Joseph C. Miller Memorial Lecture Series

29

eds. Janico Albrecht, Jeannine Bischoff, Sarah Dusend

UNIVERSITÄT BONN

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Nazan Maksudyan

Rebellious Misfits: Self-Representations of Armenian Children who Survived the Genocide

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> I believe that maturity is not an outgrowing, but a growing up: that an adult is not a dead child, but a child who survived.[1]

The writer Ursula K. Le Guin wrote these words in objection to the "disavowal of childishness" that had been part of assuming "male adulthood" in the 1970s, and which usually led to the "denial of the value of any connection to oneself as a child or to children in general". She stressed the necessity of keeping "the child-adult connection open and free of contempt".[2] The central matter here is the politics of age relations, which is instructed by adultism, an act wherein children are often presented as inchoate, not yet fully human, and less than adults; the child demarcates the boundaries of personhood, thereby limiting an individual's agency, voice, and enfranchisement.[3] Consequently, in much of historiography, children have been denied both a voice and a rational standpoint as social actors.[4] In the last decade, there has been a recognition of children's historical identity and agency[5] as part of a new historiography on children and youth. Ottoman historians have also recently come to acknowledge that children are active historical figures who deserve a history of their own.[6]

This research, following the main tenets of the new historiography on children and youth, focuses on the historical identity of Armenian child survivors as well as their agency, which has been defined in a

1 Ursula K. Le Guin, "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons? 1974," in *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, ed. Susann Wood (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993, 34–40, 39.

2 Ursula K. Le Guin, "A Child Who Survived," Ursula K. Le Guin, Blog, 28.12.2015, https://www.ursulakleguin.com/blog/106-a-child-who-survived [accessed 12.03.2025].

3 Karen Sanchez-Eppler, *Dependent States: The Child's Part in Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005): xxiv.

4 Harry Hendrick, "The Child as a Social Actor in Historical Sources: Problems of Identification and Interpretation," in *Research with Children: Perspectives and Practices*, ed. Pia Christensen and Allison James (New York: Routledge, 2008): 42.

5 David Oswell, *The Agency of Children: From Family to Global Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

6 Nazan Maksudyan, *Orphans and Destitute Children in Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014); Nazan Maksudyan, *Ottoman Children and Youth during World War I* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2019).

number of ways in childhood studies. For some, agency is an individual capacity to act in an autonomous way,[7] while for others, it is more in line with the notion of participation, in the sense of taking part in and transforming one's environment.[8] A third definition not only makes reference to children's capacity to act, but also implies that as a collective, as a subordinate social group, they help transform social structures.[9] In more recent scholarship on childhood agency, there is increased emphasis on intersectionality. Esser has emphasized that agency is not an individual property but an effect of chains of transactions between various actors, such that it exists only within interrelations.[10] Warming proposes that a child's agency is closely linked to both social relations and the identities attributed and claimed therein, at the intersection of social class, gender, age, and ethnicity.[11] Punch also argues for an understanding of agency as a continuum that varies according to contexts, identities, positions, power relations, and emotions.[12] New research in refugee studies also explores how refugee children and youth exhibit agency and resilience.[13]

As a historian of children and youth, my interest in this research is to explore the agency of Armenian children during the Armenian genocide. This essay focuses on the proud and strong self-representations of child survivors found in genocide testimonies, which portray them as

7 Allison James, "Agency," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Childhood Studies*, ed. William A. Corsaro, Michael Sebastian Honig and Jens Qvortrup (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009): 34.

8 Berry Mayall, *Towards a Sociology for Childhood: Thinking from Children's Lives* (Oxford: Open University Press, 2002): 26.

9 Michael G. Wyness, "Childhood, Agency and Education Reform," *Childhood* 6, no. 3 (1999): 355.

10 Florian Esser, "Neither 'Thick' nor 'Thin': Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood Relationally," in *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, ed. Florian Esser et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016): 50.

11 Hanne Warming, "Playing with Socially Constructed Identity Positions Accessing and Reconstructing Children's Perspectives and Positions Through Ethnographic Fieldwork and Creative Workshops," in *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, ed. Florian Esser et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016): 128.

12 Samantha Punch, "Exploring Children's Agency Across Majority and Minority World Contexts," in *Reconceptualising Agency and Childhood: New Perspectives in Childhood Studies*, ed. Florian Esser et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016): 183.

13 Dawn Chatty, "Researching Refugee Youth in the Middle East: Reflections on the Importance of Comparative Research," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 20, no. 2 (2007): 274–77.

heroes, self-rescuers, and *agents* who had a say in their own fates. Those Armenian children survived under paradoxical circumstances: they were targets (and hence victims) of direct violence, sexual exploitation, and the erasure of identity,[14] but they were also agents who tried to fight back through escape, pretension, and resistance.[15] In the context of the genocide, children's agency was not a limitless capacity nor one that could bring progressive change. Agency mostly constituted the capacity to endure and suffer. The agency of Armenian survivors was also relative to several social structures, especially age, gender, and solidarity. As will be discussed later in this essay, older children took responsibility for younger ones, such that children's agency was usually expressed and realised in solidarity with other children. Gendered aspects of genocidal violence against boys and girls also affected their agency and survival strategies. Although the genocide was gendered, as was survival, this does not imply essentialized female and male identities, as if boys were agents and girls victims. While there are more memoirs by men about their "boyhoods", comparable accounts have also been written by women.

Various genres of testimony served as primary sources for this essay, including oral histories, memoirs, and diaries. Some were written immediately after the war or in the early 1920s, and others in the 1950s, when the survivors were middle-aged. There is also a considerable repertoire of oral histories, recorded mostly in the 1970s and the 1980s. Most of those memoirs and/or testimonies were written long after the event. This time lag, and the new political and cultural conditions in which the authors sat down to write or tell their stories, surely affected the tone and content of their narratives. However, the different genres used for the testimonies invoke a certain empowering trope in which the hero is a rebellious misfit; this trope will serve as the main subject of this essay. This analysis selectively focuses on the themes of survival, journey, play,

14 Nazan Maksudyan, "The Orphan Nation: Gendered Humanitarianism for Armenian Survivor Children in Istanbul, 1919–1922," in *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics, and Power of Representation*, ed. Esther Möller, Katharina Stornig and Johannes Paulmann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020): 117–42.

