

REMEMBERING ARMENIANS IN VAN, TURKEY

This thesis is submitted to the Faculty of Art and Social Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Cultural Studies

by
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Sabancı University
Fall 2011

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REMEMBERING ARMENIANS IN VAN, TURKEY

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ABSTRACT

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Cultural Studies, MA, FALL 2011

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This thesis analyzes how Armenians are remembered in Van, a city in eastern Turkey, which had a significant Armenian population before 1915. Through the subjective narratives and everyday practices of the current residents of Van, I argue that there is not a single way of remembering Armenians. The most significant factor that affected the way my informants remembered the Armenians is the way they perceived the Kurdish issue. In the narratives of those politicized by the Kurdish movement feelings of guilt and responsibility along with wishes for reconciliation and compensation were present. My Informants claimed that in childhood they used to listen to their elderly who proudly narrated the massacres Armenians went through. However, after experiencing similar state violence as a result of the conflict between the PKK and the state, these stories of violence began to disturb them. I argue that by forming a historical connection between themselves and Armenians, they created a subversive discourse. The remnants of Armenians figured as mnemonic devices enabling them to imagine the past. I also argue that those who are politically and/or religiously conservative did not share the same sympathy towards Armenians. Moreover, the narratives of some other informants were in line with Turkish nationalist discourse. They argued that they were the real victims of 1915 and drew parallels between the current Kurdish issue and the events of 1915. Through the study of a particular locality, Van, this research shows that analyzing different interpretations of the past constructed through different subjective positions opens a way to attend to plural meanings of the past in relation to the present. This thesis makes a contribution to current debates on postmemory and perpetrator memory in a context in which the violence of the past bleeds into the violence of the present.

Keywords: Postmemory, Violence, Armenians, Remembering, Kurdish Movement, Oral History, Van, Turkey

ÖZET

ERMENİLERİ VAN'DA HATIRLAMAK, TÜRKİYE

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Kültürel Çalışmalar, MA, SONBAHAR 2011

Tez Danışmanı: Leyla Neyzi

Bu tez Türkiye'nin doğusunda, 1915'ten önce önemli bir Ermeni nüfusuna sahip olan Van'da Ermenilerin nasıl hatırlandığını analiz etmektedir. Öznel anlatımlar ve gündelik pratikler üzerinden Van'da Ermenileri hatırlamanın tekil bir yolu olmadığını iddia ediyorum. Ermenileri hatırlama şekillerini etkileyen en önemli faktörün Kürt meselesinin nasıl algılandığı olduğunu iddia ediyorum. Kürt hareketi içinde politize olan kişilerin anlatılarında suçluluk duyguları, sorumluluk, telafi ve barışma istekleri öne çıkıyor. Görüşmeciler çocukluktan beri yaşlılardan Ermeniler'in katledilmesine dair hikayeler dinlediklerini söyledi. Fakat PKK ve devlet arasındaki çatışmanın sonucunda benzer bir devlet şiddetini yaşadktan sonra bu hikayelerin onları rahatsız etmeye başladığını söylediler. Görüşmeciler Ermenilerle kendileri arasında tarihsel bir bağ kurarak yıkıcı bir söylem yarattılar. Ermenilerden kalan kalıntılar geçmişi yeniden düzenlemelerinde yardımcı anımsatıcı araçlar olarak işlev görüyor. Politik ve/ ya da dindar olan görüşmecilerde Ermenilere karşı benzer bir sempatinin mevcut olmadığını iddia ediyorum. Dahası, bazı başka görüşmecilerimin anlatıları ise Türk milliyetçi söylemiyle aynı doğrultuda idi.1915'in asıl mağdurları olduklarını iddia ettiler ve bugünkü Kürt meselesi ve 1915 olayları arasında paralellikler kurdular. Belirli yerlere odaklanmak, farklı bağlamlarda yaşayan insanların günümüzde geçmişi hatırlamada kullandığı çoklu stratejiler hakkında bilgi veriyor. Bu tez, posthafıza ve failerin hafızasına yönelik tartışmalara katkıda bulunurken, araştırma mekanında geçmişte yaşanan şiddet günümüzde yaşanan şiddete karşılıyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Post-hafıza, Şiddet, Ermeniler, Hatırlama, Kürt Hareketi, Sözlü Tarih, Van, Türkiye.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been written unless many people had supported me. I owe my deepest gratitude to my thesis supervisor Leyla Neyzi who encouraged and stood by for me from the beginning to the end and provided me with her invaluable feedback. I am thankful to the members of my thesis committee, Sibel Irzık and Meltem Ahıska, for their interest, comments and critiques without which this thesis would have been impossible. I would like to express my gratitude to Banu Karaca not only for her support and friendship, but also for our wonderful discussions that guided me sources I otherwise would have missed. I would also like to thank to Bilgesu Sümer, Sami Görendağ, Zozan Özgökçe, Ramazan Kaya and Yakup Kızıldaş who made me feel at home in a place which I had not even visited before and made my fieldwork possible. I greatly owe to all the people I met in Van who shared their life stories with me and became my friends. I would also like to thank Carina Rosenlof for proof-reading this thesis in detail. I am also indebted to Onur Calap, since he patiently listened to me throughout my writing process, read my thesis and helped me frame my ideas with his discreet comments. Lastly, I would like to thank all my friends and parents for their tireless support.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nazım: Somehow, some people caused the degeneration of the Armenians here; now, I mean, the Kurds have come to their senses somehow. But the damage is already done. The Armenians are no longer a product of this geography... It is necessary to account for some things as the events unfold... With the lapse of time, they really turn into legends; they are distorted a thousand times. This (degeneration of the Armenians) should have been accounted for at the time just like what was done for the Jews who were massacred in the years of 1944 and 1945 and then a state was established three years later.¹

It was the last day of my fieldwork, when Yener took me to his village in Amik and showed me the Armenian graves that were dug up by treasure hunters. We both were very moved by what we saw and when we went back to the city center, we headed to a coffee house to meet some of his friends. Nazım was one of the two Kurdish men who were already talking at the table. They were both in their thirties and easily compelled to have a discussion after Yener told them what we had seen. They began to talk to each other and to me. Nazım told me that his grandfather witnessed the massacres and he spoke of a very old blind man who narrated chilling stories of violence against the Armenians. They told me that there used to be approximately sixty Armenian villages in

¹ Nazım: Ya bir şekilde Ermenileri birileri burda soysuzlaştırdı şu an yani Kürtlerin akli başına geldi bir şekilde. Ama işte iş işten geçti. Ermeniler artık bu coğrafyanın ürünü değil... Olaylar sıcakken bir şeylerin hesabını sormak gerekiyor.... Zaman aşımına uğradı mı gerçekten ortaya bir efsane çıkıyor bin tane tahribata uğruyor. Yahudiler nasıl 44-45 yıllarında katledildiyse, 3 yıl sonra devlet kurulduysa, zamanında bunun hesabı sorulmalıydı. Biz artık efsaneler peşindeyiz gerçekten.

Van and Nazım commented that they were said to have been given as a dowry by an Armenian Bey to his daughter. Like many others, they also noted that local people still call these villages by their Armenian names, even though the Turkish state has renamed them (Öktem, 2008).

However, even though all these discussions took place in a highly enthusiastic atmosphere, Nazım's last comments betrayed the mood. When I transcribed this discussion, I was amazed at his comments since he was the one who brought up his grandfather's witnessing the massacres and the Armenian villages. It was also surprising for me because this feeling of belatedness was not something I had encountered in most of my informants' narratives. They were quite enthusiastic to talk about their life histories by weaving them together with the lives of the Armenians of Van.

For Nazım, the memories about the Armenians of Van people shared with each other sounded very familiar, because they had been in circulation since he was a child. For me, the stories about Armenians I heard in Van were quite new. It still surprises me today that as a person who grew up in Adana, it was only at the beginning of my university years that I became aware of the Armenian history of that city. Nazım compared the fate of the Holocaust victims and the fate of the Armenians. However, he suggested that since such a long time has passed, we can no longer reach the truth; we can only grasp legends, which for him, are truths with distortions. He implied that justice had to be served while the iron was still hot. I understood his resentment when he claimed this and took refuge in silence. However, I think otherwise about the legends. As he probably also knows, truth is not only distorted with the effects of time; or to put it in a different way; time is not an empty vacuum. Memories are created and recreated through the workings of power and what he calls 'legends' reflect the current beliefs and aspirations of various people about the Armenians of Van in and for the present.

The historiography covering the period of my interest, the period beginning with the reign of Abdulhamit II and ending with the Committee of Union and Progress (and extending up until the creation of the Turkish Republic in 1923) is highly politicized and controversial. Within this historiography, the accounts of what happened in Van in 1915 are also controversial, since in contrast to other cities in Anatolia, Van is a place where an uprising/ revolt took place against the deportation policies of the CUP

(Balakian, 2009: 179). At the end of the 19th century, Van was already an important locale for Armenian political activity (Hovanissian, 1999: 3) and with the Ottoman Empire entering World War I, Van's importance as a border city increased (Balakian, 2003: 60).

The policies of the CUP which resulted in the mass destruction of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire are interpreted in different ways by surviving Armenians and by the Turkish state. Most importantly, the Turkish state denies that a genocide occurred in 1915, resulting in the eradication of the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire (Uras 1987, Ataöv 2001). My aim is to go against this nationalistic official discourse of denialism that the Turkish state has consigned itself to. For this reason, this thesis focuses on the narratives, interpretations and emotions of ordinary people in the way they tried to understand their own past; a past which is shared with the Armenians. My main interest is in the present: How are Armenians remembered in Van by the different populations that live there today? Listening to their stories, one question that kept lingering in my mind was whether there was a way to denationalize the history of the Turkish Republic through fragments of postmemories and through the subjects' interpretations of these fragments.

Focusing on the present is important even though we cannot undo what happened, because the present is the only sphere for us if we have any intention to try come to terms with the past. Sancar argues that the struggles that aim to explain and understand our relationship to the past are actually discussions that determine the political and cultural texture of today's society (Sancar, 2007). Before going to the field, I did not even know whether there was a postmemory of Armenians in Van and I was unaware whether the people I was going to meet there had any intention to come to terms with their past.

For some, the destruction of Armenians may be seen as a tragedy that belongs to the past. However, I believe we understood that this is not easily done when we witnessed the murder of the journalist Hrant Dink. We understood that this tragedy was not only something of the past when the man who tried to imagine a way of healing not only for Armenians, but also for others who live in this country was murdered.

Memory studies envision the past as not separate from the present, since remembering takes place in the present. In a sense, the past continues to live today:

through habits, everyday encounters and the stories people share with each other and with the next generations. However, remembering is also a process of forgetting, not only for individual persons, but also for the nations that try to write their pasts. Ernest Renan, the 19th Century French historian, in his famous speech regarding nation and nation-state argued that nation is not a subject of religion or ethnicity. He claimed that; “Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (Renan, 1882). We can say that the establishment of the republic of Turkey is no exception. Turkey has a problematic relationship to its past, not only because there are many discomfiting events that happened during the nation-building process, but also because of the way the discipline of history is practiced. If history is a discourse about the past (Jenkins, 1991), it is crucial to examine how this discourse is produced in Turkey. In the last years, this discourse and its truth claims have been placed under scrutiny and various scholars have tried to unearth the power mechanisms through which this discourse and its truth claims operate. While the nationalistic historiography tried to decouple the republic of Turkey from the Ottoman era, Taner Akçam, for example, points out the continuity between contemporary of nationalism and the preceding CUP era. He argues that a wholesale endeavor should be invested to confront the tradition of CUP in order to understand the current nationalism that seems to be on the rise after the murder of Hrant Dink (Akçam, 2010). The historian Oktay Özel points out the uneasy relationship Turkey has with its past and argues that the present and history is so intermingled in Turkey that “the feeling of reality” seems to be in danger. He proposes that a calm historiography, especially in order to study the events of 1915, is necessary (2009). According to Ayşe Hür, Turkey's troubled relationship to its past is not only a problem of forgetfulness but also of distortion (2007). She argues that the attitude of denial through which we had been discussing the destruction of the Armenians is subsequently replaced by a discourse that strives to justify the policies of the CUP (Hür, 2007). Meltem Ahıska provides an insightful analysis of the relationship of republican Turkey with its past through the concept of occidentalism (Ahıska, 2006). She suggests that the reason for the lack of value given to archives in republican Turkey cannot be explained by mere carelessness, but indicates a profound sense of conflict with the past. The historian Selim Deringil also tries to grapple with the concept of the archive (2007). He speaks of the uses and abuses of

archives by historians who study the events of 1915 and warns historians against treating the archive as a “magic wand” that reveals the truth; archives are a site of political struggle.

While these revisionist historians and sociologists have been trying to unearth the tensions within Turkish historiography and pave ways for reformulating a historiography better aware of its relationship to power, a completely different critique was proposed by literary critic Marc Nichanian. He argues that what the Armenians of Anatolia went through was an event that strips one of one's language capacity. It is something that interdicts mourning, since it eradicates the witness. For him, genocide is not a fact, it is a Catastrophe; something that cannot be understood and explained by history and law, but might be approached through literature. Thus, his choice to use the term Catastrophe has nothing to do with avoiding the term genocide. In his dialogue with David Kazanjian, he reminds us of Hannah Arendt²'s discussion on concentration camps in which she argued that we have to go beyond the traditional workings of political power in order to imagine the genocidal will (Kazanjian and Nichanian, 2003: 147). Nichanian claims that the historical approach might explain the intentions that prepare the crime, the decision that transforms the intentions into reality, however, it can never say something on the nature of the crime (Nichanian, 2011: 174). Following Benjamin, he believes that history is, from the beginning, denialist.

I will not claim that the memories of Armenians that are revealed in this study and the way my informants try to come to terms with them help us to approach the sense of Catastrophe Nichanian writes about. However, they give us clues about how people that live in today's Van try to make sense of the violent history and the troubled present of Van. These memories are not analyzed as testimonies that will take their place in the archive; they are some of the multiple ways to remember the past and to be in the present.

I conducted my research inspired by revisionist approaches and recent studies on the history of Ottoman Armenians. In that sense, I attempt to contribute to the writing of a revised understanding of history by providing micro narratives and memory fragments

² See also: Arendt, Hannah. 1963. *Eichmann in Jerusalem: a Report on the Banality of Evil*. New York: Viking Press. Arendt, Hannah. 1958. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Meridian Books.

of people living in this specific city. Van proved to be a fruitful ground to see how different interpretations of the past compete with each other based on remembering the past selectively. The way my informants envisioned the Kurdish problem and the Kurdish movement figure as the most important factors in the way they selectively narrated memories about the Armenians. In all the interviews the memories of Armenians are narrated through the Kurdish issue and through the current political polarization within the city. As we will see, the most complex and subversive narratives were provided by my informants who were sympathetic to the Kurdish movement. By imaginatively reinterpreting the transmitted memories in the context of the present, they created a subversive and radical way of coming to terms with the past that goes beyond the usual collective amnesia and denialism of the Turkish Republic. Their narratives point to the unfinished nature of the past. In that sense, this thesis shows that there are other ways of remembering that go against the official discourse. Moreover, rather than the terms through which Turkish historiography discussed the 1915- fervent discussions around the chronological order of events, references to statistical information and archives, macro-scale analysis of the events- this study demonstrates that people might relate to the past through other terms.

This study aims to contribute to oral history and memory studies by its focus on a specific locale and on changing perpetrator memory. Like Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) suggested, the memories of my informants and their tense relationship with the traces left by the Armenians also show that history is not only a discourse on the past; but about the various layers where narratives, remnants, superstitions and secrets interact with each other in relation to power.

The memories that are analyzed in the subsequent chapters show us that social reality is very complex. Many of my informants' memories are both postmemories of violence and memories articulated when the possibility of war and of violence are still lurking in the background. Their narratives give us clues as to how perpetrators develop an understanding of history when they came to identify themselves as the victims of today. Though it has been nearly a hundred years since 1915, I aim to show that the eradication of Armenians from Van does not belong to the past. Many of my informants' narratives and the tense relationship which they have established with the remnants that were left behind by Armenians attest to this.

1.1. Outline of the study

In Chapter Two, I briefly discuss late Ottoman history as well as the history of the Turkish Republic. I present the policies of Turkification that were perpetuated in the Republican era and argue that Van is a place in the margins of modern Turkey due to its status of oscillating between normalcy and emergency. The war between the state and the PKK and the repressive and assimilatory policies against the Kurdish people influenced gravely the lives of most of my informants. I also discuss the concept of postmemory and emphasize its linkage with the present.

As I discuss in the methodology section in chapter three, I conducted twenty-three oral history interviews and stayed in Van for five weeks in April-May 2011. Some key informants helped me to meet others. Most of my informants were sympathetic to the Kurdish movement. The politically dense atmosphere of the city, together with the oral history interviews that focus on a local, familial and individual basis revealed the political subjectivity of my informants.

In the fourth chapter, I analyze changing perpetrator memory in the present. Much more than I expected, there was an abundance of memory about the former Armenian residents of Van and these memories were narrated openly and in detail. For many of my informants, talking about Armenians as the victims of their predecessors was far from a taboo and they did this in a highly emotional and fervent manner. Contrary to what historians might envision, 1915 is not something belonging to the past; it is a continuously flowing and dynamic issue that is articulated in the present. To a certain extent, they managed to distance themselves from their predecessors by holding onto an image of them as “ignorant” and religious people. Additionally, they argued that their predecessors were motivated by the desire to obtain material goods when committing these atrocities. However, they expressed great responsibility and guilt for the deeds of their predecessors, even though they distanced themselves from them and argued that the ultimate perpetrator was the state. The general issue that dominated the interviews

was stories of violence, rather than everyday relationships. These violent stories about the Armenians were generally colored by the language of the present victimization of the Kurdish people.

Many of them provided a complicated account of how their perspectives on Armenians changed and how they began to assume responsibility and guilt. For them, a drastic change in coming to terms with the past took place within the last thirty years, as a result of the conflict between the PKK and the Turkish state. They told me that memories of the violence inflicted upon the Armenians were narrated to them as heroic deeds by their predecessors. However, when they perceived themselves as the descendants of the perpetrators who fell victim to the demands of the absolute perpetrator- the state-, these heroic accounts began to disturb them. In a sense, the state was like a mediator that bound these two peoples to each other. Their present identification as victims not only led them to empathize with the Armenians, but also to weave their own life stories with those of the Armenians. Their narratives indicate that they collapsed these different time periods as a result of which the line that is believed to separate the past from the present blurred. I argue that their narratives were subversive since they transgressed the limits of the grievable life by redefining the losses of the Armenians as grievable, although it seemed that a proper mourning could not take place. Instead, they developed various strategies to overcome this feeling of loss and remembered the past through a sense of reflective nostalgia.

Many of my informants told me the older generations would not have the same empathetic attitude towards the sufferings of Armenians. I argue that rather than a generational difference, different political subjectivities seem to be determining the narratives of the informant's. However, because the elderly generally seem to be religiously and politically more conservative than their children, my informants' attribution of this difference as being a generational one is understandable.

I argue that the issue of descendants of converts operates as an open secret. Local people talk about those who are believed to be of Armenian origin, but claiming that they themselves keep it a secret. I also interviewed some people who had Armenian ancestors. Some of them talked about these Armenian relatives openly, while others told me that they preferred to keep it hidden. I argue that these silences are as important as

the narratives since they complicate “the discourse of change” that is assumed to have taken place in the last thirty years.

The material traces left by the Armenians figured as mnemonic devices in the instances where there was a lack of direct oral transmission of memory. Moreover, they are narrated as a means to actively imagine a past of which my informants don't have any autobiographical memory. Violation of these remnants by the treasure hunters is today seen as a further violation of the rights of an already tormented people, which might be related to the increased sensitivity that came with the beginning of the war between the state and the PKK.

In the last section of this chapter, I present the narratives of four men who were either members of or had an affiliation with an association previously called EÇKUM-DER.³ I searched on the web and found out that they had changed their name to “TEİAD”⁴ in order to contribute to the relationship between Armenia and Turkey.⁵⁶ They provided narratives as spokespersons of the official ideology and claimed that they were the real victims of 1915. For them, the period before 1915 is a nostalgically remembered golden age when different ethnic groups lived peacefully in Van. They argued that this golden age ended when the great powers wanted to divide the country and restarted in 1918. This year was narrated as the year of national revival, however, this restored peace was broken again in the 1990s when the Kurds were provoked by the

³ The abbreviation stands for “Ermeni Çetelerinin Katliamına Uğramış Mağdurlar Derneği.” It can be translated as “The Association of the Victims of the Massacres Perpetrated by the Armenian Armed Bands.”

⁴ The abbreviation stands for “Türk-Ermeni İlişkileri Araştırmaları Derneği”. It can be translated as “A foundation of Research on the Turkish-Armenian Relations”

⁵ <http://www.serhatgundem.com/haber/588/ermeni-acilimina-van-destegi>

⁶ <http://www.tumgazeteler.com/?a=4403041>

Great Powers. Thus, they argued, Van again lost its culture due to the internally displaced immigrants who could not adapt to urban life.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY AND MEMORY IN VAN

In this chapter, I will provide a brief historical account covering the period from the decline of the Ottoman Empire to the establishment of the Turkish Republic in relation to the history of Van. This basic historical account is needed in order to explicate the reasons why I chose Van as my ethnographic site and to make sense of my informants' memories. I will show that while the master narrative of denial is hegemonic, there have been some local attempts to bring the issue to public discussion. In addition, I will argue that the Turkification policies that the CUP government initiated were perpetuated after the foundation of the Turkish republic. I will argue that the Kurdish movement has had a significant effect in shaping postmemory in Van, leading to a growing polarization of the population with respect to both present politics and history.

2.1. From the Late Ottoman Period to the Establishment of the Turkish Republic

In the Ottoman Empire, inequality was embedded in the millet system (the different communities organized on the basis of religion), as the system by definition was based on the superiority of the Muslims (Deringil, 2009). The already unequal relationship among the multi-ethnic groups became exacerbated while the Empire was going through various crises. Selim Deringil argues that the real struggle for the survival of the Ottoman Empire began before the Balkan Wars and World War I (Deringil, 2009: 345). After the losses of the 1877-1878 war against the Russian Empire, the Great Powers began to take an interest in the fate of the Ottoman Armenians. In 1878, the

Treaty of Berlin which contained a series of reforms aimed to improve conditions of Ottoman Armenians was issued (Bloxham, 2005: 16). Fatma Müge Göçek argues that together with the reform plans of 1839, these reforms proved to be unsuccessful attempts by the Ottoman Empire to embrace its minorities within a principle of equality (Göçek 2006: 122).

Between 1894 and 1897, mass conversions to Islam took place. These conversions were supposed to be carried out through an elaborate procedure that required the full volition of the convert; however this procedure was disregarded during the massacres of the 1890s (Deringil, 2009: 347). In the six eastern vilayets of Sivas, Erzurum, Mamüretülaziz, Diyarbekir, Bitlis and Van, mass conversions to Islam took place to avoid death at the hands of tribal militia composed of Kurds who formed part of the Hamidiye Cavalry (Ibid: 348). The formation of the Hamidiye Cavalry took place at a time when the power vacuum was created in the Kurdistan region. In the second half of the nineteenth century the authority of strong Kurdish landlords, the *mir*, came into conflict with the Hamidian policies of centralization. The Hamidiye Light Cavalry was composed of the members of these tribes who were formerly controlled by the *mirs* (Ibid: 360). Forming these regiments, the Sultan could both control the Kurds and deal with the Armenians (Balakian, 2003: 44).

Before these mass killings took place, Van had already become an important center of Armenian political activity; in 1885 the Armenekan society was organized and soon, the Hunchakian Revolutionary Party and Armenian Revolutionary Federation opened up branches in Van. While Hovanissian (1999: 4) suggests that during the period between 1895-1896 the Armenian defenders of Van were able to avoid the attacks of the Hamidiye for a while, Kieser argues that this temporary buffer was also achieved by Governor Nazım Paşa's and other military officers' willingness to keep things in order as they were trying to prevent lootings and massacres from being carried out in the villages (Kieser, 2005: 309).

