

**“Twenty-five Percent Armenian”: Oral History Accounts of the
Descendants of Islamized Armenians in Turkey**

by

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Abstract

This thesis project seeks to develop a critical understanding on the identity formation and transformation of the descendants of Armenian survivors whose grandparents were Islamized in the *vilayets* (provinces) of Bitlis and Diyarbakır, during the Hamidian Massacres (1894-97) and the Armenian Genocide (1915-16). Drawing upon oral history interviews conducted with the descendants from Diyarbakır, Batman and Sasun, it explores the family stories of the descendants of Islamized Armenians who blur the lines between religious, national, political and cultural identities in contemporary Turkey. After a brief historical introduction to the Hamidian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide in the *vilayets* of Bitlis and Diyarbakır, it focuses on postmemories of survivor towards Ottoman and Kurdish perpetration and rescue. How the descendants narrate the physical extermination of their ancestors by the Ottoman state and Kurdish tribes, and the cultural extermination through forced Islamization and Kurdification in the post-genocide era. Do the perpetration and rescue stories shape descendants' identity narratives? Do they create a group identity for the descendants? Through both questions, this thesis explores how descendants' self-identification processes are shaped by their family stories of perpetration, victimhood, rescue and survival. It argues that the collective traumatic memories transmitted to the descendants do not constitute a common group identity based on these concepts. The study also explores the religious, national, cultural, political identity choices of the descendants who were born to various different contexts in contemporary Turkey. Considering that some descendants choose to 'go back' to Christianity, while some others combine Islam, Kurdishness, Socialism, Feminism or other cultural components of their identities with Armenian national identity, it argues that though the descendants of Islamized Armenians share the common postmemories, they do not constitute a homogenous and well-bounded group. Through, a comparative analysis of the narratives of descendants from urban areas (Diyarbakır) and relatively rural areas (Batman's villages and Sasun), this thesis highlights the spatial nuances of descendants' journeys in defining themselves. It shows how descendants from urban areas claim 'identity with an essentialist discourse, whereas some descendants of rural areas do not feel a need to do so.

Keywords: The Armenian Genocide, Hamidian massacres, Islamized Armenians, Turkey, genocide survivors, perpetration, victimhood, survival, rescue, identity, self-identification, collective identity, essentialism, social constructivism, postmemory, life story interviews.

INTRODUCTION

A hundred years ago, one of the most brutal and bloody atrocities of the 19th century that were committed against Ottoman Armenians had culminated in a genocide where approximately 1,500,000 people lost their lives. Masses were slaughtered by Ottoman and Kurdish forces or forcibly sent to the death marches in caravans. The ones who survived attacks and marches in deserts started to re-establish their communities in the diverse places of the world, creating one of the classical diasporas. A small group of Armenians in the newly founded Turkish state managed to remain Christian and became the non-Muslim minority citizens of the country. Other Armenians in Anatolia survived only at the cost of converting to Islam. Those people and their descendants are now being referred as the ‘Islamized Armenians’ in academic journalistic circles.

‘The Islamized Armenians’ or as some put it more softly ‘Muslim Armenians’ have been catching the attention of the Turkish, Armenian and international audience, as their family stories about the Armenian Genocide are of great interest on the centennial anniversary of the genocide. Their identities, partially shaped by the traumatic past their ancestors had gone through, are perceived as contradictory, not only in Turkey by those who identify themselves as Turks or Kurds, but also by Armenians, both in the Diaspora and the in Republic of Armenia.¹

Terminological problems possibly occur when referring to these genocide survivors who reside in Turkey after a hundred years later. Mostly they are called as ‘Islamized’, ‘Muslim’, ‘hidden’ or ‘crypto’ Armenians. All of these terms remain insufficient and problematic in explaining the experiences and identities of the descendants of Islamized Armenians. The term ‘Islamized

¹ Kerem Öktem & Sosse Kasbarian, “Armenians, Turks and Kurds Beyond Denial: An Introduction,” *Patterns of Prejudice*, No 48:2 (April 2014): 115-120.

Armenians' is often used by scholars who deal with the history of atrocities against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic, in reference to the policies of mass conversions and absorption of Armenian women and children into Muslim households during the Hamidian Massacres and the Genocide of 1915-16. Using this term in explaining the historical atrocities committed against the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey does not constitute a terminological problem. However the term becomes problematic when it is used for the descendants of Islamized Armenians, the individuals from later generations who are born into Muslim, Kurdish, Atheist, Socialist or other environments in Turkey. The term 'Islamized Armenian' has a connotation of a need for returning to the 'original' religious and national identity. Similarly using the term 'Muslim Armenian' creates terminological issues as it tends to ignore the violent experiences, deaths, exiles and forced conversions of Armenian population of the empire. Both terms leave no space for the descendants' choice of remembering or not remembering, commemorating or not commemorating, and self-identifying or not self-identifying. The last two terms which are usually used by Turkish nationalists who attempt to denigrate anything relating to Armenians. They describe Armenian genocide survivors in Turkey with a prejudicial and derogatory terms and adjectives such as 'the remnant of the sword,' *dönme* (convert) and *ghavur* (infidel or unbeliever). They implicitly argue that Armenians are traitors who stab the Turkish nation in the back, or cowards who feel the need to hide themselves.²

²Mehmet Şevket Eygi, a columnist from *Milli Gazete* [National Newspaper] provocatively writes about Armenians who hide their actual identities and pretend to be Kurds or Alevis. See, "Türkiye'nin Cryptoları," *Milli Gazete*, March 9, 2013. http://www.milligazete.com.tr/koseyazisi/Turkiyenin_Cryptolari/14446#.VQdo4dKG_NI Turkish politician and historian Yusuf Halaçoğlu said in his speech at the Turkish Parliament: "Hidden Armenians are slowly starting to show up, and Turkey should be on alert for them." "Professor Yusuf Halaçoğlu: 8,500 Armenians died during relocation," *Today's Zaman*, April 22, 2013. http://www.todayszaman.com/interviews_professor-yusuf-halacoglu-8500-armenians-died-during-relocation_313381.html

What is the right definition for these people whose ancestors were ‘voluntarily’ or ‘forcefully’ converted to Islam in the late 19th century? Ceren Özgül in her research which focuses on the stories of descendants who choose to embrace Christianity and Armenianness, get baptised and claim name changing in Turkey, argues that the most logical term to define these people is ‘the descendants of Islamized Armenians’.³ Moving from Özgül’s conceptualization of these newly converts, I suggest four subcategories in which the descendants of Islamized Armenians can be defined: a) the descendants of Islamized Armenians who choose to embrace Christianity, b) the descendants who negotiate Islam and Armenian national identity, c) the descendants who do not feel affiliated with any religion, but identify themselves with cultural and political affiliations, d) the descendants who remain as Turk or Kurd despite their discovery of their Armenian roots.

The question is whether the descendants necessarily have to return to the ‘original’ Armenian identity, namely Christian Armenian national identity? Or will they be going to decide which ethnic, religious, political and cultural belonging they feel close to? My hypothesis in this thesis is that the identification process of the descendants is based on their memory of the past and today, their experiences and choices. I perceive identity as individual, rather than substantial or collective. I believe, centring upon the self-identification processes of the descendants as well as their memories towards the genocide would solve the dilemma of using or not using the abovementioned problematic terms.

³ Ceren Özgül “Legally Armenian: Tolerance, Conversion, and Name Change in Turkish Courts,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 56(3), (2014): 622–649. Özgül’s anthropological research analyses the court cases and conversion procedures of the descendants who convert to Christianity, conducting interviews with these new converts and their lawyers, court officials and some individuals from Armenian clergy in Turkey

That being said, I seek to develop a critical understanding on the identity formation and transformation of the descendants of Armenian survivors whose grandparents were Islamized in the *vilayets* (provinces) of Bitlis and Diyarbakır, during the Hamidian Massacres (1894-97) and the Armenian Genocide (1915-16). Drawing upon oral history interviews conducted with the descendants from Diyarbakır, Batman and Sasun, I explore the family stories of the descendants who blur the lines between religious, national, political and cultural identities in contemporary Turkey. After a brief historical introduction to the Hamidian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide in the *vilayets* of Bitlis and Diyarbakır, I focus on the survivor memory towards Ottoman and Kurdish perpetration and rescue. How the descendants narrate the physical extermination of their ancestors by the Ottoman state and Kurdish tribes, and the cultural extermination through forced Islamization and Kurdification in the post-genocide era. How do the survival and rescue stories shape descendants' identity narratives? Through both questions, I attempt to explore whether and how the descendants' self-identification processes are shaped by their family stories of perpetration, victimhood, rescue and survival. Based on my observations of descendants' shared traumatic memories and their self-identifications, I suggest that collective memory do not always constitute a common group belonging.

I also explore the religious, national, cultural, political choices of the descendants who were born to various different contexts in contemporary Turkey. The descendants share a common traumatic memory that has been transmitted to them through generations. They all talk about the physical extermination and forceful Islamization, Kurdification and Turkification of their ancestors. Yet, they do not share the same contemporary identities. Considering that some descendants choose to 'go back' to Christianity, while some others combine Islam, Kurdishness, Socialism, Feminism or other cultural components of their identities with Armenian national identity, I assert that the

descendants of Islamized Armenians do not constitute a homogenous and well-bounded group. Through, a comparative analysis of the narratives of descendants from urban areas (Diyarbakır) and relatively rural areas (Batman's villages and Sasun), I show how descendants from urban areas claim identity with an essentialist discourse, whereas some descendants of rural areas do not feel a need to do so. I underline the spatial differences affect descendants' journeys in identifying themselves.

CHAPTER ONE: THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO COLLECTIVE MEMORY, POSTMEMORY AND IDENTITY

2.1 Collective Memory

Collective memory is defined as the common memory that is shared by a group of people. This definition is effected by the famous scholar Maurice Halbwachs's understanding of collective memory, which undermines the role of individual memory. In his *The Collective Memory*, he writes: "While the collective memory endures and draws strength from its base in a coherent body of people, its individuals as group members who remember."⁴ Deriving his holistic approach from the famous sociologist Emile Durkheim, Halbwachs perceives collective memory as crucial to the appearance of group memberships. He argues that individual memory cannot recall the history, only by itself, therefore a collective memory which consists of individuals' remembering is crucial. Halbwachs's overemphasis on collective and negligence of individual memories has been criticized by other scholars.⁵

After Halbwachs, collective memory has been defined by a number of other scholars.⁶ James Young defines it as 'collected memory', indicating that the difference between his definition and Halbwachs's 'collective memory' the search for the meaning for different types of memories. Young asserts that it is impossible to postulate a unified memory. Though social groups share

⁴ Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory* (Harper & Row, 1980), 48.

⁵ Kansteiner, Wulf. Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies, *History and Theory*, 41. 2 (2002): 181. See also; Maria Paula Nascimento Araújo and Myrian Sepúlveda dos Santos, "History, Memory and Forgetting: Political Implications," *RCCS Annual Review. A Selection from the Portuguese Journal Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, no. 1 (2009): 7.

⁶ A number of scholars have come up with their own conceptualizations and definitions of collective memory. See the works of Jan Asmann, Susan Sontag, James Young, Maria Sturken, Jeffrey Olick, Joyce Robbins.

cultures, traditions and symbols, argues Young, memory remains particular to the individuals.⁷ Halbwachs's conceptualization of collective memory involve essentialist perceptions that tend to see identities and societies as well bounded and homogenous. He postulates that memory is one of the constituents of identity building process. Studies draw upon his conceptualization assume that there is a unified memory shared by members of a group that constantly shapes the identity of that group in an on-going process, and at the same time gets shaped by that identity. Young, however, warns us for the danger of getting trapped by essentialist perceptions when studying societies. The idea postulating that memory can be unified assumes that the unity and homogeneity of social groups are possible. Social theorists such as Charles Tilly and Michael Mann pose their criticism to such an assumption. Charles Tilly argues that a tradition followed by sociologists since the nineteenth century is to perceive society as something apart. Put differently, when explaining social phenomena that have been occurring in societies, sociologists and most other social scientists too, assume that societies are distinct realms that have boundaries around.⁸ Michael Mann poses a similar criticism to the mainstream understandings of society and identity, saying that "societies are constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power" rather than well bounded homogenous entities.⁹ Through the criticisms of social theorists as well as scholars like James Young and Jan Assman, the field of memory has started to detach collective memory from identity. Now, we come to realize the "danger of treating social groups as essential and static entities."¹⁰

⁷ Young, James Edward. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.