15 Maksudyan, *Ottoman Children*: 121–29.

friendship, and solidarity. The protagonist in each story (the survivor) assumes power, resists authority, saves the weak, retaliates against bullies, and embarks upon a journey. These survival stories of child victims who suffered through innumerable acts of violence, loss, and trauma also portray proud and self-confident survivors who came "through hell alive". Their narratives bring to light several aspects of genocidal violence, but also the genocide survivor's agency.

I will first discuss the genocidal violence perpetrated against children by shedding light on the mass murder of children as well as other forms of violence such as forced conversion, forced adoption and assimilation. My focus will, for the most part, be on the empowering tropes present in survival narratives: the "child hero", "adventures", "talent", and the "city". These tropes bring to light the everyday activities, decisions, and self-representation of children, thereby stressing their resilience and agency. However, this does not mean that this essay will proceed with a literary analysis of literary tropes. While testimonies may make use of literary styles, values, and tropes, they are essentially meant to provide a "historical account". It is hard to claim that they are unassailable pieces of historical evidence, yet they are not entirely acts of "self-staging" either. I will then argue that survivor testimonies—used over the years as evidence for the violence committed against Armenian victims—also contain other elements that portray Armenians as agents. I will conclude by discussing the importance of resilience and the conscious decision to survive as processes of healing and coping with the violence that children endured.

1 The Armenian Genocide and Gendered Violence Against Children

As Hans-Lukas Kieser's recent work has emphasized, the genocidal policy of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) aimed to create a homogeneous Muslim population in Anatolia.[16] This biopolitical endeavour,

[16] Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Talaat Pasha: The Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018): 27.

which also targeted other non-Muslim groups such as Assyrians, was undertaken through sexual violence, abduction, adoption, forced marriage, and conversion, in an effort to modify the demographic composition of the empire's multi-ethnic and multi-religious population.[17] The main aim was to decimate the male members of the community so as to prevent the Armenian people from procreating and ensuring their demographic future in Anatolia.[18] The first targets were the Armenian male religious and civil leadership, as well as all adult men, who were murdered outright at the beginning of the genocide (April–August 1915). Armenian women, girls, and young children were the next major groups targeted by the Unionist government. On very short notice, a few weeks or sometimes even a few hours, Armenians were forced to leave their homes and possessions in Anatolia and march toward the Syrian Desert, to Der Zor, supposedly to be 'relocated'. This was a death march, an unending series of dislocations and deportations, exposure, exhaustion, starvation, disease, and epidemics. Large-scale massacres of women and children were also integral to the genocide. The few survivors of the death marches that managed to reach the Syrian Desert were put into camps with no provisions, such as food, water, or medicine.[19]

Thanks to new research on the Armenian genocide, there is now a more nuanced analysis of the violence that targeted different groups of victims. The literature on the gender-specific aspects of the Armenian genocide has grown richer in the past two decades.[20] These works

17 Dror Ze'evi and Benny Morris, *The Thirty-Year Genocide: Turkey's Destruction of its Christian Minorities, 1894–1924* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

18 Ronald Grigor Suny, "Armenian Genocide," in *1914–1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson, Freie Universität Berlin, 2015, https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10646.

19 Raymond H. Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011).

20 Matthias Bjørnlund, "'A Fate Worse Than Dying': Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide," in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe's Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Basingstoke: Springer, 2009): 16–58; Katharine Derderian, "Common Fate, Different Experience: Gender-Specific Aspects of the Armenian Genocide, 1915–1917," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005): 1–25; Ara Sarafian, "The Absorption of Armenian Women and Children into Muslim Households as a Structural Component of the Armenian Genocide," in *In God's Name: Genocide and Religion in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack (New York: Berghahn Books,

examine the sexual violence committed against young girls and women, which took the form of rape, kidnapping, abduction, sexual slavery, and forced marriage. This body of literature underscores the fact that sexually violent acts were a structural component and natural extension of the CUP's genocidal policies, and that they were instrumental in increasing the Muslim population. The genocidal fate of Armenian children has also received closer attention. Miller and Touryan Miller's valuable work of oral history on the Armenian genocide is one of the earlier examples wherein children (and women) were treated as separate groups of victims that had been affected differently in the course of the genocide.[21] Dadrian's research on violence against children specifically focuses on the "ferocious and sadistic methods" through which thousands of Armenian children were murdered.[22] Darbinyan and Peroomian have also written about children as "the most vulnerable victims" of the Armenian genocide.[23]

Forced deportation to the desert was harder for younger children, both boys and girls, to endure, with many of them perishing during the marches due to starvation and disease. From a gendered perspective of childhood, this means that boys over a certain age—mostly twelve, but sometimes up to fifteen—were murdered directly along with adult men. The CUP orders make it clear that younger boys had better chances of being 'spared' by the perpetrators. In July 1915, the Ministry of Interior authorized the provinces to collect and distribute Armenian orphans to Muslim families, for the purposes of "care and education".[24] In April 1916, the government stipulated the age limit for boys as "up to twelve

2001): 209–21; Vahé Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 60–80.

21 Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

22 Vahakn N. Dadrian, "Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case," *Journal of Genocide Research* 3, no. 5 (2003): 421–37.

23 Asya Darbinyan and Rubina Peroomian, "Children: The Most Vulnerable Victims of the Armenian Genocide," in *Plight and Fate of Children During and Following Genocide*, ed. Samuel Totten (New York: Routledge, 2018): 57–84.

24 BOA, DH.ŞFR., 54/411, 12.07.1915.

years old"[25], suggesting that older boys were considered as threats to be eliminated. This is why mothers usually dressed older boys as girls, so as to save them from being killed. Many survivor stories stress that such disguises constituted a survival strategy for boys, as long as they were not discovered by the guards during the marches.[26] By the same token, memoir sources reveal that mothers tried to make their daughters unattractive by blackening their faces or cutting their hair, and that they would keep them in the middle of a group to avoid rape and abduction.[27]

The genocidal violence inflicted on the Armenians was gendered. Hence, even though girls had better chances of surviving, they were not exempt from other forms of genocidal violence, specifically abduction and rape.[28] By the orders of the government, they were either "adopted" or "married off", and they were allowed to live as long as they obeyed their masters and converted to Islam. The Ministry of Interior also encouraged state officials to adopt Armenian girls into their households.[29] The government claimed control over Armenian women's bodies, sexuality, marital behaviour, and reproduction as part of its nationalist population politics. When incorporated into Muslim households—in other words, once they converted to Islam, were married and impregnated, and submitted themselves to patriarchal power within the family—young women and girls were considered less threatening and more malleable. Forced marital conversions were part of the genocidal violence and instrumental in increasing the Muslim population. Girls were also sold, bought, forcefully abducted, stolen, and even put up for auction by Turkish, Kurdish, and Arab households.[30] Although it is

25 BOA, DH.ŞFR., 63/142, 30.04.1916.

26 Miller and Touryan Miller, *Survivors*: 115–17.

27 Elise Hagopian Taft, *Rebirth: The Story of an Armenian Girl Who Survived the Genocide and Found Rebirth in America* (New York: Plandome, 1981): 49; Alice Muggerditchian Shipley, *We Walked, Then Ran* (Phoenix, AZ: self-published, 1984): 65; Dickran Kouymjian Highgas, *Refugee Girl* (Watertown, MA: Baykar, 1985): 100.