Bloxham believes that the massacres that were committed by the Hamidian Cavalry are especially important for genocide scholars who attempt to understand how the 1894-96 massacres of 100,000 Armenians were related to the events that unfolded during the subsequent reign of the CUP (Bloxham 2003: 23). He emphasizes that for most genocide scholars, this period demonstrates the vulnerable position of the

Armenians in Ottoman society and that the actual doomsday came later when the CUP seized power in 1913. The initial aim of the CUP was to protest Abdulhamit II's despotism and reinstitute the constitution of 1876 (Dündar, 2011: 18). Moreover, as Akçam argues, the CUP aimed to create a modern state in which all members of the empire were bound together based on a principle of equality. However, they were attempting to do this within the millet system of the Ottoman Empire where the society was divided into separate and unequal categories (Akçam, 2004: 127). Thus, the principle of universal citizenship was adopted together with Ottomanism; a cultural identity established around the values of the Muslim Turkish society (Ibid: 128). Due to this factor, as the ideology of the CUP shifted from Ottomanism to Turkism after 1911 (Dündar, 2011: 32), especially after the loss of territory during the Balkan Wars, the Armenian hopes that were tied to the CUP were also crushed. Akçam argues that after the Balkan wars, Anatolia became the focus of the CUP's leaders who considered it to be the new center of the Empire (Akçam, 2004: 11-12). Therefore, the fatal decision was made to deport and exterminate the Christian population and to assimilate non-Turkish Muslims (Kurds, Albanians, Bosnians, immigrants from the Caucasus, among others) in order to keep the remaining territories under Ottoman rule. Klein's argument concerning the continuing powerful position of the Hamidiye under the CUP regime is significant, since it shows that the CUP leaders decided to ally with this powerful element which they felt they should not alienate (Klein, 2011: 96). She argues that among the rural population, the reaction to the Young Turks and the new constitution were ambivalent; while some rejoiced at the constitution, others, including the Hamidiye chiefs, were worried subsequent developments would affect their position unfavorably (Ibid: 96).

Van, as a city located near the Turkish-Russian border was approached with suspicion by the Turks because of the political activities that emerged in Russian Armenia (Balakian, 2003: 60). With the beginning of World War I, Van gained importance as a border city. In 1915, Armenians of Van rose up against Vali Cevdet Bey's demand that more than four thousand Armenian men join the labor battalions. The refusal of the Armenians of Van and their resistance that followed served as a "pretext for the CUP to claim that the Armenians were disloyal during wartime." (Ibid:179). During the summer of 1915, the attacks of the Russian Empire that caused the Ottoman Empire to withdraw temporarily were then followed by counter attacks; Van changed

hands three times. The last retreat of the Armenians occurred during 1918 after the permanent withdrawal of the Russian forces in 1917 (Hovanissian, 1999: 243).

During this period, not only the Armenians, but also the Muslim population of Van migrated to other cities because of Ottoman conflicts with the Russian army. Some scholars argue that along with the Armenians, the Kurds in the eastern regions were also influenced by the deportation policies. Fuat Dündar argues that while the deportation of Armenians was almost fully accomplished in the eastern regions in the summer of 1915 (Dündar, 2011: 138), Kurdish Muslims were exiled from Van, Bitlis and Erzurum to a large extent in the spring of 1916. In the introduction to their volume, Schaller and Zimmerer refer to Jacob Künzler, the Swiss deacon, who wrote about what he witnessed in Urfa during WWI. Künzler noted that “the same Young Turks, who wanted to exterminate the Armenians, drove the Kurds from their homeland located in upper Armenia” (cited in Shaller and Zimmerer 2009:2). In the same volume, Uğur Üngör discusses the fact that the Young Turk’s social engineering project partly originated from the competition with the Great Powers for regional hegemony (Üngör 2009: 15). Üngör argues that this social engineering project was partly achieved by the CUP's policy of mass deportation of the Kurds from the eastern regions. Another significant aspect of the CUP's engineering project was to see to it that non-Kurdish Muslims were resettled in those regions (Ibid: 20).

Minassian provides a detailed account of the self-defense of Van, which he divides into three periods (the first beginning on the 20th of April and the last ending on 18th of May) and two strategic zones (the rock city and the gardens) (Minassian 1999). He also relates some important Armenian figures who were murdered in the belief that they were causing unrest within the Armenian population even before the defense began. With the beginning of the defense, the Armenians' military capacities were inferior to the military forces of Vali Cevdet in many respects⁷. This unsuccessful defense was one reason why I focused on this specific locality. I expected that Van's current residents would provide different and conflicting memories about the past. Ultimately, along with the other Armenians of the Ottoman Empire, the Armenians of Van were also destroyed.

⁷ For an account of the defense of Van in the form of a novel, see: Mahari, Gurgen. 2007. *Burning Orchards*. Great Britain: Black Apollo Press.

2.2. A Brief History of the Turkish Republic and its Relationship to its “Others”

Van is still a multi-ethnic city in which, among others, immigrants from Iran who usually define themselves as of Turkish origin and Kurdish immigrants from the Caucasus live together with local Turks and Kurds. To understand the different ways in which current residents of Van remember Armenians, it is important to consider the history of the Turkish Republic. In the following discussion, I will focus briefly on the policies of Turkification that aimed at the assimilation of non-Muslim groups and Kurds during the Republican era.

After the extermination of the Armenians, the Republic of Turkey maintained the Turkification policies that began with the CUP regime. At first glance, a civic and territorially based formulation of Turkish nationalism was adopted in the new regime: the people of Turkey were viewed as Turkish, regardless of their religion and ethnicity (Kirişçi, 2006: 1). However, Parla argues that Turkish nationalism deviated from its declared civic origins and gained a 'racist-ethnic' dimension (Parla cited in Kirişçi, 2006: 2). This deviation from civic origins resulted in various discriminatory and assimilatory policies. One of them was the exchange of populations involving the Anatolian Greeks, and Muslims from the Greek lands which was made mandatory by the Lausanne Treaty signed in 1923. (Kadıoğlu, 2007: 287; Clark, 2006; Öztürkmen, 2010). In 1928, the Law Faculty Students' Association of Istanbul University started a campaign with the motto “Citizen, Speak Turkish!” to spread the use of Turkish language in a city where there was a considerable number of people whose mother-tongue was not Turkish (Aslan, 2007: 250). Aktar gives two other significant examples of this 'racist-ethnic' dimension: the fact that non-Muslim citizens either had to abandon their jobs or were denied positions in various sectors of the economy and the forced migration of the Jewish citizens of Anatolia to Istanbul in 1934 (Aktar cited in Kirişçi, 2006). Kirişçi states that the immigration and refugee policies of the Republic had favored the people of 'Turkish descent and culture' and persons of Sunni-Hanifi background (Kirişçi, 2006: 4). During the Second World War, Jewish and Christian businessmen were seen as responsible for the severe economic crisis of 1939-1942 and

the Wealth Tax (Varlık vergisi) levied in 1942 required non-Muslims to pay much higher rates of tax compared to Muslims (Aktar 2010, Bali cited in Özyürek 2001). In 6-7 September 1955, the Greek-owned stores in Istanbul were extensively attacked. Vryonis presents an analysis of these incidents by pointing out how the pogroms were carried out according to a centralized plan and how they were related to the government's policy on Cyprus (Vryonis, 2005).

The non-Turkish Muslims were also the target of the assimilation policies and these policies paved way for various rebellions during both the late Ottoman and Republican era. After the end of World War I, the Kurds were divided among Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, along with a few significant enclaves in the Transcaucasian republics of the former Soviet Union (Bruinessen, 1994). It would not be misleading to argue that there was an initial Turkish-Kurdish alliance against Armenians during the War of Independence. For centuries, and especially during the last decades of the Empire, being a Kurd meant being a Muslim for the majority of the Kurds and this was one of the reasons of this alliance against the Armenians (Bozarslan, 2003: 171). The Kurdish nationalists were alarmed at the prospect of an Armenian state, however, the formation of an Armenian state would have been necessary for the creation of a Kurdish state since the Kurdish statehood project could not expect any support if it opposed that of the Armenians (Ibid: 171). Finally, the treaty of Sevres (1920), which prepared the ground for an independent Kurdistan remained a lost opportunity and the Koçgiri revolt that took place three months after the signing of the treaty in Dersim (Tunceli) was severely suppressed in 1921 (Romano, 2006). Bozarslan argues that during the Koçgiri revolt, its suppression as well as the extermination of the Armenians was widely discussed in Grand National Assembly of Turkey. He claims that what happened to the Armenians has remained in the Kurdish collective memory:

“There is no doubt that the Kurds were scared by the prospect that Kurdistan might become absorbed into Armenia, as Kazim Karabekir had suggested. But they were equally afraid at the idea of being victims of the same fate as the Armenians.” (Bozarslan, 2003:182)

According to Bozarslan, the violent repression of the revolt created the conditions for the return of the repressed memory.

When the Republic of Turkey was established, the Treaty of Sevres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne and from then on, the new regime went so far as to argue that the Kurds were in fact Turks (Romano, 2006: 32). Yeğen argues that while the Turkish governments of the post-Empire and pre-Republic times were open in their acceptance of Kurdish ethnicity, this openness was replaced by denial during the Republican era (Yeğen, 2011). In this phase, policies of oppression and assimilation were adopted. The practices of assimilation against non-Turkish Muslims put restrictions on the Kurdish language, Kurdish names and traditional costumes as well as limitations on the use of the words “Kurd” and “Kurdistan” in history books (Kadioğlu, 2007: 289). The Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925 and many others (including the Mount Ararat Uprising of 1927-1930, the Dersim revolt of 1938 and Zilan massacres of 1926-1931)⁸ that took place throughout Kurdistan were violently crushed by the Turkish Republic (Romano, 2006: 32). The Kurds who participated in the 1925 rebellion were displaced and resettled in western Turkey together with their families (Yeğen, 2011: 23). A number of boarding schools were established as means of assimilation; mainly in Kurdish regions in order to educate Kurdish children away from their families and their cultural context (Ibid: 73).

Bruinessen argues that the early Kurdish uprisings were more religious and tribal in nature than ethnic nationalist (1992). In the last thirty years, however, in accordance with the rise in ethnic nationalism, the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) politicized and united Kurds (İçduygu et al. 1999). The PKK emerged in 1978 under the leadership of Abdullah Öcalan (Romano, 2006). While, urban guerrilla warfare was adopted by the majority of Turkish and Kurdish revolutionary groups in 1970s, the coup of 1980 crushed most insurgent groups (Ibid: 50). However, Öcalan had anticipated the coup, fled the country and took refuge in Syria. (Ibid: 50-53). The 1980 military coup was followed by a period of severe repression and martial law. It was a period that was framed by repression and state violence which resulted in the prohibition of parties and

⁸ The reader can find an account on the Zilan massacres in Sedat Ulugana's book *Ağrı Kürt Direnişi ve Zilan Katliamı (1926-1931)* Peri Publishment (2010). Zilan massacres took place in the area between Aladağlar and Erciş, where the Turkish troops killed thousands of people in 1930. Ulugana states that the tribes of Heyderan and Ademan had participated in the Hamidiye Cavalry in 1899 and with the encouragement of the CUP, they had committed crimes against humanity towards the local Yakubi Kurds and Armenians (Ulugana, 2010: 15)

political organizations. Thousands of people including trade unionists, legal politicians, students, lawyers, in short, anyone who was vaguely leftist was arrested (Zürcher, 1993: 294). Many were tortured, killed, went into exile or disappeared (Zürcher, 1993).⁹ With the constitution of 1982, power was concentrated in the hands of the executive and the freedom of the press, the freedom of trade unions and the rights and liberties of the individual were limited (Ibid: 295). Bruinessen argues that the constitution of 1982 also enacted new laws to destroy Kurdish culture (Bruinessen, 1994). Diyarbakır prison is a notorious example of the period's violent repression; not only were the prisoners severely tortured, but the Kurdish inmates were subjected to attempted Turkification (Zeydanlıoğlu, 2010: 72).

After the coup of 1980, the PKK decided to organize a guerrilla war in a rural environment where it could build up forces under a guerrilla army (Jongerden, 2007: 39-40). Jongerden argues that in the second half of the 1980s, Turkish politico-military organizations failed to regain control of this undeclared war (Ibid 43). From 1987 onwards, the village guard system which was sanctioned in 1985 was put into practice. This system required villages to assign men to participate in operations against the PKK (Ibid 65). In the 1990s many villages were burned down or evacuated by the Turkish state as a strategy of counter-insurgency against the PKK (Ibid). According to Jongerden, this spatial counter-insurgency program that obliged villagers to resettle was not collateral damage. They were the main elements of a program which had as its goal the deprivation of rural areas where the PKK had established itself (Ibid: 40).

Yeğen argues that the 1990s were also the years when the Turkish state's perception of the Kurdish question began to change. The prime minister at the time, Süleyman Demirel, gave a speech in which he declared that Turkey recognized 'the Kurdish reality' and president Turgut Özal also seemed to support a PKK amnesty (Yeğen, 2011: 74). However, Özal's sudden death and the murder of 33 Turkish soldiers

⁹ Nurdan Gürbilek argues that this period was not only a period of mass repression: it was also a time when the texture of the society went through drastic changes. This political repression and violence went hand in hand with the liberalization of the economy and with the production of new discourses on desirable ways of life. She argues that with this new form of governmentality that did not forbid but produced, people enjoyed the freedom of consumption (Gürbilek, 1993).

in 1993 changed the atmosphere of resolution. The state revisited the politics of repression and the above mentioned resettlement program was put into operation. In the mean time, pro-Kurdish political parties, the People's Labor Party (HEP) and the Democratic Party (DEP) were banned in 1993 and 1994 respectively (Ibid: 75). The parliamentary immunity for eight Kurdish deputies was rescinded in 1994 and four were arrested. In 1999, Öcalan was captured, the two decades long state of emergency in the Kurdish regions was lifted and in the same year Turkey was recognized as a candidate for European Union Membership. Yeğen argues that while the possibility of a resolution seemed to be on the way in these years, in this new climate and especially after 2003, suspicions over Kurdish loyalties increased which precipitated “a new wave of sanctioned discrimination against Kurds at all levels” (Ibid: 77).¹⁰

During the period when Turkey was recognized as a candidate for European Union membership, a period of normalization began in the Kurdish cities. Kerem Öktem argues that, for the first time after the two decades long state of emergency rule, Kurdish cities witnessed the creation of a relatively peaceful public space (Öktem, 2008). The EU-reform package of the Ecevit government which opened the way for limited broadcasting in local languages was celebrated as a first step. Violence in the Kurdish cities never stopped completely, but the Diyarbakır events of 29 March 2006 set in motion a circle of violence; security forces killed many demonstrators including children (Öktem, 2008). Currently, the guerrilla war between the state and the PKK continues and the Kurdish issue is not resolved.¹¹

¹⁰ To read about Turkey's Kurdish policy since 2002, read: Öktem, Kerem. 2008. *The Patronizing Embrace: Turkey's New Kurdish Strategy*. Stiftung Forschungstelle Schweiz-Türkei and Kerem Öktem Basel, February 2008. <http://www.sfst.ch>

¹¹ To read a detailed account of the events, visit the page of the Human Rights Organization: http://www.ihd.org.tr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=106&Itemid=90

2.3. The Past in the Present: The Role of Postmemory in Van

The villages surrounding Van were also influenced by the resettlement program of the 1990s. As a result, many people had to migrate from the rural areas either to Van's city center or to other cities. As Yüksekler and Kurban argue, as the largest regional center in eastern Turkey, Van was one of the provinces that received the highest numbers of internally displaced people (Yüksekler, and Kurban, 2009: 10). They also note that a significant proportion of these people were originally from the rural areas of Hakkari and Şırnak.

Most of my informants were relatively young people who were pro-Kurdish and sympathetic to the PKK. In our interviews, most of them narrated how the years of the 1990s and the state repression that they witnessed had a formative influence in their lives and for their political subjectivity. Many of them narrated how their families had migrated to Van from surrounding villages and from cities like Hakkari and Şırnak. Their migration to Van seems to have strengthened the nationalistic discourse of those who identified themselves as the natives of the city. In the interviews that I conducted with the people who referred to themselves “Özvanlıs”, I noticed that their narratives on Armenians had a strong nationalistic tone which seems to have been exacerbated in the last thirty years. For them, the Armenians are mainly remembered through the current Kurdish issue.

Among other themes like village guards, unsolved murders and mass graves, the spatial reorganization implemented by the state was a prominent theme in the narratives of my pro-Kurdish informants. Moreover, the everyday encounters of people take place in a highly politically charged atmosphere. As I will discuss in the methodology chapter, even my brief stay allowed me to experience the politically charged atmosphere of the city which was surrounded by a great number of police and police vehicles, something which had a suffocating effect on me. Thus, Van had not only witnessed the violent eradication of its former Armenian inhabitants, but is still a scene of continuing violence. Present experiences of violence as a result of the conflict between the state and the PKK played a significant role in the way my informants narrated their life histories and remembered Armenians. In her article on the Armenian crisis in Mardin,

Özlem Biner borrows the concept “margin” from Veena Das and Deborah Poole and defines Mardin as being situated at the margins of contemporary Turkey. She argues that this refers not only to Mardin's geographical position, but that Mardin is also in a borderline position because of its fluctuation between normalcy and emergency, legality and illegality (Biner, 2010). Due to its status of oscillating between normalcy and emergency, Van is also a city on the margins of the state, both geographically and politically.

In Van today, not only this ongoing atmosphere of violence, but also *the absence* that was left behind by the Armenians is highly visible given the remnants of the Armenian heritage. Armenians are present in both the narratives and the silences of the individuals living in Van today. Until now, studies of different forms of political violence have usually concentrated on the narratives of victims. This tendency is partly related to the original motivation which gave rise to oral history: to give a voice to and convey the experiences of the subaltern such as the working classes, women, minorities and immigrants in order to rewrite history as well as to empower these groups (Neyzi, 2010: 444). My inquiry, on the other hand, was not about how the victims remembered the past. Even though oral history mostly deals with victims, there are some studies that inquire about perpetrator or by-stander postmemory. Rosenthal and Völter tried to understand the ways in which the family past was given meaning in the presentation of life stories of the next generations of both Jewish and non-Jewish German families (Rosenthal, and Völter, 1998). They note that in both types of families the first generation was, to a certain extent, silent about the past, yet in different ways and with different motives. Because of this lack of transmission, the next generation had to fantasize about the gaps in their families' pasts. While the perpetrator families were silent because they did not want their children “to be aware of the gruesome activities of their near and dear” (Rosenthal, and Völter, 1998: 7), the victims were silent because they did not want their stories to haunt their children. Parens (2009: 31), in his article on the silence of Germany in the aftermath of the Holocaust, refers to various studies conducted with children and grandchildren of victims, perpetrators and bystanders. He argues that while the children and grandchildren of the victims do carry the burden of

their parents' dreadful experiences, the descendants of the perpetrators inherit a heavy burden of guilt and shame.

The case of Turkey is of particular interest both because there is no recognition of genocide and the fact that the subject is still taboo. Having said this, it should also be noted that there are domestic attempts to raise awareness about “the Armenian Question” to the public. Dixon (Dixon, 2010: 476) argues that, to this end, an increasing number of civil society organizations and a new generation of scholars like Taner Akçam and Fatma Müge Göçek has contributed to the debate. Moreover, the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party called on the Turkish Parliament to apologize to Armenians and used the Kurdish word for 'genocide' (cited in Dixon, 2010: 475). Currently, members of the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party also bring up the issue in various contexts. Radikal¹² newspaper reported that Osman Baydemir, the head of the Diyarbakır municipality stated: “They (the Armenians) went and we couldn't find peace.” Thus, Turkey's official discourse is also challenged within party circles. There are also attempts to bring the issue to public discussion. Ronald Suny (2009: 942) notes that the conference “The Ottoman Armenians during the Era of Ottoman Decline” had to be postponed as a result of an aggressive campaign of “pressure, threats and slander,” but the fact that it was finally held in the Bilgi University was a significant step that facilitated a broad scholarly discussion. Moreover, as Neyzi argues, Turkey has begun to develop a new discourse of the self along with the emergence of identity politics with a rediscovery of silenced ethnic and religious identities, a process influenced by diverse factors including the conflict between the PKK and Turkish state, Turkish-Greek rapprochement and the debates over Turkey's application for full membership to the European Union (Neyzi, 2008: 108). Moreover, this increase in the search for identities gave birth to books like *Anneannem*¹³ and *Torunlar*.¹⁴ And lastly, I believe that the unfortunate assassination of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink in 2007 in front of the

¹²<http://www.radikal.com.tr/Radikal.aspx?aType=RadikalDetayV3&ArticleID=1050971&Date=29.05.2011&CategoryID=77>

¹³ Fethiye Çetin, 2004

¹⁴ Ayşegül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin, 2005

building of Agos represented a turning point after which the discussions around the Armenian issue came to public attention with full force (Neyzi, 2010).

Undoubtedly, the past and the present cannot be separated. For example, the project in which I participated, that mobilized students from Armenia and Turkey to collect oral histories in both countries, gave us clues as to how people construct their life stories by constantly trying to make sense of the past and the current political and social context in which they live (Neyzi and Kharatyan-Araqelyan, 2010). In my study, I chose a specific locality in order to analyze individuals' narratives and try to understand how their perspectives on the past are influenced by their subjectivity in the present.

Some researchers indicated that memory studies have flourished in the humanities in the last years and warned against the possible dangers of the overuse of this concept (Berliner, 2005). My research has a very modest and clear stance; I am interested in how different groups remember and give meaning to the transmitted knowledge of the past, with a focus on the memories related to the Armenians. Still, one might ask why one should study memory especially since memories are considered to be uncertain and even deceiving. Susana Kaiser, the author of "Postmemories of Terror" asks similar questions on the role and importance of memory. By focusing on how memories of dictatorship are narrated by young Argentineans, she claims:

For memory is more about what we believe happened than about what actually took place. Indeed, the value of actual facts is relative if they are not perceived as truth. Hence, memories of the dictatorship may be subject to distortion but, ultimately, they constitute Argentineans' perceptions of the past terror and reveal what this historical period meant for them....What these young Argentineans believed happened, their postmemories, may prove more important than what actually happened. For what we think took place in the past informs and shapes our way of thinking and acting in the present, or how we insert ourselves within a historical process (Kaiser, 2005: 44).

Thus, what we believe happened matters, even though what actually took place might be different. I think that this statement is especially important when we regard the recent history of Van as a history of violence. How do people go on after living through, witnessing or perpetrating violent acts? How is the burden of remembering carried? What do the descendants of perpetrators think about their predecessors, especially when they regard themselves as victims of similar state violence? Scholars who tried to

understand how violent events are remembered mostly focused on testimonies of victims of trauma. In my study, even though many of my informants noted that they grew up listening to stories of violence inflicted upon the Armenians, these stories were narrated in an atmosphere in which the perpetrators felt proud of what they had done. I will argue that, even though my informants had postmemories about these violent events that they heard about while growing up, initially, these stories encouraged them to feel superior to the victim group. However, for many of my informants, this initial perception was followed by disillusionment when they began to see themselves as victims. Together with this disillusionment, the memories that were transmitted to them with joy and pride began to disturb them. They have postmemories, memories that can be seen in those “who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth” (Markovitz, 2006: 253).

Susannah Radstone argues that memory is always mediated, even those personal memories that seem to emerge spontaneously and give depth to everyday life (Radstone, 2005: 135). However, mediation in postmemory has another dimension, since there is a generational difference. Moreover, as Kaiser argues in relation to the memories of Argentina's dirty war, postmemories are “a chain of representations by which you receive a representation and you create new ones. Although more mediated and less connected to the past, post-memory is in itself a powerful and highly significant form of memory.” (Kaiser, 2005: 16) Post-memory as a concept signifies indirectness and selectivity. As Kaiser (Kaiser, 2005: 25) suggests, “memory has political value and power” which influences people's beliefs and choices. Moreover, if we consider Van a place where some of the perpetrators or their descendants became the victims of similar state repression, the narratives of these next generations can give us clues as to whether or not their discourses might change as a result of their own victimization. Moreover, since postmemory's link to the past is not only mediated by recall but also by an active imaginative engagement, projection and creation (Hirsch, 2008: 114), these narratives will be much more connected with the present than with the past.

For Armenians of Anatolia, the year 1915 constitutes a rupture as many of them experienced violent persecutions, lost members of their families, and were uprooted from their homelands. What I wondered was whether these events are also experienced

by perpetrators and/or by-standers as a rupture, and if so, what kind of language is used to speak about these events. The question of language is important since it gives us clues as to how the stories of 1915 are narrated by interviewees and also how 'the event' is retold and framed in present circumstances. I believe that oral history interviewing can bring another dimension to the issue that will exhibit how the memories on Armenians are formed and narrated in present circumstances.