⁸ Charles Tilly, *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (Russell Sage Foundation June 1989), 20-26.

⁹ Michael Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge:Cambridge Press, 1986), 1.

¹⁰ Gregor Feindt et al., "Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 53, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 26.a

The alleged link between collective memory and group identity do not occur every time. Anthropologists' and oral historians' works have already demonstrated that such a link is artificial and problematic. Anny Bakalian's work on the Armenian diasporan identity in the US shows how Armenians who have the same traumatic background do not share the same political and religious (sectarian) identities. The conflicts between Protestant, Catholic and Gregorian Armenians, or the tensions between the Dashnak and Hunchak political parties sometimes prevent Armenians from narrating and practicing a unitary Armenian national identity.¹¹ Veena Das, in her anthropological work with Sikh women who lost their husbands and sons in Sultanpuri massacres, shows how Sikh women who experienced the same violence in their neighbourhood have dissimilar narratives and identities. Some survivor women, wanting their grief to be known by the world shared their memories of violence collectively, reconstructing and reinterpreting of themselves and the world. On the other hand some survivor women choose to experience their grief individually, rather than communicating with other survivors. Das' research on Sikh women's individual and collective mourning about their traumatic experiences in the Sultanpuri massacres demonstrate that collective memory does not always create a basis for identities or belongings to arise.

In the case of the descendants whose ancestors were Islamized Armenians, the alleged link between collective memory and group identity does not appear either. The descendants share similar post-memories that are transmitted to them from the earlier generations. Although their ancestors survived more or less the same ways, through forceful marriage and Islamization, adoption, orphanage or Kurdish rescuers' help, the descendants' narratives about these survival mechanisms are different from one another. Or, more importantly, though they come from the same national backgrounds for which they lost their family members, not all descendants self-define themselves

¹¹ Anny Bakalian, *Armenian Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*, (New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1992), 89-90.

with Armenian national identity. Then, they do not constitute a homogenous and well-bounded group even though they share the same traumatic postmemories of the Armenian genocide. The post-memories of the descendants are not unitary, but fragmented, multiple, contested. Thereby the identities possibly stem from memories are not in the form of social or group identity.

2.2 Postmemory: Transmitted Memories

Postmemory is a term that Marianne Hirsch first introduced to memory studies, which is the memory of traumatic events transmitted generations by generations. She defines the term as “a powerful, a very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source that is mediated not through recollection but through imaginative investment and creation.”¹²

Focusing on the relationship between survivor generations when transmitting their painful family stories, Hirsch describes the concept she created as “a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience.”¹³ The difference between memory and post-memory then gets clearer: while memory is interested in events –the question of ‘what happened’, postmemory is interested in the personal connections during the transmission of memory regarding those events. The descendants of survivors who grow up with traumatic stories, argues Hirsch, establish their memories based on what they hear from the earlier generations. In some cases they even might be so traumatized by the narration of the experiences that they perceive the present day through the prism of those overwhelming stories. Their own belated stories are replaced by the postmemories.¹⁴

¹² Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Harvard University Press, 1996), 22.

¹³ Marianne Hirsch, “*The Generation of Post Memory.*” *Poetics Today* 29.1 (Spring 2008): 106.

¹⁴ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames*, i.b.i.d., 662. See also; Marianne Hirsch, “*The Generation of Post Memory,*” i.b.i.d., 106-7.

How do the descendants carry and transmit the painful memories of the earlier generations? Gary Weissman asserts that a memory of one person can never be fully transmitted to another mind. Hirsch acknowledges that though there is no degree of monumentality or power to completely transmit the traumatic postmemories. Yet, she argues, what is more important than fully transmitting a postmemory, is how the next generations shape that memory through their own imagination, projection and creation.¹⁵ They tie their scenarios to what they hear, and thereby completely subjectify the postmemories.

James Young also underscores the role of imagination in the creation of postmemories, or in his term ‘vicarious’ memories which he refers to the memories of post-Holocaust generations who have not experienced the Nazi Genocide themselves but have received the stories of the past and merged them with their own experiences.¹⁶ Young argues that the imaginative implications of contemporaries create dozens of new versions of collective memory. Therefore having a single unified collective memory shared by the social group members is impossible.

Using the concepts of postmemory and ‘vicarious memory’, this thesis attempts to explore how the traumatic memories of the Armenian Genocide transmitted to the descendants of Islamized Armenians effect their present, but also to show how the descendants bind their own experiences to the self-narratives they create.

2.3 Identity

Identity has been the biggest trend to be studied in social sciences in the last few decades. There are a number of scholars have reflected on identity from essentialist point of view to the constructivist. Essentialist perspective postulates a ‘strong’ or hard type of identity, whereas the constructivist approach frames a ‘weak’ or anti essentialist type.¹⁷

¹⁵ Marianne Hirsch, “*The Generation of Post Memory*,” i.b.i.d., 108-11

¹⁶ James E. Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (Yale University Press, 2002), 12-15.

¹⁷ Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘identity,’” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (February 2000): 1–47.

I follow the second stance closely, in conducting this research. I attempt to perceive the descendants of Islamized Armenians as the signifiers of non-stagnant, multiple, changing and fragmented ‘identity’ concepts in modern Turkey. In his famous article, Stuart Hall suggests there is no essential, true or substantial self but, instead, identities are constituted and enacted through cultures and languages. He puts a strong emphasis on the constructiveness of identities, saying that they are a matter of “becoming”, rather than “being”. Identities, according to Hall, are never unified but fragmented especially in modern times; they are always constructed as complex and plural; and they are never static but in a process of a constant change and transformation.¹⁸

Hall’s understanding of identity – that perceives identity as unstable, multiple, changing and fragmented- can explain the identity issue of the descendants of Islamized Armenians who suffered the Armenian Genocide and conversions in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic.

¹⁸ Hall, Stuart. “Introduction: Who Needs “Identity?”” In *Questions of Cultural Identity*.1–18. London: SAGE Publications, 1996.

CHAPTER TWO: HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO THE GENOCIDE OF ARMENIANS IN THE VILAYETS OF BITLIS AND DIYARBAKIR

The Genocide of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire was an outcome of a process of many violent acts occurred during the Hamidian Massacres of 1894-97, Adana Massacres of 1909, and the deportations and mass killings of Armenians in 1915-16. Armenians of Bitlis and Diyarbakir provinces (*vilayets*), as well as other Ottoman Armenians, were subjected to physical and cultural extermination during and in the aftermath of the genocide. Many of them could not survive the attacks and deportations organized by the Ottoman government and Kurdish local tribes in the region. The ones who had been able to survive were mostly women and children who were absorbed into Muslim households by forceful marriage and child adoption. Few others survived through Kurdish tribes' or ordinary individuals' protection, rescue or hiding. However, all of them became subjected to systematic cultural genocide in the Turkish Republic, the successor of the Ottoman Empire. By getting 'forcefully' or 'voluntarily' converted to Islam, receiving new Muslim names, and not being able practice their ancestral language, religious rituals and cultural traditions, the genocide survivors lost to the assimilation policies of the Turkish state and society. In this chapter of the thesis, I give a brief introduction to the physical extermination of Bitlis and Diyarbakır Armenians in the Hamidian Massacres and the genocide of 1915-16. Then I touch on Kurdish perpetrators and rescuers in both provinces, discussing the blurred lines of the concepts of perpetration and rescue. Finally I focus on the cultural genocide of Armenians who survived the physical attacks in the aftermath of 1915-16. In discussing all three, I underscore the multidimensional and processual aspect of the Armenian genocide, arguing that the Armenian genocide is a process with various different stages; including mass killings, deportations, sexual

violence and property confiscation as well as assimilatory policies and acts occurred in Turkey; Islamization, Turkification and Kurdification.¹⁹

2.1 Mass Killings and Conversions in the Hamidian Massacres of 1894-97

Armenians of Bitlis and Diyarbakır had been experiencing massacres and assimilation since Sultan Abdulhamit II's reign in the late 19th century. The Hamidian Massacres in which hundreds of thousands Armenians were killed, had started in Sasun because Armenians of this district refused to pay exorbitant amounts of tax to the Kurdish tribes. The root of the conflict and violence was economic which triggered the pre-existing ethno-religious tensions among Kurdish tribes and Armenian inhabitants of Eastern provinces.²⁰

At the beginning of the 19th century, as a part of centralization and bureaucratization reforms, the Ottoman state had appointed Kurdish tribes as central administrators and tax collectors to Eastern Anatolian provinces. A Land Code was initiated in 1858, introducing a new system of landownership and taxation based on deeds issued to individuals in return of a certain amount of money paid to the Ottoman state. The code allowed Kurdish *aghas*, *sheihks*, and other elites to have administrative and economic power over peasants.²¹ Kurdish tribes in the provinces of Bitlis

¹⁹ A number of genocide scholars acknowledge that genocide is a process, not a single event. See; Norman Naimark, "Preface," in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny, Fatma Muge Gocek, and Norman M. Naimark (Oxford ; New York: Oxford Univ Pr, 2011), xvii. Jacques Semelin, *Purify and Destroy: The Political Uses of Massacre and Genocide* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007). Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses, "Editors' Introduction: Changing Themes in the Study of Genocide," *The Oxford Handbook of Genocide Studies*, ed. Donald Bloxham and A. Dirk Moses (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010), 1–15.

²⁰ Nadir Özbek, "The Politics of Taxation and the "Armenian Question" during the Late Ottoman Empire, 1876–1908," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54(4) (2012):770–797. See also; Stephan Astourian, "*The Silence of the Land: Relations, Ethnicity and Power*," in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Fatma Müge Göçek & Donald Bloxham, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011),55-81.

²¹ Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 175-186. For detailed discussions on Kurdish landownership in the late 19th century, see also; Şükrü Hanioglu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 60-72. Denise Natalie, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*, (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2005), 4-5. Hakan Ozoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries* (New York: SUNY Press, 2004), 43-68.

and Diyarbakır registered lands under their names, and started collecting taxes or portions of harvests from Armenian and Kurdish peasants. Armenians often sent petitions to Istanbul, complaining about the Kurdish tribes' imposition of extra taxes. Armenians of Muş in Bitlis province, for instance, had complained about the Kurdish tribe leader, Hacı Musa Bey because he ravaged villages and collected unduly taxes from peasants.²² Similar cases occurred in other districts and provinces highly populated by Armenian peasants. Taxation problems in eastern Anatolia triggered inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts, and caused mass violence against Armenians in 1894-97. The atrocities were facilitated by the Hamidiye Light Cavalry Corps, a Kurdish semi-official paramilitary group involving Kurdish tribes of the eastern provinces.²³ In Bitlis and Diyarbakır the Mutki, Bekran, Beder, Bozek, Calal, Dekşuri, Heverkân, Khiank, Pencinâr, Zirkan (Zirkî) tribes took part in the Armenian slaughters.

Mass conversions to Islam followed the massacres of 1894-97 in eastern Anatolia. The Ottoman Archival documents refer to these conversions as 'voluntary'. Since Sharia Law forbids forced conversion of non-Muslims, theoretically conversion must be voluntary. A person who wishes to convert to Islam should fulfil four requirements: a) having reached to the age of puberty (*akıl baliğ*), b) confessing at the court in front of two adult male witnesses and a prosecutor (*kadı*), c) declaring that the conversion is determined by free will and conscience, d) pronouncing (*shada*), a statement which declares that God is the only creator and Muhammad is his prophet.²⁴ The

²² Margaret Lavinia Anderson, "A Responsibility to Protest? The Public, the Powers and the Armenians in the Era of Abdülhamit II," *Journal of Genocide Research* 17, no. 3 (2015): 259-283.

²³ Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford University Press, 2011), 52-94.

²⁴ Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13-23. Tijana Krstic, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 22.

question is whether Armenians had fulfilled these requirements of legal conversion during the Hamidian Massacres. Selim Deringil asserts that this procedure remained unimplemented in mass conversions of Armenians. Sometimes a whole village converted to Islam to save their lives from the Hamidiye Regiments. In Bitlis, all Armenian men and women who resided in the districts of Genc, Mezan, Erzif, and Tanimaveran converted to Islam in late November of 1895.²⁵ Around the same time, in the province of Diyarbakır almost twenty thousand Armenian inhabitants also converted to Islam. Uğur Ümit Üngör writes about the estimated numbers of violence and conversion cases took place in the districts of Diyarbakır: “1100 Armenians were killed in Diyarbakır city and 800 or 900 more in the outlying villages, while 155 women and girls were carried off by Kurdish tribesmen. In Silvan district 7000 Armenians converted and 500 women were carried off. In Palu 3000 and in Siverek 2500 converted to escape being massacred.”²⁶ These conversions were not officially testified by Ottoman courts, as the legal Islamic provision required individual confession proving the free will and conscience of the converts at a court in front of witnesses.²⁷ These mass conversions of Armenians were a strategic response to the Hamidian massacres, and they were forced conversions.