28 This is not to say that Armenian boys were not subjected to sexual violence and abuse during the genocide. Yet, rape, marriage, and impregnation were systematic acts that targeted female bodies.

29 BOA, DH.ŞFR., 61/23, 17.01.1916.

30 Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, "A Climate for Abduction, a Climate for Redemption: The Politics of Inclusion During and After the Armenian Genocide," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3, no. 55 (2013): 522–53; Keith David Watenpaugh, "'Are There Any

impossible to ascertain the exact figures, both archival and narrative sources point to a marked difference in the number of Armenian girls in Muslim households as compared to boys.

Children were also handed over to state orphanages and schools for upbringing and assimilation (*terbiye ve temsil*); in other words, to be Islamicized and Turkified through conversion, name changes, and by not being allowed to speak Armenian.[31] In sum, Armenian boys below a certain age, as well as girls, had a greater chance of survival through forced assimilation, thanks to their perceived utility as a demographic resource. Nevertheless, the majority of Armenian children were primarily killed during the genocide as a result of the CUP's systematic genocidal policy, and only a minority survived.

2 The Trope of the Armenian Child Hero

Taken together, the words genocide and children inevitably conjure up sad images. As in Armin T. Wegner's photographs of Armenian children in 1915–1916, we envision starving, crying, and dying children, their emaciated bodies lying on the barren ground.[32] These are visions of a cruel historical reality, and they capture what happened to many children during the genocide. The existing historiography of the Armenian genocide largely focuses on child victims who were bought, sold, kidnapped, or rescued. In contrast, this essay will present another image, that of the Armenian children who survived. These youngest of witnesses and survivors of the genocide can also be portrayed as agents who had a say in their own fates. In fact, self-representation in survivor narratives

Children for Sale?': Genocide and the Transfer of Armenian Children (1915–1922)," *Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 12 (2013): 283–95.

31 Maksudyan, *Ottoman Children*: 16–47; Edita G. Gzoyan et al., "In the Beautiful Heaven, a Golden Cage: Race, Identity and Memory in Turkification of Armenian Children in State Orphanages During the Armenian Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* 26, no. 3 (2023): 243–63.

32 Vanessa Agnew and Egemen Özbek, "Topographies of Genocide, Flight, and Hospitality – Then and Now," in *Refugee Routes: Telling, Looking, Protesting*, ed. Vanessa Agnew, Kader Konuk and Jane O. Newman (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020): 51–88.

is not only characterized by victimization, but also by resilience. These survival narratives depict an Armenian child hero who is not only rebellious, but also superior to an inhumane and coercive society made up of cruel, malevolent, and insensitive adults.

Staying alive is a leitmotif in several testimonies; survival is a true source of resilience, and a very important form of resistance. "Resolving to live" has also been identified as an important element of resilience and a coping strategy among Holocaust survivors.[33] Using adaptive strategies to survive, participating in civilian resistance (in the form of food theft, escape, pretension), being a problem solver, and making choices each day allowed survivors to become resilient.[34] The will to survive also provided Armenian children with resilience, fostered new "talent", and lent them the strength to fight, such that they came to realise, within certain limited parameters, that they could take control of their own lives and assume a degree of agency over their survival. However, emphasizing children's agency should not be read as an idealization, one implying that those who did not survive lacked agency. The distinction between resilience and suffering—between being a victim and an agent—is not always so clear-cut.

In his memoir, Avedis Abrahamian reflects on how he survived the conditions that killed so many, how he was able to "sustain life" and "come through hell alive". He concludes that it was a "struggle against an enemy who was trying to exterminate" them, and that in this battle, "people exerted superhuman efforts to survive", their one and only weapon to frustrate this goal of extermination.[35] No matter how easy it was to kill a child, it was harder to kill his or her will to survive. In her biography of her mother Iskouhi Parounagian from Sivas, Alice A. Tashjian similarly stresses that the main theme in her testimony is the

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33 Roberta R. Greene and Sandra A. Graham, "Role of Resilience Among Nazi Holocaust Survivors: A Strength-Based Paradigm for Understanding Survivorship," *Family & Community Health* 32 (2009): 75–82.

34 Roberta R. Greene, "Holocaust Survivors: A Study in Resilience," *Journal of Gerontological Social Work* 1, no. 37 (2002): 16.

35 Avedis Albert Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story: An Armenian Boy's Journey*, ed. Carolann S. Najarian (London: Gomidas Institute, 2014): 70.

"will to survive".[36] Karnig Panian's (1910–1989) *Memoirs of Childhood and Orphanhood* (*Husher Mangutyan yev Orputyan*) is mainly about his own struggle to survive: it documents life in the camp at Hama, where death from cholera was ubiquitous, and how he eked out an existence in the orphanage, mountains, and caves, where he subsisted on leaves, wild fruit, twigs, and tree bark. It is the story of how he and his friends did whatever it took to live just one more day.

Retaining their Armenian identities was another common form of resistance by Armenian orphans. Children escaped deportation, abduction, camps, orphanages, and Muslim households when they had the chance. Little Mary escaped her prospective husband with the solidarity and help of another girl, Big Mary. Little Mary was living with her family when the deportations started in Marash. According to Big Mary's account, a Turk had seen Little Mary and given orders that she be brought to his house once the deportations began. Big Mary heard of this and so sent a warning to Little Mary. She told Little Mary that if she could escape and reach the German missionary hospital in Marash, she would take her in and hide her. To evade the soldiers, Little Mary stained her face and hands with dirt, dressed in rags, and walked to the hospital with a cane, like an old woman. Big Mary waited for her all night; Little Mary reached the hospital gates just before morning came, and Big Mary let her in.[37]

Armenian children kept in Muslim households tried to find other converts to befriend in the village or neighbourhood. Whenever a child in a Muslim household found out that a servant in the same house, or one living next door or in the next village, was also a converted Armenian, they found ways to meet and keep one another company. They usually became friends and planned escapes or other moves together.[38] Papken,

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36 Alice Agnes Tashjian, *Silences: My Mother's Will to Survive* (Princeton: Blue Pansy Publishing, 1995).