Another question that I particularly want to be attentive to is whether or not people's narratives will include feelings of nostalgia. This, I believe, is a particularly important question since it has the potential to give us clues as to whether there is a sense of longing and if so, what the imagination that leads to this longing is. For example, one feeling that was present in the oral history project consisting of interviews with people who define themselves being of different identities (Turks, Armenians, Kurds) was that of nostalgia (Neyzi and, Kharatyan-Araqelyan, 2010). Nostalgia can be etymologically defined as “the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one's native land,” and was a prominent theme not only in the narratives of the people of Armenian descent who were uprooted from their native towns or villages, but also in the interviews that were conducted with Turkish people (Atia, Davies, 2010: 182). My preliminary impression is that in some of these narratives, this nostalgia manifested itself as a superficial longing for the 'good old days,' which usually pops up hesitantly in a contradictory discourse which is dominantly nationalistic and serves the purpose of covering contradictions (Neyzi, Kharatyan-Araqelyan, 2010). That is probably the reason why many scholars have pointed out the political dangers of nostalgia, arguing that it can be deeply exclusionary (Steiner, 1974; Doane and Hodges, 1987 cited in Atia, Davies, 2010: 181). However, if we consider nostalgia to be a mood that reflectively lead one to long for a missed possibility (for example, a possibility of peace), then it can also be critical. As in the case of some interviews conducted for the aforementioned oral history project, the narratives of the informants were vivid, elaborate, beyond a claimed longing for an imagined golden past and had subversive potential. As Svetlana Boym argues “Longing might be what we share as human beings, but that doesn't prevent us from telling very different stories of belonging and nonbelonging” (Boym, 2001: 41). She argues that two kinds of nostalgia characterize one's relationship to the past:

restorative and reflective. For her, the first one emphasizes rebuilding and patches up the memory gaps; it can be seen in nationalist revivals that engage in myth-making of history by returning to the national symbols. The reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, “lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time” (Ibid). In this research, I want to gain further understanding of this binary nature of nostalgia and question to what extent it can be subversive and whether or not there are moments liberated from the urge of creating golden pasts.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The primary methodology used for this research was oral history interviewing. Oral history interviewing facilitates conversation quite fruitfully as it focuses on the life stories of informants (Portelli, 1991: 47). As I expected, oral history methodology proved a very useful technique for the topic that I am interested in as it eased communication on the subject by focusing on the individual, communal and everyday level. As the topic is a highly sensitive one, I accessed my informants through personal connections. Establishing a relationship of trust, my informants gave me the permission to tape record the interviews, even though in one case the informant wanted me to turn the recorder off. To my surprise, most of my informants expressed genuine enthusiasm even when they found out that I was interested in memories of Armenians. Memories of Armenians were recalled easily, for example, when I asked interviewees what kind of lifestyle their parents had had and who had been their neighbors in their places of origin. Most of them showed no hesitancy to talk about these neighbors, the remnants of Armenian houses and churches, and especially the treasures buried by Armenians which are still believed to be unearthened. I was surprised by this willingness to talk, as my acquaintance with the subject only dates back to my first year in university. When I think about it now, it seems shocking that as a person who grew up in Adana where the 1909 massacres took place, my engagement with the subject began so late. Moreover, the fact that my informants were willing to talk led me to think that maybe the Armenian issue is not as taboo as we envision it to be. In the interviews I conducted, the memories of Armenians always revealed themselves in relation to the way my informants made sense of the present.

I stayed in the field for five weeks and did participant observation as well. Even though I mostly stayed in the city center as a guest at a friend's house, I also traveled to villages in Gevaş, Amik and Çatak. By traveling to these places, I began to understand many of my informants' enthusiasm to share their knowledge of material remnants, the parts and pieces of the churches, bridges, houses and signs that are considered to be significant sources of Armenian treasures. On most of my journeys, my informants accompanied me. Having them by my side helped the local people to trust me even though I was a stranger in town. Among these trips, visiting the Akhtamar Church (which is now turned into a museum) and the monastery of Varak left an impression on me.

If we leave aside the formal interviews, my friends' network shaped my everyday practices. Delil, who is the secretary of the Human Rights Association of Van, took me to his office and helped me to meet many people. As the office is in the center of the city, which many people visit to voice their problems and concerns, I found myself in the middle of fervent discussions about the politics and social life in Van. Every day, I collapsed on my bed after an exhausting day, having survived a bombardment of new pieces of information and thinking of all the people I met.

It is difficult to describe the tense and dynamic atmosphere of the city during the period of my stay. First of all, the city and the geography were completely new to me. I had never been to Van before or in the eastern part of Turkey for that matter. The great lake, which the natives call the sea of Van and the steep mountains surrounding the city dazzled me. The day I arrived, I found myself in the middle of preparations for a press conference held to criticize the police attack on the head of the Municipality, Bekir Kaya. I can visualize myself following Delil to his office, where the statement to the press was going to be drawn up: walking through the streets with a nervous and curious countenance, passing by a grand number of police and police vehicles that I had never seen in such numbers before. After arriving at the office, I was amazed at the fact that four people including Delil completed the statement in only ten minutes after a very deliberate and fervent discussion. At that moment, I understood that I would never have spare time in the city and my impression proved to be very accurate. The number of police and their huge vehicles proved to be an essential part of the city, which I naively thought were so many because of the press conference. However, to my surprise, my

initial fear on encountering them everywhere gradually turned into indifference and, sometimes, anger. Like the buildings, the cars and the people, they formed part of the terrain in which everyday life was experienced.

One of the reasons for the highly tense atmosphere was the fact that my stay coincided with the period just before the national elections on the 12th of June 2011. In the city center, Çözüm Çadırları - tents that were put up by the BDP (the pro-Kurdish Peace and Democracy Party) to give voice to people's concerns - were attacked several times during my stay, each time to be put up again. On the 18th of April, when the High Board of Elections announced its decision to veto 12 candidates, 7 of whom were supported by BDP, the streets of Van turned into a battlefield. Many people were injured as a result of the disproportionate force used by the police, and the air turned gray.

In this heavily charged atmosphere, my subjectivity in the field was formed. My circle of informants, most of whom later became my friends, were mainly composed of relatively young people between the ages of 25 and 50. A friend from Boğaziçi University hosted me in his house and through this friend I met my key informants. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to them and all other informants by their pseudonyms. One of my key informants is Delil, who introduced me to a number of his friends and to people who he thought would be willing to talk to me. My main informants are friends of Delil and are sympathetic to the Kurdish movement and differentiate themselves from what they call “conservatives” living in the region. They regarded me as an open person without prejudgments, willing to listen to their stories. One of the reasons why I was easily accepted, I believe, was the fact that I was introduced to my informants by their friends with whom they have been acquainted for several years. Another key informant was Baran, who accompanied me in Gevaş and helped me conduct interviews with some of the villagers. Therefore, my subjectivity was always shifting, formed as an unintended consequence of the relationship between me and the person I was talking to.

I should explain what sympathy for the Kurdish movement means as it is in itself complex and diversified. A person may be a supporter of different branches of the Kurdish movement, someone who merely expresses an awareness of the Kurds as a people, or someone who has lost family members in the conflict between the Turkish state and the PKK. The Kurdish movement does not come across in the life story

narratives in the form of a systematic political or cultural agenda per se. However, the reality of the Kurdish movement has penetrated into the very fabric of everyday life.

I believe that it would be illuminating to share an anecdote to explain the slippery ground I was standing on. One day, I came back to Van from Gevaş, where I had gone to see the Akhtamar Church and conduct some interviews. When I arrived in the city, I called Delil and he invited me to a tea house where he was chatting with his friends. I went there, sat down and went on to ask him about a man he had previously told me about. I told him that I wanted to interview this man, and asked him if we could schedule a date for an interview. He tried to persuade me not to talk to this man by claiming that he was actually not very clever (using some derogatory terms). Since he had previously told me that this man and his family were locals and he might have stories that would help me in my thesis, I was unwilling to be dissuaded, and I told Delil that I wanted to talk to this person. I used these words in Turkish *pek akıllı olmasa da* meaning “even if he is not that bright.” At that moment, the other people at the table were conversing with each other on a completely different topic, but suddenly one of them looked at me and asked Delil why I had used these words. Then, he added “Look at Burcu, she still says *pekaka*,” suggesting that I was, at a discursive level, utilizing the state's version of pronouncing the name of the Kurdistan Workers' Party. For him, this abbreviated version of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was probably both annoying and upsetting since this pronunciation reminded him of the discourse that condemn Kurds as terrorists. My and Delil's initial bewilderment gave way to laughter and amusement and we told him what we were actually talking about. Later, he also laughed a lot and told me that he shared this anecdote with other people on many occasions. This event happened during the second week of my stay and afterwards I talked to this person several times in daily conversations. Thus, I came to realize that maybe I was not accepted as much as I had imagined I would be and that many people might have had room for suspicion about what kind of person I was.

In the beginning, I had great difficulty accessing female informants because my initial circle of people was mainly composed of men. However, after the first couple of weeks, I managed to interview women as well. Not being able to speak Kurdish proved to be a barrier for me mostly when I talked to elderly women and men, as I had to conduct the interviews in Turkish.

Another group of informants I mostly accessed through another friend Şilan were the members of TEIAD. These informants easily talked to me assuming that I would share their opinion and they did not even ask me about my position. These interviewees saw me as a young Turkish woman who probably wants to learn from the elderly about the sufferings of her nation, both in the past and in the present. I felt great discomfort talking to them, because of the implicit or explicit hatred of Armenians and Kurds through which they narrated their stories. These informants claimed that their families are locals of Van and even though they seem to represent a small segment of the population, they are notables of the city. As well-to-do, successful men who are members of various associations and have close connections both with the Yüzüncü Yıl University and various state officials; they have the power to influence public opinion.

CHAPTER 4

REINTERPRETING AND REFRAMING TRANSMITTED MEMORIES OF ARMENIANS

In this chapter, I will analyze some of the themes developed mainly by those informants who are sympathetic to the Kurdish movement and who provided powerful, emotion-ridden and engaging narratives containing postmemories of the Armenians of Van. I will argue that by imaginatively reinterpreting these memories in the context of the present, a subversive and radical way of coming to terms with the past is created by these informants that goes beyond the usual collective amnesia and denialism of the Turkish Republic. I will also present some other narratives that are in line with the official discourse of denialism. Overall, I will provide quotations from more than twenty interviews, all of which were conducted with people of different age and gender. We will see that in all these narratives, the Armenians are remembered and narrated through the current Kurdish issue, although different people attributed different meaning to this issue.

4.1. Accepting a Perpetrator Identity within Victimization as the Line between the Past and the Present Blurs

When asked about the daily lives of their grandparents and the villages where they lived, many of my informants, in the absence of any direct questions, expressed that they were actually Armenian villages. “Buralar hep Ermenilerindi” (All these places belonged to the Armenians) was the typical response I received from many of my informants. “These places” correspond both to the villages and today's city center. The

reason why they refer to both is because most spent their childhood in the surrounding villages and in the last thirty years migrated to the city as a result of the deteriorating life circumstances.

Even though I tried hard to find clues about the everyday lives of my informants' grandparents, the general issue that dominated these interviews was violence. Aspects of everyday life were touched upon briefly mostly to show that Armenians and Muslims had a relatively peaceful relationship, either before the establishment of the Hamidiye regiments or before the Russian occupation. What was narrated profusely were the events in which Armenians were forcefully pushed out of the city. The most detailed stories were those of violence and what I noticed was a desire to tell, to narrate all they knew both about the perpetrators of violence and their victims.

This impulse to narrate struck me and there are many reasons for my surprise. First of all, contrary to what I expected, talking about Armenians in Van was far from a taboo.¹⁵ Alper, a young man of 25, told me that in their family gatherings they frequently talked about his paternal great grandfather's cruelties (a Hamidiye soldier) against the Armenians. Secondly, some of my informants' narratives were highly emotional and fervent, as if they were talking not about a past event but about a continuing issue. And lastly, these informants portrayed the Armenians as the ultimate victims of cruel deeds. They also expressed a sense of responsibility and feelings of guilt for the acts their predecessors committed without necessarily portraying Armenians as a passive people. Some claimed that the Armenians were accumulating guns and ammunition sent from Russia. Some discussed instances in which Armenians burned down houses while leaving the city. Others described situations where Kurds and Armenians fought one another. Suny (Suny, 2009: 941) argues that before the workshop held in 2000 that brought scholars from Turkey, Armenia and scholars from other countries together to discuss the history of non-Muslims in the last years of the Empire, the Ottoman Armenians had usually been portrayed as passive victims that lacked agency. I found this granting of agency to the Armenians in the narratives of my

¹⁵ To see a fruitful discussion on how the Armenian issue has been a taboo since the beginning of the Republic, read: Dixon, Jeniffer. 2010. *Defending the Nation: Maintaining Turkey's Narrative of the Armenian Genocide*. South European Society and Politics. 15 (3): 467-485.

informants particularly important, especially since despite the fact that they granted this agency, they never tried to justify what happened to the Armenians. It was never implied or expressed that the Armenians “deserved” what had befallen them as a people or that they were themselves perpetrators. In the following paragraphs, I want to quote sections from two different interviews in order to show how narrators depict the victimization of Armenians.

Below is an account of the period between the Russian invasion and the retreat of Armenians from the city narrated to me by Mahmut, a 48 year-old Kurdish man, whose grandfather and great uncle were soldiers in the Hamidiye regiments. When I met him in the office of the Organization for Human Rights, he showed great interest in talking to me. Since he was also working for an NGO which located in the same building as the IHD, we arranged an appointment to meet there the next morning. When I arrived, he was already waiting for me. While listening to him, I felt that he was a very humorous and sentimental person who could narrate heart-breaking stories sadly, but also sarcastically. He had deep blue eyes, which, I ironically discovered later, are regarded by many people living in Van as a tell tale sign of Armenian descent. During our interview, Mahmut described a scene of conflict in which his grandfather and his brother chased Armenians from the city. Although he claimed that a relatively peaceful relationship existed between Armenians and Kurds, his narrative never fell into the trap of constructing a golden age. He did not forget to add that his grandfather used to tell him: “They used to give their daughters to us in marriage, but we wouldn't.”¹⁶ I want to emphasize two aspects of this narrative, which I have encountered during other interviews as well. The first is Mahmut’s usage of past and present tenses in describing the very same event; a discursive move that zooms in to a past event. The other aspect is the use of contemporary terminology in describing a past event. For example, the term “strategical zones,” currently used to describe scenes of conflict between the state and the PKK is borrowed widely from the present. (Another man I talked to explained to me how his grandmother's sister got lost during the turmoil of the Armenian massacres by likening the event to a “demonstration.”)

¹⁶ “Onlar bize kız veriyordu, biz onlara vermiyorduk.”

Mahmut: My grandfather said “for four years the Russians came here and most people ran away. I mean, the Kurds vacated this region, up until Bitlis creek, up until Siirt.” But my grandfather and some others did not go away.

Burcu: How come they didn't go away?

Mahmut: He (my grandfather) said “we were on good terms with Armenians and the Russians never interfered with us. *Since we have lots of sheep, a house and what have you*, we didn't go away, and no harm came to us... One day we went to Erciş and saw a commotion going on. In a sense, there was this great bustle, people were running away in different directions so and so...” He said “They bombed certain strategic zones in the Armenian districts. Of course, after this struggle that lasted 15-20 days the Armenians had no other choice but to flee in the end. As they were fleeing, they set all the sugar and flour warehouses on fire, that is, after the Russians left these places, they were fleeing all the way to the borders of Ağrı.” You know, there is this wire fence from Ağrı all the way down to the shore of Lake Van.

Burcu: How is this possible? Did they build wire fence all the way?

Mahmut: This is what he said. He said “when we chased the Armenians, they all reached these fences, a great number of them jumped into the water to save their lives.” The Turks and the cavalymen are shooting them down, such a massive slaughter. He used to tell me this and to this day when I'm told this, my brain gets, I mean, it is really an atrocity. Yes, it is indeed an atrocity. We drove them all the way to Tebriz, to Mako, Iran.¹⁷

¹⁷ Mahmut: (büyükbabam) dedi, dört sene Ruslar geldi, milletin çoğu kaçtı. Yani Kürtler bu bölgeyi taa Bitlis deresine kadar, Siirt'e kadar boşalttılar. Ama dedem gil gitmediler.

Burcu: Onlar nasıl gitmemiş?

Mahmut: (Dedem) dedi, bizim aramız iyiydi Ermenilerle, Ruslar da bize hiç karışmadı. *Biz baktık ki bir sürü koyunlarımız var, evimiz var şeyimiz var* gitmedik. Herhangi bir zarar da bize gelmedi... Bir gün geldik baktık Erciş'te bir kargaşa var. Yani müthiş bir kaçamak var, oradan oraya gidiyorlar falan... “Dedi, “onlar Ermenilerin belli *stratejik yerlerini* hep bombaladılar. Bombaladılar, tabii bu en az 15-20 günlük bir uğraştan sonra. En son Ermeniler kaçmak zorunda kaldılar. Kaçtıkları zaman da un ambarı, şeker ambarlarını hep ateşe verdiler. Ruslar gidince, Ağrı sınırlarına kadar kaçtılar.” Ağrı'dan taaa Van gölünün kenarına kadar tel örgüsü bu dikenli teller var ya...

Burcu: Bu nasıl olur ya bu kadar alana tel örgüsü mü yapmışlar?

Mahmut: “İşte tel örgü” dedi “bizler de Ermenileri kovaladığımızda Ermeniler hep onlara dayandılar, bir sürü ben kaçayım, çıkayım diyen -suya yetiştirmişler ya- suya kendilerini attılar”. Türklerle süvariler de bunları vuruyorlar yani büyük bir kıyım. Bana anlatıyordu hala da beynim anlatıldığı zaman şey oluyor yani gerçekten de vahşet. Evet, vahşet yani. Biz bunları Tebriz'e, Mako İran'a kadar götürdük.

Alper is a university student in Istanbul, though originally from Van. The first time we met, on our way to his place to conduct the interview, he was already telling me how his great grandfather killed an important Armenian leader called Hovan. He told me that he has special sympathy for the Armenians who had lived in Van because of his great grandfathers' involvement in the massacres. According to the stories that transmitted from his father, his great grandfather played a significant role in the "Armenian events" by chasing them all the way to the border. He described to me a scene of conflict in which Armenians attack Muslims, an atmosphere of chaos. Finally, he described to me how his great-grandfather, together with other soldiers and Muslim residents, chased Armenians outside the city, pushing them all the way to Yerevan. Then, he solemnly added "Of course, later they return. When they returned they all get land and stuff (in a low voice) in exchange for it."¹⁸ As the narrative unfolds, the description of conflicts fades away and leaves its place to another anecdote which he regards as even more "painful."

My grandfather is wandering around. The smell of meat is emanating from one of the houses. Of course, there is such a great poverty at that time that, excuse my language, they remove the barley corns from the feces of the animals and grind them to make bread. It is a very miserable situation they are in. The smell of meat is reaching his nose which seems impossible. He figures out where the smell is coming from; it is an Armenian house. Armenian houses are two-storey houses made of mud-brick. He goes to the house, opens the door and enters in. He sees an old woman sitting in the hall. (hesitates) Ahem, my grandfather walks in. People say he knew Armenian. He asks the woman "what are you doing here? Who are you?" to which the woman replies "all my relatives have run away, I am the only one left here." He doesn't believe her. Ahem, he looks around and the woman starts getting restless. So the woman says "okay, okay, stop, below where I'm sitting, there is a door, go down there, all our foodstuff is there, you can take them all." (hesitates) He opens the door and sees that there really are stairs going down, and there are sacks full of stuff, you know, food supplies, cracked wheat. By the way the Armenians are rich. The house also has an upstairs. (hesitates) He goes upstairs, opens the door, as he walks in, a woman jumps and holds him. Then, all of a sudden, 6-7 women appear and attack him which means that the daughters of the women hid upstairs, ahem,

¹⁸ Sonra tabii geri dönüyorlar. Geri dönünce hepsinin toprağı oluyor, hepsinin yeri yurdu oluyor (sesi kısık) bunun şeyinde karşılığında.

because they are young, she (the old woman) knows that as soon as he sees them, he will kill them. She stayed downstairs thinking that maybe he wouldn't touch an old woman. But the women upstairs attack him as soon as he walks in. (speeds up) He pulls his gun from his back, first, shoots the one who holds her and then, when he shoots her, the others are scared of the sound of the shot. (emphatically) He shoots them one by one, (hesitates) killing them all; 6 or 7 young girls shot down. He also kills that old woman, takes the meat she cooked, the chicken, the cow and takes a bag of cracked wheat with him to where they are deployed.¹⁹

There are a lot of important themes in these narratives: the Russian occupation, the fleeing of most of the residents of Van from the city after the occupation, the conflict between Muslims and Armenians, the role of family members of my informants in Armenians' leaving the city, the cruel acts committed against women, the plundering of Armenian goods and houses together with the myth of the Armenians being wealthy. I would like to emphasize here four features of these narratives. First, although fragmented and anecdotal, the narratives were very detailed and rich, especially when contrasted with the memories about the everyday relations between Armenians and

¹⁹ Dolaşıyor dedem. Bir evde et kokusu geliyor, tabii o zamanlar müthiş bir yoksulluk var. Hani işte çok afedersin, hayvanların pisliğindeki arpaları çıkarıp onları öğütüp ekmek yapıyolarmış; çok ciddi bir sefalet var. Et kokusu geliyor, olmayacak bir şey. Bakıyor bir Ermeni evi -iki katlı kerpiçten olur- Ermeni evinden geliyor. Gidiyor oraya, kapıyı açıyor, giriyor içeriye yaşlı bir kadın salonda oturmuş. (duraksıyor) Geliyor içeriye. Dedemin Ermenice bildiğini de söylüyorlar. İşte kadınla konuşuyor, diyor “Senin ne işin var burada, kimsin sen?” Kadın da diyor ki “işte benim bütün akrabalarım kaçtı gitti; bir tek ben kaldım burada.” Bu inanmıyor buna. Etrafa bakınıyor, kadın da huysuzlanıyor. Diyor ki “tamam tamam dur, bu benim oturduğum şeyin altında bir kapı var, in oraya, bizim bütün erzağımız ordadır, onu alabilirsin”. (duraksıyor) Açıyor kapıyı, bakıyor işte hakikaten merdiven iniyor aşağıya, çuval çuval erzak var, bulgur var - Ermeniler zenginler de aynı zamanda-. Bir de evin üst katı var, dedem üst kata çıkıyor. (duraksıyor) Kapıyı açıyor, içeri girince arkadan bir tane kadın atlayıp tutuyor bunu. Sonra 6-7 tane kadın birden çıkıyor ve buna saldırıyor. Yani o kadının kızları yukarda saklanmışlar çünkü onlar gençler, onları gördüğü anda öldürecek biliyor. Yaşlıya belki karışmaz yani belki dokunmaz diye altta duruyomuş. Ama yukarıdaki kadınlar hemen saldırıyor içeri girince bu. (Hızlanıyor) Bu sırtından silahını çekiyor, önce kendisini tutanı vuruyor, sonra bi tanesini vurunca zaten diğerleri silah sesinden korkup kaçıyor. Hepsini (vurgulu) tek tek tek tek vuruyor, (duraksıyor) öldürüyor hepsini, 6 tane mi 7 tane mi genç kız. Dedem iniyor aşağıya, o yaşlı kadını da öldürüyor orada. Onların pişirdiği etleri, tavukları, ineği falan ve bi torba bulguru alıyor, götürüyor konuşlandıkları yere.

Muslims before 1915. Second, the narrators were willing to narrate in as much detail as they can. It is impossible for me to put their enthusiastic and emotion-ridden narratives into words, however, they were really fervent as if they are reliving the events that they themselves have never experienced. Third, none of these informants referred to World War I or the Turkish War of Independence when they narrated their grandfathers' deeds, an issue which was very central to other informants' explanations on what happened to the Armenians of Van (See the last section). Additionally, none of these informants tried to locate the events in calendar time, but they invoked geographies, places, mountains and houses. Finally and most importantly, narrators viewed the deeds committed by their grandfathers as unjust and cruel. Feelings of guilt and sadness linger throughout the narration of events. I cannot emphasize this last point enough, because even in instances where the narratives lacked detailed stories of violence or the narrators did not have family members who had committed these cruel deeds, they expressed a similar kind of guilt and sadness.