2.2 Physical Destruction: The Genocide of 1915-16 in Bitlis and Diyarbakır

Two decades after the Hamidian Massacres, Armenians and Assyrians became subjected to a planned cleansing program organized by the Committee of Union and Progress (the CUP). After

²⁵ Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, i.b.i.d., 217. For detailed discussion on mass conversions of Armenians, see; Selim Deringil, ‘The Armenian Question is Finally Closed’. Mass Conversions of Armenians during the Hamidian Massacres of 1894-1897.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. Vol 51. (2009) 344-371.

²⁶ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (OUP Oxford, 2011), 19.

²⁷ Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy*, i.b.i.d., 245-249.

the defeat of Ottomans in World War I frontiers, particularly Sarıkamış, the Unionists decided to order the deportations of Armenians, as they perceived them as the collaborators of the Russian enemy. In April 24, 1915 the CUP leaders ordered the arrest of Armenian parliamentarians and intellectuals and executed them.

Approximately one million five hundred thousands of Armenians died on the death marches, or got killed by the Ottoman and Kurdish forces. A secret organization, *Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa* (The Special Organization) founded by the Unionists in 1914, and operated by Bahaeddin Şakir, carried out most of the attacks on deportee's caravans. This organization was constituted by high ranked Ottoman soldiers, brigands, convicts, as well as Kurdish tribes.²⁸

In the province of Bitlis, Kurdish tribes together with Ottoman generals, butchered the Armenian populations in the *kazas* of Bulanık, Hizan, Manazgerd and Genc. Raymond Kevorkian writes about the extent of the violence: “681 Armenian localities, with a total population of 218,404, and 510 churches, 161 monasteries, and 207 schools were to be wiped off the face of the earth with extreme violence.”²⁹ In the province of Diyarbakır, due to the order of Mehmet Reshid, Armenians and Assyrians living in the *kazas* of Derik, Silvan, Beşiri, Lice, Argana, Çermik, Palu, Nusaybin, and others were either sent to the Syrian dessert with caravans or were killed by the Ottoman Kurdish forces.³⁰

2.2.1 Perpetrator and Rescuer Kurds in Bitlis and Diyarbakır

²⁸ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, i.b.i.d., 61.

²⁹ Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London ; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011), 339.

³⁰ Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, i.b.i.d., 347-352. Uğur Ümit Üngör, “Disastrous Decade: Armenians and Kurds in the Young Turk Era.” in *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbakır, 1870-1915*, ed. Joost Jongerden, Jelle Verheij. (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 278-282.

Historical researches about the perpetrator groups in the Armenian Genocide have recently expanded with a new focus on the Kurdish tribes' roles in mass killings in eastern provinces. Scholars such as Tessa Hoffman, Janet Klein, Raymond Kevorkian and Uğur Ümit Üngör have focused on Kurdish inter-tribal relations and perpetrations committed by Kurds during the genocide. The authors are of like mind on that the physical annihilation of Armenians were jointly facilitated by Kurdish tribes and the Ottoman army.³¹ The Kurdish tribes were involved in a paramilitary army called *The Tribal Light Cavalry Regiments* which once was founded by Sultan Abdulhamit II and later was resuscitated by the CUP in 1913. The Bekran, Bozek, Beder, Calal, Dekşuri, Heverkân, Xiank, Pencinâr, Zirkî, Mutki tribes from Bitlis and Diyarbakır provinces were involved in this paramilitary group. These militias facilitated the attacks against Armenian inhabitants, ravaging villages, confiscating properties, killing the male members of the group, abducting women and children.

Apart from the perpetrator tribes, there were other Kurdish tribes who resisted the Ottoman government's orders of deportation, and protected their Armenians from the attacks of other tribes. Their previous negative experiences with the Ottoman state and neighboring tribes presumably made them more likely to play a rescuer role in the genocide. For instance, the Ottoman state had many conflicts with the Milan tribe from Diyarbakır, the Reşkotan tribe from Beşiri district and the Şigo tribe in Sasun prior to the genocide. In 1915-16 these tribes played a key role in protecting and rescuing Armenians from killings, since they were at odds with the

³¹For general discussion on Kurdish tribes' role in the Hamidian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide, see; Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, i.b.i.d., Anton Weiss-Wendt & Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Collaboration in Genocide: The Ottoman Empire 1915–1916, the German-Occupied Baltic 1941–1944, and Rwanda 1994" *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2011): 410-18. Martin van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 133-192. Tessa Hofmann and Gerayer Koutcharian, "The History of Armenian-Kurdish Relations in the Ottoman Empire," *Armenian Review* 39, no. 4 (1986): 1–45.

Ottoman government or other Kurdish tribes.³² During the field research conducted with the descendants of Islamized Armenians, often it was possible to encounter stories of survivors who had been rescued, hid or adopted by a Kurdish chieftain or an ordinary villager during 1915-16. Oral accounts of some diasporan Armenian survivors also demonstrate that Kurds, be it elite or ordinary, involved in acts of rescuing or hiding Armenians. A third generation Christian Armenian survivor, Greg Sarkissian who is the co-founder of the Zoryan Institute in Toronto recounts the rescue story of his grandparents: “Khalil, a righteous Turkish Muslim, had made a pledge to protect my family, no matter what. He took enormous risks to save my grandmother and six other members of the family. Two of the family’s children died in the nine months that they were in hiding. Khalil was so fearful of being caught harboring Armenians that he buried the two infants at night. Khalil finally somehow managed to get the family on a train to freedom in Aleppo, Syria, where the late Krikor’s brother, Gevorg, was living.”³³

Cases for Kurdish rescue and protection of Armenians co-exist with perpetration stories in the Armenian Genocide. Yet, much of the scholarly attention has been paid on Turkish and Kurdish perpetrators because there are barely no documents on the saviors. Besides it is much easier to spot perpetrators, and explore their motivations or the factors led them to perpetrate. However, we know very little about how and why some Kurds operated rescues. Rescues may stem from the altruistic preferences as well as the sporadic choices of individuals. The circumstances that they are surrounded by might have affected their decision. They may have done the favor in return of

³² Heci Mihemedê Mistê, the leader of the Reşkotans facilitated Armenians’ escape from the Ottoman army and Kurdish paramilitaries. See; Ugur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, i.b.i.d., 21. Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire*, i.b.i.d., 232, Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, i.b.i.d., 337-380.

³³ “Greg Sarkissian - A Life Story Worth Reading,” Text, *100 LIVES*, accessed November 2, 2015, <https://100lives.com/en/stories/detail/regular/242/greg-sarkissian>.

a gain such as monetary reward or payment, religious conversion, marriage, and requesting victims to abandon their names, language or religious practices. Though in such cases individuals are not defined as rescuers in studies of violence³⁴, their acts, by definition, still fit the framework of rescue. Nonetheless it will the definitions of rescuer, bystander and perpetrator remain blurred, it is impossible to know what these individuals had in mind when they facilitated the rescues. The need for memory studies appears here. Oral accounts of Armenians and Kurds pave the way for the studies of rescue in the Armenian Genocide.

2.3 Cultural Destruction: The Islamization, Turkification and Kurdification of Armenians

What followed the physical extermination of Armenians in post-1915-16 was the cultural genocide in the newly established Turkey. The initial purpose of the cultural extermination was to erase any physical or spiritual traces that would remind the presence of Ottoman Armenians. There were two ways to operate this reign of oblivion. One was the eradication of public memory zones such as Armenian churches, monasteries and schools, once established and used by Armenians. These buildings either were destroyed or used by Muslim populations as private houses, stables, mosques or in other forms. Kevorkian asserts that 2,538 Armenian churches, 451 monasteries and 1996 schools were perished during and after the genocide.³⁵ Some of the buildings that belonged to the Armenian Churches were confiscated by the Turkish state, in order to use the buildings and their revenues for the Turkish governments' favor.³⁶

³⁴ Hasmik Tevosyan's work on rescue cases in the Armenian Genocide argue that the forcefully Islamized Armenian women and children who physically survived the genocide are impossible to be considered as the rescued ones, even though they did survive by the sporadic helps of the Muslim locals. Hasmik Tevosyan, "Rescue Practices During the Armenian Genocide," in *Resisting Genocide*, ed. Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger (Oxford University Press, 2014), 163–82.

³⁵ Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, i.b.i.d., 272-278.

³⁶ Birol Başkan, *From Religious Empires to Secular States: State Secularization in Turkey, Iran, and Russia* (London: Routledge, 2014), 49.

Another way to operate the cultural genocide against Armenians was to erase the survivors' sense of national, religious and cultural belonging, and their affiliation to Armenian language, traditions and symbols. Abducting women and collecting children on the roads in order to place them in Muslim households or orphanages were the most practised way of the cultural genocide. The Islamized Armenian women and children, who constituted the five or ten percent of the Armenian population during the genocide, 'voluntarily' or 'forcibly' converted to Islam.³⁷ They were expected to abandon their previous beliefs and traditions, and acquire a new sense of belonging. Since Armenian men were strategically killed during the genocide period, women and children remained central to the national politics of the Ottoman and Turkish governments.³⁸ They were also the main concern of Christian and Armenian rescue movements, organizing *vorpahavak* (gathering of Armenian women and orphans) campaigns.³⁹ The reason why Armenian women became the main objects of national politics was because of the nationalist understanding of male and female roles in family. Both sides assumed that family lineage was carried by man and woman was the object for producing children to the family she was absorbed in. Therefore both abductors and rescuers sought to integrate Armenian women into Muslim or Christian households.

³⁷Ara 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*. Edited by Omer Bartov and Phyllis Mack. (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001), 211-212. See also; Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity*, i.b.i.d., 242-264.

³⁸ Uğur Ümit Üngör, "Orphans, Converts, and Prostitutes: Social Consequences of War and Persecution in the Ottoman Empire, 1914–1923", *War in History* (2012): 181-6.

³⁹ 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* 55, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 522–53. See also; Vahé Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide," *Nations and Nationalism* 15, 1 (2009): 64-8.

Besides the Islamizing policies, used both by the Turks and Kurds, there were two other types of assimilations used against Armenians: Turkification and Kurdification. On the state level, the systematic Turkification propagandas of the Turkish state affected both Muslim and non-Muslim minorities. The social engineering created by the Unionists were accepted and maintained by the Kemalists in Turkish Republic.⁴⁰ Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of the republic, carried out the exclusivist, hostile and marginalizing policies both against Armenians who were Islamized during the genocide, and Kurds who were the old collaborators of Turks. He initiated a dozen of reforms, and established modern schools and institutions to foster the Turkish national belonging to Muslim and non-Muslim citizens.⁴¹

Kurdification, on the other hand, was carried out on the society level by the local power holders as well as ordinary Muslim Kurds in eastern Anatolia. The Kurdification of women and children with Armenian descent happened in a process, and mostly behind the closed doors of the Kurdish households. Only the survivor accounts may reveal the extent of the social pressure they felt, as there is no archival documents on the Kurdification of Armenians in contemporary times. The interviews conducted with the descendants in the field study suggests a clear picture on how the process of Kurdification evolved in eastern Anatolia.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter focused on three main subjects relating to the historical background of the Armenian Genocide. First, it briefly discussed the mass killings and conversions of Bitlis and Diyarbakır Armenians in the Hamidian Massacres of 1894-97. Then it concentrated on the

⁴⁰ Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, i.b.i.d., 170-212.

⁴¹ Sabiha Gökçen, an Armenian orphan who was adopted by Atatürk, became a proud Turk, a hero pilot who bombed Kurds during the massacres of Dersim in 1938. See; Fatma Ülgen, “Sabiha Gökçen’s 80-Year-Old Secret’: Kemal Nation Formation and the Ottoman Armenians,” (PhD Thesis: UC San Diego, 2010)

physical attacks of Ottoman-Kurdish forces, as well as the efforts of some Kurdish tribes and ordinary people to rescue Armenians in the genocide of 1915-16. Finally, it focused on the multifaceted cultural genocide of Armenians who survived the attacks and remained in the newly founded Turkish Republic. Combining the three historical phases, this chapter argued that the genocide cannot only be discussed in the context of physical violence. The assimilatory policies either inherited from the Ottoman Empire or later commenced in the Turkish Republic have a place in the cultural extermination of the group. The destruction of memory zones such as Armenian monasteries, churches and schools, the absorption of Armenian women and children into Muslim families, the prevention of Armenian lingual and traditional practices can be seen as a set of examples of that cultural extermination. The conclusion put forward to this chapter, then, is that the genocide of Armenians is a process that involves various stages, not a single event occurred in 1915-16 as an outcome of conflicts and violence.