37 Mabel Evelyn Elliott, *Beginning Again at Ararat* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1924): 76–77.

38 Papken Injarabian, *Azo the Slave Boy and His Road to Freedom*, trans. Elizabeth Eaker (London: Gomidas Institute, 2015 [1980]); Aram Haigaz, *Four Years in the Mountains of Kurdistan: An Armenian Boy's Memoir of Survival*, trans. Iris Haigaz Chekenian (Bronxville, NY: Maiden Lane Press, 2015); Miller and Touryan Miller, *Survivors*.

for instance, was nine years old when the deportations started in Amasya on 21 June 1915. In the space of a few months, he lost his entire family and was left alone.[39] He had a total of nine different masters, working as their servant or "slave", as he described it. In 1918, when he heard that Armenian children were gathering at the Near East Relief orphanage in Urfa, he dreamed of running away. He wanted to join the other Armenian orphans and possibly find members of his family. He then tried to convince a number of other adopted or enslaved Armenian boys in the neighbouring villages, but they were scared and indecisive. He even pretended to be a true Muslim, swearing to never run away. When he could finally flee, however, he was unable to reach Urfa, ending up instead with another master in a nearby village, in Cimbolat (Cinpolat), where he befriended another Armenian boy named Resho. Together they planned their escape to Urfa and finally reached the orphanage in the summer of 1919.[40] While he described the orphanage as heaven, he also ran away from there when he suffered from excessive hunger.[41] In light of such deprivation, Papken thought that finding a new master—even if it meant converting for a third time (he converted once to Islam, then again to Christianity at the orphanage)—offered the best chance of survival. But then he met an Armenian shopkeeper at the marketplace and so opted to stay with this family. In yet another twist to the story, he left this household as well when he heard that the orphanage was going to be transferred to Lebanon. Though the orphanage administration had declared that "no escapees would be readmitted", he managed to join his friends at the Orphanage of Antelias.[42]

Children in institutional settings had better chances of finding solidarity among their peers, which then allowed them to act and resist

39 Injarabian, *Azo the Slave Boy*: 1–14.

40 Injarabian, *Azo the Slave Boy*: 83.

41 Food scarcity and hunger were common problems in all orphanages, Turkish, Armenian, and American alike.
Ramela Martin, who was a very little girl during the genocide, stayed in various Near East Relief orphanages in
Aleppo, Beirut, Istanbul, and Corinth. Her account of her experience in each was equally sad, filled with stories of children dying from hunger and illness; Ramela Martin, *Out of Darkness* (Cambridge, MA: Zoryan Institute Publications, 1989).

42 Martin, *Out of Darkness*: 110–11.

authority en masse. Three "Armenian convert" boys (*Ermeni muhtedilerinden*) from the İzmit CUP Orphanage escaped and attempted to go to Adana "with fake documents" (*sahte vesikayla*). We know their names and places of origin: Hasan, otherwise referred to as (*nam-ı diğer*) Avedis, was from Aleppo; Ali, also known as Krikor, was from Adana; and Osman, known as Arşag, was from Erzurum. According to official records, they were caught in a freight train in Eskişehir and were held there by the police department.[43] When the Aintab Orphanage was closed, a significant number of its boys were transferred to Istanbul. Nine Armenian boys escaped from the orphanage in Istanbul and returned to Aintab in the hopes of locating family members and acquaintances.[44]

An important site of resistance for children was the Antoura orphanage, which was under the direction of Cemal Pasha, one of the most prominent CUP leaders and the governor of the province of Syria at the time. The institution was infamous for its policy of Turkifying Armenian orphans by changing their names into Turkish, and by enforcing the exclusive use of the Turkish language. Orphans were tormented not only by hunger but also by unprecedented diseases, ruthless beatings—including a daily bastinado (foot caning) ceremony—and other humiliations. Panian reports that the children were very weak and knew they were fighting "an unequal battle", but were still "determined to resist" by clinging to "their identities, which were all they had left".[45] As part of their firm decision not to relinquish their names, they put up a remarkable act of rebellion when forced to welcome Cemal Pasha on his first visit to the orphanage.

The children were instructed to smile and applaud when the great man arrived, and to shout "*Yaşasın* (long live) Cemal Paşa". The children obeyed the order, but then one of the older ones spoke out and said that they were dying of hunger. Others joined in and cried out, "We're hungry! We're hungry!" Then, some of the bolder boys climbed onto the trees, leapt about the branches, ate the wild fruit, and made funny noises

43 BOA, DH.EUM.2.Şb, 48/56, 10.02.1918.
44 BOA, MF.MKT., 1238/71, 14.05.1919.
45 Karnig Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura. A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide*, trans. Simon Beugekian (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015 [1992]): 83.

like monkeys.[46] Not only were they disobedient, but they also showed a capacity for creative rebelliousness. According to Panian, Cemal's entourage was deeply ashamed but unable to respond to the unruly children. Finally, Cemal turned around and gestured for his followers to retreat. The message to the children was clear: a handful of starving children could drive the Pasha away just by asking for food. Later that day, the children dared to speak Armenian in the classroom and courtyard. They assumed they had scored a "victory" in their "battle against the forces of Turkification".[47]

It is impossible to corroborate such survivors' narratives so long after the fact and in the absence of non-partisan reports. The accounts of bravery, resilience, and resistance may have been exaggerated by the survivors themselves. Yet, what is crucial is that innumerable Armenian child survivors recounted similar stories of how they fought, resisted, and prevailed. Their self-representation in these narratives is that of a child hero.

3 The Trope of the Adventurous Armenian Orphan

Dawn Anahid MacKeen knew her grandfather, Stepan Miskjian, only through the struggle and pain of the genocide. After discovering and reading his memoirs, which was published by a small Armenian press in the US in the 1960s, she was profoundly surprised. She realised that she had unfairly "reduced him to one dimension: he was a survivor". Never had she imagined him—or other survivors of the genocide—as possessing their own individual personalities, as being funny or enjoying life. The legacy of the genocide had erased all the tiny yet meaningful details of the survivors' lives. Without these memoirs, which made his daughter and granddaughter giggle, she would never have imagined that this sad-looking old man had once been "a little prankster".[48]

46 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*: 85–89.
47 Panian, *Goodbye, Antoura*: 97.
48 Dawn Anahid MacKeen, *The Hundred-Year Walk: An Armenian Odyssey* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016): 14.