The following question arises: How can one make sense of “the evil deeds” one’s predecessors have committed, especially when one finds them unjust? What are the mechanisms used in order to distance oneself from one’s predecessors? My informants, indeed, did try to make sense of the atrocities their predecessors committed. One way to do that was to create an image of the ancestor as an “ignorant” character that was easily manipulated by the state, especially when he was provoked to commit these actions for the sake of Islam:

Until 30-40 years ago, people, except for this new generation, used to consider killing Armenians to be something that would bring them glory. A man who killed an Armenian used to be thought of as glorious, that is, like he earned a place in heaven because, after all, he killed a lot of infidels. It is about this culture of holy war, the culture of jihad. He killed an Armenian which means a non-Muslim, someone who fought against Muslims.²⁰

²⁰ Bundan 30-40 sene öncesine kadar, yani bizim bu yeni nesil hariç, Ermeni öldürmek bir şan şefer olarak bilinirdi. Bir Ermeni öldüren adam şanlı şerefli adamdır yani böyle cennette yer edinmiş adamdır. Çünkü o gaza kültürünün cihat kültürünün etkisi var. Ermeni öldürmüş, gayrimüslüm öldürmüş, müslümanlara karşı savaşan birini öldürmüş.

Alper evaluates what had happened within a frame in which fighting against infidels was regarded as a respectable deed. Other informants also recalled similar memories pertaining to the belief that killing Armenians was assumed to guarantee one's place in heaven. Mahmut also tells me how and why the killings took place:

I mean, if the imam had told them “don’t kill them,” they would have in no way killed them. Here lies the problem, if the sheikh had said “if you do this man any harm, you go against God’s laws.” he would in no way have done it. (Emphatically) Besides, it was already the sheikh who told them “whoever kills 3 Armenians, he will go to heaven three times.” This mentality is still prevalent.²¹

The image of the “ignorant” Kurd was also reinforced by some of my informants who were skeptical of the religiosity of their predecessors. Hagit, who currently lives in Hakkari, told me that he and his family always discuss the Armenians and try to answer various questions as to what happened. And he told me that he wished they had never left. As I am always curious about the intergenerational dynamics within the family, I asked him whether his father shares his opinion:

Burcu: Does your father also think so?

Hagit: Ah, my father didn’t think this way earlier because he is an ignorant and uneducated person who only considered things from religious perspectives. However, now he looks at things from different perspectives because we told him and discussed with him many times about how Islam does not only mean massacring people. Islam applies the principle of equality regardless of religion, language, race or sect. I mean, that’s how we know it. Islam doesn’t dictate to kill or slaughter somebody just because he is of a different religion. No way.²²

²¹ Yani imam eęer bunlara deseydi sen bunu öldürme, hayatta öldürmezdi. Eksiklik işte burdan geliyor, şıh deseydi bu adama zarar verdin mi Allah’a karşı geliyosun hayatta bunu yapmazdı. (vurgulu) Zaten o şıh ona demiş kim 3 tanesini öldürürse 3 sefer cennete gidecek. Halen o zihniyet devam ediyor.

²² Burcu: Babanız da böyle düşünüyor mu?

Hagit: Ya babam başta böyle düşünmüyordu çünkü cahil okumamış bir insan. Sadece dini boyutlarıyla düşünen bir vatandaş. Ama şimdi dünyaya farklı pencerelerden bakıyor, çünkü biz defalarca anlattık tartıştık yani islamiyet sadece insanları katletmek değildir, eşitlik ilkesi var islamiyette; din, dil, ırk, mezhep ayrımı yapmadan. Biz öyle biliyoruz yani. Müslümanlıkta bu var. Müslümanlıkta demiyor ki bunun dini ayrıdır, ben bunu katledeyim, veyahut da bunu öldüreyim bizden değil ben bunu keseyim. Olmaz.

During one conversation Mahmut told me a joke, which he believes to be a popular one in Van. According to the story, when the Kurds were massacring the Armenians, a Kurdish man ordered an Armenian to convert to Islam. The Armenian man tells him that he will do that if he is told what he should do in order to become a Muslim. The Kurdish man hesitates and says that he doesn't know what he should do but orders him to convert to Islam anyway.

Thus, by holding onto an image of their predecessors as “ignorant” and religious people, the narrators both managed to distance themselves from them and to reduce their predecessors' agency, as they were assumed to have behaved in accordance with the state's agenda. What they meant by “ignorance” seems to be related to their conviction that their predecessors were malleable. A young man from Gevaş told me that he has Armenian friends from Istanbul, and that they always visit Van. He told me that when these Armenians friends were in Van, he invited them to a wedding. The next day, it was reported in a local newspaper that “Armenians crashed a wedding!” He added that “the Kurds have always known how to be someone else’s tool, but they have never learned how to be sovereign.”

In the attempt to make sense of why the Kurds massacred the Armenians, my informants provided an additional dynamic: they claimed that feelings of jealousy were at work. Mahmut comments that all the people who made their living through trade were Armenians. Actually, there is a widely held belief regarding the prosperity of Armenians of Van, which is the reason why many people are still digging up the surroundings of old Armenian houses, buildings, churches and even graves. Although some narrated instances in which their grandfathers had Armenian workers at home or portrayed a heterogeneous picture regarding wealth, most told me that they have heard that the wealth of Van mainly belonged to the Armenians, while the Kurds were mostly poor except for the landlords and the religious leaders. My informants thus argued that the Kurds were also motivated by the desire to obtain material goods when committing these atrocities. Dilan is a university student close to my age. We were in a local bar in the middle of the day when she narrated her life story and what she knew about the Armenians of Van:

For example, they talk about grape production a lot. They say that the Kurds were always jealous of the Armenians because the Kurds were very poor,

engaged in agriculture but they had few possessions. However, the Armenians were hard-working and that's why they prospered. Almost the whole economy was in the hands of the Armenians and wine production was a huge source of their income, therefore, they got very rich.²³

Another time, she called and told me that she and her friends were in one of the coffee houses near the court house. When I went there they told me that some of their friends had a trial and that they were waiting for them. On that occasion, one of her friends was talking about how a friend of his went treasure hunting and found a bible and some golden bracelets. He told me that this friend gave the bible to the Armenian man who had brought the treasure map and kept the bracelets for himself. Dilan, thrilled by the story, told me that since the Armenians are already rich, they only want to get the items that are spiritually important for them. The young man also narrated his unsuccessful stories of treasure hunting, and recalled how his uncle explained the deteriorating relationship between Armenians and Kurds:

There is a story my uncle told me about the Armenians. He is from the village of İsviran, Muradiye. He says that there were Armenians with whom they lived together there and they used to get on well with them. Thereafter, fetwas were put on them in the mosques. When you put such fetwas, it means that you already did the harm. Then they say 'what a man!' 'Well done' to those who kill Armenians. For example, generally, our people (the Kurds) say that we used to get on well with the Armenians, but that later on, (emphatically) when land and similar issues are involved... For example, when someone killed an Armenian, he appropriated his land; therefore, the Armenians had no other chance but to migrate. I mean, they were made to migrate: people call it forced migration.²⁴

²³ Ya mesela genelde üzüm yapımından falan çok bahsediyolar. İşte Kürtler Ermenileri falan hiç çekemezmiş diyorlar, çünkü Kürtler çok fakirmiş, tarımla uğraşıyorlarmış ama pek de bir şeyleri yokmuş. Ama Ermeniler çok çalışkanmış. Yani çok çalışkan oldukları için çok zenginleşmişler. Ya böyle hemen hemen bütün ekonomi Ermenilerin elindeymiş ve şarap ihracatı onların büyük bir gelir kaynağıymış. Bu yüzden de çok zenginleşmişler.

²⁴ Ermenilerle ilgili mesela Muradiye'de benim amcamdan dinlediğim bir şey var. Kendisi zaten Muradiye'nin İsviran köyünden. Diyor ki "daha önceden bizim köyümüzde beraber yaşadığımız Ermeniler vardı. Biz gayet iyi de geçinirdik. Ki ondan sonra bunlar hakkında camilerde fetva verilmeye başlandı." Öyle bir fetvayı zaten sen verdin mi işi bitirmiş anlamına geliyorsun. Bu sefer Ermeni öldüren için "nasıl bir erkek! helal olsun! böyle yapmış böyle etmiş" diyorlar. Mesela normalde bizimkiler çok iyi geçindiğimizi söylerler yani Kürtlerle Ermeniler. Ama daha sonradan (vurgulu) işin içersine arsa marsa girince... Mesela

Forced migration is a term which has gained widespread use within the last thirty years. In this quote, the narrator utilizes the language of the present victimization of the Kurds in talking about the Armenians. In the narrative, in opposition to the poor and “ignorant” Kurd, the image of the hardworking and prosperous Armenians is established and the element of envy is also expressed to be at work in the killing of Armenians. Mahmut shared a joke with me that epitomizes the dichotomy between the image of the hardworking Armenian and the Kurd as “plunderer.” According to the story, a Kurdish man visits his Armenian neighbor and when offered a bowl of honey, he begins to eat the honey greedily with a big spoon. First, the Armenian man remains silent, but, finally, he cannot hold it in and warns his friend by telling him that the honey is not produced by a donkey, but by a very small animal. During our interview, Mahmut again brought up the issue and told me an actual account that is similar to the joke he had narrated before. He expressed his resentment of the ignorance of the Kurds in telling me of a dialogue that took place between one of his father's uncle's wives and an Armenian woman. He told me that this woman was cutting the branches of the grape trees planted by the Armenian woman and her family, and then boiling the milk that she extracted. The Armenian woman warned her not to do this, since the family had put a lot of labor into growing them. Mahmut's relative refused to stop swore and at the Armenian woman. After telling this story, Mahmut commented: “You know, the Kurds actually did great injustice to them (Armenians).²⁵”

Thus, these narratives contain my informants' attempts to understand what happened and reflect their meaning making processes. This attempt to make sense may be said to reduce their predecessors' agency as they are described as “ignorant”, religious and open to manipulation by the state. We should keep in mind that this image is constructed against the image of the hardworking and prosperous Armenian. This strong opposition that reveal itself in my informants' narratives might be related to the feelings of guilt they expressed. This might also be the reason why their stories exalted

öldüren kişi öldürdüğü kişinin arsasına sahip olabilmış. E böyle olunca Ermeniler burdan göç etmek zorunda kaldı. Yani göç ettirdiler daha doğrusu. Zorunlu göç derler ya.

²⁵ “Kürtler var ya aslında onlara karşı büyük cahillik yapmışlar.”

the Armenians to such a great extent. Besides this opposition between the image of the Armenian and that of the Kurd, my informants also implied that they themselves are different from their predecessors. As I commented, the ignorance they attributed to them was mainly about their conviction that their predecessors were easily manipulated by the state. “The state”, or what some others' called “the system” always had its place in our interviews; and by distancing themselves from their ancestors, they also implied that they themselves has a different relationship to it. I want to repeat what the young man from Gevaş said: “the Kurds have always known how to be someone else’s tool, but they have never learned how to be sovereign.” By distancing themselves from the elderly, in a sense, they depicted themselves as different and from those who are “still someone else's tool.” They argued that they have the agency to evaluate the past on their own terms.

The state was also like a mediator that bound the fates of these two groups of peoples. However, by designating the state as the ultimate perpetrator, my informants did not shy away from calling the massacres Armenians went through atrocious and feelings of shame and regret filled their narratives.

4.2. “We began to understand their tragedy after we experienced our own”

Listening to these narratives that express guilt and responsibility for the atrocities their predecessors perpetrated in such detail, I became curious about what kind of emotions these predecessors had felt at the time when they told these stories to my informants. Many of my informants told me that these stories have always been in circulation and they have heard them from early childhood. Then, what was the motivation to transmit them? If they heard these from their parents, how did their parents feel narrating them? If it was this previous generation that narrated these stories to them, what was the emotion that prevailed? Why do my informants know these stories in such detail?

Their answers to my questions surprised me as they signified something drastically different from their own emotions: I was informed that these stories were narrated as heroic accounts and that the perpetrators of cruel deeds were regarded as

heroes by their predecessors. The secrecy (Rosenthal, and Völter, 1998) surrounding the families of the Nazi perpetrators seems to be absent in the families of my informants, as these memories were narrated as justified and even heroic deeds by the perpetrators. They argued that there has been a change in the way of remembering Armenians among Kurds for the last 30 years, as a result of the conflict between the state and the PKK. They talked about an ambiguous past when the word *fille-* which means Christian in Kurdish- had a very bad connotation, a word that is uttered when someone wanted to swear at someone else. On the other hand, some also claimed that the word still has bad connotations for many people. Thus, there seems to be a transformation for some people in the way they feel about Armenians, while for others this has not taken place. Through the narratives of my informants, I intend to show that the fate of the Armenians is reinterpreted and as a result of this reinterpretation, a great degree of disillusionment is experienced by the narrator.

Serhad, a 38 year-old man, was influenced by socialist and anarchist traditions. Both of his parents' families had migrated from Iraq to Çatak before the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Even though he doesn't know much about the details of this migration, he told me his family was influenced by Iraqi culture since “the center of the authority,” that is the Ottoman government, was far away. He told me that as his grandmother could speak Turkish very well, whenever there was a security problem, she was the one who would go to the police station. His family had moved to the city center in 1992, as they did not accept the village guard system, and had great difficulty adapting to urban life. He told me that there are still people among the elderly who regularly visit their villages in summers to remember the old days, even though the villages have been evacuated and they no longer have houses to stay in. He went to a boarding school in Gevaş, which he remembered with hatred, and told me that there the students had to shave their hair as if they were in a Nazi concentration camp or in an orphanage for Armenian children. As we spoke, he got very sad and sentimental and I noticed how he weaved his own life story with the stories of Armenians. He narrated stories of massacres of Armenian and explained the general change in perspectives and feelings towards them:

Burcu: Are there any stories you heard from those around you?

Serhad: This I heard from those around me. I heard about them (Armenians) being burned alive. They told me about three or four of them being tied to a tree and set on fire.

Burcu: I wonder how people narrate these stories, I mean, with what kind of emotions?

Serhad: Now, these subjects have come to surface recently. Due to the fact that the Armenians were infidels, the old generation was manipulated by the system and they talked about the things they did proudly. Now, after '84, it is a tragedy, I mean, with the war the PKK started and with the tragedy people have gone through, they have woken up and come to their senses. I mean, the moment they started suffering from the same cruelties, the new generation tried to understand this (the sufferings of Armenians).²⁶

For Serhad, it was their own “tragedy,” the sufferings they experienced that drastically changed the way they interpreted the deeds committed against the Armenians. He confessed that even he had a different perspective before high school: “Our fathers killed the infidels! This was giving us a thing, I mean, a sort of enjoyment. However, after we saw our own tragedy or after your perspective changes, I mean, you begin to know what life is....after that, one way or another, you begin to feel a disappointment, I mean, from the moment you begin to get to know the world, you feel ruined.”²⁷

Serhad is not the only one who claims to have experienced a sort of “awakening,” however, he was one of the few who implied the unbearable weight this “awakening”

²⁶ Burcu: Senin yakın çevrenden duyduğun hikayeler var mı?

Serhad: Benim bu duyduğum yakın çevremdendir. İşte diri diri yakılmaları duymuşum. Ermenilerden 3-4 kişiyi bir ağaca bağlayıp ateş yaktıklarını anlatmışlardır.

Burcu: Ben şeyi merak ediyorum insanlar bunlardan nasıl bahsediyolar, hangi duygularla yani?

Serhad: Şimdi bunlar yeni yeni su yüzüne çıktı. Ermenilerin gavur olması itibariyle sistem bu yaşlı kuşağı kullanmış, onlar da bunu övünerek anlatıyor. Şimdi 84'ten sonra, trajedi, yani PKK'nin başlattığı savaşla beraber yaşanan trajediden sonra insanlar irkildiler, kendilerine geldiler gelmeye başladılar. Yani kendileri bu acıları görmeye başladıkları itibariyle yeni kuşak bunu anlamaya çalıştı.

²⁷ Bizim dedelerimiz babalarımız gavurları öldürmüşler bize şey verirdi, yani bir neşe verirdi. Ama kendi trajedimizi gördükten sonra ya da hayata bakışınız farklılaşıyor yani hayatla tanışıyorsunuz..... Ondan sonra da bi şekilde hayal kırıklığına uğruyorsunuz... Dünyayı anlamaya başladığımız noktadan itibaren mahvoluyorsunuz.

carries. Another informant, a young woman of 25, also claims that “after the Kurdish reality, after the PKK,” people began to recount these stories with guilt and sadness. Here, what we witness is a parallel drawn between the fate of the Armenians and the fate of the Kurds, both of whom are depicted as victims. What complicates this story, however, is the fact that the perpetrators of the past or the children they gave birth to are now the victims in the hands of the absolute perpetrator, or as Serhad calls it “the system.” And after recognizing that it is the same “system” that causes pain in his life, the heroic stories of the past disturb and disappoint him.

“After the Kurdish reality, after the PKK,” there seems to be a drastic change in the way people began to come to terms with the past. The war between the state and the PKK seems to be the most influential element that led people to face their past and reinterpret, in a new fashion, the memories that had been transmitted to them. Although many informants told me that this rupture was due to the Kurdish movement and people's perspectives had changed within the last thirty years, nobody specified exactly how this process had taken place. Serhad was one of the few who tried to provide an explanation by claiming that their own tragedy enabled them to try to understand other people's tragedy. Thus, this rupture in people's personal lives, both during the interviews and during daily conversations, is formulated as one of the ramifications of the war between the state and the PKK.

A young man, Yener, while narrating to me his family history, touched upon significant events which he regarded as constituting “breaks” in the way he makes sense of the world. Throughout his childhood, he and his family had lived in a police lodging since his father was working as an electrician there. He told me that one day, a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the second floor of one of the buildings and out of forty-eight families, he was the only one who was considered a suspect and taken into custody by the police. This was, for him, the most significant event that opened his eyes:

There is an ongoing war right now. With this war, you start questioning it and then start reading. With all the reading, your standpoint takes a form. After you hear about, you know, familiarize yourself with revolutionary ideologies you start questioning the system, then, you develop sympathy for all the ‘others’ that the system addresses. For example, even if they told me that the Turks and the Kurds did not commit genocide but it was the

Armenians who did it, I wouldn't believe it. Do I make myself clear? I mean when we look at the current situation, history repeats itself.²⁸

Yener's reasoning is very calm compared to Serhad's narrative. For him, his sympathy for the Armenians is the natural result of his political subjectivity. In this respect, I believe the stance of the PKK and the Peace and Democracy Party facilitated the way my informants communicated their memories of Armenians. Many of my informants either implicitly or explicitly talked about how their perspective in various spheres of life changed as a result of the war between the state and the PKK. For example, one of my informants claimed that the struggle for the recognition of Kurdish identity was not only against the Turkish state, but also against other power holders such as the sheikhs and landlords. Here, he points to the role of class struggle together with identity struggle. Another informant stated that the PKK took a stance against domestic violence. Therefore, the drastic change in the memories of my Kurdish informants on Armenians is achieved both by the transformative policies of the PKK and by a realization of the similarity of the violence inflicted upon Armenians and themselves at the local level by the state. The assimilatory and repressive policies against the non-Muslims as well as Muslim Kurds seem to have finally ruptured the initial alliance between Abdulhamit II and the local Kurds continued during the CUP regime at least for my informants. In that way, they became victims of the present and identified as such.

²⁸ Ortada bir savaş var. Savaşla birlikte ne oluyor, yani insan merak ediyor, ne oluyordan sonra bi sorgulama daha sonra okumaya falan giriyor. İşte bunlarla birlikte artık düşünsel şeyin şekilleniyor. İşte o arada duyuyosun falan ama işte devrimci düşüncelerle tanıştıktan sonra sistemi sorguluyosun ya, sistemin muhatap olduğu bütün ötekilere karşı bir şey benimsiyosun, sempati. Yani ben mesela şu anda Türkler ve Kürtlerin ortaklaşa bir jenosidinin değil de Ermenilerin yapmış olduğunu bile söyleseler benim bu durumu kabul etmem zor yani. Anlatabiliyo muyum? Şu anki durum yani tarih tekerrürden ibarettir.

4.3. “If we are the breakfast, then you will be the dinner”

In this section, I want to add another dimension to my informants' claim that their reevaluation of transmitted stories of violence took place after their own victimization. The subheading of this section is a fragment, a curse that is believed to have been uttered by the Armenians to those who were chasing them out of the city. I have heard it many times, both in personal conversations and in the interviews when narrators tried to explain their own experiences of state violence. This phrase seems like a prediction that stretches towards the future. However, it is also like a warning to the perpetrators, a warning that admonishes them to put an end to the massacres unless they want to experience similar atrocities themselves.

Mahmut, who grew up listening to the heroic stories of his grandfather and how they expelled the Armenian population from Van, constantly repeated how the very same people who played a role in this event experienced terrible massacres in the 1920s in Zilan. Mahmut recounted that after the Russians evacuated Erciş, his grandfather and his brother who were in the Hamidiye troops pushed the Armenians out of the city:

My grandfather said that he was a soldier, and in fact, he was almost not allowed to serve in the military. They told him that he was too young. But then they allowed him. He said that they drove them (the Armenians) up to 15 km out of Doğubeyazıt all the way up to Mako, Iran (emphatically). Some of them died, some were impoverished, some mistreated and some others old. In short, they took them there. Of course this was a 2-3 month process. He said that when they got back (sighs) everything was in shambles. After a little while, the same thing happened to them, what I mean is the Zilan massacre. They said that the grandfather of a relative of ours who worked in KESK threw 32 little children down from that cliff. It was because of a religious point of view, I mean, they believed that whoever killed Armenian children and women, he would go to heaven. I witnessed that nobody died naturally in their families, they always kill each other.²⁹

²⁹ Dedem dedi, biz artık askeriz hani. Dedi hatta benim askerliğimi de kabul etmiyorlardı. Dediler senin yaşın küçüktür. Bunları biz İran Makoya kadar İran sınırının İran Doğubeyazıt sınırının 15 km oraya kadar biz götürdük. (vurgulu) Kimisi öldü kimisi perişan kimisi mağdur kimisi yaşlı. Velhasıl oraya kadar götürdük. Tabii bu iki-üç aylık bir süreç ya kaçıyorlar. Biz dedi döndük geldik (iç çekiyor) ortalık darmadağın perişan. Ondan sonra kısa bir dönemden sonra aynı olay onların başına geldi işte benim demek istediğim o Zilan şeyi var ya Keskte çalışan bizim bi tane akraba var, onların onun bir dedesi. Dedi 32 tane küçük çocuk o seyden attı aşağı. O da biraz dini yönden hani kim Ermeni çocuklarını,

Before telling me that “the same thing happened to them,” he had narrated to me all the difficulties his maternal side of the family had to go through after they were expelled from Zilan. He drew a parallel with the current system of village guards and told me that someone claimed that his family had played a role in the rebellion, thus they were all expelled and some of them were even put in jail. For him, it was the cruelties his family committed against the Armenians with whom they were living with that heralded their own doomsday.

Interestingly, the example of the Zilan massacres was provided by someone else as well; a Kurdish woman, Rojda, in her 50s narrated a similar story. Her life story suggests that she had to survive various atrocities including torture by the police and various forms of gendered repression imposed upon her by the male members of her family who did not want her to perform her art as a *dengbej* (a minstrel). She is a truly skeptical and insightful woman who has interesting and amusing ideas about religion; she told me that the prophets of the old days were just like the politicians of today, who fought one another merely to attain power. She also asserted that the Armenians' curse brought pain and agony to her people:

Rojda: Honestly, we brought this (atrocities) on them (the Armenians), so what has befallen us is their curse.

Burcu: Is this the way you think?

Rojda: Yes, that's what I think, because the pain you cause always comes back to you. This is a belief, there is no such a thing in Islam, I am just guessing. If I do you harm, I will definitely suffer from it. That's how it is; at least, that's what I am thinking it is. I mean, the Armenians suffered a lot. I was utterly inhumane. For example, these Muslims abducted their women, their beautiful girls and did many things to them and then killed those children, the same thing happened to us. For example, in Zilan, there was such a huge massacre (emphatically), the things they did to women, I mean. For example, what if now I am asleep in my house and there is an attack, what could my husband do? It is the same in my case, for example, I was subjected to torture for 18 days, water torture, being hung naked, and what have you, I went through all of it.³⁰

kadınlarını öldürürse cennete gidecek. Ve şahidim şu an onların zürriyetinde kimse ölmemiş hep birbirlerini öldürüyorlar.