CHAPTER THREE: MAPPING THE FIELD STUDY: RESEARCHING 'IDENTITATION' JOURNEYS OF THE DESCENDANTS OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE SURVIVORS

The present research stands at the intersections of the field of history and the field of social anthropology. On the one hand, it deals with one of the most brutal and bloody atrocities of the 20th century that culminated in the genocide of Armenians during the First World War, attempting to convey the historical accounts of survivors from the Turkish Republic. It goes back to 1915-16 through the help of the survivor memories, employing oral history method in exploring the histories of perpetration, victimhood, rescue and survival in the Armenian Genocide. On the other hand, this research concentrates on the 'identity' issues of the descendants who have different set of experiences with national, religious, ethnic, cultural and political 'identity' constructions in contemporary Turkey. It draws upon oral history interviews, conducted with the descendants of survivors in order to see how they identify themselves dependently or independently of the family stories that have been transmitted to them. It combines the disciplines of history and social anthropology, to explain how memories of the past and politics of the present are marbled, shaping each other and the descendants' journeys of 'identity' construction.

3.1 Reflections on Previous Studies: What has directed us to survivor accounts?

What has directed researchers to study the Armenian Genocide through oral accounts of the descendants of Islamized Armenians in Turkey? The memories of genocide survivors have started to be studied in the absence of archives. Historical archives about the genocide of 1915-16 in Turkey reflect the official Turkish discourse, deliberately denying the genocide and the

responsibility of the Turkish state. In such a political environment where there is a continuous policy of denial on the side of Turkish governments, only the few researchers whose works rely on Ottoman archival documents have been able to write the history of the Armenian Genocide. Taner Akçam, a Turkish historian from Clark University Holocaust and Genocide Studies is one of them. Akçam has written about the extermination policies that the Committee of Union and Progress (the CUP) initiated in 1915-16, drawing upon documents from the Ottoman imperial archives.⁴² Selim, Deringil, Janet Klein, Uğur Ümit Üngör, Zeynep Türkyılmaz, Mehmet Polatel, Ümit Kurt, Hilmar Kaiser and few other scholars have also focused on the Ottoman policy of deportation, conversion, extermination of Armenians and property confiscation during the genocide.⁴³ In the course of their research, all had difficulties reaching archival documents, as the Ministry Ottoman Archives (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi) has revealed only ten percent of the documents relating to Ottoman Armenians. Furthermore, those documents were restricted for non-Turkish researchers until recently. Janet Klein whose work is on the Kurdish Hamidiye Regiments who facilitated the attacks against Armenians during the Hamidian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide, was denied to access to the Ottoman Archives at the time she was writing her PhD thesis at Princeton University.⁴⁴

⁴²Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013)

⁴³ Selim Deringil, *Conversion and Apostasy in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2012). Janet Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford University Press, 2011). Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (OUP Oxford, 2011). Uğur Ungor and Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (A&C Black, 2011). Zeynep Turkyilmaz, "Anxieties of Conversion: Missionaries, State and Heterodox Communities in the Late Ottoman Empire" (PhD Thesis, UCLA, 2009). Ümit Kurt & Taner Akçam, *The Spirit of Laws: The Plunder of Wealth in the Armenian Genocide*, trans. Aram Arkun, (New York: Berghan Books, 2015). Hilmar Kaiser, *The Extermination of Armenians in the Diyarbekir Region* (Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴ Janet Klein, "Power in the Periphery: The Hamidiye Light Cavalry and the Struggle over Ottoman Kurdistan, 1890–1914." (PhD Thesis, Princeton University, 2002), 10.

In the last ten years there has been a relatively more liberal policy towards researchers studying the Armenian Genocide. A possible reason is that the Justice and Development Party (the AKP) has been treating “the Armenian question”⁴⁵ with a more liberal yet still denialist policies and narratives compared to the previous Turkish governments.⁴⁶ In 2008, the AKP made some amendments to Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code, better known as the code of ‘denigrating Turkishness’. Until the amendment, this code was used to prosecute Turkish journalists, publishers, politicians and scholars who acknowledged the Armenian Genocide. Hrant Dink, the famous Turkish Armenian journalist who was assassinated by a 17 years old Turkish boy, had been prosecuted under this article because of an interview he gave to Reuters in which he affirmed his recognition of the Armenian Genocide. Two Turkish novelists, Orhan Pamuk and Elif Şafak were trailed for their criticisms of the Turkish nationalist policies. In 2008, the Turkish publisher Ragıp Zarakolu also received a five months prison sentence for publishing books about the Armenian Genocide. Such a legal prevention had affected researchers negatively, hindering them from approaching to the field of Armenian Genocide.⁴⁷ The last couple of years have been more liberating for scholars, as the usage of the ‘G’ word is not officially prohibited to use anymore, and archival documents are more accessible in the Ottoman Archives. Yet there are still dozens of documents relating to the Armenian Genocide that still have not been released at the Turkish

⁴⁵Turkish governments use the term ‘Armenian question’ when referring to anything related to Armenians in the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic. This phrase, which was created in the late 19th century, reflects a political statement on the debate of the Armenian Genocide and Turkish responsibility. For further discussions on the Turkish official narrative of the ‘Armenian Question,’ see; Jennifer M. Dixon, “Education and National Narratives: Changing Representations of the Armenian Genocide in History Textbooks in Turkey,” *International Journal for Educational Law and Policy Special Issue on “Legitimation and Stability of Political Systems: The Contribution of National Narratives”* (2010), pp. 103–26.

⁴⁶ The AKP has made some improvements on the genocide debate, replacing statements like “the so-called Armenian Genocide” or “groundless genocide claims” with relatively less hostile phrases such as ‘common pain’, ‘shared sorrow’, ‘Armenian incidents’ and ‘1915 incidents’. However these statements are only more sophisticated arguments that maintain the fear that the recognition of the Armenian Genocide poses a real trouble to the existence of the Turkish state.

⁴⁷ Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence Against the Armenians, 1789-2009* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 8.

General Staff Directorate of Military History and Strategic Studies Directorate.⁴⁸ Besides the documents released are nothing but a re-production and re-representation of the denialist discourse, though a slightly more sophisticated and scholarly one. Thereby researchers have started appealing to oral history in exploring the stories of perpetration, victimhood, rescue and survival in the Armenian Genocide.

In the last two decades, many memoirs and academic studies relying on the oral accounts of survivors and witnesses from Turkey have been published. One of the earliest publications on this matter is Serdar Can's memoir, *Nenemin Masalları [The Tales of My Grandmother]* in which he writes the story of his grandmother Xelat who became the third wife of a Kurdish villager at a very early age in 1915's Diyarbakır.⁴⁹ Can decided to write his grandmother's story in Diyarbakır Prison where he stayed for ten years as a political prisoner between 1981 and 1991. In the reign of severe tortures against Kurdish political prisoners in Diyarbakır, Can wanted to write down the memories of 1915 her grandmother transmitted to him.⁵⁰ In 2004, Fethiye Çetin published her famous memoir *Anneannem [My Grandmother]* which brought the issue of Islamized Armenians into Turkish public and political debate. Çetin's grandmother Heranush was one of the few survivors of the genocide from Elazığ's Palu district. Adopted by an Ottoman soldier in her early childhood, Heranush lost her parents who ended up migrating to the United States of America and her brother Horen who was taken away from one of the caravans in Syria. While her parents were able to find and bring Horen to the US, Heranush remained in Turkey, growing up as a Muslim with a Muslim name. Her name became Seher. Seher got married to a Kurdish man in Elazığ with whom she had

⁴⁸ Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks' Crime against Humanity*, i.b.i.d., 9.

⁴⁹ Serdar Can, *Nenemin Masalları [The Tales of My Grandmother]*, (Istanbul: Umut Yayıncılık, 1991).

⁵⁰ "Nenemin Masalları Gerçeğin Ta Kendisi" (The Tales of My Grandmother Are the Truth) Agos last modified April 10, 2014. <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/11234/nenemin-masallari-gercegin-ta-kendisi>

five children, and lived her ninety five years of life as a Muslim. She has never been able to meet her family members who reside in the US. Decades later, Fethiye Çetin contacted them to bring the family together.⁵¹ In her memoir, Çetin does not only recount Heranush's or Seher's story of survival, but also narrates her own journey to discover her Armenian background through the painful memories of her grandmother. Those memories shape Çetin's journey to discover her identity, her views towards Ottoman and Turkish history, and her thoughts on contemporary politics. In one of her interviews she gave to Al Monitor, Çetin says:

“I was in prison for protesting against the military regime as a young student for a short time in 1980. We were brave and loud in our resistance. We sang, shouted our slogans. In our small cell, we formed strong bonds of friendship as the women of resistance, yet whenever this issue of Armenian roots came up, we only whispered. That is what led me to come out in the open decades later [in 2004] and publish this book. I wanted it to be heard loud and clear. I believed I owed it to my grandmother and others who survived the events and whose lives and identities changed completely and they never got a chance to talk about it.”⁵²

Fethiye Çetin's story encouraged other descendants of Islamized Armenians to come out with their background stories. In 2005, İrfan Palalı, a neurologist from İzmir published his memoir *Tehcir Çocukları: Nenem bir Ermeni'ymiş* [*Children of the Deportation: My Grandmother was an Armenian*]. In his book, Palalı recounts his grandmother Fatma's story of survival in Urfa at the cost of Islamization.⁵³ Another memoir based on an Islamized Armenian grandmother's accounts has been published by Yusuf Bağrı in 2007. Bağrı narrates his grandmother Mariam's memories towards violence committed against Armenians in Mardin during the genocide. Being the only survivor in her family, Mariam converted to Islam, changed her name as Fatma and lived the rest

⁵¹ Fethiye Çetin, *Anneannem*, (Istanbul: Metis, 2004). The book also got translated into English: Fethiye Çetin, *My Grandmother: A Memoir*, (London: Verso, 2008).

⁵² Pinar Tremblay, “Turkish woman's search gives voice to Islamized Armenians” Al-Monitor, last modified November 23, 2014. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2014/11/turkey-united-states-islamized-armenians.html#/>

⁵³ İrfan Palalı, *Tehcir Çocukları: Nenem bir Ermeni'ymiş...* [*Children of the Deportation: My Grandmother was an Armenian...*], (İstanbul: Su Yayınevi, 2005).

of her life as a Muslim.⁵⁴ Yet, like other Islamized grandmothers she did not abstain from conveying her memories to the next generation of her family. Thereby Bağı has been able to share his grandmother's traumatic experience with the reader.

In almost all published memoirs of descendants, it is women who are eager to preserve their past and whisper their painful memories to the next generations. Ayşegül Altınay asserts that Armenian mothers and grandmothers constitute the majority of memory transmitters in Turkey. They convey memories much easier than Islamized Armenian men. One reason might be, writes Altınay, the survivor men's "practices and fears of economic marginalization" in the aftermath of the genocide.⁵⁵ Women have been absent in work places and have stayed at home, being occupied with housework and raising their children. Men, on the other hand, have mostly been job holders and property owners. Male descendants of Islamized Armenians might have felt that "they –and their families- had more to lose if their Armenian heritage became publicly known, which prevented them from sharing this knowledge even with their children and grandchildren."⁵⁶ Female survivors and descendants, raising their kids in households, have used their only power to preserve their past: storytelling. Melissa Bilal and Estelle Amy de la Bretéque, in their research about the post-genocide Armenian and Kurdish lullabies (*oror* and *lori*), argue that Armenian grandmothers transmit painful memories through singing Armenian lullabies which serve as a resistance to silencing and forgetting in Turkey.⁵⁷ "They offer their own commentary on events, be it historical and contemporary, involving personal, familial or communal matters."⁵⁸ Those lullabies are forms

⁵⁴ Yusuf, Bağı, *Ermeni Kızı Ağçık* [Armenian Girl: Agchik], (İstanbul: Peri. 2007).