As is to be expected, children's survival narratives contain many traumatic episodes, but also include accounts of the children's daily activities such as sports and rivalries, fighting with adversaries, escaping from schools and orphanages, travelling alone to distant places, climbing fruit trees and scampering off with a full tummy, collecting things, riding trains, engaging in petty theft, searching for treasures, and the like. Many stories recounted by Armenian survivor children also portray happy moments from their childhood.

Describing his first days on the deportation road, Panian asserts that like all the children who shared his fate, he had to say "farewell to the innocence of… [his] childhood"; he was only five years old at the time.[49] However, when he was in the company of other children, his "childishness" quickly reasserted itself through play. The ability to play also lent him the strength to cling to life in the face of adversity. A note from Anne Frank's diary, in which she stresses her need for escape and her longing for a normal life, allows for a comparison with the Holocaust. She wrote on Friday, 24 December 1943: "I long to ride a bike, dance, whistle, look at the world, feel young and know that I'm free … I sometimes wonder if anyone will ever understand what I mean … and merely see me as a teenager badly in need of some good plain fun."[50] George Eisen, the author of an important study on children and play during the Holocaust, argues that play served as a tool for survival.[51] Armenian narrative sources also point to the centrality of play in children's lives. Panian relates that whenever they took a break or camped out during their exile journey, the children would play games every evening "without knowing what fatigue [was]". They played simple, lively games like catch and "blind man's bluff", games that did not require any equipment. Since the image of children at play inspired a belief in the future, these games pleased, relaxed, and encouraged the adults as well. According to Panian, the parents thought that if the children played the same games

49 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*: 33.

50 Anne Frank, *The Diary of a Young Girl: The Definitive Edition*, trans. Susan Massotty, ed. Otto H. Frank and Mirjam Pressler (New York: Doubleday, 1995): 310.

51 George Eisen, *Children and Play in the Holocaust: Games Among the Shadows* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988): 10.

they had once played, then "the ones after them will also play the same games".[52]

One day at the orphanage in Hama, when Panian went out to the courtyard to play, he saw that the other children had already separated into different groups and were playing "all kinds of games". Later, he wrote that their "joyful voices" proved that they still had "the ability to enjoy life". Play, it would seem, had an almost magical capacity to help children adapt to abnormal situations: engaged in play, they "were children again" and no longer remembered that they had been exiled, and that their families were still suffering in the camps.[53]

Another survivor, Avedis Abrahamian, who hid on the premises of an American mission in Harput during the first months of the deportation, tells the story of Enver Pasha's visit by motorcar in August 1915. Although all of the town's remaining Armenians were hiding in the basement of the American missionary school, the children were hypnotised by the unfamiliar sight of the car. Avedis, his cousin, and a friend all went to the road where Enver Pasha's car was passing by. As if this were not dangerous enough, they jumped onto the rear of the car and clung onto the spare tire to hitch a ride. After a time, the car stopped and they were nabbed by the police.[54] The children were fortunate to be released, but this never stopped Avedis from taking risks and trying to have fun during his deportation journey. He recalls that when the White Army evacuated Novorossiysk, they left a large amount of half-destroyed artillery, ammunition, and rifles on the pier. The children devised lots of games so that they could play with this artillery and ammunition. For instance, they took the shells apart and buried them in the ground with dynamite and gunpowder, and then they blew it up by igniting it from a distance. He admits that it was a miracle that no one was blown up or injured during these escapades. According to the author, these games

52 Karnig Panyan, *Elveda Antura, Bir Ermeni Yetimin Anıları*, trans. Maral Fuchs (Istanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2018 [1992]): 101–2.
53 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*: 67.
54 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 39.

were inevitable for they were boys, and as such were supposed to "be mischievous and have fun".[55]

Some of the girls were also described through their "hardihood", struggles, and adventures. The memoirs of the medical doctor Mabel Evelyn Elliott, who worked at the Scutari Rescue Home (Istanbul)—a shelter for girls escaping Muslim households—are very valuable as she recounts many of the interviews she had with the girls there. One girl told her story "in a matter-of-fact voice", as if she "had lost her sensitiveness". Her manners were "bold, almost callous". She was only twelve years old when some Kurdish men abducted her. She was valued because of her youth: they held her for a higher price while the other girls were being sold. She later escaped, and for a year she lived a "phantasmagoria of adventure". She was subsequently captured, then escaped again, and was wounded, beaten, and hunted. She also managed to get a knife and use it to kill. Driven by starvation, she sought out Muslim households on several occasions and was taken in, but she escaped the moment she realised she was going to be sold as a slave: once she wrenched bars from windows, and another time she jumped off the wall.[56]

Notwithstanding its grim preface, *Men Deprived of their Childhood* is also an account of everyday activities, play, laughter, and fun. Describing his time with his best friends, Dzarugyan wrote with pride that they spent days, weeks, and months learning to ride a bike, playing with marbles, going to the movies, and skipping school.[57] In Antoura, the "tragic life of orphans" could only be "livened up by games and jokes". The children devised all sorts of dares, such as eating their tiny bread ration without dropping a single crumb. The game was played in the presence of a referee and before a large audience. The older children played the sorts of games that Panian regarded as adventures, while little ones like himself were content with merely watching. Nevertheless, all of them,

55 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 70.
56 Elliott, *Beginning Again*: 24–25.
57 Antranik Dzarugyan, *Çocukluğu Olmayan Adamlar*, trans. Klemans Zakaryan Çelik (Istanbul: Aras Yayıncılık, 2016 [1955]): 200.

older or younger, would apparently "forget their pain during the game and laugh endlessly".[58]