³⁰ Rojda: Valla biz onların başına getirdik, bu da onların ahıdır başımıza gelen.
Burcu: Böyle düşünüyor musun?

Her narrative is specifically sensitive to the gendered forms of violence that the Armenians and she herself went through. She imagines what could possibly have happened to these Armenian women by resorting to her own lack of any means to avoid a similar situation. At some point, when she told me how her mother and grandmother always talked about Armenians with great sadness, she also mentioned her grandmother's uncle who was very proud of killing the Armenians. I asked her how this could be possible, reminding her of her statement that her grandmother felt very sad for them. I was surprised that two people of the same family perceived the same situation in very different ways. She looked at me and asked ironically: “My girl, men are savages, don't you know that?”³¹”

Through a linkage of the destruction of Armenians, the Zilan massacres and her own experience of state violence, she compiled different events that happened in different periods and created a uniform narrative in which the perpetrators of the past become the victims of the present. The line usually believed to separate the past and the present blurs and a general sense of loss prevails. Their victimization reminded them of the Armenians and that the suffering of Armenians (they thought) was precipitated by their grandfathers' crimes which stretched forward and caused their own victimization. As I mentioned earlier, what mediated the relationship between these two peoples was the state.

The state also seems to have caused an interesting tie between the Kurds living in Van and the radio Yerevan which was founded in 1955. Many people talked about this

Rojda: Ben düşünüyorum çünkü kimsenin ahı kimsede kalmaz. Bu inançtır müslümanlıkta böyle bir şey yok. Ben öyle tahminden söylerim yani. Ben sana yapsam yani muhakkak ben de çekeceğim yani. Öyledir ben öyle düşünüyorum. Yani çok çok çekti Ermeniler. Yani gerçekten insanlık şeyi değildi. Aynı mesela onlar nasıl bu müslümanlar nasıl onların kadınlarını, güzel kızlarını kaçırıyordular, farklı farklı şey yapıyorlardı, ondan sonra öldürüyorlardı çocukları, aynı bizim başımıza geldi. Mesela Zilan'da (vurguluyor) o kadar katliam olmuş ki kadınları yani afedersin yani her şey olmuş yani. Şu anda mesela şu an ben evimde yatsam akşam baskın yapsa kocam ne yapacak? Ben kendim de diyorum mesela 18 gün işkencede kaldım, tazyikli su çıplak askı ne dersin yani her şeyi gördüm.

³¹ “Kızım, erkekler barbardır, sen bilmez misin?”

radio station wistfully, since this radio aired music and delivered the news in Kurdish during the times when broadcasting in Kurdish was forbidden in Turkey. They talked about it with excitement, telling me how they secretly listened to the music.

4.4. Unfinished Business: Regarding the Loss of Others as Your Own and Strategies to Overcome the Loss

My informants' feelings of guilt and their willingness to narrate everything they knew about the Armenians of Van, very surprising to me in the beginning, became understandable after noticing that many of them drew parallels between their own life stories and those of the Armenians. The difference between these two violent accounts is that the suffering and the struggle of my interviewees still continues today. What they accomplished in the interviews was a maneuver that collapsed different periods and experiences. Thus, their narratives zoom into a distant past and bind it to contemporary problems, and in this way they sustain Armenian losses as something that cannot be forgotten. In this way, a historical connection between the past and the present is achieved; the heroes of yesterday are now considered the perpetrators of cruel deeds. It is either implicitly or explicitly expressed that their present victimization was predicated on the destruction of the Armenians.

Embracing the suffering of Armenians is to criticize the state and the violent measures it took to deal with its “others.” To talk about Armenians in a way that goes beyond the limits of and even refutes the official discourse of denial can be read as a subversive move to undermine the hegemonic discourse of power. It is a way to reinvest their memories in a politically relevant manner that objects to the violent history of the nation building process of the Republic of Turkey. However, these narratives seem to carry a much deeper meaning.

I want to share an ethnographic moment which struck me heavily, because it exhibits the blurred boundary between the past and the present and the deep sense of loss. I believe that this moment is specifically significant as it was not revealed during an interview but spontaneously brought up at an occasion in which the narrator did not know me and did not address his concerns to me. The moment concerns a discussion

about the mass graves of Kurdish guerillas whose whereabouts remain unknown. Before this discussion, Delil and I had visited the *Çözüm Çadırları*³² as we were informed that they were torn down by the police. Besides Delil, the other four people that took part in the discussion were unknown to me. As the discussion unfolded, one of the men commented that in cases where the location of the graves is known, one should be very careful not to damage the corpses. As Delil works for the Human Rights Association, this problem was specifically addressed to him. The discussion suddenly gave way to a moment of silence when a man in his 40s complained about how people are digging up the graves of Armenians with the hope of finding gold. Nobody said anything, only with a nod, they agreed with him.

This man did not know that I was there as a researcher. However, the topic of mass graves in the present reminded him of the Armenian graves from the past. After we left the restaurant, Delil told me that this man had family members who were probably killed and buried in unknown places.

Thus, I am convinced that, for my informants, both in their fervent narratives describing past atrocities and in their daily discussions, this subject is far from being sealed; it is an unresolved issue that is refracted through their present concerns about their own subjectivity. This is why stories, questions and concerns about Armenians constitute postmemory: a memory with which my informants do not have a biographical and personal connection. However, it is a memory that still haunts them, still leads them to a never-ending internal struggle to understand and explain what happened in the past and its connection to what is happening in the present. The fragments of memory they possess effect their sense of time, bind them to those regarded as the victims of their predecessors and make them situate the loss of “the other” within their own losses. Following Hobbes, Rebecca Bryant claims that “the nature of war is not simply violence but the expectation of it” (Bryant, 2011: 9). The context she describes is a partitioned island (Cyprus) where there is always a threat of continuing violence. Van is a city on the margins of the state with its position oscillating between emergency and normality, troubled by the events of 1915, the massacre in Zilan, and the on-going war between the state and the PKK. Therefore, Van is also a place where the expectation of

³² Solution tents

war seems to influence subjects' understanding of time and history. Even though the losses of the Armenians are among their losses now and within the limits of grievability (Butler, 2004), mourning and closure seem impossible, as can be seen in my informants' intense preoccupation with the past (Navaro-Yashin 2009:15). What are the reasons for this impossibility? Certainly, the policy of denial and the continuation of their own experience of violence contribute to this impossibility. However, I think there is another dimension of the issue. Robben writes on the military rule in Argentina and points out that the disappearance of the corpses was a widely used tactic in order to silence the opposition (Robben, 2007). However, contrary to what had expected, this tactic paved the way for weekly protests held in front of the Plaza de Mayo by the mothers of the disappeared. Robben argues that “the military had underestimated the human need for mourning and the moral obligation to care for the dead” (Robben, 2007: 255). The uncertainty hinders mourning. The mass graves and disappeared relatives were also themes that were quite often brought up by my informants when talking about the consequences of the guerrilla war between the state and the PKK. The man, who complained about treasure hunters who are digging up the graves of the Armenians, as well as others, who repeatedly and empathetically talked about the massacres Armenians went through, in a way, recalled their own losses also for which a mourning process is impossible.

David Kazanjian and David L. Eng claim that a politics of mourning, although it sounds counter-intuitive, can be of creative quality. They argue that this statement becomes understandable when one considers the lost through what remains, “for what is lost is only known by what remains of it, by how these remains are produced, read and sustained.”(Eng and Kazanjian, 2003: 2). Following Sigmund Freud's discussion on melancholia, they suggest that an active engagement with the past through melancholia has creative, unpredicted and political aspects. This sort of preoccupation when there is a sense of the impossibility of closure leads the subject to reinterpret the past as well as reimagine the future in unpredicted ways. I think that my informants' preoccupation with the past is of a similar kind.

In the face of this impossibility of closure, my informants tried to find ways to orchestrate their efforts to deal with this uneasy past. The dengbej artist Rojda emphasized that songs do not lie and told me the story behind one of her favorite songs.

She said that the story is about an Armenian woman named Gule, who was kidnapped by a wealthy landlord's (Hacı Misu) son from Tatvan, a town close to Bitlis. She remarked that Gule was apparently the most beautiful girl in the village and also very clever. The man wanted her to convert to Islam but she refused to do so:

Then he keeps torturing her but despite the heavy torture she doesn't convert to Islam. He tortures her so much that he leaves her on the very spot thinking that she is already dead. I used to sing that song, I used to think that they had killed her but I guess she didn't die.³³

Rojda also told me with a smile on her face that her grandmother used to sing this song sometimes after she performed her prayer in front of a walnut tree next to which there was a beautiful creek. She added that her mother also used to sing it occasionally and she thought at first that maybe Gule was a man that her mother secretly loved. Then, she listened to Gule's story from her mother who narrated it sadly. After a while, as she was talking about the life in her village, Rojda told me that there were more churches than the mosques and she brought up the story of Gule one more time. The story of Gule affected her so deeply that she named her daughter after her:

Rojda: This is the system of the state, I mean, garbling these stories, such as, you converted to Islam, you should kill Armenians so that you can go to heaven. (emphatically) these are horrible things. I never accept such things. I was little back then, I didn't accept them and I still don't. I resent it. I loved the song about Gule so much that I named my daughter after her. I still sing that song and it affects me deeply.

Burcu: Did your mother also used to feel sorry?

Rojda: Of course, she used to feel sorry too, she is the one who told me this story. With the things she told me like 'Gule was such a girl, they killed her etc.' the story is engraved in my brain. Besides, I have this motherly love; I am sensitive to such issues. Both my mother and grandmother used to feel sorry.³⁴

³³ Ondan sonra işkence yapıyor, yapıyor o kadar ne yapıyor müslüman olmuyor, öyle işkence yapıyor ki öyle bırakıyor sanki ölü gibidir. Bırakıyor diyor ölmüş artık bırakıyor gidiyor. Ben de artık o şarkıyı söylüyordum, zannediyordum Gule'yi öldürmüşler ama demek ölmemiş.

³⁴ Rojda: Bu da sistem devletin sistemi, yani bunları yanlış anlata anlata işte sen müslüman olmuşsun sen Ermenileri öldür ki sen cennete gideceksin. Bunlar çok böyle (vurgulu) vahşet şeyler. Ben asla böyle şeyleri kabul etmem. O zaman küçüktüm ve kabul etmiyodum hala etmiyom da. Zoruma gidiyor. Küçükten beri.

Later, I found out that Rojda was not the only one who named her child after an Armenian. I met another woman who did the same thing and gave her son an Armenian name.

Two years ago, it was announced that a mass was to be held in Akhtamar church. Many people told me that they wanted to go to the church to listen to the mass and to meet the Armenians who, they thought, might be the descendants of the Armenians of Van. This event was regarded by some as an opportunity to apologize to the Armenians. Below, I want to provide an anecdote about an old man from Gevaş who went to the island and held a very interesting dialogue with an Armenian woman who came from Istanbul. Before sharing this anecdote, however, I want to touch upon some of the stories Şiyar narrated to me. He is a 73 year-old man who does not show his age and always has a smile when he narrates his stories. He talked about how the Ottoman Empire expelled the Armenians from Gevaş, and how, before the Armenian youth had organized and attacked the Muslims, the Muslims were attacking and plundering the houses of the Armenians. While he told me that the Armenians were actually very loyal to the Muslims, he also added that they were in a subordinate position to the Muslims. For example, if a Muslim man wanted to cross a stream, the Armenian supposedly had to carry that man on his shoulders: “If a Muslim would have gone there, the Armenian man had to carry him on his shoulders. It was obligatory, if he did not, the state would punish him. I mean, the same way Kurds are under the influence of the state, they were under the influence of the Muslims.”³⁵ He narrated to me instances in which some Muslims tried to protect Armenians from the massacres, and also how some Armenians

Ben Guleyi sevdiğim için kızımın ismini de Gule bıraktım. (vurgulu). Gerçekten beni etkiliyor yani. Ben hala da söylüyorum çok etkiliyor.

Burcu: Senin annen de mi üzülüyodu?

Rojda: Tabii tabii üzülüyodu o zaten anlattı bana işte, Gule böyleydi böyle oldu kızım öldürdüler öyle hep beynimde kalmıştı. Mesela insanın yani duygusu, çocuk duygusu var yani. Yani ben biraz da duygusalım yani o konularda. Annem de üzülüyodu, nenem de.

³⁵ “Bir tane müslüman oraya gitseydi o ermeni mecbur ayağını çıkarıp onu sırtlayıp götürecekti bu tarafa. Mecburdu, götürmezse devlet ceza verirdi. O kadar, yani Kürtler nasıl devletin tesiri altındadır, onlar da müslümanların tesiri altındaydılar”

tried to protect their Muslim neighbors from the “Armenian youth.” When he told me that Gevaş's villages were mainly populated by Armenians and that there were few villages in which Muslims lived, I asked him how all these people were expelled:

Burcu: So, there were a lot of people (Armenians) here, how were they all expelled?

Şiyar: How? It is the state that did it. Don't you think that the state can kill all the Kurds, if it wants to?³⁶³⁷

He also narrated to me that his family had migrated to various places during the Russian invasion and after the Russian retreat the state sent them back to Van:

Burcu: So, did they expel your family by force?

Şiyar: They (his family member) said that it was by force. They (the officials) sent the emigrants (muhacir) away, because the land was emptied. They (the officials) told them (the emigrants) to go and occupy those lands.

Burcu: The lands of the Armenians?

Şiyar: Of course, they were all emptied. For example, these villages were all populated by outsiders. There were not many Armenians in Gevaş, there were just a couple of neighborhoods, but the villages were all Armenian villages.³⁸

³⁶ His question was rhetorical; I knew that he didn't expect any answers. However, his reaction reminded me a piece of an article that was published in the Turkish magazine *Ötüken* in 1967 (cited in White, 2000 : 133): Let the Kurds go away from Turkey! But to where? To whatever they like! Let them go to Iran, Pakistan, to India, to Barzani. Let them ask at (sic.) the United Nations to find a home for them in Africa. Let them go away before the Turkish nation gets angry. The Turkish race is very patient, but when we get angry we are like lions. Let the Kurds ask the Armenians about us!

³⁷ Burcu: Peki bu kadar çok insan varmış, nasıl kovmuşlar?

Şiyar: Nasıl kovmuşlar, yav devlet ya devlet şimdi Kürtleri istese öldüremez mi?

³⁸ Burcu: Peki sizinkileri zorla mı yollamışlar?

Şiyar: Dedi valla zorla, hemen hemen zorlaydı dedi. Muhacirleri tutup gönderidiler, çünkü boş kalmış. Gidin işgal edin dedi.

Burcu: Ermenilerden boşalan yerler?

Şiyar: Tabii boşalmış hepsi boşalmış. Mesela bu köyler hepsi dışardan gelenler doldurdular. Gevaş yok Gevaşta fazla Ermeni yoktu, az bi iki mahalle vardı, fakat köyler hepsi Ermeni.

I also asked him whether he knew about the mass that was held in the Akhtamar Church. He told me that initially they were informed that the locals were not allowed in the mass. However, he managed to catch the end of the ceremony:

Şiyar: I missed the mass. In fact, it was said that they wouldn't let us participate. That's why I went in the late afternoon. They let me go to the island. I did some enquiry to check to see if there was anybody originally from our town. I asked a woman, she said that she was Armenian. I asked her "Armenian from where?" She said "Istanbul," I asked her "don't you know anybody from these villages?" She said "what! You people have confiscated their lands, will you return them if they come back?" I said "they should come back, the land is more than enough for both us and for them."

Burcu: Did you say that?

Şiyar: I swear I said that. I said "they should come back, the land is more than enough for both us and for them."³⁹

Many people mentioned giving the Armenians their land back as a strategy of compensation. Yener, whose family lives in Amik, a few kilometers from the city center, told me about a humorous conflict between him and his father when he told his father that if necessary, he was willing to host some of the Armenians who came for the mass. First his father objected to his proposition:

Yener: Back then I told my father if needed I would go and put my name on the list, I could host up to 10 people in my place. I told him that if Armenians came to stay here, don't do that thing

Burcu: What thing?

Yener: I mean, I told him not to react. Since they are not muslims, he said (Impersonating his father) 'oh! They will come and make everything

³⁹ Şiyar: Yetişmedim ayine. Esas dediler bırakmayacaklar. Ben de geç gittim öğleden sonra gittim. Bıraktılar ben gittim adaya. Böyle bi soruşturdum dedim hani bizim buraların adamları yoktur? Bu köylerin adamları hani bana göster. Bir tane kadın dedim dedim sen? Dedi ben Ermeniyim dedi kadın. Dedim nerenin Ermenisisin? Dedi İstanbul dedim yav bu köylerden falan yok mudur senin tanıdığın? Dedi nee dedi, siz onların arazilerini zaptettiniz gelse vereceksiniz? "Yav" dedim "gelsinler, bize de yeter onlara da yeter."

Burcu: öyle mi dedin?

Şiyar: He valla dedim gelsinler hepsi de gelsinler dedim arazi bize de yeter onlara da yeter dedim.

haram.' He made too much fuss about it. (laughing) I said "shame on you, you have been living on their lands for 90 years but you don't put them up even for a night. Then he got it, he said that I could bring them over."⁴⁰

Serhad also told me about his feelings about and motivations for visiting the church on the day when the mass was held. He wanted to apologize to the Armenians, even if he knew that his grandfather was not specifically involved:

Owing to my psychology, I am saying, for example, that I felt like kissing the hands of all the Armenians who went there. When I say kissing their hands (hesitating), I mean, to apologize to them. I mean I didn't massacre anybody, I am sure that my grandfather didn't do it either but, after all, the group I belong to, the Kurds, did it. You go with this thought for years, I mean, when I went to Istanbul (hesitating) I used to visit the Armenian churches. When I come across an Armenian, I want to talk to him, I want to be friends with him and there are still a lot of Armenians who moved to Istanbul from Van. I mean, it is about us, it is about facing the past.⁴¹

According to Serhad, the reason why he is always keen to meet Armenians is in order to come terms with the past. However, as he suggests this desire for confrontation is also about "them", namely the Kurdish people. Therefore, these encounters are anticipated both in order to talk to the Armenians, to befriend them and to confront the Kurds' own complicity in the destruction of Armenians. In that sense, it seems to be a communal feeling of responsibility. I want to evaluate his first sentence a little bit; the sentence

⁴⁰ Yener: Ben o zaman söyledim böyle bir mağduriyet olursa gider ve yazdırırım hani, on kadar insanı da evime götürebilirim. Ben o zaman babama söyledim bak gelirse eğer Ermeniler şey yapma tamam mı?

Burcu: ne yapma?

Yener: Yani bi tepki falan koyma bi refleks gösterme dedim. (taklidini yapıyor) 'Yaaa dedi gelecekler haram edecekler,' o şey var ya hani, müslüman değil ya. Bir sürü yaygara falan. Ya dedim ayıptır dedim ya, 90 yıldır adamların topraklarında (gülüyor) yetişiyosunuz bir akşam konaklattırımıyorsunuz bu insanları falan (gülüyor). Hani anladı daha sonra dedi tamam getirebilirsin.

⁴¹ Psikolojim itibariyle diyorum ki mesela oraya gelen bütün Ermenilerin elini öpmek gelirdi içimden. Yani elini öpmek derken bu bir (duraksayarak) özür mahiyetinde. Yani ben katliam yapmadım, dedem de yapmamış eminim, ama sonuçta mensup olduğum topluluk, Kürtler bunu yapmışlardır. Yani o düşünceyle yıllardır gidiyorsun, mesela ben İstanbul'a gittiğim zaman (duraksayarak) kiliselere gidiyodum Ermenilerin. Ermenilerin bir yerde birisini bulduğum zaman konuşmayı çok isterdim, arkadaş olmayı çok isterdim ve Van'dan giden çok Ermeni var İstanbul'da hala da. Hani bizimle ilgili işte, geçmişle ilgili yüzleşmek için.

through which Serhad states his urge to kiss the hands of the visiting Armenians. This statement made a great impression on me, since it seems to suggest something other than mere apology, other than a proposal of compensation by land. I cannot think of a more powerful way of apologizing than the act of kissing someone's hands. Through this act one does not simply apologize. It is an act that aims to recognize and reclaim the dignity of the other.

Expressing a desire to make Armenian friends, naming one's own children after Armenians and looking for ways to apologize and pay them back were topics that my informants brought up frequently. Another issue that I have not brought up in this chapter is the feeling of nostalgia through which they communicated their memories. In chapter 2, I briefly presented Svetlana Boym's definition of two kinds of nostalgia. I think that my informants' memories on Armenians seem to be driven by a sense of reflective nostalgia; a sense of longing that lead one to remember shattered fragments instead of engaging a recovery of the past. Boym argues that those whose longing is reflective discover that the past is not something that is over but through this reflective engagement “the past opens up a multitude of potentialities”(Boym, 2001: 50). In my informants' fervent narratives on Armenians and in their preoccupation with the past, I sensed a similar understanding of the past as a multitude of potentialities. For them, what was missed and could have been fulfilled seems to be the possibility of peace.

4.5. Interpretations on the Memories of the Elderly: Generation Gap or Political Subjectivity?

In the previous section, I argued that many of my informants' had an uneasy relationship to the past and devoted their energies to seek ways to come to terms with it. As I have already mentioned, many of them also argued that not only did the elderly transmit these uneasy stories with pride (“since the system/ the state used them”) but they did not share the sympathy my informants had towards Armenians. This was a theme that was frequently brought up: when they complained that some people still use the word *fille* in a derogatory manner and when they referred to those who shout at their children by

calling them *axçig* and *dğa*.⁴² Some claimed that, for the elderly, the Armenians were rightfully massacred in the name of religion. Some others said that old people would narrate stories in which the Armenians were depicted as perpetrators who caused the suffering of the Muslims. Naturally, many of my informants expressed that these remarks disturb to a great extent. I witnessed a situation in which a young man challenged his father while I was interviewing his father who was from Gevaş. His son and some other family members were also present in the room. His son, who had kept silent until that moment, protested against his father when he claimed that the Armenians of Gevaş had attacked and killed the Muslims and that was why the state had deported them. His son's intervention was quite rough as he said “Don't lie father, they also killed them. Please, speak the truth.”

Even though my informants talked about this difference as a generational one, during my fieldwork, I noticed that there is actually something more to it. A few interviews I conducted in the villages of Gevaş showed me that this difference is based on the political subjectivity of the informant rather than his/her age. I also understood that my informants were largely correct in interpreting this difference as being due to a generation gap, because generally the older generation is more conservative politically and religiously.

The informants, particularly if they came from religiously conservative families and/or were politically opposed to the PKK and Kurdish movement, did not share the empathy for Armenians expressed by the interviewees discussed above. Melek, a young woman in her early 20s, explicitly told me that she and her family are very religious people. She grew up in Muradiye, but when she entered university, they moved to Istanbul. She told me that her grandfather on her father's side was from Iran and probably migrated to Muradiye after the establishment of the Republic. He did military service in Izmir where he met Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Melek told me that he always talked about Atatürk with great admiration. She remarked that as a family they love and respect Atatürk, even though, as she commented, religious people are usually not so fond of him. Her mother's side is from Muradiye, but they had to migrate to Iran when, as she puts it “the Armenians came.” She told me that when she was a child her mother

⁴² Respectively; “girl” and “boy” in Armenian.

always talked about this migration and she always feared the possibility of going through a similar experience. Even though the possibility of “the Armenians coming again” frightened her as a child, she also told me that her grandfather together with his fellow villagers expelled the Armenians from Muradiye.

Melek: I know it from my grandfather. For example, the first time he came to Muradiye, there were Armenians who lived here. Then they drove them out, you know? When my grandfather came there were still Armenians in the village. Then, they drove them out.

Burcu: How did they drive them out?

Melek: They fought them and somehow sent them away. I mean they kicked them out. As a matter of fact, my grandfather started living here after the Armenians left.

Burcu: So, he didn't see them being expelled?

Melek: He was also one of the people who expelled them.

Burcu: Aha, your grandfather also expelled them...

Melek: My grandfather together with the whole village expelled them.

Burcu: So, did your grandfather used to tell you about this?

Melek: Well, he used to us tell a lot of things but I was too little. When I think about it, I realize how important the things he used to tell us were. If he were alive now, we would learn a lot of things.⁴³

⁴³ Melek: Dedemden biliyorum. Dedem mesela ilk buraya (Muradiye) geldiği zaman Ermeniler hala yaşarmış. O insanlar daha sonra Ermenileri kovmuşlar biliyor musun? Dedemler ilk geldiği zaman o köyde Ermeniler yaşıyormuş biliyor musun, sonra o Ermenileri kovmuşlar.