⁵⁵ Ayşe Gül Altınay, "[Gendered silences, gendered memories: new memory work on Islamized Armenians in Turkey.](#)" Eurozine (2014): 1-15, 10.

⁵⁶ Ayşe Gül Altınay, "[Gendered silences.](#)" i.b.i.d., 10.

⁵⁷ Melissa Bilal & Estelle Amy de la Bretéque, "The Oror and the Lori: Armenian and Kurdish lullabies in present-day Istanbul" in *Remembering the Past in Iranian Societies*, eds. P.Kreyenbroek and C.Allison, (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2013), 125-140.

⁵⁸ Melissa Bilal & Estelle Amy de la Bretéque, "The Oror and the Lori," i.b.i.d., 127.

of coping mechanism that survivor women use in order to deal with the silencing in post-genocidal Turkish and Kurdish societies. They express their grief, convey and retain their memories towards violence committed against themselves and their beloved ones.

Decades of mourning and whispering of survivors in Turkey have culminated in a recent unsilencing process. The stories of Islamized Armenians' have become widely discussed in Turkish media and public sphere. Oral historians, sociologists and anthropologists who have been interested in researching the Armenian Genocide survivors have conducted qualitative studies with descendants in various Turkish cities. Fethiye Çetin and Ayşegül Altınay, in their collaborative work entitled *Grandchildren*, interviewed with twenty-five young descendants who lately became aware of their Armenian heritage. They have published the transcriptions of the interviews, without trimming them, in order to give descendants full voice in narrating their family traumas.⁵⁹ Gülçiçek Günel Tekin has published her journalistic work on the stories of Islamized Armenian women who were abducted and forcibly Islamized by Kurdish chieftains in the villages of Elazığ, Van, Kozluk, and Dersim. Tekin's motivation in writing this book was the story of her dearest friend, Şirin Tan who is a descendant of a convert Armenian woman from Dersim. Tan's grandmother Varter's last will was to have her children be aware of their Armenian ancestry, and of her pain. She wished to be buried with a black shroud when she died.⁶⁰ Laurence Ritter, another journalist from France, conducted qualitative interviews with various descendants who have converted to Islam yet have tried to preserve their Armenian family lineage by getting married only among themselves. In doing so, Ritter states, these families have sought to maintain their connection to Armenian

⁵⁹ Ayşe Gül Altınay & Fethiye Çetin. *Torunlar [Grandchildren]* (İstanbul: Metis, 2008). For the English version, see; Ayşe Gül Altınay & Fethiye Çetin. *Grandchildren* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2014).

⁶⁰ Gülçiçek Günel Tekin, *Kara Kefen: Müslümanlaştırılmış Ermeni Kadınların Dramı [The Black Sound: The Tragedy of Muslimized Armenian Women]*, (İstanbul: Belge Publishing, 2008).

language, culture and traditions.⁶¹ A number of other academics and journalists such as Leyla Neyzi, Ferda Balancar, Erhan Başyurt, Vicken Cheterian have also conducted qualitative interviews with the descendants of genocide survivors.⁶² All of these researches contributed to the history of violence against Armenians in the late Ottoman Empire and contemporary Turkey, giving a voice to the testimonies that have been silenced and marginalized for a long time.

Why, though, is there a burst of memoirs and qualitative researches published about the genocide survivors in the last ten years? Why have the family stories of descendants become fairly popular in Turkey? One reason for the increasing interest may be the centennial anniversary of the genocide which sparked political and public debates on what Ottoman Armenians have experienced in 1915-16 and in the aftermath. Television programs, newspaper articles and columns, and politicians' speeches involved stirring discussions on whether it was genocide or not. The hundred-year anniversary of the genocide may have popularized academic and fictional publications on the Islamized Armenians.

On the way to the centennial, the efforts of Turkish scholars and activists have been effective in opening discussions about the atrocities against Ottoman Armenians and the Islamization, Turkification, Kurdification processes. These scholars have attempted to overcome the Turkish nationalist and denialist discourse, and tried building dialogue with Armenian scholars in writing the history of violence against Armenians.⁶³ In 2013, the Hrant Dink Foundation organized a

⁶¹ Laurence Ritter & Max Sivaslıyan, *Kılıç Artıkları* [Remains of the Sword], trans. Cengiz Aktar. (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation Publishing, 2013).

⁶² Leyla Neyzi & Hranush Araçelyan, *Birbirimizle Konuşmak* [Speaking to Each Other], (Bonn: DVV International, 2010). Ferda Balancar, *The Sounds of Silence: Turkey's Armenians Speak* (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation Publications, 2012). Erhan Başyurt, *Ermeni Evlatlıklar: Saklı Kalmış Hayatlar* [Armenian Adoptees: Secret Lives] İstanbul: Karakutu. 2006). Vicken Cheterian, *Open Wounds: Armenians, Turks, and a Century of Genocide* (London: Hurst & Company Publishers, 2015), 211-243.

⁶³ In 2005 a small group of academics and intellectuals, among whom Hrant Dink, Fatma Müge Göçek, Halil Berktaş and others were present, organized a conference entitled, "Ottoman Armenians in the Period of the Fall of the Empire" at Istanbul Bilgi University. The conference was rescheduled few times due to the attempts of Turkish politicians and Istanbul Administrative Court to cancel it. For detailed information, see; Fatma Müge Göçek, *Denial*

conference, specifically focusing on the Islamized Armenians in which many Armenian, Turkish and international scholars presented their papers about the post-genocide lives of survivors in Turkey.⁶⁴ No doubt, these academic and journalistic works have offered a new way of looking at the Armenian Genocide debate, incorporating human stories, and making the traumatic experiences of survivors known to Turkish, Armenian and international readers.

On the other hand, the memoirs and academic works have started to be treated only as the evidences of the Armenian Genocide, so much so that descendants' individual memories and identitarian journeys have remained unheard or ignored. Much of the reason is that the Armenian Genocide is taken as a focus of study, not the life stories of survivors. I argue that the initial objective of an oral history research conducted with survivors is not to demonstrate the veracity of the Armenian Genocide. Therefore survivor accounts should not be collected for the sole purpose to be useful or practical. Rather, they themselves should become the focus of scholarly attention. As Feindt et al. suggests: "One starts to encounter epistemological difficulties if one takes the study of memory to serve as an access point to allegedly real events rather than as interpretations of a past."⁶⁵ In this research, the Armenian Genocide is a starting point, or a historical frame of reference from which I depart from to discuss the survivors' personal stories. My purpose is to move on to the postmemories of the genocide transmitted through generations and the descendants' self-identifications that are derived from them. Of course, the descendants' memory of violence

of Violence.i.b.i.d., 388-389. A number of Armenian and Turkish scholars, including Fatma Müge Göçek, Ronald Suny and Gerard Libaridian, have been organizing a series of workshops (The Workshop for Armenian and Turkish Scholarship) since 2002 to collaboratively research the Armenian genocide. The last workshop has been held in Istanbul, between October 1-4, 2015.

⁶⁴ The conference papers have been published by Hrant Dink Foundation Publishing: Müslümanlaş(tırıl)mış Ermeniler:Konferans Tebliğleri, ed. Altuğ Yılmaz (Istanbul: Hrant Dink Foundation Publishing, 2015)

⁶⁵ Gregor Feindt et al., "Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies," *History and Theory* 53, no. 1 (February 1, 2014): 26-27.

provides new information and insights on what happened to Armenians who stayed in Turkey. Of course, their memories of the killings, deportations, and cultural destruction through forceful Islamization, Turkification and Kurdification are crucial in writing the history of the Armenian Genocide. Yet, what is more essential is how they shape and re-shape their self-identifications according to the memories transmitted to them. Drawing upon oral history accounts conducted with the interviewees, my research attempts to bring a new perspective to the Armenian Genocide field, combining survivors' postmemories with their 'identity' construction and transformation.

3.2 Methodology: Oral History Interviewing

Oral history is a relatively new and widely used qualitative research method in social sciences. It is an outcome of a dialogue created between narrator and interviewer in which they collaboratively work in re-constructing the past. In such an interactive process, the interviewer leads the dialogue by asking questions to which the narrator responds based on his or her own memories, postmemories, present experiences and thoughts. The narrator allows the interviewer to enter the private zones of his or her personal life.⁶⁶

Alessandro Portelli describes oral history as 'history-telling' that connects "life to times, uniqueness to representativeness, as well as orality to writing."⁶⁷ This methodology reflects how the act of recounting transforms into a life history. Though historicizing the oral accounts of ordinary individuals is undisputedly essential in oral history, the process of memory recalling and

⁶⁶ Kathryn Anderson & Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses." in *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds. Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai. (New York: Routledge Press, 1991): 11-26.

⁶⁷ Alessandro Portelli, "Oral History as Genre," in *Narrative and Genre*, ed. Paul Thompson and Mary Chamberlain (London: Routledge, 2002).

narrating is equally important. Meaning, oral history is not only interested in absorbing the preserved memories of individuals but it also deals with how they make sense of those memories and change their narratives in time.⁶⁸ In this research, I make use of oral history method not only when I attempt to historicize the silenced stories of genocide survivors, exploring the transmitted memories relating to destruction, assimilation, survival and recovery but also when I focus on the present memories and self-identifications of the descendants in which they construct, deconstruct and transform their 'identities'.

My goal, in deploying this research method, is not to write what exactly happened to Ottoman Armenians in the provinces of Bitlis and Diyarbakır in 1915-16. Nor do I believe objective history writing and truth telling is possible in social sciences.⁶⁹ In other words, I am not interested in demonstrating the physical and cultural genocide of Armenians in Bitlis and Diyarbakır provinces. Scholars in history and law fields have been focusing on that question quite well. I depart from the historical aspect of the genocide, and move on to the contemporary memory and identification processes of descendants in which their own imagination and creation towards transmitted memories as well as their present struggles and quotidian experiences are entangled. I search for the meaning in personal narratives of the descendants. I focus on what they insist to remember and recount, how they imagine their grandparent's traumatic experiences with death, deportation, loss of properties, poverty, abduction, adoption and orphanage, how they make sense of the cultural assimilation weighed on their ancestors through Islamization, Turkification and Kurdification, and

⁶⁸ Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks & Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 1998), 63-74.

⁶⁹ For post-modernist criticism of objective history writing, see; Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 1997), F. R. Ankersmit "Danto, History and Tragedy of Human Existence" *History and Theory*, Vol.42, (2003): 291-304. Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (JHU Press, 1975). Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1991).

finally how they associate themselves with ethnic, religious, political and cultural ‘identities’ through historical memories and contemporary experiences.

3.3 The Field Research: Collecting Accounts from Diyarbakır, Batman and Sasun

In April 2015, I conducted oral history interviews with thirteen descendants from three different places: Diyarbakır, Batman and Sasun. All the interviewees in this research are the descendants of Armenian survivors who during the Genocide of 1915-16 resided in the *vilayets* of Diyarbakır and Bitlis. Their ages vary between twenty-one and ninety-three. They are from the second, third and fourth generations. Of these fifteen respondents, five reside in Diyarbakır, three in Batman’s rural areas, and five in Sasun. The number of second-generation survivors is four. The third and fourth generations are five and six people, respectively.

This study has aimed to collect accounts from Diyarbakır, Batman and Sasun for a number of practical and theoretical reasons. The practical reason for choosing Diyarbakır is that it has been easy to find and talk to descendants of survivors living in this city. Muş and Bitlis are the other two cities where the field research could have been conducted. Yet, I have not attempted to include them as I did not have any connections with genocide survivors residing in these places. The theoretical reason for incorporating Batman and Sasun is that I aim to make a comparison between ‘identities’ of descendants in urban and rural spaces. Diyarbakır is a recently urbanized city, while Batman and Sasun are relatively rural places compared to it. Social relations and networks in these places impact the practices of cultural and identitarian forms differently from one another.