A theme common to all survivor accounts is the desire to be reunited with family. The hope of finding family members was an important motivation for children to go on the road. The story of eight-year-old Mgrdich from Urfa is one such example.[59] In the summer of 1915, the convoys from Diyarbekir, Harput, and Siverek passed through their city. When it was finally their turn to leave, Mgrdich's mother dressed him up as a girl. Cross-dressing helped Mgrdich reach Der Zor. Although only a small boy, he assumed the role of the head of the family and bought a horse and a donkey to take his mother and sisters to Mosul. His sisters were mounted on the animals, while he chose to walk beside them along with his mother. Hungry and thirsty, they spent days walking through the desert, only to find living conditions no better in Mosul. The area was experiencing a terrible famine, and the family had nothing to eat but grass. The children's mother eventually died. Mgrdich took his sisters and went on to Tel Afar, in present-day Iraq, where he learned that his older brothers were still alive and working in a vegetable garden in Aleppo. He said his heart jumped at the news, and he resolved to go and find them. What followed was a remarkable tale of an eight-year-old doing all he could to reunite with the rest of his family. Mingling with a caravan of Arabs, he journeyed on foot to Nusaybin for six or seven days. There he found relatives who cleaned him up, gave him clothes, and helped him prepare for the difficult journey ahead. He went to a train station, where he observed the comings and goings, and gathered what information he could about travelling without documents, tickets, or money. Despite numerous mishaps along the way, the boy finally reached Aleppo and actually located his brothers. After a few happy, peaceful days, he began to worry about his sisters back in Tel Afar. His brother said one of them should go and fetch them. Upon reflection, Mgrdich realised that his brothers would not be able to find the way back, even though they were considerably older: it would have to be

58 Panyan, *Bir Ermeni*: 184–85.
59 Miller and Touryan Miller, *Survivors*: 115–17.

him. Although he was the youngest of the brothers, he volunteered to go and, as improbable as it seems, he successfully accomplished his mission.

All of these endeavours, so moving and astonishing for the reader, are part of the repertoire of children's survival stories. Their testimonies demonstrate their self-construction and reveal their undeniable effort to leave historical evidence behind. It is as though they somehow thrived on movement, action, and a sense of accomplishment. As Eisen argues within the context of his research on the Holocaust, children's play constituted a part of their quest for survival. Their activities surrounded them with "a protective cloak, a spiritual shelter" that shielded them from the damaging effects of the genocide—even if only for a brief moment.[60] From another perspective, resilience was not just a personal trait or an outcome, but also a process of healing for survivors.[61] They made a conscious escape through their journeys: the escape was a promise to transcend their physical limitations and leave behind their trauma and terror.

4 The Trope of the Talented Armenian Orphan

The attribute of being *carbig* (ճարպիկ, agile) is one of the most frequently invoked characteristics in survivor narratives, with every story revolving around the skills and abilities of those identified as being *talented*.[62] The term is used to describe a person who is talented, clever, quick in taking decisions, and able to manipulate circumstances to his or her own benefit. These individuals would charm potential saviours with their sweetness, special abilities, or intelligence, and they managed to exploit opportunities for their own advantage. Sometimes they even strove to be taken into Muslim households or orphanages. At other times, they would escape from these relatively secure environments in order to

60 Eisen, *Children*: 42.

61 Bea Hollander-Goldfein, Nancy Isserman and Jennifer E. Goldenberg, *Transcending Trauma: Survival, Resilience and Clinical Implications in Survivor Families* (New York: Routledge, 2012): 12.

62 Miller and Touryan Miller, *Survivors*: 113; Dzarugyan, *Çocukluğu*: 11, 16, 31, 33, 49, 74; Injarabian, *Azo the Slave Boy*: 93.

search out other opportunities. Some of them successfully resisted their masters or orphanage directors. They became thieves if necessary, went into business to make money, and made long-distance train journeys to find family members. All of this meant taking risks and making choices that gave them control over their circumstances. Thus, talent can also be translated as agency.

The discourses of "the end of childhood", "never having a childhood", or "growing up before one's due"[63], which are prevalent in the narratives of child witnesses and survivors of the genocide, are also indicative of the actors' self-realization of their own empowerment. As active agents, these children felt independent, responsible, and powerful, and hence defined their new selves as adult-like.

One of the talented children most admired by Dzarugyan was named Hachig. He was among those who found a way to attend the Protestant church on Sunday mornings. While the children who attended the Armenian church returned exhausted because they were obligated to stand for hours on end, the children in the Protestant church luxuriated in their seats, and even came back bearing colourful pictures. The matron of the orphanage, whom the children called *Mayrig* (Mother), would also give them some silver coins to put in the donation bowl at the church. She would spread terror among the children by severely punishing those who dared to pilfer the money. During the service, the orphans were told a cautionary tale called "The Silver Ladder", in which the last rung on the ladder to heaven was said to be missing for the children who kept money for themselves. Impervious to this message, Hachig stole the money destined for the church collection and bought himself raisins. He offered raisins to his friend, Antranig, and showed him another coin he had stolen from the bowl. Antranig said he was afraid to eat the raisins as they might prevent him from going to heaven. Hachig confidently answered, "you eat them now, we go buy more again tomorrow. Ladders and all, this is all empty talk […]"; Hachig was just six years old at that time.[64]

63 Panyan, *Bir Ermeni*: 92; Dzarugyan, *Çocukluğu*: 10.
64 Dzarugyan, *Çocukluğu*: 50–55.

Panian describes Mihran, the leader of their gang at Antoura, with a similar fascination for his talent. He readily and fearlessly made all sorts of sacrifices for his friends. Panian wrote that he was "wilful, bold, and enterprising", possessing "not only rare courage, but also the willingness to lead others".[65] Mihran organized their nightly excursions to the storeroom, vegetable gardens, and nearby farms; encouraged the little ones to come along; found a stash for their treasure; and distributed it justly among the members of the group. Describing himself as a scared child, Panian was extremely proud of the courage and resistance demonstrated by his friends. He lamented how their childhood had been "taken away from them", and that they were now only dealing with "matters of life and death". But their hold on life was so splendid that he wanted to "be like them".[66]

Yusuf is another talented child who appears in Panian's memoir. He is the sole reason the group survived when they escaped from the orphanage and lived in the mountains and in caves. Expert in the ways of the natural world, Yusuf possessed a rich knowledge of trees, plants, animals, and the weather. He easily found caves that served as shelter, located water sources, and brought them sacks of fruit. Panian never forgot the taste of the carob that Yusuf supplied them with. He was probably only thirteen or fourteen, but the group members praised him as their senior, leader, a master thief, and they always did as he said. As the narrative constantly reiterates, the children feared losing Yusuf and starving to death on their own. For Panian, Yusuf was so gifted that he imagined that he would one day "cure the sick, and even resurrect the dead".[67]

