berberian, escaping from the train with his brother, set off for their hometown Adana, where their military brother was. The survivor tells about food procurement on the road: “*We were small. Anyway. Only, after going abit, there was a thing, a garden, we found a, what was it, tomatoes, tomatoes, from that garden, we found a tomatoe. We ate one or two of that.*”⁵³

Begging

Another way of food procurement that the Armenian deportees were resorting to not only when passing through villages and small towns on the way of exile but also in Arab settlements was begging, also quite common among the children.

The US Consul to Harput Leslie Davis writes: “*There were a number of children whom I found at one time or another and kept in the Consulate, in addition to those who had come there with their mothers. The first one was a little boy about nine years old by the name of Nerses Der Garabedian, who was born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, and had been brought to Turkey by his parents just before the war. They were gone, together with his brothers and sisters, and he was begging in the market place....*”⁵⁴

49 Born in Kars Bazar in 1911.

50 Andreas (Tavros) Garamanean, *Տարագրեալի մի յուշերի* [The Memories of an Exile], Volume 2 (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1972), 10.

51 Babken Incheapean, *Մեծ եղեռնի շրջանին հայ որդի մը ողբասուլիսը* [The Odyssey of an Armenian Orphan during the Genocide] (Paris: Turabian Press, 1951), 230-231.

52 Arshalous Boyajian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

53 Hamparsoum Berberian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

54 Leslie A. Davis, *The Slaughterhouse Province: an American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide*,

Zaruhi Ayanian from Kessab, who was six during the Armenian Genocide, tells that they had a cow with them when they were deported, which her mother was milking on the road. They were deported to the village of Bazur, where they sold the cow, then they reached Hama, Homs, and from there the settlement of Nebek near Damascus. Staying there for a year, she begged together with her mother to live on.⁵⁵ Abraham Aghbashian who we already had mentioned and who was telling about eating dandelions, continues: “*I had a stomach as big as a cow, because I was eating nothing but the wild dandelion. Occasionally, I remember when my mother and I used to begging house to house for food.*”⁵⁶ Ten-year-old Karnig Arpajian born in Balu stayed in Aleppo for two years before the British entered. Here he was begging [in the streets] together with two orphan kids to survive:

Well, I wasn't afraid no more, I said, the most, what they gonna do, gonna kill me. This is what I had in my mind. I always thought tomorrow is another day, the next day is another day, like that, I didn't give a care for it, that's the way I felt. I didn't care nothing. I'm hungry, I'm starving, I'm begging here and there, two weeks of it, I beg, I beg. I ate apple cores, I ate pear cores, I ate watermelon peelings, and I ate melon peelings, you name it, I ate any dogged thing that could be eaten, it wasn't eatable, but I had to eat it.⁵⁷

Suren Papazean, born in 1901 in the village of Havav of Balu, writes about his experience:

In the winter of 1917 I arrived in Peri all alone. I did not know anyone; I walked in the market, in the streets, I saw that a group of Armenian orphans of my age, smaller than I, would beg all day long, while at night they would go to the stable of government horses to sleep. I joined them, I found a desolate corner and huddled. Everybody took out whatever they had begged, started to eat. I had been hungry all day long, and I slept hungry.⁵⁸

Haykanush Mekonean told how the government provided food to the deportees in Aghbunar to prevent the latter from begging and spreading diseases in Aintab. She says: “*My sister and I got to go to same village called Aghbunar. There was a woman with us who had a five- or six-year-old boy; the woman would go to the city to beg to be able to sustain the little one. The government would give a small loaf of bread a day so that we did not go to the city to beg and spread diseases there.*”⁵⁹

Family Solidarity and Mutual Help

Family solidarity and mutual assistance could also be considered as manifestations of

1915-1917 (New York, Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989), 113-114.

55 Zaruhi Ayanian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

56 Abraham Aghbashian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

57 Karnig Arpajian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

58 Suren Papazean, *Վերսուրողի մը ողբակերտը* [The Odyssey of a Survivor] (Yerevan: Amaras, 2000), 113.

59 Melkonean, *Life and Death*, 27-28.

unarmed/moral resistance in the context of organizing the daily life, particularly food procurement. In some cases, the survivors themselves described and interpreted this phenomenon as “a way to survive,” in some cases we assessed it as such. During the discussion of the topic in the context of the Holocaust, of importance was the riskiness of mutual assistance, i.e. the existing danger and types thereof: to what extent people would risk their own life to help their family members or just relatives. This statement often helped to explain the notion - why they did not come to each other’s help. “Mutual assistance” in everyday life is viewed as “constructive behavior” contributing to survival.⁶⁰

Parantzem Alexanian, a survivor of the Armenian Genocide from Balu, tells that a Turk took her out on the road of deportation, separating her from the members of her family. When passing nearby a bakery, he gave her some bread: “*When he got piece of bread, I ran back to the way I came. The man followed me, understood that I wanted to give that bread to my mother. I reached, throw that bread to them, came and joined him.*”⁶¹ Abraham Aghbashian proudly recalls how risking his own life he delivered bread to the Armenian deportees personally when his mother had been working for an Arab family.⁶²

Karnig Arpajian tells about stealing from a grocer and helping his kin: “*I started stealing, it’s not good, but reason I steal because I wanted to give it to my nationalities, they were hungry, I want to help my people. I’m ten, eleven years old but I still think of my nationality and my religion, I won’t change.*”⁶³

The above examples demonstrate that Armenian children have understood that they are risking their own life, but still they have run the risk and extended help to their relatives.

Thus, the article touched upon an important scientific question: what is non-armed resistance and the purpose and problems of its study? Based only a few distinctive examples from many thousands of testimonies, the notion that the various ways in which Armenian children procured food during the years of the Armenian Genocide could be viewed as manifestations of *unarmed resistance* was put forward and corroborated.

60 Boaz Kahana, et. al., “The Victim as Helper-Prosocial Behavior during the Holocaust,” *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 13, no. 1/2 (1985-86): 361.

61 Parantzem Alexanian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

62 Abraham Aghbashian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.

63 Karnig Arpajian, Armenian Assembly Oral History Project.