Diyarbakır is a Kurdish populated city where different ethnic and religious groups are welcomed. It has a relatively liberal environment, which embraces its Armenian and Assyrian communities

and acknowledges the Turkish and Kurdish responsibilities in the Armenian Genocide. In the last couple of years, there have been annual genocide commemorations in the city during which Kurdish politicians participated. Kurdish inhabitants of Diyarbakır are very embracing of the residents with Armenian ancestry. There is an active Armenian Church named Sourp Giragos which has recently been renovated. The Diyarbakır Municipality rendered material support to the restoration of the church as a symbol of apology for Kurdish atrocities against Armenians.⁷⁰ In April 2015, on the centennial anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, Selahattin Demirtaş, the leader of the pro-Kurdish People's Democratic Party (HDP) has publicly acknowledged the Armenian Genocide.⁷¹ Also, in the last national elections the HDP nominated an Armenian candidate, Garo Paylan, for the Turkish parliament.⁷² The HDP's multiculturalist approach to different ethnic and religious groups is strongly felt in Diyarbakır. Armenian and Assyrian residents of the city are at more ease than other Kurdish cities, when 'coming out' with their Armenian heritage. There is an active Armenian Community in Diyarbakır which embraces all the descendants without regard to their religious, political and cultural affiliations. It is possible to encounter to descendants who go back to their ancestral religion, to those who choose to be Muslim or Atheist, or to the ones who prefer combining their Armenian and Kurdish national identities within the same community.

⁷⁰ Yonca Poyraz Doğan, "Sourp Giragos Armenian Church in Diyarbakır Prepares for Liturgy," *Today's Zaman*, accessed October 31, 2015, http://www.todayszaman.com/national_surp-giragos-armenian-church-in-diyarbakir-prepares-for-liturgy_259664.html.

⁷¹ Uzay Bulut, "Armenian Genocide: Kurdish Leaders Set Moral Example to Turkey by Facing Their Crimes," *International Business Times UK*, accessed October 30, 2015, <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/armenian-genocide-kurdish-leaders-set-moral-example-turkey-by-facing-their-crimes-1498053>.

⁷² Ayla Jean Yackley, "Gay, Christian, Roma Election Candidates Show Turkey's Changing Face," *Reuters*, June 5, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/05/us-turkey-election-minorities-idUSKBN0OL1BN20150605>.

What has led me to conduct the field research in Diyarbakır is that it is easy to reach the descendants of Islamized Armenians and to talk to them openly about their backgrounds. I have used the snowball sampling method to find my respondents, starting by interviewing a few people from the Armenian community and then asking them who else to interview to get a more complete picture in my research.⁷³ Interviews lasted between one hour to two hours, apart from the introductions, welcoming and other ceremonial acts. Some respondents eagerly talked about their family stories and self-identifications, as if they give personal interviews every day. In such cases, I needed to look for the silences and emotions in their narratives.

In Batman and Sasun, it was hard to reach to the descendants and get them openly talk about their backgrounds. Part of the reason, I suspect, is that in both places social relations among inhabitants are more informal and social control is stronger in comparison to Diyarbakır. Fearing of social pressure in their neighborhood or of the Kurdish tribes perpetrated their families, the descendants find compelling to openly talk about their Armenian background. There are no communities or organizations through which they can get together in Batman and Sasun. The descendants are either not aware of each other's existence, or they simply try not to draw attention to their Armenian and Christian ancestry. Thereby, rather than deploying the snowball method to find the descendants, I preferred following an ethnographic methodology. I stayed in both places in total for ten days, trying to track down and talk to anyone who is informed about the descendants of Islamized Armenians. Even in cases where I achieved finding the traces of the descendants, some refused to participate in an interview. There are two possible reasons for their hesitancy to talk: the perceived 'identity' of the researcher and the fear of the social pressure.

⁷³ For further information on the snowball sampling method, see; Earl Babbie, *The Basics of Social Research* (Cengage Learning, 2010), 208. Also; Harvey Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Anthropology: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Rowman Altamira, 2006), 192-194.

Researchers acknowledge that the interviewee's perception of the researcher is decisive on what he or she talks or does not talk about in the interview.⁷⁴ An ethnographer, Leila Lomba de Andrade argues that the participants' interpretation on her identity is incorporated into her research process as a determining factor of participants' identity narratives. In her ethnographic research on the racial and ethnic identity of Cape Verdean American community, she shows how Verdeans attempt to locate her in a racial and ethnic category before answering her interview questions. Participants, writes Andrade, "are not simply sharing their perspectives of race and ethnicity, they are crafting interpretations in reaction to and through interaction with researchers."⁷⁵ In the course of all my interviews, the descendants tried to situate my 'identity' in a category, be it ethnic or religious. They all were suspicious of me at the beginning, because my outfit, in other words, my hijab, reveals that I am a Muslim woman. The first thing respondents insistently asked was my ethnic background. They wanted to know whether I was Turkish, Kurdish or Armenian. Some tried to associate my interest in studying the Armenian genocide survivors with my family story, asking if I am a descendant of an Armenian survivor. I referred to myself as a second-generation immigrant, a daughter of an Iraqi Turkoman who immigrated to Turkey escaping the Saddam regime in the 1980s. My attempt to locate myself in an alternative ethno-political category helped some of them to open up easily. However, this positioning process was not always successful. Despite my honest answer to their question, some descendants from Sasun refused to be my interviewees. The fact that I do not speak Kurdish, and I am a hijabi woman might have caused any assumptions, on the side of the descendants, that I was an outsider to their painful stories. I have experienced this

⁷⁴ Joseph A. Maxwell, *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach: An Interactive Approach* (SAGE, 2012), 23-38. Laura L. Adams, "The Mascot Researcher: Identity, Power, and Knowledge in Fieldwork," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 28, no. 4 (August 1, 1999): 331-63. Lelia Lomba De Andrade, "Negotiating from the Inside Constructing Racial and Ethnic Identity in Qualitative Research," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 29, no. 3 (June 1, 2000): 268-90.

⁷⁵ Lelia Lomba De Andrade, "Negotiating from the Inside," i.b.i.d., 286.

failure once in a village of Sasun, Purşenk, with a Christian Armenian family who are descendants of an Islamized Armenian.

The second possible reason for the descendants' refusal to talk is the social pressure they feel in their neighborhoods. The descendants who reside in Batman's villages and Sasun may feel be afraid from the other inhabitants of their areas. Some of them have been living side by side with the descendants of their perpetrators. And they know which Kurdish tribe attacked their families or saved them from death. Such a situation does not allow for the traumatic memories of survivors and their descendants to fade away.

With five interviewees from Diyarbakır, three from Batman, and five from Sasun I have conducted my field research. Before starting the interviews, I received the respondents' written consent that the recorded information would be used only for research purposes. Three interviewees decided to be mentioned as anonymous in the research. All the interviews have been conducted in Turkish and transcribed later. The relevant parts have been translated into English and arranged under two thematic sections: survivors' memories and identifications relating to ethnic, religious, cultural and political issues and survivors' memories and identifications based on their stories about perpetration, victimhood, survival and rescue.

3.3.1 Research Questions

This section is to outline and describe the research questions posed to the descendants of genocide survivors in Diyarbakır, Batman and Sasun. The main objective of this study is to investigate the identitarian journeys of the descendants through their memories towards the physical and cultural destruction of the Armenian Genocide. The main question, then, is whether there is a correlation between the postmemories transmitted to descendants and their (re)construction of 'identities'. To

what extent and how does collective memory of violence contribute to the self-identification processes of the descendants?

This main question refers to two theoretical aspects of survivors' identification processes:

1. The first one is the engagement of memory with national, religious, political and cultural identifications. Here, I am interested in exploring how the descendants combine collective memory with their individual experiences and choices in Turkish and international politics. How do their background stories shape or get shaped by their preferences of Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish national and cultural identities, Christianity, Islam, Atheism, Deism, Feminism, Socialism and any other political ideologies?
2. The second one addresses these identifications based on the concepts of perpetration, rescue, survival and victimhood. Put in other words, I try to explore how the descendants' self-identification processes are shaped by their family stories which involve rape, abduction, forceful Islamization and confiscation of properties, as well as rescue, help, protection and survival.

In the course of the interviews I approach the interviewees with an emic perspective, trying to understand their 'identities' from their own point of views.⁷⁶ I avoid categorizing them in the first place according to pre-existent national, religious, cultural and political 'identities' in Turkey. Instead of starting with a question that would immediately remind them those 'identities', I focus on their family and individual stories relating to the Armenian Genocide and the aftermath process in Turkey. By conveying their personal memories, the interviewees implicitly or explicitly talk

⁷⁶ Malinowski is one of the first cultural anthropologists who made use of the emic perspective, attempting to evaluate culture through the eyes of the insiders. See; Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (London:Routledge, 1922).

about ‘identities’ of their choice or ‘identities’ that they have inherited in the course of the interviews.

During the interview, I have made use of the themed questions below. Besides these core questions, I have posed some spontaneous ones relevant to the life stories of the descendants in situations where they have found difficult to open up to me.

- What are their memories of the Armenian Genocide? How did they come to know about their family stories? Do they know how their ancestors survived? Is there any case of perpetration, rescue or protection in their stories of survival?
- Were they always aware of their Armenian background? If they found out later, how did they feel when they first realized?
- Whom did they learn their Armenian heritage from? From the female or male members of their families?
- Do they openly talk about their Armenian heritage? If so, what kind of reactions do they get from their acquaintances? Are they involved in any Armenian community?
- How do they perceive their former political stances and environments in Turkey? Which political parties do they vote for? What do they think of the national history of Turkey, the Kurdish question, and the Turkish and Kurdish narratives about the genocide? What do they think about the Armenian Diaspora and the Republic of Armenia?

3.3.2 The Interviewees

The thirteen interviewees are the descendants of Islamized Armenians who at the time resided in the vilayets of Bitlis and Diyarbakır, and somehow survived the Genocide of 1915-16. Five of them, Xangül, Sami, Rahime, Gaffur and Sevan currently reside in Diyarbakır; three, Descendant1,

Dilaver and Atilla in Batman; and the remaining five, Ferman, Hero, Nihat, Descendant2, Descendant3 live in Sasun. Their ages vary between twenty-one and ninety-three. They are from the second, third and fourth generations. None of them have personally witnessed the genocide process in 1915-16, yet the stories of physical destruction of their families have been transmitted to them. Like their parents and grandparents, they have been experiencing cultural genocide in modern Turkey.

Table 1:

Descendants According to Current Residency	
Diyarbakır	Xangül, Sami, Rahime, Gaffur, Sevan
Batman	Descendant1, Dilaver, Atilla
Sasun	Ferman, Hero, Nihat, Descendant2, Descendant3

Table 2:

Descendants According to Generation	
2nd Generation	Ferman, Hero, Sami, Rahime,
3rd generation	Dilaver, Atilla, Nihat, Xangül, Gaffur
4th generation	Sevan, Descendant1, Descendant2, Descendant3

The descendants' post-memories towards survival of their ancestors can be categorized in three sections: a) Armenian women's physical survival through marriage and Islamization, b) Armenian children's physical survival through adoption and orphanage, c) Armenian families' survival through rescuers' help. The grandmothers of Xangül, Nihat, and Descendant1, as well as the mothers of Hero had been forcefully or voluntarily married to Kurds and converted to Islam after

the genocide. Sami's and Rahime's fathers, and the grandfathers of Atilla and Dilaver had been adopted by a Kurdish *mufti* during 1915-16. The families of Ferman, Gaffur, Descendant2 and Descendant3 had survived because they were rescued by Kurdish tribes who refused to attack Armenians.

The descendants do not share the same memories transmitted by earlier generations. Nor do they fit in the mainstream identity categories. Xangül considers herself as an Atheist Kurdish Armenian guerrilla woman. Sami, Rahime, Gaffur, Hero and Sevan initially refer to themselves as Christian Armenians. Yet, Sami and Rahime diverge from the group in terms of their political affiliations to socialism. Dilaver, Atilla, Descendant2 and Descendant3 call themselves as Muslim Armenians, while Ferman only calls himself Muslim and avoids the term 'Armenian'. Descendant1 refers to herself as a Muslim, anti-capitalist and feminist Armenian woman. Nihat calls himself a Kurdish Muslim Armenian.

3.4 Limitations of the Field Research

Given the fact that this master's thesis is a study built upon only a sixteen days field research in three different places, it has its limitations. Though I hope this study has contributed to the theoretical discussions on memory and identity, and to the field of the Armenian Genocide through the descendant's life stories; it is impossible to claim these research findings can be generalized for all the descendants of Islamized Armenians in Turkey.

One of the limitations of qualitative interviewing methods is that respondents are never able to tell their personal or family stories in one piece. Naturally, memory is scattered, and stories are told in episodes in different times and contexts. Therefore, it is impossible to expect to hear "a full

coherent oral narrative” about a life story of a descendant.⁷⁷ The descendants’ subjective responses and reactions to my questions have been affected by my role and identity in the research. Our interaction and dialogue in the course of the interviews have also been affected by their remembering, narrating and self-identifying processes. Then, to an extent, imagination, projection and creation has shaped the genocide survivors’ narratives, and thereby this research. Subjectivity exists in every decision, thought, experience and writing, at least as much as it exists in this study.