Burcu: Nasıl kovmuşlar?

Melek: Bir şekilde savaşp göndermişler yani. Kovmuşlar yani. Zaten dedem o Ermeniler gittikten sonra orda yaşamış.

Burcu: Ha deden o kovulma şeyini görmemiş mi?

Melek: Dedem de onları kovmuş.

Burcu: Ha deden de kovmuş...

Melek: Dedemle birlikte orda yaşayan köy halkı onları kovmuşlar.

Burcu: Peki deden anlatıyor muydu?

Melek: Ya dedem çok şey anlatırdı da ben çok küçüktüm yani şu an düşünüyorum da. Dedemin anlattıkları aslında ne kadar önemliymiş. Dedem şu an yaşasaydı biz şimdi neler öğrenirdik.

She told this story not in a vengeful manner, but rather in a curious and surprised way. She told me that her aunt got married to a man whose family was of Armenian origin and converted to Islam many years ago. She noted that even though “they” live like the people of Muradiye and their women cover their heads, she does not find them sincere in terms of their religiosity. She always had a distrust of them and she was also strongly against this marriage. She told me that her aunt also did not want to get married to this man, but it was “kısmet.” The way she talked about the converts was interesting because she implied that these Armenian converts were not originally from Muradiye.

The elderly are generally more religious and conservative in the way they see the Armenians and tend to perpetuate the discourse that defines the Armenians as “infidels.” For example, I interviewed a 90-year-old man who was a peasant in one of the villages of Gevaş. He constantly narrated stories about his father's bravery in fighting both the Armenians and the Russians. I had difficulty interviewing him because of the language barrier, however, his general narrative was a narrative of war full of stories of bravery, murder and plunder. He casually told me how his grandfather killed a very old Armenian man in order to get the gold coins that he had hidden under his pillow. He also expressed his resentment against the PKK. Another man was a village guard in his 50s in Gevaş. This man explained to me how Armenians had committed massacres against Muslims and talked about mythical and heroic Muslim soldiers who could take a lot of bullets without getting injured. Explaining these, he did not refrain from talking about a few instances in which Armenians were murdered and mobbed. Moreover, when I asked him whether there was an order to kill the Armenians, he did not tell me that there was no order issued. He told me that the locals did not kill the Armenians living in the village even after the order was issued since they were women, children and the elderly and that the Armenian youth were already up in the “mountains.” However, in order to emphasize the extent of the massacres that the Armenians had committed, he told me the story of the Zeve war grave.⁴⁴ He argued that before the Russian invasion,

⁴⁴ This war grave is found northwest of Van, 18km from the center. It was turned into a memorial to commemorate the Muslims who died in 1915. It is a long stone column, which I found very similar to high column in the genocide Memorial in Yerevan. One Turkish informant said that the height of the column in the Zeve war grave is 19 meters and 18 cms, which symbolizes the liberation day of Van.

even though the Armenian youngsters “had gone to the mountains⁴⁵” (an idiom that is currently used whenever someone joins the PKK), this was still not war; the mass violence began with the invasion of the Russian army. He told me that there are still children of those Armenians who converted to Islam living in Gevaş. Hearing this, I asked him whether there were any feelings of distrust towards the converts' descendants and at that moment our conversation reached a very interesting point:

Burcu: I want to ask you something. Are people suspicious of Armenians who live here?

Ahmet: Do you mean now? In fact, the leaders of the PKK were all those, at the beginning.

Burcu: Those who?

Ahmet: They were all Armenians. They provoked people, stirred them up and withdrew. Now, it is the Kurds and the government that came face to face. It was them (Armenians) before (silence).⁴⁶

This issue was also brought up by Mahmut when he complained about how the mosques turned into “dirty” places of propaganda. According to him, the imams in the mosques talked about the members of the PKK as being of Armenian origin⁴⁷ and as being uncircumcised. For him, these sermons were to denigrate both the Armenians and the Kurdish movement. He told me that he no longer goes to the mosque, but instead attends the civil Fridays⁴⁸ and performs his prayers there, where “their” imams preach sermons in Kurdish.

⁴⁵ “Dağa çıktılar”

⁴⁶ Burcu: Peki bir şey sorcam hiç güvensizlik oluyo mu arada Ermenili kökenli insanlar var ya?

Ahmet: Şu an için? Zaten bu ilk etapta, ilk etapta bu PKK'nın şeyini yöneticileri hepsi şeylerdendi.

Burcu: Neylerdendi?

Ahmet: Hepsi Ermenilerdendi. Milleti kışkırttılar, uyandırdılar, onlar çekildiler şimdi Kürtlerle hükümet başbaşa kaldı. Daha önce onlardı. (sessizlik)

⁴⁷ Ermeni asıllı.

⁴⁸ This strategy is employed in order to boycott prayers at state-controlled

Therefore, the Kurdish movement and its armed struggle seem to play a dominant role in the way different people look at history and assign friends and foes. Rather than a generational difference, the political subjectivity of the informant seems to affect his/her perspective towards the Armenians. Moreover, in a locale where political positions of different subjects obviously sharpened in an atmosphere of violence, the past and the present get interlocked with each other to such an extent that some people go as far as to equate the Armenians with the PKK.

4.6. The Secrecy around Armenian Ancestors

In the previous section, I tried to indicate that even though many of my informants have developed a radical way to remember Armenians, some others did not share the empathy for Armenians expressed by these informants. In this section, I will discuss another dimension that led me to question the extent of the declared drastic change in remembering Armenians that happened in the last thirty years.

Throughout my fieldwork, I frequently heard from various people that there are many descendants of Armenians whose families converted to Islam during or after the massacres. Many of them also told me that these people are known in the community even though they themselves do not disclose their Armenian origins. Thus, this issue seems to operate as an open secret; a secret everybody knows but nobody reveals.

Some of the people I interviewed and/or had conversations with either told me that they actually had an Armenian relative in the past or that they suspect they did. For example, Mahmut had the opportunity to meet his wife's grandmother, an Armenian woman, the daughter of a priest. She told him how her mother was murdered in front of her own eyes. According to the story, someone hid her and later she got married to Mahmut's wife's grandfather, who was murdered in the Zilan massacre. Mahmut told me that although she took a Kurdish name, she always said that she did not trust the Kurds. Zelal, in her mid-30s, who had recently given her son an Armenian name, told me that the first husband of one of her mother's grandmothers (Saniye) was an Armenian man

who kidnapped Saniye and married her. Zelal told me that when the conflict began, Saniye took her son with her and tried to run away. She knew that since she had an Armenian husband, she would definitely be killed. Somehow, she managed to escape death, but nobody knows the whereabouts of the child. In the meantime, the Armenian husband was also hiding elsewhere hoping to meet them later, but since a price was put on Armenians' heads, he was murdered.

However not everyone was as explicit as Mahmut and Zelal were when talking about the Armenians in their families. Zeynep, in her late 60s, talked in detail about her deceased father and how he always suffered agony because of the things he had witnessed. She had a photograph of her father hanging on the wall behind her son who mainly kept silent during the interview. She wore a black scarf barely covering her hair. Most of the time, she spoke in a very calm manner, and it was obvious that she loved and respected her father who always wanted her to have a good education. With her father's early death, her life changed drastically, as her mother did not keep her promise to allow her daughter to continue her education. Her fluent speech and the newspapers that piled up in a corner of the room indicated that she still had a thirst for reading. She told me that her father was from Bahçesaray and had to leave the town, at the time of what she called “the great migration”:

Zeynep: Honestly, it was the state that expelled *the Armenians*. Our state did it. It was all oppression and cruelty. I mean, why would one leave one's home; to escape cruelty. They persecuted them. They literally killed them, butchered them, hanged them. There were some who could escape but they killed all the ones that couldn't escape. They tortured them to death. My father used to say “we ran away so hastily that we couldn't even take bread with us.” They raided and killed as many as they could. There were some who got the chance to escape at night, and the rest were killed by the state. Miserable people, they just left everything behind and ran away. There were a lot of people who escaped from Van, too. I remember that all the wealthy of Van whose last names are “ogullari” (the sons of) appropriated Armenians' wealth and prospered at their expense.

Burcu: Is that so?

Zeynep: After the Armenians left, I don't know wherever they came from, some shady types moved in Van from the neighborhoods. Of course, after the Armenians left, all the land became vacant such as houses and farms. They seized those places and settled without paying anything (angrily).

There were a lot of wealthy people in Van but that all that wealth belonged to Armenians.

Burcu: Do you know where these people whose last names are “ogullari” came from?

Zeynep: That’s not known, they came from somewhere, maybe they are also Armenians.⁴⁹

Finally, I couldn't restrain myself and asked whether her father might be Armenian:

Burcu: Was your father Armenian?

Zeynep: What?

Burcu: Was your father Armenian?

Zeynep: E, honestly, I don't know what my father was. Maybe they were but converted. I suppose there were a lot of converts from Bahçesaray.⁵⁰

After a while she told me that she was actually convinced that her father was of Armenian origin:

⁴⁹ Zeynep: Valla *Ermenileri* devlet kovmuş yani, bizim devletimiz kovmuş, baskı zulüm; insan yurdunu yuvasını niye terkeder zulümden kaçır? Zulüm ettiler. Resmen öldürdüler, kestiler astılar, kaçanlar kaçtı, kaçmayanların da hepsini öldürdüler. Valla işkenceyle öldürdüler, babam anlatırdı, diyordu ‘biz öyle kaçtık ki evde böyle bu kadar ekmek alacak fırsatı bulamadık.’ Öyle baskın yapmışlar yani, öldürebildiklerini öldürmüşler. Gece kaçanlar artık fırsat bulup kaçanlar, kalanları da devlet öldürdü hepsini. Bırakıp kaçtılar zavallılar. Van’da da çok kaçan olmuştu. Ben hatırlıyorum Van’ın zenginleri şimdi soyadı oğulları olan hepsi Ermenilerin malını yediler.

Burcu: Öyle mi?

Zeynep: Ermeniler gidince bunlar işte çevrelerden nerelerden geldilerse Van’ın içine ne oldukları da belli olmayan insanlar. Tabii Ermeniler gidince her taraf boş kalıyor, evler, araziler, bahçeler; parasız pulsuz alıp oturdular (sinirli). Çok zengin vardı Van’da ama hep Ermenilerden kalmaydı.

Burcu: Hiç biliyor musun bunların nerden gelmiş olduğunu, soyadı oğlu olanlar?

Zeynep: İşte belli değil, bir yerden gelmiş, belki de Ermeni de olabilirler.

⁵⁰ Burcu: Teyze senin baban Ermeni miydi?

Zeynep: Ne?

Burcu: Senin baban Ermeni miydi?

Zeynep: E valla benim babamın ne olduklarını ben de bilmiyorum, herhalde belki de öyleymişler ama dönmüşler. Bahçesaray’dan dönme çoktu herhalde.

Burcu: So, did you also have some thoughts about them being Armenians before I asked you?

Zeynep: It occurs to me from time to time because after *Hadji* (her husband) passed away, I came to this conviction. I guess someone told Zeynel that those who stayed there were the descendants of Armenians.

Burcu: I see. Did they tell this to your husband?

Zeynep: No, no. To my elder son.

Burcu: Elder son?

Zeynep: when the hadji (her husband) passed away, they came from Bahcesaray to express condolences. I think someone told him there, an elderly said that we might be of Armenian origin, but converted.⁵¹

Her son was also in the room and reminded her how his grandfather used to speak a foreign language with some of his relatives. She told me that she never directly asked this question to her father who died when she was 14 and who always talked about “the Armenians” with great sadness. During the interview, she was very sad and told me that her father's sorrow was so great that he got heart disease. Yet her son warned me specifically not to put her real name in my thesis, explaining that they have “conservative” relatives who would not like his mother to be talking about this secret.

Another informant, a young woman named Berfin in her early 20s, talked about her Armenian grandmother Gayane, who is said to have died due to sorrow. She told me that Gayane was left behind in her cradle when everybody left their village and when she grew up she got married to the man who had adopted her. Then, she got married to Berfin's grandfather after the death of her first husband, and Berfin knows the story of

⁵¹ Burcu: Peki sen ben sana sormadan evvel de düşünüyor muydun acaba Ermeniler miydi diye?

Zeynep: Geliyor zaman zaman aklıma geliyor. Çünkü benim rahmetli hacının ölümünden sonra ben buna iyice karar verdim, birileri anlatmıştı herhalde, orda kalanların kökenlerinin Ermeni olduğunu anlatmıştı.

Burcu: Hı senin hacıya mı anlatmıştı?

Zeynep: Yok yok benim büyük oğlana.

Burcu: Büyük oğlana?

Zeynep: Hacı (kocam) rahmete gittiği zaman Bahçesaray'dan taziyeye geldiler orda herhalde birileri anlatmış büyük biri, demiş belki de yani kökenleri Ermeni olabilir sonra dönmüşler ama.

Gayane through her grandfather. She told me that she died very early, in her 40s, and the people who knew her always mentioned that she was a very sad woman. Berfin's own life seems to be very painful as well, and got further complicated by her Armenian aunt's sudden return in 1996. She explained to me with great sadness that their neighbors ostracized her and her family when her aunt stayed with them at a time when "everybody was suspicious of everybody else." Her aunt could stay there only a year, because of the pressure that came from the state. She told me that their house was always under scrutiny by the police who were occasionally breaking in. Her narrative was full of pauses and her voice was grave while she was talking about her childhood fears. She told me that there might be other Armenian families in her village, but nobody speaks of the past, nobody wants to remember the past. She claimed that everybody wants to *believe* that these sufferings belong to the past. She thinks that most of the descendants of the perpetrators also want to forget the past, since it weighs on their conscience. Then, she confessed that she does not want to think about the lives of her aunt and her grandmother:

I don't even want to feel it. I get sad when I think about it. I feel what they might have gone through. We haven't led a normal childhood either. When their pain comes on top of ours, I feel like I go round the bend. We grew up in the middle of the war. The state of mind it created is very different. Even now, when I hear a loud noise, I wake up thinking that there is an armed conflict. It is the best to forget. What if we start talking, there is so much pain to talk about; do you think this is the only one? Compared to what we lived through, this one is the softest. All these things we heard from our grandparents. How will we be normal? I sometimes think about this (silence).⁵²

For Berfin, the past is something that should be forgotten since the burden of remembering it is too heavy. That is why she told me that only her close friends know

⁵² Ben hissetmek bile istemiyorum. Düşününce üzülüyorum. Neler yaşamış olabileceklerini hissediyorum. Biz de çocukken normal bir çocukluk yaşamadık ki bi de onların acıları da üstüne binerse insan kafayı yiyecek gibi oluyo. Savaş içinde büyüdük. O savaşın üzerimizde yarattığı psikoloji çok farklı. Halen bile bir ses duyunca bir çatışma mı var diye uyanıyorum. Unutmak en iyisi. Konuşursak o kadar acı var ki sadece bu mu? Bunlar en hafifi bir de bizim yaşadıklarımız var birebir yaşadıklarımız. Bu bizim duyduklarımız nenemizden dedemizden. Biz nasıl normal olacaz bazen bunu çok düşünüyorum. (sessizlik)

about these stories and that she does not disclose her identity to everyone. Her narrative was the most fragmented and burdensome of all the interviews I conducted.

This secrecy concerning Armenian relatives was present both in Zeynep and Berfin's lives. Neither of them easily disclosed their Armenian origins to me. Many of the informants I mentioned above and many others with whom I had personal conversations told me that when they noticed that their parents do not want to talk about one of their ancestors they would think of the possibility that this person was of Armenian origin. For example, in the next section I will talk about Baran, who as a child found some remnants which he thought belonged to Armenians. When I was in Van, he frequently told me that he suspects that his mother's side is of Armenian origin, because he knew that the village his mother's family lived in was an Armenian village in the past. Another reason for his suspicion was his family's reluctance to talk about his mother's side whenever he asked questions about them. I still regularly talk to Baran on the phone. A month ago he called me and told me that one of his relatives helped him construct his family tree and apparently his mother's grandmother was actually Armenian.

These silences are as important as what is uttered and what I understood is that what is deemed important is transmitted and what reached my ears were the bits and pieces of the transferred memories which were regarded as relevant to the interviewee.

4.7. The Remnants that Give No Rest

We were in a great plain, the summit of a plateau fifty-five hundred feet above sea-level, bordered by mountains twelve thousand to fourteen thousand feet high. The city lay before us, its suburbs called Aikesdan (Garden City), with their orchards and vineyards, stretching greenly eastward from the old walled city for four miles. This walled city, with its crowded houses, its mosques and minarets and churches and bazaars, lay at the base of a great rock rising three hundred feet sheer above it, on the summit of which stood the towers and battlements of an ancient castle; on the lakeward side was carved in cuneiform characters a tri-lingual inscription by Xerxes; its northern side, covered with earth and verdure, sloped steeply to the plain (Ussher, 1917: 34-35).

The above description is taken from the book of Dr. Ussher, an American representative and missionary, who wrote an eyewitness account about the events of 1915 in Van. It would not be misleading to say that the city and its suburbs he describes no longer exist. The old city center was completely burned down apart from some indistinguishable ruins that one can view from the rock castle of Van. The current city center is actually what was previously called “the gardens,” and is now full of new blocks of flats. The city was totally destroyed by 1918 following the Russian invasion and evacuation (Minassian 1999: 172). Robert Bevan claims that apart from two mosques the city of Van was almost entirely flattened (Bevan, 2007: 54). I was hoping that in people's memories one could find the echoes of old Van even though at first glance the city center seemed devoid of history.

One of the reasons that I chose Van as my research site was the fact that I was told that there were still material remnants of Armenians in the city. As I have mentioned earlier, my informants also commonly either implied or directly stated that Van used to belong to the Armenians. The traces of the environment operated as corporeal reminders for many of them (Bevan, 2007: 15). They gave me examples of villages which are still called by their Armenian names and fields or mills named after their Armenian owners (Vartan's field or Marko's mill). They mentioned stones with crosses on them that people used to build their houses with. During our trips to the surrounding villages, my key informants helped me meet locals. These people accompanied us and showed the terrain, pointing at crosses and places that were dug up. My untrained eyes mostly failed to see these signs and this amused them because they considered these signs to be conspicuously visible.

While walking in the city, there are a number of restaurants, hotels, hospitals and internet cafes called either Akhtamar or Akdamar and, thus, it is no surprise that almost everybody living in Van sees the Akhtamar church as the hallmark of the Armenian culture of Van. Despite its restoration as a museum, people living in Van still refer to it as Akhtamar⁵³ or Akdamar church even though no mass was held there until September 2010 for decades. It is a place famous for its natural and architectural beauty and

⁵³ Officially the church is called Akdamar church, but locals and Armenians mostly call it by its historical name; Akhtamar, emphasizing the “kh” sound.

associated with a folk story that narrates the tragic love story between a young man and woman.⁵⁴ As I have discussed in the preceding sections, the opening of the church for mass was an exciting event that was perceived by many of my informants as an opportunity to meet Armenians, even maybe those whose grandparents had lived in Van. The mass was not only a happy and exciting occasion for the residents of Van, for some, it was also seen as being profitable for the city's economy. There also seem to be those who were disturbed by the mass, for example my informant Osman (see the last section), who initiated a performance of Muslim prayers in the mosque found in the rock castle of Van just before the opening of the church.

I believe that the remains they have encountered growing up profoundly influence my informants' memory of Armenians. In many narratives, interviewees mention objects they found while tilling the soil, or the ruins of a church they discovered while grazing their animals. These material traces seem to capture their imagination and lead them to ask questions about their previous owners. Their narratives suggest that, these traces, even in the absence of specific transmitted memories of Armenians, bind them to a past that they have not witnessed themselves. They facilitate the residents of Van to actively imagine and interpret the past. As David Lowenthal argued, "Like memories, relics once abandoned or forgotten may become more treasured than those in continual use; the discontinuity in their history focuses attention on them, particularly if scarcity or fragility threatens their imminent extinction" (Lowenthal, 1985: 240). My informants' narratives indicated the appeal that they found in the remnants of the Armenians. However, Lowenthal rightfully added; "unlike history and memory, whose sheer existence betoken the past, the tangible past cannot stand on its own" (Lowenthal, 1985: 243). This section intends to show the way my informants gave voice to these mute remnants.

⁵⁴ In the typical plot, a young man falls in love with an Armenian girl named Tamara; the daughter of the hermit living in the church on Akhtamar island. Every night, the man crosses the lake by following the light of the candle the girl holds in her hands. One night, the father discovers this and takes the candle from Tamara. He keeps wandering around the island while the man is swimming, and finally the man loses his way and dies. While dying, he shouts the girl's name: "Akh Tamara."

Many of my informants narrated stories of poor men who became rich after unearthing what they believe to be buried Armenian treasures. I met two young men, one from Muradiye and one from Amik, who had participated in a treasure hunt and both claimed to have found nothing. The belief in buried Armenian treasures seems strong, since many of the people I talked to mentioned that people are digging up the surroundings of old houses, churches and even graves with the hope of obtaining wealth. For example, I met an old man from Diyarbakır who told me that in the 1970s he and some other men were taken to Akhtamar Island by an organizer who told them that they could find gold there. All the talk about buried treasure seems to be so prevalent that another informant, a young woman of 18 years of age, told me that her friends in the cram school were asking her to bring a metal detector and some maps with her when they figured out that she had an Armenian relative. For some of the people I met in Van, the treasure hunting stories were amusing since they told me that many of these hunters spend enormous energy and a lot of money in vain. For many of my informants, however, except for those who claimed to have participated in these treasure hunts, these acts were regarded as disrespectful. A general sense of uneasiness was expressed by many of my informants who believed that this was a further violation of the rights of an already tormented people. It is difficult to date the beginning of this sensitivity, because this uneasiness was expressed to me in the current circumstances. However, their radical reinterpretation of the transmitted memories in the last thirty years might also be reflected in their relationship with the remnants that were left behind by the Armenians. In a politically polarized city where the threat of violence still lingers, the traces that reminded people of the destruction of the Armenians and their heritage seemed to have found a new meaning in the stories of those who began to identify themselves as the new victims of the state.

Burcu: So, what do your parents say when they see these remnants?

Baran: (Discontentedly) they say “they (Armenians) lived here and then left.”

Burcu: That’s it?

Baran: But this is actually a question that should bother our grandfathers more than us, because Armenians living here go a long way back in this geography. Unfortunately, our generation is unaware of these things. If it

wasn't for these remnants, maybe we would not be able to see the truth in its true color.⁵⁵

The above dialogue took place between me and Baran, who is a young Kurdish man living in Gevaş. He told me that one day while he and his father were working in the fields, they discovered pieces of pottery and some coins which they gave to the museum of Van. He was one of my informants whose childhood questions regarding these objects they had found were left unanswered or answered half-heartedly as his parents simply said "the Armenians had lived here." He argued that it was through these remnants they came to know the past of the city.

Baran told me that he and his father discovered the pottery when he was 9 or 10 and also shared another memory of his childhood. He recounted that one day while he was playing with his friends in the street, a Volkswagen with a couple of people in it approached them and asked them where the mill was. When he narrated to this to his father, he told Baran that maybe they wanted to take something from the ruins, or maybe just wanted to know their history.

Like Baran's story, many of my informants' narratives contained childhood encounters either with ruins or with Armenians who visited Van. Delil told me that every year, Armenians used to come to his village in Çatak and show their children the place. He told me that they would not talk to anybody; they just moved around silently and looked around. Rojda, the narrator of the story of Gule, implied that she could grasp the difference between a Muslim and a Christian whenever she visited the cemetery with her family. She told me that they used to call the graves of the Armenians "the cross," and while her family demanded that she be on her best behavior when they were close to the Muslim graves, she was allowed great liberty when playing around Armenian graves. This liberty, she argued, disturbed her as a child and disturbs her even today:

⁵⁵ Burcu: Peki bu kalıntıları görünce ne diyor ailen?

Baran: (Tatminsizce) Gelip yaşamış gitmişler diyor.

Burcu: O kadar?

Baran: Ama bizim hafızamızı değil de daha çok dedelerimizin hafızasını zorlaması gereken bir soru aslında bu. Çünkü Ermenilerin bu coğrafyada yaşantıları daha eskiye dayanıyor. Malesef, bizim nesil belki bihaberdir. Bu kalıntılar olmasa belki biz de bu gerçekliği bu kadar çıplak göremeyecektik.