This is not at all to suggest that only those children who could escape from a Turkish orphanage or master could be considered as agents, and that the ones who remained in Muslim households were victims. New research on the reclamation and repatriation of Armenian women and

65 Panian, *Goodbye Antoura*: 101.
66 Panyan, *Bir Ermeni*: 194.
67 Panyan, *Bir Ermeni*: 315.

children points to the different choices made by young women.[68] While many abducted women and girls longed to escape their life of bondage, they followed different routes. Some young girls left their children behind and escaped alone; others escaped together with their children; yet others escaped as pregnant women, with their decisions regarding their soon-to-be-born baby always differing according to each case.[69] We should also note the decision made by younger women to stay in Muslim households with their Muslim husbands. For instance, Yevkineh, an Armenian girl who had two babies by her Kurdish husband, did not join other Armenian converts in escaping the village since she could not leave her children.[70]

5 The Trope of the Armenian Orphan in the City

Notwithstanding their mostly rural origins, many children managed to find their way to the city, where they benefitted from urban social life, came into contact with other refugees and exiles, and took part in economic activities. A number of survival narratives contain episodes, mostly towards the end of the account, in which orphans find themselves in a big city. After years of wandering in the desert, small towns, and mountainous villages, those orphans would eventually find themselves in urban centres like Aleppo, Urfa, Sivas, or Istanbul. Such city-episodes are focused on the children's adventures in an urban setting and their encounters with different sorts of characters. These urban experiences

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68 Ekmekçioğlu, "A Climate for Abduction"; Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion"; Victoria Rowe, "Armenian Women Refugees at the End of Empire: Strategies of Survival," in *Refugees and the End of Empire. Imperial Collapse and Forced Migration in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Panikos Panayi and Pippa Virdee (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 152–72; Edita Gzoyan and Regina Galustyan, "Forced Marriages as a Tool of Genocide: The Armenian Case," *The International Journal of Human Rights* 25, no. 10 (2021): 1724–43.

69 Vahé Tachjian, "Mixed Marriage, Prostitution, Survival: Reintegrating Armenian Women into Post-Ottoman Cities," in *Women and the City, Women in the City: A Gendered Perspective on Ottoman Urban History*, ed. Nazan Maksudyan (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014): 86–106; Elliott, *Beginning Again*: 24–28.

70 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 303.

are mostly portrayed as enjoyable and happy in the survivor narratives. Here, I will focus on the experiences of two Armenian boys who came to Istanbul in 1919 or 1920. Both had been on the road for about five years, and had travelled through a number of different regions. Yet, their exile route did not end in Istanbul for in 1921, they both left for the United States.

Avedis was nine years old when the deportations started in 1915.[71] His mother first took her three children to hide in the American school in Harput, then escaped to Trabzon in 1916, where they lived for two years while the city was under Russian control.[72] Avedis went to work in a grocery store.[73] In early 1918, when the Russians withdrew from the city, the family followed other Armenians to the new Republic of Armenia and settled for a while in Armavir. Avedis joined the shoe industry there, selling thread to shoemakers.[74] In 1920, the family decided to move to Istanbul. As they were in Novorossiysk, where they were to take a boat, the Armenian authorities tried to convince them to return to Armenia, but they refused. However, they also had no passports or any other form of identification; they only had enough money to buy a single ticket between the four of them. His mother boarded the ship as a regular passenger with a ticket, taking Avedis and his little sister along. His older brother, pretending to be a porter, sneaked onto the vessel but was promptly caught, and he was told that he would be delivered to the authorities in Samsun. Nevertheless, he and a number of other stowaways were released by some of the sailors on board, thus allowing the family to reach Istanbul intact.[75]

They were immediately taken to the refugee quarters on the European side, in Beşiktaş. Avedis learned that they were just a few blocks away from the sultan's palace. The buildings, he said, were magnificent, with huge rooms and decorative ceilings and walls. Hundreds, if not

71 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*.
72 Sam Topalidis and Russell McCaskie, "Life During the Russian Occupation of Trabzon During WW1," *Pontos World*, 2018, https://pontosworld.com/index.php/history/sam-topalidis/647-life-during-the-russian-occupation-of-trabzon [accessed 31.08.2018].
73 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 48.
74 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 62.
75 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 70–73.

thousands, of other refugees were already housed in this refugee centre, formerly occupied by members of parliament.[76] As he describes it, the days that followed were filled with excitement. Together with his brother Abraham, they struck up business deals with fellow refugees from Russia, since they knew Russian from their days in Armavir and Novorossiysk. They bought whatever those White Russians were selling and then resold it to the other refugees—clothes, army blankets, boots, heavy coats, and even newly printed money. The White Russians also possessed worthless roubles that were printed on beautiful paper. So, the brothers bought up millions and millions of their roubles and sold them as paper. They made sizeable profits on those deals, which considerably bolstered the family's fortunes. They also organized raffles to make a profit: they put a number of cheap things into a box with a glass lid, and then people would try to fish things out for a fee.[77]

One day, Avedis was put in jail by the British police for riding the tram without a ticket.[78] He was caught hanging onto a tram, and the police demanded that he pay five liras or spend five days in prison. Since he did not have the money on hand, he was put in a cell where all kinds of prisoners were crowded together. The food they received was inedible and the water undrinkable. Then, they cut off his hair and put him to work. He had to carry bags from the ground floor to the fifth floor. When the work was over, the prisoners were forced to run on the roof of the prison for a long time; those who fell down were whipped by the guard. He felt desperate, but was saved by an Armenian-American, who later made all of the arrangements with the organisation Near East Relief that would allow him and his family to travel to the US.

Aram Haigaz was fifteen when the massacres and deportations started in Şebinkarahisar in June 1915.[79] His brothers, father, and several relatives were killed right at the outset. He and his mother survived and took to the road. On the insistence of his mother, he was convinced that conversion to Islam and living under the protection of

76 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 73.
77 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 74–75.
78 Abrahamian, *Avedis' Story*: 76.
79 Haigaz, *Four Years*.

a Muslim household were the only options for staying alive. He was adopted by a certain Ali Bey, who had three wives, the youngest of whom was an Armenian convert of fifteen years of age. There were other 'adopted' Armenian children in the household; three of them were boys, and three were girls.[80] In other words, Aram was lucky to be admitted into a wealthy household that was sympathetic to Armenian survivors. After converting, and thanks to the fact that he was literate, his status improved. He went from being a shepherd to becoming a trusted servant and secretary. His life in the mountains of Kurdistan was isolated from the cities, and his account reflects a happy, even idyllic existence among the nomads and peasants.