CHAPTER FOUR: AN ANALYSIS OF THE DESCENDANTS’ MEMORIES AND SELF-IDENTIFICATIONS

4.1 The Making of ‘Identities’: Effective Stories of Perpetration and Victimhood

How do the descendants narrate the physical extermination of their ancestors by the Ottoman state and Kurdish tribes, and the cultural extermination they have been experiencing? How do the survival, perpetration and rescue stories shape descendants’ identity narratives?

In this part I focus how descendants’ self-identification processes are shaped or not shaped by their family stories about perpetration, victimhood, rescue and survival. The descendants approach differently their Armenian parents’ or grandparents’ victimhood. Some extremely feel very close to their pain, and often commemorate it in their own narratives. They shape their identifications according to the victimhood, merging their contemporary struggles in Turkey with the traumatic stories of their ancestors in the Ottoman Empire.

⁷⁷ Alessandro Portelli, “Oral History as Genre,” i.b.i.d., 24.

Perpetration stories of Armenian Genocide survivors are transmitted from one generation to another. They leave impacts on people's self-identification. Xangül, a respondent from Diyarbakır narrated the perpetration of his own grandfather. Her grandfather was a reputable member of the Zirkî tribe was known for his killings in the *kazas* Hazro and Lice. His name was Hüseyin. Xangül was so distanced from her grandfather because:

(Xangül): “Of course he was guilty and responsible for everything. He had killed my grandmother Vartanuş’s former husband, abducted and forcefully Islamized her, and confiscated all her remaining properties. Vartanuş became Xangül for the rest of her life. And she was not happy because he never cared about her. She died soon after he married a second wife.”⁷⁸

Here is a perpetration story, told by A Kurdish Armenian who considers herself as an Atheist and politically leftist. Her opinion of her grandfather is that he is a perpetrator, thereby she does not want to stay with his memory.

Another the descendant do does not forgive Kurds is Hero who is a Christian Armenian and a descendant of an Islamized Armenian. My mother says, Hero:

(Hero): “My father was a Kurdish chief in Beşiri district and Xaniki village. His name was Şemseddin *agha*. My mother’s name was Riha. She had lost previous her husband in Sasun before being the wife of my father. She would stay with her mother in law (the Armenian mother in law) during the deportations. My father forcefully married with her and her mother in law at the same time. The mother in law had died soon after the marriage. Because of her grief, she had died... I was small, fifteen or sixteen years old. She told me this story by crying. I do not forgive my father. I cannot... [she cries]”

Rahime, whose father somehow survived as an Armenian child about 8-9 years old during 1915-16, shapes her identity based on her father’s victimhood, not on her Kurdish mother’s stories. Rahime was closer to her father much more that she was to her mother:

⁷⁸ Interview conducted with Xangül, Diyarbakır, April 18, 2015.

(Rahime): “I think my mother knew. She would call him Moskof all the time. That is a similar version to Ghavor is guess [Moskowan- presumably this was a derogatory term used for Armenians because they had collaborated with the Russians.] He did not tell us anything. Only once he had told my sister that all his relatives were killed. In 1915-16 he was around 8-9 years old, I think. I got out of prison in 1983. He died in 1985. When I went to the Birth and Death Registration Office to get on official paper, they gave me his old identification paper. On the paper, it was written Sarkis. It was scratched. And right next to it it was written Hüseyin. That’s all. No surname. Nothing...I could not understand for a while what was going on. Then I learned that Sarkis is an Armenian name. By that time, I was still thinking that I was Kurdish...”

(Rahime): “My mum was Kurdish. They did not speak to us with that language. That’s why I did not speak until 1980s. When was jailed in the 1980 coup, I decided to learn it. Just to resist the state. Because I was suspended from the school I was teaching. I was trialed because I said in a protest: “Mothers, teach your children their mother tongue” I felt Kurdish during those years... I do not feel Kurdish at all right now. I feel more Armenian. Much more. I am an Armenian. Not even of Armenian descent, I am an Armenian....They have blood in their hand. Butchering us, taking all the lands for themselves. And now they are suffering. The HDP is trying to show off with its Armenian MPs. They just want to seem more multiculturalist... If Kurds want to apologize genuinely, then they should give up the lands their grandparents took away from us. They should give those back first. I do not believe in only apologies.”

Besides the perpetration stories of Xangül, Hero and Rahime, there are accounts of survivors about Kurdish rescuers who were either ordinary villagers or tribe members in Diyarbakır and Bitlis *vilayets*. One of my interviewees, Ferman who is a second generation survivor from Sasun says that his entire family managed to flee Beşiri’s Khaniki village through Reşkotans’ help:

(Ferman): “My family escaped to Syria with the help of the Reşkotan tribe, resided there throughout 1916-17. They came back to Khaniki village after the Kurdish attacks stopped. Since then we all have good relations with Reşkotans and their resistance against the Turkish state.”

Ordinary Kurds also protected or hid Armenians in the genocide. Sami from the Kulp district of Diyarbakır narrated his father Alexander’s escape and survival story. His grandfather was a 9 years old child who got protected by an ordinary Kurdish man, named Hacı Muhammed for at least 15 years. Alexander was called Filite Goçkar by the inhabitants of his district. Filite means the

one who survived and *goçkar* or *goşhakar* means shoe maker in Armenian language. Apparently, Alexander he had learned how to make shoes from his father who could not survive the genocide. When Salih was telling me about his father's nickname, he voiced a suspicion that has been in his mind for a while. He said: "Maybe he survived because he was a shoe-maker. Everybody knows that only Armenians could have such an artisanship. Kurds were not involved in shoemaking, ironworking, carpentry and other jobs." I asked him what would change if Hacı Muhammed had hid Alexander (his father) in order to make money. He said: "Then that means he did not rescue my father only to save a nine years old kid. He saved him for his own desire to gain something from him."

Another story of rescue is Atilla and Dilaver's grandfather's story:

(Dilaver): "My grandfather had survived because he was a 9 or 10 years old boy. He told me that Ottomans gathered the whole village. His mum was with him, but his father, Grigor was not because he was killed. By the time the soldiers were counting women and children for deportations, his mother had hid him. Before she went with the group, she gave him a big package full of gold materials. And she left with other Armenians. And Ahmet walked through the valleys until he reached to a house. The house owner was a *mufti* (an Islamic leader). He took all the risks and hid him in cupboards. Especially when the gendarmerie would come to check the houses. Few years later, the mufti (Abdullah) adopted him. My grandfather remained in his house until he got married."

The interviewee's accounts on their ancestors' survival stories make a precious contribution to the literatures of rescue in genocide studies. The concept of rescue is defined based on saving lives of victims that are not prompted any material or immaterial gains for the rescue. No monetary reward or payment, any forceful religious conversion, forced marriage, or requesting victims to abandon their name, language, and religious practices in return of rescue is considered as an act of rescue in genocide studies. Some Kurdish rescuers may have done the favor in return of a gain. Though

in such cases individuals are not defined as rescuers in studies of violence⁷⁹, their acts, by definition, still fit the framework of rescue. Nonetheless it will the definitions of rescuer, bystander and perpetrator remain blurred, it is impossible to know what these individuals had in mind when they facilitated the rescues.

4.2 Descendants' Perspective on Islam, Christianity, Conversion and Religious Nationalism

In the course of the interviews, I focused on the descendants' memories and feelings about Islam, Christianity and the act of converting. They reflected on various issues such as forceful conversion, religious integration, crypto-Armenians, Islam, Christianity, Armenian religious communities, and the diaspora. Through those stories they narrated themselves sometimes similarly, sometimes dissimilarly from one other. Some descendants were positive about combining Armenian nationality with Islamic identity. One respondent combined Armenian and Kurdish identities merged with Islam. Some descendants converted to Christianity, getting baptized and officially changing their names. Few others stated that they do not affiliate themselves with any religious categories.

4.2.1 Combining Islamic Identity with Armenianness

Some descendants, especially those who reside in Batman and Sasun, prefer to combine Armenian national identity with Muslim identity. Atilla, Dilaver, Nihat, Descendant1, Descendant2 and Descendant3 intertwine their religious affiliation and practicing with Armenian backgrounds. This does not mean that they only combine the two elements. In fact, on top of their Muslim Armenian

⁷⁹ Hasmik Tevosyan's work on rescue cases in the Armenian Genocide argue that the forcefully Islamized Armenian women and children who physically survived the genocide are impossible to be considered as the rescued ones, even though they did survive by the sporadic helps of the Muslim locals. Hasmik Tevosyan, "Rescue Practices During the Armenian Genocide," in *Resisting Genocide*, ed. Jacques Semelin, Claire Andrieu, and Sarah Gensburger (Oxford University Press, 2014), 163–82.

identification, some add an anti-capitalist stance to world economy, a feminist approach, and a Kurdish national identity intermingled with the Armenian Muslim national identity.

Atilla and Dilaver are two Muslim Armenians from Batman. They live at the city center with their families. The two brothers always been aware of their Armenian background. They do not see any contradiction between the choice of religion and national identity.

(Dilaver): My grandfather was a haji. I saw him many times praying when I was a kid. I do not think he was a hidden Christian. He genuinely practiced Islam. Religious integration might happen to people.

(Atilla): I do not feel the need to be Christian, get baptized and change my name to be an Armenian. I know what my background is. I do not need a religion to validate my Armenianness. I would not want to approach Islam this was either.

Atilla referred to how he had realized the ‘immense’ difference between himself and diasporan Armenians in Los Angeles. “That was all my imagination.” he said. He had imagined a community for him to be accepted by in Los Angeles.⁸⁰

(Atilla): “When I first moved to Los Angeles for my new job, I thought I would get along well with Armenians there. I was laid back. Was not worried at all. I went to the biggest Armenian community center in town and met some people there. Some of them became my good friends. But even then, they were suspicious of me. I was a Turk for them. If you are Muslim, then you cannot be Armenian. So, I was never fully Armenian in their mind.”

Atilla’s observations over the Los Angeles Armenian community are in line with the scholarly works of Armenian diasporan historians. Some genocide scholars narrate the conflict during the genocide as a clash of “victim Christian Armenians” and “perpetrator *jihadist* Turks”. This dichotomist perception has recently been criticized by young diasporan scholars, as it fails to elucidate the existence of Islamized or Muslim Armenians who embrace both their Armenian and Muslim identities. The older generational scholars, politicians and clerics perceive Christianity as

⁸⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991).

the most essential component of Armenian identity, and the converts as lost to the Armenian nation. They argue that if ‘Islamized Armenians’ will embrace their Armenianness, they should go back to their ‘original identity’ namely to ‘Christianity’.⁸¹ The young generational scholars in the diaspora, however, are more open to the idea that Armenians can be Muslim as well as Christian or Atheist. Raffi Bedrosyan, a columnist from *Armenian Weekly*, writes: “If they have made a conscious decision to identify themselves as Armenian—a risky and dangerous initiative under the present circumstances—they should be readily accepted as Armenians, regardless of whether they stay Muslim or atheist or anything else. Relationships get even more complicated as there are now many families with one branch carrying on life as Muslim Turks/Kurds, another branch as Muslim Armenian, and a third branch as Christian Armenian.”⁸² These two different narratives concerning the Islamized or Muslim Armenians demonstrate that there are emerging shifts between old and young Armenian diasporic generations.

Nihat is a high school history teacher in Sasun, who combined three different identities into one self-identification form. His grandmother was Armenian, grandfather was Kurdish. In addition to combine these two inherited national identity, he added his religious affiliation into two intertwined national identities:

(Nihat): “I am twenty-five percent Armenian, twenty-five percent Kurdish and fifty percent Muslim. My identity does not only revolve around Armenianness only. I feel equally Kurdish. I care about Kurds’ motivation to gain their rights from the Turkish state. I am also a practicing Muslim. Islamic life is essential to me. Without praying and talking to God I am not myself. Islam is the most crucial component of my identity.”