For example, there are crosses in our village, they are Armenian graves; they are different. Muslim graves are separate from them; their graves were different from the Muslims'. That's why we know about them, because we always used to ask "why are they like this?" For example, they put two stones on our graves and they face towards the kiblah but theirs are not like that. Theirs are straight on top of this thing, they call it cross, they call them "haça fille." They used to call them "Armenians' crosses, that's how we know about them, you see? (Emphatically) If it wasn't for their heritage, if it wasn't for their corpses, we wouldn't be able to know about them. That's why we kept asking about them because they didn't used to hold them dear. For example, when it comes to Muslim graves, they would tell us not to step on them, but they wouldn't say such a thing for their (Armenians') graves. You could just step on them or break them, they would say no word. But dead is dead. I have respect for them. I mean I feel remorse for it myself in the name of them.⁵⁶

Zeynep, who suspects that her father was Armenian, narrated an event that happened seventeen years ago. She told me that she was in Bahçesaray when she and her uncle discovered a "hiding place" of Armenians:

Zeynep: I went to Bahcesaray 17 years ago. My uncle had sheep. There was this huge mountain. One day he brought the sheep and herded them up on a hill; I saw this haystack, he lifted it and I saw a door this big (showing it with her hands).

Burcu: And then?

Zeynep: It was a stone door. He kept pulling the door. I herded the sheep through the door. I asked my uncle "what is this?," he said, "It is from the Armenians, it is a hiding place from Armenians." Dating back to Armenians which means that they were hiding in there... Now people

⁵⁶ Mesela bizim köyde haç var, Ermenilerin mezarları var, ayrıdır. Mesela müslümanların ayrıdır, onlarınki de ayrıdır. Onun için biz biliyoruz, çünkü hep sorardık: "Niye bunlar böyledir?" Mesela bizim mezarlarımıza iki tane taş bırakıyorlar, böyle kible tarafına verirler, onlarınki öyle değil. Onlarınki böyle düzdür, bir büyük şey üstündedir yani, haç diyolar onlara. İşte haça fille. Ermenilerin haçları diyordular onun için biz biliyoruz biliyor musun? (vurgulu) Yoksa onların mirası olmasaydı, cenazeleri olmasaydı belki biz de bilmedik yani. Onun için hep sorardık yani. Çünkü onların mezarına da hiç değer vermezdiler. Mesela müslümanların ha işte basmayalım şudur kör olacaksınız, ama onlarınki hiçbir şey demezdiler. Yani basarsan kırarsan ne yaparsan da hiçbir şey demezdiler. Halbuki ölü ölüdür. Ben öyle- kendi fikrim benim saygım var, gerçekten ben şu an vicdan azabı, onların yerine ben vicdan azabı çekiyorum.

turned them into, excuse my language, barn or hayloft (making a wry face). Some churches still exist.⁵⁷

These unexpected encounters with objects of the past are regarded as evidence of the Armenian past of the city. They are also powerful tools of imagination for a period one has not experienced directly. Some seem to operate as means of transgressing the limits of knowing; finding pottery or encountering graves lead people to ask questions of their parents and, years later, these encounters are still remembered and reinterpreted:

So, when you see those ruined places where you live, those buildings which have turned into shambles, you become interested, you want to go back to the history and inquire about the past. Think of a tree, I mean I saw a 400 year-old tree once. I mean, I started to ask by whom that tree was planted. But in reality you cannot pass beyond two hundred years, not two hundred, even one hundred years in history. There is a barrier before you.⁵⁸

As Necmi suggests above, the ruins attract attention and lead one to think of history. The tree he is talking about is a grape vine in Gevaş from which he extracted a branch and planted in the garden of their house. As he states, even when one encounters a barrier when one inquires about the distant past, all these ruins and remnants serve as evidence of Van's Armenian past and have important roles in constituting local people's memories.

⁵⁷ Zeynep: Ben 17 sene bundan önce şeye gittim, Bahçesaray'a gittim. Benim dayımın koyunları vardı. Bir gün koyunları dayım aldı getirdi, böyle dağdır yani bakıyosun kocaman bi dağ! Sürdü sürdü sürdü Mustafa dayı, böyle bir tepeye çıkardı baktım; böyle girdi ot vardı otları kaldırdı baktım o dağın önünde (eliyle gösteriyor) bu kadar bir kapı.

Burcu: Eee?

Zeynep: Taş kapı. O taşı çekti çekti çekti. Baktım koyunları sürdüm onun içine. Dedim dayı bu nedir? Dedi, bu Ermenilerden kalma, onların saklandığı yerlerdir. Ermenilerden kalma demek ki saklanıyolarmış orda...A şimdi millet kendine afedersin ahır yapmış hayvan yeri samanlık falan (yüzü ekşiyor). Ben onu da öyle gördüm yani. Kiliseler hala var.

⁵⁸ İşte yaşadığım yerlerdeki o viraneler, harabeye dönmüş bazı yapılar ister istemez bunlar ilgili çekiyor, tarihe dönmek istiyorsun geçmişi biraz irdelemeye çalışıyorsun. Bir ağacı düşün yani ben 400 yaşında ağaç gördüm. Hani bu ağacın kimler tarafından ekildiğini sorgulamaya başladım. Bakıyosun iki yüz ne iki yüzü yüz yıllık bir tarihin ötesine de geçemiyorsun, bir set var karşında.

While these remnants lead the subjects to imagine a period about which they have no autobiographical knowledge, other informants of mine seem to have a more ambivalent relationship with them. Those who search for the wealth of the Armenians establish a mysterious relationship with it:

When we get to Van, if we see that all the doors and windows are made of gold, then we say “yes, all those who live here have dug out our gold.”⁵⁹

The above sentence was told to me by Yener, who claimed that there is a rumor that circulates among the people living in Van that there is Armenian wealth lying under the earth. Although not all of my informants thought the wealth of Van was held mainly by Armenians, the stories of treasure hunting that I have mentioned above show that this belief has certain validity for the current residents of Van. Yener accompanied me to Amik, a village close to Van, as he insisted that I see the places where he and his family had picnicked when he was a child. It was a small village very near the lake. While we were wandering around, we met a young man who showed us the places that had been dug up and told us that he had also tried to find some Armenian or Urartian gold, though his search had been in vain. I was terrified seeing some bones extracted from a Christian grave. I could not stop myself and asked him if he did not fear digging up human graves, to which he answered no. He also told us that there have always been people coming to the village with maps, and, with the help of local people, they would clandestinely excavate places where they believed precious items were buried.

I saw similar holes in another village in Perwari, next to which a pile of old stones created a small mound. I was told that this was once a church. For some people, the treasure hunting attempts of others is an amusing conversation piece as many of these attempts seem to be unsuccessful. I was also told that some people were burying items and waiting for them to get old. According to this story, counterfeiters trick their victim by introducing themselves as an Armenian coming from outside of Van with a fake map for buried treasure.

Apart from these humorous stories, however, the people who talked about such stories during interviews mentioned them with disapproval. Yener, whose grandfather's

⁵⁹ Biz Van'a geldiğimizde Van'daki bütün kapı pencerelerin altından olduğunu görürsek o zaman deriz, evet, burdakilerin hepsi bizim altınlarımızı çıkartmışlar.

house was built on the garden of an old church, narrated me this very vivid and elaborate story with great enthusiasm:

Yener: One day, they were ploughing the soil in the backyard of my grandfather's house which was built on a church. Do you know what that means?

Burcu: No, I don't know.

Yener: It means that they were turning the soil over to cultivate. As they are doing it, the shovel goes down in a bit deeper and gets stuck there. They start digging a bit. They see a big *sal*, I mean stone and then lift it. They are not my uncles or someone from my grandfather's side. This incident took place when my grandfather's family was not there. The neighbors start digging the stone, and lift it. Underneath is lime. You know what that is, right? When you hide something, you pour lime on it for isolation. So they get very excited and clean off the lime. They find a vessel and then break it. They see that it is full of ants (hesitatingly).

Burcu: Ants?

Yener: Yes. Of course, it would never cross their mind. And then the ants start scattering around and disappear. (fast) So, they get together at dinner and narrate what happened. In fact, my grandfather goes there and sees the stone, the lime and the broken vessel, but there is nothing in it. There is only some sand and soil inside it. He says "it was a spell. If you had poured some blood on the ants, they would all have turned into gold." You get it? This is very strange, that is, interesting. For example, bees. These stories are mostly about ants or bees like when you pour blood on them etc...But where are you going to find blood. It can't be your own blood, you could kill a chicken and when you pour the blood they will turn into gold and so on.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Yener: Bizim dedenin kilisenin üzerine kurulan evinin arka bahçesinde bir gün şey yapıyorlar, işte kerdi tepme var biliyosun?

Burcu: Bilmiyorum.

Yener: Kerdi tepme işte toprağı havalandırıp daha sonra ekmek. Bunu yaparken kürek biraz derine falan gidiyor, bir şeye takılıyor falan, ordan biraz kazıyorlar. Bir sal, büyük, sal diyorlar taşa, sonra taşı kaldırıyorlar. Bunu yapan amcalarım ya da dedemin ailesinden değil, imece usulüyle yapıyorlar. Şimdi dedemlerin olmadığı bir zamana denk geliyomuş bu olay, komşular kazıyorlar sala denk geliyolar, salı kaldırıyorlar, kireç. Hani kireci biliyosun hani, bir şeyi saklarsan izolasyon noktasında kireç dökersin. İşte bayağı bir heyecanlanıyorlar, kireci falan temizliyorlar. Bir küp çıkıyor. Küpü kırıyorlar ve küpün içi karınca dolu.(duraksıyor)

Burcu: Karınca?

Yener: Evet. Tabii akıllarına gelmiyor, tabi karıncalar dağılıyor gidiyor sonra.

Yener told me that years ago his father had a dream, in which a respected religious figure told him the whereabouts of some buried treasures. Even though he is occasionally reminded of this dream and gets excited about the possibility of its coming true, Yener told me that he did not try to do anything. Yener thinks that the way his grandfather and his friends dealt with the treasure hunt was quite superstitious, but I came across similar supernatural elements in other stories as well. Dilan, whose aunt's husband seems to be a treasure hunting enthusiast, narrated a story with a similar theme:

When the Armenians come to Van, they bring maps with them. Do you know how it works? They bring a map and say “there are some things buried here and there, come help us, we are going to share it.” They search for it. For example, there is a very nice story about this. Supposedly, there was an enormous treasure in their village, okay? They threw that device, there really was treasure. They went and dug there at night. A huge snake came out of the pit. The imam who was there at the time said “you need the blood of a young and virgin boy, you will kill him and pour the blood there.” Of course no family would sacrifice their son for such a thing. The top of the snake remained uncovered for a couple of days. They say “when the grader approached closer, the snake was getting aggressive but when it was staying away, it was not attacking anybody.” Everybody tells this story there. I don't know how much of it is true and how much of it is not but that was the story they told us. Then they realize that they cannot deal with the snake, and of course no one would kill their son for this, so they buried it again. They just ignore that there is treasure underneath.⁶¹

(hızlı hızlı) İşte akşam yemekte falan buluşuyorlar, anlatıyorlar işte böyle böyle bir şey bulduk falan. Hakikaten dedem gidiyor bakıyor sal var, kireç var, küp kırık, içinde hiçbir şey yok. Kum falan toprak var. Ya diyor ki ‘İşte bu büyüydü’ diyor. ‘Yani siz aslında bu karıncaların üstüne kan akıtsaydınız hepsi altın olacaktı.’ Yani tamam mı? Garip bir şey yani ilginç. Mesela arıdır özellikle arıya dönüşüyordur. Mesela karınca ve arı üzerinde daha çok söyleniyor bu şeyler. Mesela kan döktüğünüz zaman, hani işte o kadar kanı nerden bulacaksınız falan, e kendi kanın olmaz, tavuk kesebilirdiniz falan. İşte karıncaların üstüne doktüğünüz zaman hepsi çil çil altın olacaktı.

⁶¹ Ya Ermeniler Van'a geldikleri zaman haritalarla geliyorlar. Yani nası oluyor biliyor musun, bir harita getiriyorlar diyorlar: ‘burda burda bir şey var, gelin yardım edin, bölüşeceğiz’. Arıyorlar. Mesela bak çok güzel bir hikayeleri var. Onların köyünde çok büyük bi gömü varmış tamam mı? Bu aleti atmışlar gerçekten de var. Gidip gece orayı kazmışlar, koskoca bir yılan çıkmış gömünün olduğu yerde. Ordaki imam demiş ki ‘genç ve bakir bir erkek ölüsü, erkek kanı lazım, öldüreceksiniz ve kanını oraya akıtacaksınız’. Tabii hiçbir aile genç oğlunu bunun için feda etmez. Bir kaç gün o yılanın üstü açık kalmış ve şey diyorlar, greyder yılanı yaklaştığı zaman yılan saldırgan oluyordu, uzak durduğu zaman

Another informant, a young woman called Melek from Muradiye, told me that there was a buried treasure protected by the djins. She claims that even though its whereabouts is known, nobody tries to unearth it. While some people become cautious about these treasures as a result of these stories, others seem to become attracted to them and begin to search for treasures as well. Muhammed seems to be one of the former whose attention was captured by these mysterious stories:

Muhammed: Selimbey street, it is a place very close to the Rock Castle. The Castle is an ideal place to hide gold, so that's why we chose it. I have friends who do this job, I mean, I have friends who have taken this up as an occupation.

Burcu: And then?

Muhammed: I felt very strange. They told me very interesting things. For example, they told me that one day when they were going to the Castle to search for gold a white cat was watching them.

Burcu: Aha

Muhammed: It drew my attention because of these exciting and interesting things happening. Therefore, I joined for treasure hunting.⁶²

The belief in these supernatural elements is usually based on the claim that Armenians, while burying their precious items, had put spells on them in order to prevent others from excavating them. Apart from those who find these stories amusing or sad, those

yılan hiç kimseye saldırmıyordu. Boğa yılanı, çok büyük bir yılan. Bunu herkes anlatıyo orda. Yani ne kadarı gerçek ne kadarı değil bilmiyorum ama öyle anlattılar bize de. Ondan sonra baktılar olmuyor, yılanla başedemiyorlar, kimse de kendisi çocuğunu öldürmez bunun için, üstünü kapattılar. Yok sayıyolar şimdi orada bir gömü olduğunu.

⁶² Muhammed: Selimbey mahallesi, Kale'ye yakın bir yer. Kale de altın için ideal bir yer, ondan dolayı orayı seçtik. Arkadaşlarımız, sürekli bu işi yapan arkadaşlarım var, yani bunu kendine iş edinmiş arkadaşlarım var. Ondan dolayı.

Burcu: Sonra?

Muhammed: Acayip oldum. Mesela bana çok ilgi çekici şeyler anlattıkları oldu. Mesela bir gün Van Kalesi'nde bunlar altın aramaya giderken bir beyaz kedinin bunları seyrettiğini söylediler

Burcu: Him

Muhammed: Böyle heyecan çekici, ilgi çekici şeyler olduğundan dolayı da benim ilgimi çekti. Ben de bundan dolayı gömü aramaya katıldım.

who believe in them seem to be attracted to treasure hunts both for the possibility of getting rich, and for these uncanny stories that surround treasure hunts. Freud argues that while novel things might be threatening, an additional dimension is needed for us to understand “the uncanny.” He argues (Freud, 1919: 223-224) that the opposite of the German word “unheimlich” has two meanings at the same time: “what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other hand, what is concealed and kept out sight.” Thus uncanny is “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud, 1919: 219).

Some folklorists (Lindow, 1982; Mullen, 1978) have pointed out similar extraordinary elements; djins and souls protecting treasures in the contexts of American and Swedish buried treasure tales. However, as one of my informants pointed out, the interesting aspect of Van's treasures is that they turn into bees and ants; animals believed to be productive and hard-working. These characteristics are also attributed to Van Armenians by the local people. In that sense, there might be something familiar lurking in the image of these animals that comes into the open when the 'concealed' treasure is unearthed.

However, not all the stories contain supernatural elements. Even though the treasure hunts are said to be failed attempts most of the time, the view is prevalent that if a person gains wealth easily and quickly, it might have been gained through buried treasures. Melek, who told me about a treasure protected by djins, also remarked that throughout her childhood, she was told treasure hunting stories:

Melek: There are some who look for stones in the graves. There were some in my hometown, I used to hear about them. You hear about people who search for treasure, Armenians buried them somehow. But I know some people who have been searching for treasure for years. But I also know a lot of them who really found treasure and improved their positions in life. But I won't say who they are (laughing). Nobody from my family found treasure but I heard about a lot of people moved to Istanbul after they found treasure. (laughing) We grew up with these stories, I saw it with my own eyes.

Burcu: Really?

Melek: I can't reveal their names now. There is a village next to ours; I know a family from there. For example, there was a kid at school; he used to say “My father and I have been searching for gold for years but all we found was one silver coin.” All the mountains! When you go to the mountains you can see many places dug up. People are still searching because there were

some who found treasure. Of course not everybody found something. I mean, one has to know where to search for treasures. For example, think of a shepherd who herds his animals up in the mountains. The best sign for him is a rock: the shape of the rock. It's been marked. When you see a huge rock, you figure out that it was placed there later. Do you understand? Anyone with common sense understands and says that "that rock was not played there by the will of God, I mean, someone touched (moved) it and put it there". There are a lot of people who thought so and found gold.⁶³

Thus, there seems to be a universe of signs and codes associated with these practices. What intrigues me, however, is the way my informants grew up with these stories and came to know Van's past not only through stories of violence that were directly narrated to them by the elderly, but also through this discursive plane that embraces mystery, hope and curiosity at the same time. Moreover, through this belief in wealth that awaits unearthing, the belief in the wealth of Armenians is also reinforced.

Baran told me the story of a man he met on the bus to Gevaş. He reported that the man told him about his desire to move to another house because him and his family were not able to find peace in the house where they were living at the time. When Baran inquired further, the man told him that his family migrated from Caucasia and when they came to Gevaş, they built their house on an Armenian graveyard. He also told my

⁶³ Melek: Mezarda taş arayanlar oluyo mesela. Memlekette vardı, duyuyordum. Orda define arayan insanlar duyarsınız, Ermeniler gömmüştür bir şekilde. Ama bunun için yıllarca arayan insanlar biliyorum ben. Ama gerçekten bulmuş ve çok iyi yerlere gelmiş insanlar da çok biliyorum. Onları da söylemeyeyim (gülüyor). Benim ailemden hiç olmadı bulan ama başka çevreden duydum, İstanbul'a yerleşen çok insan duydum. (gülüyor) Oooo küçükken hep böyle şeylerle büyüdük, gözümle gördüm.

Burcu: Yaa?

Melek: Şimdi o insanların isimlerini falan veremem. Bizim köyün yanında başka bir köy var, orada bir aile biliyorum. Mesela onun erkek çocuğu, o hep okulda derdi mesela: 'Biz babamla yıllardır altın arıyoruz ama sadece bir tane gümüş para bulduk'. Bütün dağları! Çünkü mesela siz dağlara gittiğiniz zaman çok kazılmış yer görürsünüz. Çıkarın, bulan olduğu için insanlar arıyor. Tabii herkes de çıkaramıyor yani. Tabii bilmek lazım, yani mesela bir çoban düşünün hayvanları otlatmaya götürür dağa. Onun için en güzel işaret taş orda, taşın şekli. İşaretlenmiştir. Bir de kocaman bir taşı siz oraya koydunuz mu o taşın sonradan oraya konduğunu anlarsınız, anladınız mı? Her aklını kullanan "Ya bu taş Allah'ın yaratmasıyla burada değil. Bu buna bir el dokunmuş, buraya koymuş" der yani. Böyle deyip de o taştan altın çıkarın çok insan var.

friend that when he was a child an Armenian woman occasionally came to their house telling them that their house actually belonged to her family.

When a friend and I visited the Varag Monastery in a village called Yedi Kiliseler, I spoke to a man whose name was Süleyman. He told me that his father migrated from Bahçeşehir to the village where he worked as an imam. The monastery was being used as a barn, but his father convinced the villagers to turn it back to a monastery and became its protector. When we were inside, I noticed that although it was an old structure it was very nicely kept. It was a very cold but orderly place. We learned that Süleyman had been taking care of the monastery for approximately twenty years. When I asked him the reason, he told me that it was the last wish of his father, who for thirty years had protected the monastery by himself. I noticed old photographs of the monastery he had hung on the stone walls and I also noticed a large visitor's notebook. Süleyman told me that there were some other notebooks at home, all filled by the visitors of the monastery who had come to visit if from many different places. Süleyman has made various friends from Armenia and visited them in Yerevan. He told me that they were very nice people as his father had always said, and that they sometimes brought small gifts for him and for the children who live in the village. I saw a pile of stones that was meticulously placed in a corner. I was told that they were stones that had fallen from the roof. He was keeping them in case the time comes and the monastery is renovated. As far as I understood, he had also become a social pariah, as he prevented treasure hunters from digging around the monastery and he, the son of the imam, also wrote a number of petitions requesting that the mosque adjacent to the monastery be demolished.

4.8. Perpetrators or victims?

I also interviewed four men between the ages of 50 and 80, who claim to be natives of the city of Van. Being the notables of the city, they referred to themselves as the "Özvanlılar" (the genuine residents of Van) and in that way they tried to differentiate themselves from other groups currently living in Van; especially, from the Kurds who

have migrated to the center in the last 30 years. Two of them are retired teachers, while the other two had worked as state officials. They all provided very similar nationalistic accounts, to such a degree that they overshadowed their own life stories. In this section, I want to analyze their narratives, because they all are notables of the city who have great power over public opinion as they are involved in many associations and occasionally write for local newspapers.

The person who put me in contact with these people was a feminist activist from VAKAD⁶⁴ (Women Association of Van). Before doing my fieldwork in Van, I had heard about an association called (TEIAD). Later, I figured out that all these four men were either members of or had a connection to this association, however none of them told me this directly. Even though I tried to conduct oral history interviews with them by trying to focus on their everyday and family life, I think that they narrated their stories not as ordinary persons but as spokespersons of this association.

These informants remembered the past in a significantly different way compared to my other informants. Their narratives were in line with the official discourse of denialism. First of all, all of them depicted themselves and their families as victims of Armenian cruelties. Moreover, they argued that they were also the victims of the ongoing struggle between the state and the PKK. In this way, like my other informants, they drew an analogy between 1915 and today, but the meaning they attributed to this similarity and the emotions accompanying these two different periods were significantly different. Like the PKK of today, the Armenian armed bands were narrated with explicit hatred. The period before 1915 was remembered as a golden age when their families had lived with their Armenian neighbors like brothers and sisters. They also argued that their childhood years were very happy times which deteriorated with the migration wave that took place in the last thirty years. Lastly, their life history narratives were overshadowed by “objective” historical information derived from statistics and archives and by references to the great powers' division plans of the Ottoman Empire/ Turkey. Most of all, much in their narratives was overshadowed by their concern to refute genocide claims.

⁶⁴ “Van Kadın Derneği”

These informants claimed that they were the real victims of 1915. According to them, they were both the victims of the Armenian armed bands and of the migration period which began with the Russian army's occupation of Van. Rifat, a neatly dressed, 50 year-old Turkish man with great elocution, recounted the difficult circumstances at the time his grandparents evacuated the city.