When the news came that an independent Armenian state had been founded, Aram decided to escape. This was a difficult decision as he was in love with a Muslim girl, Kadriye. But he decided he did not want to "put down roots" by marrying her and living "as a Muslim slave serving the Turks forever, licking their boots like a beaten dog".[81] Finally, he ran away with the intention of reaching Sivas. Many people he met on the road somehow identified him as a converted Armenian. He was surprised by his own transparency and could not discern why he was unable to pass as a Muslim.[82] When he reached Sivas, it felt as though all the surviving Armenians were gathered in the city. He discovered relatives and fellow townspeople that he had thought dead. He spent two very happy months there, working in a carpentry shop in the district known as the American Centre.[83] The American missionaries at that time already had orphanages and vocational schools set up in the city. However, as the Kemalist movement was gaining strength, Sivas did not remain a safe haven for Armenians. Thus, many decided to leave for Istanbul, where the Allied Forces were in charge.

As for Aram, he took a train from Sivas in the fall of 1919, travelling through Kayseri, Konya, and Eskişehir, before finally arriving at

80 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 39.
81 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 303.
82 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 321.
83 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 322.

the Haydarpaşa Station.[84] Entering Istanbul required identification and health documents, and he possessed neither. Just like Avedis's family, who were protected by sailors they did not know, Aram was lucky enough to encounter a group of Greek soldiers of the Allied Forces on the train. They provided him with the uniform and papers of one of their dead compatriots. Aram joined the soldiers and walked out of the station as if he were one of them.[85] After saying goodbye to the Greek soldiers, he took the ferry to Eminönü, and then the train to Kumkapı. He knew that his cousin Victoria, his paternal aunt's oldest daughter, was working in a pharmacy in Kumkapı that was operated by the Armenian patriarchate. Hence, he went directly to the patriarchate and enquired about the pharmacy. It was already seven in the evening, and the doorkeeper said that the pharmacy was closed. But since he trusted Aram, he took him to Victoria's house[86], where he was warmly welcomed and taken to the movies the next day.

Aram Haigaz found Istanbul intensely enjoyable. He considered working for a shoemaker as an apprentice in order to learn the trade and earn some money, but his aunt wanted him to go to school. He resisted, they fought, but he ultimately obeyed. He attended the Central Armenian High School (Getronagan) of Istanbul, which had an orphanage for young boys who had survived the genocide.[87] However, the triumph of the Turkish nationalist forces would disperse the Armenian refugees yet again, and Aram finally went to the United States in 1921, settling in New York City.[88]

84 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 324.
85 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 325.
86 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 326.
87 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 323–29.
88 Haigaz, *Four Years*: 333.

Conclusion

> Ben, en acıklı anda bile güldürücü sözler bulabilen bir insanım. Kendime acımam yoktur.
> I am a man who can find funny things to say in his most tragic moment. I have no self-pity.[89]

Le Guin observed that neither Tom Sawyer nor Huckleberry Finn "consent to be victims", and noted that Mark Twain had depicted both fictional characters as having a "powerful sense of ironic humor", which clearly precluded self-pity. Both characters tried to act like adults and take charge of their own lives.[90] While Le Guin was discussing literary characters, the Armenian survivors were actual people, who may not have read Twain. The parallel that can be drawn, however, is that the heroes in the survivor testimonies also do not consent to being a victim. Armenian survivors carried the nightmares of the genocide with them, but this went hand-in-hand with their conscious struggle to survive. In order to cope with the trauma, they avoided self-pity and instead thought positively of themselves, appreciated family and community, and provided testimony about their experiences.

Stanley E. Kerr, a relief worker employed by Near East Relief, photographed almost two thousand orphans in Aintab and Maraş from 1919 to 1922 and also transcribed each one's survival narrative. He later wrote that he found some of the stories simply "fantastic", and in a way "unbelievable". The extent of the violence and death that these children experienced and were obliged to normalize as part of life was so great, but they could still speak of their tragic story as if "it was happening to someone else".[91] In his work on the genocide and on testimony as a literary form, *Entre l'art et le témoignage: Le roman de la catastrophe*, Marc Nichanian points to a sense of numbness in the writings of the survivors, which

89 Oğuz Atay, *Tutunamayanlar* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2000 [1971]): 61.

90 Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Inner Child and the Nude Politician (October 2014)," in *No Time to Spare: Thinking About What Matters*, ed. Ursula K. Le Guin and Karen Joy Fowler (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017): 123.

91 Stanley E. Kerr, *Lions of Marash: Personal Experiences with American Near East Relief, 1919–1922* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975): 49.

made everything look ordinary. They clearly suppressed their feelings, pain, and memories in order to survive; they had to appear oblivious and had to disregard their pain.[92] Surviving children suppressed their sadness, numbed their feelings, and silenced their traumas in order to be able to go on with their own lives.

Armenian children's survival narratives are, without a doubt, full of tragic events such as the loss of their families, their lonely suffering, the experience of constant hunger, and their longing for home. However, these are not exclusively tragic stories of loss; they are also sagas of courage and resilience. The tropes in the stories show that the children undertook journeys, organized escapes, played games, and made friends. Their very testimonies illustrate their capacities as active agents, as heroes, and as empowered, resilient, strong, and courageous people.

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92 Marc Nichanian, *Entre l'art et le témoignage: Le roman de la catastrophe*, vol. 3 (Geneva: Metis Presses, 2006).

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This study examines the self-representations of Armenian child survivors during the Armenian genocide, while engaging with new historiography on children and youth. Armenian children survived under paradoxical circumstances: they were targets (and hence victims) of direct violence, sexual exploitation, and the erasure of identity, but they were also agents who resisted through escape, deception, and defiance. Their agency was neither limitless nor transformative, but primarily a means of endurance, shaped by age, gender, and social bonds. Relying on various works in the self-narrative and testimonial genres as primary sources, including oral histories, memoirs, and diaries written at different points in time in the twentieth century, I analyse how child survivors depicted themselves as heroes—rebellious misfits who resisted authority, protected the weak, retaliated against oppressors, and embarked on perilous journeys. These narratives highlight survival, play, friendship, and solidarity amid trauma. I argue that, though often used as evidence of Armenian victimhood, survivor testimonies also reveal a parallel narrative: one of agency, resilience, and self-determination, thus challenging traditional portrayals of genocide survivors solely as passive victims.

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