⁸¹ For scholarly discussions see; Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris* (Harper Collins, 2009), 169-170, 223-224. Richard G. Hovannisian, *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide* (London: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 41-63. For ecclesiastical discussions of Armenian Patriarchate see; Ruben Melkonyan, “Attitude of the Armenian Pathriarchate in Istanbul towards the Issue of Forcibly Islamized Armenians” http://noravank.am/eng/issues/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=4412

⁸² Raffi Berdosyan, “The Islamized Armenians and Us,” *Armenian Weekly*, November 15, 2013, (Last modified November 15, 2013)

Descendant1 who is a hijabi woman from Batman is also a Muslim Armenian. However she combined that with her political stance and identity. She became an anti-capitalist and a feminist Muslim Armenian:

(Descendant1): “I do not feel belonged to one identity. I am a Muslim who wears hijab first and foremost. I feel Kurdish because Kurds have been persecuted for decades. When I think of Riha, my grandmother’s mother who forcefully married to a Kurd, I feel Armenian. And I feel feminist. Often I feel feminist. My identity constantly changes. I would not want sole identity. I want to be sided with the oppressed, not the oppressor. And Armenian women have been the oppressed ones in Turkey... My cousins... We are the grandchildren of the same people. They heard the same stories from my grandmother. They do not feel close to these memories. They say: “We are not Armenians, we are devout Muslims.” I am devout Muslim too. I wore hijab in high school. You do not have to be non-Muslim to be an Armenian.”

4.2.2 ‘Going Back to Christianity’

Sami (Istepan) and Rahime (Anjel) and Gaffur are the three interviewee from Diyarbakır who decided to convert to Christianity, though they normally do not feel belonged to any religion. In

the summer of 2013, Sami and Rahime participated in a birth right program in the Republic of Armenia. They decided to get baptized in Yerevan during the trip, and changed their names.



Figure 1: Sami and Rahime getting baptised in Yerevan (Photo Credit: Fırat Aygün)

When I asked them how they feel about Islam, Christianity and religiosity, they indicated that they are not devout and they have never been. Sami started by recalling his childhood memories about his father's connection to both Islam and Christianity. He recounted how he would try to remind the family members that they are from different ethnicities and religions. Rahime combined her experiences or thoughts on Islam with her father's story of conversion. Though her father did not pass any memory to her relating to his pre-genocide Christian Armenian life, Rahime's own memories with him and her imagination of what forceful conversion should be like are interwoven in her narrative.⁸³ In a way, the unstated pain and silenced postmemory, or -in James Young's term- the 'vicarious memory' of her father binds with her imagination.⁸⁴ Those vicarious memories

⁸³ Marianne Hirsch, "The Generation of Post Memory," i.b.i.d., 106-7.

⁸⁴ James E. Young, *At Memory's Edge*, 1-2.

made her cried during this whole part of our conversation. She sometimes exposed her anger towards his father's surrender to assimilations, and sometimes she said she understood her. Gaffur talked about how the assimilation of his grandparents affected his decision to convert to Christianity.

Sami (Isdepan): My father was an interesting man. In *fajr* times (morning prayer) he used to break the ice and melt it to perform ablution. But my mum would not get up to pray in the morning. She was raised as a practicing Muslim. When I was a kid, I would tell my dad sometimes: Dad, our prophet (the Jesus) is more precious than Prophet Muhammad. He would not say anything back. But he would smile, take my hand and kiss. I wanted to upset my mum by saying these things. I wanted to differentiate them. I used to say: Dad we are Christian, we are Armenian but mum is Kurdish, she is not one of us. I do not know why I would say these things. Maybe I wanted to do the same things to my mum. The things that once Kurds did to Armenians... I have never been religious. I felt very close to the socialists. But sometimes I had an urge to read the Bible and the Quran to see whether they could convince me. I do not want to be disrespectful to you [referring me] but I could not find anything in them. I became a Christian not because I believe. Because my grandfathers were Christian. They took that identity from us. Now I am getting it back.”

Rahime (Anjel): “I grew up as a feminist Marxist. I always believed that religion is unnecessary. Even today, practicing is not important to me. My dad was a *haji*, you know? He was a devout Muslim. In Ramadan he used to stay in the mosque. My mum would prepare some food for him. I used to bring it to the mosque. I would knock the door to give him the food... [Rahime stops here because she cries.] I would often see him washing the ground. He would repair the gutters in the mosque. He would not come back to the house for the whole Ramadan. I was angry at him at the beginning. When I first realized that he was Armenian. I did not even visit his grave for a while. I could not believe it. How can you believe in a religion that perpetrates you? How can you be a Muslim? [She cries.] You should have died too, I thought... But then later, I thought, he was just a child. He had to live like a Muslim. There was no other option for him to survive.”

Gaffur: “I do not think full integration to Islam is not possible. Because this is forceful Islamization. I am a third generation. Even I cannot accept that. For only the remembrance of my ancestors who got Islamized, I changed my identity. I changed my religion in my identification card. I want to sustain their traditions and culture. Otherwise, I am not that devout. I was not a good Muslim either, before converting to Christianity. I cannot tell you that I am a great Christian right now. But I changed my identity as a reaction, a resistance to the Islamization of our ancestors. We are 9 siblings. Only two of us changed our identification cards. The remaining are not interested in becoming Christian or embracing Armenianness. It is out of fear. Even though we, our family, lived as Muslims neighbors were not convinced. You are a kid, you fight with other kids. They would say ‘gavurun oğlu’ [son of an infidel- a Turkish expression]. They would say: “Senin kemiğin haram”

[Your bones are forbidden –a Kurdish and Turkish expression used to denigrate Armenians]. They insult you. They know you are Muslim. But just to disturb you...”

All of the interviewee’s accounts make references to the relationship between religion and nationalism. Their understanding of Armenian national identity is related to their symbolic religious affiliation to Christianity. Rogers Brubaker, in his article entitled *Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches* conceptualizes four way to look at the relationship between religion and nationalism: a) approaching religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena, b) approaching religion as a cause of explanation of nationalism, c) approaching religion as intertwined with nationalism and d) religious nationalism as a distinct type of nationalism.⁸⁵ Sami’s and Rahime’s feelings towards the Islamization policies, their self-identifications, and self-conversion processes shows that they understand Christianity as intertwined with Armenian national identity. The initial reason is the forceful Islamizations that the Ottoman Armenians faced in the Hamidian Massacres and the Armenian Genocide. The atrocities were more motivated by religious feelings than Turkish nationalist feelings in 1915-16. The Islamization process through deportations, mass killings and absorptions of women and children into Muslim households were carried out by the CUP government. In post-genocide era, the Armenian national identity and Christian identity have, therefore, overlapped and reinforced each other.⁸⁶

Sami’s and Rahime’s understandings of Christian Armenian identity remain essentialist, as they posit Christianity as an inevitably necessary determinant of Armenian national identity.⁸⁷ They do

⁸⁵ Rogers Brubaker, “Religion and Nationalism: Four Approaches” *Nations & Nationalism*, 18:1, (2012), 2-20.

⁸⁶ Razmik Panossian, “The Past as Nation: Three Dimensions of Armenian Identity,” *Geopolitics*, 7:2, (2002), 121-146.

⁸⁷ For discussions on essentialist perceptions of identity: Paula M. L. Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity?’” In *Questions of Cultural Identity*. 1–18. London: SAGE Publications, 1996. Deaux, Kay, and Peter Burke. “Bridging Identities.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 73, no. 4 (December 1, 2010): 315–20. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (SAGE, 2011), 231-233.

not leave space to possible alternative identifications that would stem from other directions. Gaffur, on the other hand, has a more nuanced view on the relationship between religious and national identity. He does not perceive Christianity as crucial to Armenian national identity. He criticizes the ones who do so, including some groups from the Armenian Diaspora for not acknowledging Islamized survivors of the genocide:

(Gaffur): “My father is a Hadji. But if you ask him he openly says that he is Armenian. Diasporan Armenians do not see my father as Armenian. But he is. Can a Turk be atheist? Can he be Socialist or Communist? Can a Turk be Christian? Of course he can. Kurds can be Christian. Arabs are Christian. These things are about preference. Why, then we cannot accept Muslim Armenians? Diasporan Armenians were lucky to keep their religious identity. But, if they would be in our shoes, they would convert too. There was no other option anyway. Even if there was no compulsory Islamization, when we would remain in Anatolia and convert to Islam at our will, does it mean our Armenianness finish?”

4.2.3 Religious non-affiliation

Sevan is one of respondents who do not have any religious affiliation. Sevan identifies himself as an ‘individual Armenian’ who is independent from Islam, Christianity or any other religion.

(Sevan):I am neither Muslim nor Christian. I go to the church for maintaining my traditions. I like the Easter festivals. In my work place I have only Muslim friends. They are mostly Arabs with Turkish citizenship. My office mate was shocked when he learned that I am Armenian. He asked my name. I said, I am Sevan. He asked me the meaning of my name. When I said it is the name of a lake in Yerevan, he realized. I also told him that I am neither Christian nor a Muslim. I have not made up my mind yet. One day he did something very offensive to me. He said, Sevan I will take you with my car bring you somewhere very special. And I accepted. So, at the weekend he took me from my house with his car. We went to a house where there were only men. First I did not grasp what was going on. What is this place? Then I realized that it was an Islamic meeting. My friend took me there without asking me or having my consent. I perceive this as offensive. I never said anything there of course. The day after I told him that I do not like going to such places. But the next week he called me again. I said I am not coming. The third week, the same... I never felt belonged to any Armenian religious community. I identify myself as an individual. Armenian community in Diyarbakır encourages the descendants of Islamized Armenians to participate in the prayers and to come to the church regularly. I do not go to church because I am not religious. I told them I am not, many times. "

To conclude, all Diyarbakır residents are either non-religious or Christians. They are able to talk openly about their memories, experiences and identities. The existence of the Armenian community in the city, the community's link to politics, and the Surp Giragos Church creates a space for the acknowledgement and mourning of the descendants. Sasun and Batman, on the other hand, are two small places which the descendants of survivors might not find it safe to 'come out'. The social relationships among people are informal and social control is stronger in comparison to Diyarbakır. Fearing of the social pressure in their neighborhood or the Kurdish tribes perpetrated their families, the descendants may find compelling to openly talk about their Armenian background. Indeed all the three descendants who did not want get their names mentioned in this project are from Batman and Sasun, not Diyarbakır. A comparison of the three places demonstrates that the descendants who live in urban space (Diyarbakır) openly talk about their family experiences and identities, whereas the ones who live rural areas are hesitant to do so.

The other conclusion that can be drawn from this research field is that the descendants do not share the same memories transmitted by earlier generations. Nor do they fit in the mainstream identity categories. Xangül considers herself as an Atheist Kurdish Armenian guerrilla woman. Sami, Rahime, Gaffur, Hero and Sevan initially refer to themselves as Christian Armenians. Yet, Sami and Rahime diverge from the group in terms of their political affiliations to socialism. Dilaver, Atilla, Descendant2 and Descendant3 call themselves as Muslim Armenians, while Ferman only calls himself Muslim and avoids the term 'Armenian'. Descendant1 refers to herself as a Muslim, anti-capitalist and feminist Armenian woman. Nihat calls himself a Kurdish Muslim Armenian. Then, the conclusion is, descendants of Islamized Armenians share the common postmemories but they do not constitute a homogenous and well-bounded group.

Conclusion

In this thesis I explored the religious, national, cultural, political choices of the descendants who were born to various different contexts in contemporary Turkey. The descendants share a common traumatic memory that has been transmitted to them through generations. They all talk about the physical extermination and forceful Islamization, Kurdification and Turkification of their ancestors. However they do not make the same identity claims. Considering that some descendants choose to 'go back' to Christianity, while some others combine Islam, Kurdishness, Socialism, Feminism or other cultural components of their 'identities' with Armenian national identity, I assert that the descendants of Islamized Armenians do not constitute a homogenous and well-bounded group. Through, a comparative analysis of the narratives of descendants from urban areas (Diyarbakır) and relatively rural areas (Batman's villages and Sasun), I showed how descendants from urban areas claim 'identity' with an essentialist discourse, whereas some descendants of rural areas do not feel a need to do so. I underlined the spatial differences affect descendants' journeys in identifying themselves.

My final conclusion put forward to this study, is that collective memory does not necessarily lead the descendants to unite under a common group identity. The descendants may determine their senses of belonging according to their own experiences, rather than the transmitted painful memories of their ancestors. They do not constitute a homogenous and well-bounded group even though they share the same traumatic postmemories of the Armenian genocide. My final suggestion, then, would be that one should not be trapped by the essentialist perspectives when approaching the descendants of Islamized Armenians. Otherwise we are in danger of groupism which nation builders are interested in doing, though ironically we are very much against it.

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