Our grandfathers became *muhacjir* (immigrants) in 1915, that is, they migrated. After the Russian invasion, the Governor Mr. Haydar issued a decision for the families of Van, who were mostly the old, women and children, to evacuate the city on the basis that they wouldn't be able to stand up to the massacres of the Russian invasion and the attacks of the Armenian armed bands. The families who evacuated the city went mostly to Adana, Kahramanmaras, Kirkuk and Mosul, all the way down to the south. Some of them stayed there and couldn't make it back for various reasons. Some of them lost their lives on the way due to diseases and hunger. Some others came back to Van on foot later on. They went on foot all the way. They may sometimes have ridden on animals but along the way, they came face to face with hunger, thirst and bandits. It was a painful and anguished journey. Along the road, it turned into a matter of life and death. Some of them saved their lives and took shelter somewhere. Some went to Diyarbakir, some to Konya. Some others, who were strong enough, settled, albeit temporarily, wherever they were protected or taken care of.⁶⁵

Another informant is Osman, who I visited in the office where he worked as a newspaper columnist. He was an energetic man in his 70s, who wore a lapel pin of the Turkish flag. His room was decorated with Turkish flags and photographs of the Zeve war grave. He told me that his mother died very early and his father got married to a Kurdish woman who, as he told me, had made great efforts to contribute to his

⁶⁵ Bizim ailemiz 1915'te dedelerimiz muhacir olmuş, yani göç etmişler. Burada Rus işgalinden sonra Vali Haydar Bey bir karar çıkarmış artık burda Rus işgali ve Ermeni çetelerinin katliamlarına karşı durulamayacağı için Van'lı ailelerin, ki bunların büyük çoğunluğu yaşlı ve kadınlardan çocuklardan oluşan, Van'ı terketmeleri istenmiş. Van'ı terkeden aileler genel itibariyle Adana, Kahramanmaraş, Kerkük Musul, güneye kadar gitmişler. Bir kısım orada kalmış dönememiş çeşitli nedenlerle bir kısım yolda hayatını kaybetmiş, sağlık nedenleriyle, hastalık, açlık, bir kısmı da daha sonra Van'a dönebilmiş. Yollarda hep yaya gitmişler. Kısmi olarak belki hayvan kullanılmış ama yolda her gidişlerinde açlıkla susuzlukla eşkiyalarla karşılaşmışlar. Acı ve ızdırap içersinde. Artık yol bir can pazarı haline gelmiş yani canını kurtarmak! Kimisi yolda sağlık nedenleriyle hastalık nedenleriyle hayatını kurtarabilen bir yerlere sığınmış. Kimisi Diyarbakır'a, kimisi Konya'ya, gücü olan da nerede bi ilgir görmüşlerse, sıcak bir sahiplenme görmüşse orayı kendilerine geçici de olsa bir yurt edinmişler.

upbringing even though she was illiterate. He extensively recounted the story of his father, who was taken captive by the Russians. While he narrated this story, he brought up the subject of Armenian armed bands and strongly suggested that I visit the Zeve war grave, where, he said, three martyrs from his family were buried:

“We were lying right beside the walls,” my father says, “fortunately, it was summer time so we were taking shelter anywhere to sleep and in the morning we sometimes begged for jobs, like a portage.” “Born into an affluent family and ending up in such a desperate situation,” he says, “I felt resentful but had no any other option.” “Anyway, when the exchange of prisoners took place,” he says, “we went from Baku to Turkey, to Kars and then went to Erzurum. We stayed in Erzurum for a while. During that time my younger brother died and the state took his body and buried him. How would I know what to do, who I should take care of, I was also helpless.” He says “I want to get to Van, but I don’t know how.” My father used to tell me these stories crying. He used to say “God forbid that you go through what we did.” (Emphatically) Besides, Armenian armed bands were also responsible for them being captured. It was not only the things they did to us, they were also guiding the Russian troops giving information like this family is wealthy, that family is poor or (loudly) this family has, excuse my language, beautiful women, this and that, either in villages or in the city (angrily). For example, there is this Zeve war grave, have you ever heard of this name?

Burcu: Yes, I have but haven’t seen it yet.

Osman: I think you should. Three martyrs from my family are buried there; my mother’s uncles. They died in that massacre. They (Armenian armed bands) cut off their escape route when they were coming to Van as refugees so they settle in Zeve. These seven villages get together to join forces. Then Armenians attack and massacre 3.000 people there. A stream flows through Zeve. In fact, a great many brides and young girls committed suicide in order not to surrender; they throw themselves in that stream and drown. I go and visit the war grave on the 2nd of April every year and pray. It is full of unenshrouded martyrs lying there. That’s why, today Armenians are bawling that we massacred them and committed genocide but, quite the contrary, it was us who were massacred.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Duvarlar dibinde yatıyorduk diyor, bereket diyor mevsim yaz olduğu için kısıtlı yatıyorduk. Efendim sabahleyin de kalkıp dileniyorduk bazen de işte amca işiniz var mı böyle hamallık yapıyorduk. Şimdi o varlıktan o sıkıntıya düşen bir ailenin çocuğu olarak diyor çok da zoruma gidiyordu ama başka çarem yoktu. Neyse diyor esir mübadelesi yapıldıktan sonra biz Bakü’den Türkiye’ye geçtik, Kars ondan sonra Erzurum’a gidiyor, Erzurum’da diyor bir süre kaldık diyor, o küçük kardeşim de diyor o sıra öldü işte. “Onu devlet geldi kaldırdı götürdü” diyor, “ben nerden bileyim. Ben de zaten acizim doğrusu” diyor, “ona mı bakayım onu mu götürüyüm. Sonra ben tek kaldım” diyor. “Van’a geleceğim ama nasıl yol

This passage demonstrates what I meant when I claimed that much in the life stories of these informants was overshadowed by their concerns to refute genocide claims. The subject of the Armenian armed bands was automatically brought up, while my informant was talking about the memories of his father.

He was not the only one whose stories of victimization were full of shifts; my informants used the words “Armenian armed bands,” “Russians” and “Armenians” interchangeably. Just like Osman, others also referred to current debates on the Armenian genocide and, sometimes, directed their speech to an invisible audience while emphasizing their victimhood. The criteria through which they communicated the history of Van and the Turks' victimization was profoundly influenced by a historiographical preoccupation regarding the Armenian genocide: the trust in the authenticity of government archives, a fervent competition about the number of deaths, references to Armenian “disloyalty.” Kemal, a retired teacher in his seventies, expressed his resentment that this issue was always studied by foreigners and in the absence of any direct question he began to do a calculation:

Kemal: They couldn't find anything intact when they came back. They settled and built new houses. But the fact remains that we didn't investigate our own history; we always listened to what foreigners told us. But we, Van

bilmiyorum, iz bilmiyorum.” Babam çok böyle hem ağlardı hem anlatırdı, “Allah o günleri size göstermesin, biz gördük siz görmeyin” derdi. Özellikle onların yakalanmasında da (vurgulu) Ermeni çetelerinin yol göstermesi etken oldu. Ermenilerin bize sadece kendi yaptıkları değil ayrıca onlara da Rus ordularına da şeylik yapıyorlardı, kılavuzluk yapıyorlardı. Bak işte bu aile budur, bu aile zengindir, bu aile fakirdir, bu ailede (yüksek) afedersiniz çok afedersiniz güzel kadınlar var, gerek köylerde gerek şehirde (sınırlı). Mesela Zeve Şehitliği var, siz duydunuz mu ismi?

Burcu: Duydum ama görmedim daha.

Osman: Görmeniz lazım bence. Orda benim 3 tane şehidim var. İşte büyük annemin dayıları. O katliamda ölmüşler. Muhacir olmak için vana gelirken yolları kesiliyor, onlar Zeve'ye yerleşiyorlar. Bu yedi köy halkı Zeve'de efendim artık korkudan orda güç birliği yapalım diye bir araya geliyor, Ermeniler o zaman basıyorlar orayı, 3000 kişiyi orda katlediyorlar. Hatta bir hayli genç gelinler, gelinlik kızlar Ermenilere teslim olmamak için intihar etmiş, kendisini o çaya atarak boğmuşlardı. Ordan bir çay geçer, su akar, Zeve'nin içinden geçer. Ben her iki nisanda falan giderim ziyaret ederim, bir Fatıha okur gelirim. Zaten altı hep (vurgulu) kefensiz yatan şehitlerle doludur. Onun için yani Ermeniler bugün basbas bağıyorlar bizi katlettiler, bize soykırım uyguladılar, şöyle ettiler, böyle ettiler, tam tersine katliama biz uğramışız.

people, were persecuted to a great extent. I mean, a lot of people died on our side *as well*. Think of it this way, back then, it is said that the population of Van and its surroundings were about 100.000. So there must have been at least 10-15.000, 20.000 or 30.000 people in Van. When they got back here there were only 3.500-4.000 people and let's think that 60 percent of this population got lost on the way and couldn't make it back here, so this means that 20-25.000 or 30.000 people perished.⁶⁷

Kemal claimed that “a lot of people died on our side as well” but he did not elaborate on what he meant by this remark and did not explicitly tell me what this *as well* might imply. As we will see below, Rifat was the only one who claimed that “common sufferings” were experienced. However, a closer look at the way he narrated the events suggests otherwise. For him, Van is a city that has lost its memory. While his general tone is moderate when compared to the others, his insistence on victimization is to be noted:

As I said before, you will hear a lot of different stories from these people who are from Van. Some of these stories are very tragic; Kemal, for example cries when he talks about those days. But, as I said, where we stand now, on these lands everybody went through common sufferings but we won't let some people rule out our conscience and victimhood by insulting our grandfathers, our ancestors and judging and calling them murderers; we are *the real* victims. Who will ease our pain? Who? I mean, these pains cannot be measured with numbers. A human life is valuable and so is a thousand. I mean, I understand Armenians' pains but they should also understand our pains and what we went through. Today, we lost many important things that passed down from previous generations. The

⁶⁷ Kemal: Geri döndüklerinde hiçbir şey bulamamışlar, zaten herkes yeniden iskan açmış yeniden kendine ev yapmış. Ama şu gerçek ki söylenenlerle yazılanlar, biz kendi tarihimizi incelememişiz, hep yabancılar anlatmış biz hepsini dinlemişiz. Ama biz orada vanlı olarak vanlı yaşayanlar olarak çok büyük mezalim görmüşüz. Yani bizden *de* çok fazla insan ölmüş. Düşünün bir kere o zamanın nüfusuyla diyelim ki Van ve çevresi 100.000 civarında insan diyorlar, Van'ın içinin en azından 10-15.000 20.000 30.000 olması lazım değil mi? Büyük bir şehir, dönüşünde 3.500-4.000 kişi dönüyorsa, bunun yüzde 60'ının da gittiği yerde kaybolduğunu düşünelim, dönmediyse 20-25.000 kişi 30.000 kişi en azından telef olmuştur.

source of the social and economic problems that we face today is 1915.⁶⁸

Even though he began his narrative with reference to common pain and sufferings, it turned out that, to him, the real victims were actually 'us' that is, the Turkish nation. He claimed that we cannot compare the pain and suffering different groups went through in those years, however he still insisted on 'our' victimization.

Another aspect that differentiated their narratives from others was the way they talked about the period before 1915. These informants constructed their narratives by alluding to an image of the past in which a perfectly harmonious relationship between the Armenians and the Turks existed which deteriorated due to the invasion of the city by the Russians. Even though in some cases they implied that this peaceful relationship was not one among equals, but was sustained within a context in which Armenians were subservient to the Muslims, this inequality was not regarded as an issue that was up for: It was something taken for granted. I talked to Zeki, a retired teacher of 82, in the living room of his orderly flat which was decorated simply but tastefully. The room was like a museum that documented his successful career as a teacher; in every corner, there were medals and photographs of him together with Van's notables:

Zeki: Armenians and Muslims used to live here in peace like brothers; they were really very close, no commotion whatsoever. Besides, Armenians used to be very subservient to the Muslims; they wouldn't object to it. Some part of the trade was in the hands of Armenians, especially jewelry. They used to work with Muslims without any problem. But when the Russians occupied Erzurum and Van, of course meanwhile Armenians were carrying out

⁶⁸ Dediğim gibi yani Van'lı olup da tabii bu arkadaşlardan çok farklı ilginç hikayeler dinleyeceksiniz. Kimisi acıklı, Kemal mesela ağlarken anlatır. Ama dediğim gibi bugün geldiğimiz nokta bu bölgede herkes birlikte paylaşmış, acı yaşamışız. Artık bunu çok yargılayarak ama bizim dedelerimize, atalarımıza hakaret ederek, onları katil olarak, onlara bir hüküm giydirerek birilerinin vicdanı ve mağduriyeti ortadan kaldırılmaya çalışılıyorsa biz bunu asla kabul etmeyiz. *Asıl* mağdur olan biziz. Bizim acılarımızı kim dindirecek peki? Kim dindirecek? Yani bu sayılarla acılar sayılarla terazide tartılacak bir şey değil. Bir kişi de önemlidir, bin kişi de önemlidir. Yani Ermenilerin acılarını anlıyorum ama onlar da bizim acılarımızı, bugün kuşaklar boyu kaybettiğimiz çok önemli şeyler var. Bizim bugün içinde yaşadığımız sosyal ve ekonomik sorunların kaynağı 1915'tir.

clandestine operations, therefore, these two families, I mean, Armenians and Muslims started to nurture enmity against each other. Unidentified murders were committed and slowly things deteriorated. They started to be at odds and things got so bad here that the commander told the people of Van not to stay here any longer but to migrate.⁶⁹

As can be seen above, he spoke through a sort of nostalgia that covered up all the social inequalities and problems; a nostalgia which is regarded as misleading and deceiving by many scholars of memory (Atia, and Davis, 2010). This nostalgic view of the past was also found in the narratives of the other three interviewees. Osman explained the intimate relationships between the Turks and the Armenians:

As I said, there was no hostility back then. As I said, they were neighbors. They used to get about or eat together. In fact, in Armenia, there are still people who cook dishes from Van. Moreover, the Armenians of Van who went to Damascus kept the Van traditions alive. This is fundamentally one of the games the Russians played in order to disintegrate Turkey and the Ottoman Empire.⁷⁰

While holding onto an image of the past in which no problems existed between different groups of people, the narrator also managed to explain the reasons for the conflict by alluding to the conspiracies of “foreign” states. Within this narrative, the Russian invasion stood out as an important factor in explaining subsequent events. Like the others, Rıfat stated that the Russians and the Armenian armed bands were the instigators

⁶⁹ Zeki: Bak babam ondan önce Ermenilerle müslümanlar böyle kardeş gibi beraber yaşamış çok iyi çok iyi yaşamış. Ses seda yok. Sonra Ermeniler de müslümanlara çok itaat edermişler ses çıkarmazmışlar. Sonra ticaretin bir kısmı da onların elinde, bilhassa kuyumculuk. Bizimkilerle beraber çalışırlarmış yani herhangi bir durum yok. Fakat, Ruslar’ın Erzurum Van’a gelişi, tabii Ermeniler alttan alttan çalışıyor yani faaliyetleri varmış öyle olunca yavaş yavaş, iki aile arasında, yani Müslümanlarla Ermeniler arasında bozukluklar başlamış. Gizli ölümler faili meçhul ölümler olmuş, yavaş yavaş kötü bir duruma girmiş. Araları açılmış, araları açılınca zaten öyle bir durum olmuş ki artık burdaki kumandan Van’da artık müslümanların kalmasına, hicret edin demiş.

⁷⁰ Şimdi bir düşmanlık yokmuş o zaman, dedim ya komşularmış o zaman. Beraber gider gelir yemek yer, hatta Ermeni menüsünde Ermenistan’a gittiğinizde Van yemeklerini yapanlar var hala. Hatta Şam’a giden Van Ermenileri bile ordaki Van adetlerini hala yaşarlarmış. Bu esasen Rusya’nın Türkiye’yi Osmanlı’yı parçalamak konusunda Türkiye genelinde oynadığı oyunların bir parçası.

of the enmity between the Armenians and the Muslims who had been living together in Van for 700 years:

What my family went through is one of the events everybody in Van went through. In 1915, Armenians, Muslims, Kurds and Turks lived here together. The Russian invasion in 1915 and the uprising and the revolt of the Armenian armed bands made these two people that lived here together for 700 years in peace enemies. After all, Armenians with the support of the Russians burned down Van.⁷¹

The victimhood of Muslims was underscored in this narrative not only through memory fragments, but also by furnishing these memories with many of the themes that dominate the Turkish historiography through which the Armenian issue is discussed. As we see above, the devastated landscape and the reconstruction of the city from scratch after the Russian retreat was narrated within a story of victimization, but with an emphasis on revival. Zeki recounted how his grandmother used to tell him about the Armenian house in which they began to live when they returned to Van:

For example, my grandmother used to tell me; there are those enormous Armenian houses on the way to the barracks. Armenians deserted their houses leaving everything they had behind. They took everything from those houses and used them. People who came here settled in those houses. That's how Van started to develop slowly.⁷²

While Zeki's family moved into an Armenian house, Kemal claimed that all of central Van was burned down and his family and other people who returned to the city had to rebuild their houses :

Kemal: There was almost nothing intact in the city. They tore down the whole city. Back then, the premises were below the Castle. But Armenians used to live in the premise that is the current city center.

⁷¹ Bizim ailemizin başına gelen her Van' lının başına gelen olaylardan biri. 1915'te burda Ermenilerle müslümanlar Kürtler Türkler birlikte yaşıyor. 1915'teki o Rus işgali ve Ermeni çetelerinin burdaki isyanı ve ayaklanması burada 700 yıldır birlikte yaşayan iki halkı birbirine düşman ediyor. Neticede burda Ermeniler Ruslarla birlikte çok yakın bir destek alarak Van' ı yakıp yıkıyorlar.

⁷² Mesela benim büyükannem anlatırdı, kışlaya doğru gidince orada muazzam Ermeni evleri var, her şey halı kilimi falan bırakmış gitmişler. Onlardan faydalanmışlar, almışlar, gelmiş, kullanmışlar. Ve gelen halk işte boş evlere yerleşmiş. Van öyle yavaş yavaş gelişmeye başlamış.

Burcu: You mean around here?

Kemal: Our Armenian citizens used to live around here but our descendants used to live rather in the Castle or around it. But, during the mobilization period, all those places were burned down.

Burcu: So, how was it when they came back?

Kemal: They couldn't find anything intact. After all they built new houses, new places and settled again.⁷³

For Rifat, the devastation of Van was such a sad event that all the songs and poems written by Van's residents were about the pain experienced by the Muslims (no mention of the Armenians) and the fear passed down through the generations.

Rifat: For example there is this folk song called "Ali Pasha." Ali Pasha was the governor of Van in the 1900s but in 1907, he was dismissed from his post due to the pressure of the English American ambassadorship and Armenian armed bands. During the period of collapse of the Ottoman Empire, in order to go to Istanbul, one used to go to Trabzon on foot and then go to Istanbul by ship. After he left Van to go to Istanbul, (hesitatingly) he was massacred by an Armenian armed band in Batumi harbor. Of course there are hundreds of folk songs and poems that express the feelings of the people who when they returned, saw a burnt down city. Like I said, all the poems of Van are about sorrow. People internalized this sorrow so much that the immigration, pains and fears all passed down from the generations to today. Right now, it is as if it is infused into our DNA.⁷⁴

⁷³ Kemal: Şehirde hemen hemen hiçbir şey kalmamış. Şehri dümdüz etmişler. O zaman Van'ın yerleşkesi Kale altındaymış. Ama bugünkü yerleşke olan yerde Ermeni vatandaşlarımız yaşarmış.

Burcu: Yani buralarda mı?

Kemal: Buralarda Ermeni vatandaşlarımız yaşarmış ama bizimkiler daha ziyade Kale'nin içinde ve Kale'nin etrafında yaşarlarmış. İşte seferberliğe giderken oraların hepsi yakılıp yıkılmış.

Burcu: Geri döndüklerinde o zaman?

Kemal: Hiçbir şey bulamamışlar zaten herkes yeniden iskan açmış, yeniden kendine ev yapmış, yeniden yerleşmişler.

⁷⁴ Rifat: Mesela Ali Paşa Türküsü var. Ali Paşa 1900'lü yıllarda Van valiliği yapmış ama 1907'de burdaki İngiliz Amerikan Sefirliğinin ve Ermeni çetelerinin baskısıyla görevden alınmış. Osmanlı döneminin artık o çöküş döneminde Van'dan yaya yoluyla Trabzon'a, Trabzon'dan gemiyle İstanbul'a gidiliyordu. Van'dan ayrıldıktan sonra İstanbul'a giderken Batum iskelesinde (duraksıyor) bir Ermeni çetesi tarafından katlediliyor (duraksıyor). Tabi bu Van'a dönüşteki o

He also suggested that first with the Russian invasion and then with the incoming immigrants Van has lost its culture. Both Rifat and Zeki talked about their attempts to keep Van's culture alive and to memorialize the pain and suffering Van's residents experienced. To this end, they wrote newspaper columns and published booklets that narrated Van's culture. Osman told me how he helped in the construction of *Zeve Şhitliği* in 1970. He told me that he was very content with the governor of the city, who had the mosque renovated on the rock of Van and opened it on a Friday just before the mass in the Akhtamar church was going to be held:

Osman: Our governor shows sensitivity about the restoration of the old works of art. I am very pleased about him. There is this Suleyman mosque on top of the Castle in which my grandfather used to recite the azan. Despite my age, I climbed up there for the opening on a Friday.

Burcu: When was the opening?

Osman: I was this year. In fact, it was the day when the Mass in the Akdamar was going to be held. He (governor) had it renovated and put it into service before the Mass. We performed our Friday prayer *before the mass*.⁷⁵

I believe there is a secondary meaning and function to my informants' preoccupation with preserving the tradition of Van. They all told me that life in Van was very pleasant when they were children as they grew up knowing everyone. Both in their childhood

yakılmış yıkılmış küle dönmüş o şehrin hissiyatini anlatan yüzlerce şarkı, şiir var. Dedğim gibi Van'ın şiirleri manileri hep böyle hüznün üzerine yazılmış. Aileler o kadar kanıksamış ki artık bu göç, acı, korku bizim kuşaklar boyu yaşamış. Şu anda bizim Vanda dna'lara adeta işlemiş.

⁷⁵ Osman: Valimiz bu eski eserleri canlandırma restore etme anlamında bir hassasiyeti vardır. Ondan çok memnuniyet duyuyorum ben, çünkü orda dedemin mesela ezan okuduğu Süleyman Han cami var Kale'nin en tepesinde. O gördüğünüz orda dedem ezan okumuş. Oranın ilk açılışında Cuma günü ben tırmandım gittim yaşıma başıma rağmen.

Burcu: Ne zamandı bu?

Osman: Bu sene açıldı. Hatta o Akdamar Adası'ndaki kiliseninde ayin yapacaklardı ya (vurgulu) ondan önce o camiyi yaptırdı hizmete açtı. *Biz önce orda cuma namazımızı kıldık.*

and in their youth, the population of the city was not as large as it is today and they had an intimate relationship with their neighbors. Rifat narrates those days wistfully:

My father used to sell readymade clothes brought from Urfa back then. Later he started to work for the bureau of public roads and then retired. There were large cupboards for bedding in our houses, floors and doors were wooden, in the living rooms there were ovens, now they call them fireplaces. There wasn't coal in Van in the past. People used to burn wood. Afterward they used to put the charcoal in the oven both for cooking and heating. In the cellar, as I said, there was also an oven. There was no water-supplies in the house. Van has very famous water channels which supplied people with water. Later on, the water-supply system was constructed and people started to get water indoors. In fact, I even remember the days of no electricity, even though our house is located in the center, it is only 100 meters high up there. But people were happy and cheerful. *No one had any hostility towards one another.* For example, we used to sleep on the floor-bed together with my aunts' and uncle's children and fall asleep listening to the stories and jokes our fathers and grandfathers told us until late at night. They used to wrestle us. We used to eat nuts or foods our parents cooked for us; things bought and produced with a lot of labor and little money at hand.⁷⁶

At the heart of this narrative of a golden past lies a feeling of loss. While they emphasized the joy and happiness of living in Van, they did so in order to contrast today's Van with that of the past. While Rifat contrasted the Van of his childhood with today's Van, he claimed that it was a peaceful city where everybody respected one another and the question of ethnicity was irrelevant:

⁷⁶ Babam o zaman Urfa tarafından getirilen hazır kıyafetler satıyordu. Daha sonra işte karayollarında çalıştı emekli oldu. Bizim evlerimizde yüklük vardı, yerler tahtadan kapılar tahta, salon kısmında bir de ocak vardı, şimdi şömine diyolar. Eskiden Van'da kömür yoktu evlerde odun yakılırdı o odunun yakılmasından sonra kömür ocağa bırakılır üzerinde yemek yapılır hem de ısıtıldı. Kilerde dediğim gibi aynı şekilde bi ocak vardı. Su şebekesi evin içersinde zaten yoktu. Van'ın meşhur yeraltı su kanalları vardır, ordan su elde edilirdi daha sonra şehir şebekesine geçtikten sonra insanlar evlerine su çekmeye başladı. Hatta ben elektrik olmadığını hatırlıyorum. Bizim evimiz merkezi, şu anda burdan yüz metre yukarda ona rağmen. Ama insanlar mutluydu güler yüzlü, *kimsenin kimseyle böyle hissi, husumeti yok değerlendirmesi yok*, herkes mesela biz çocukken yer yatağında yatarız kuzenlerimiz bugün işte teyzemizin çocukları dayımızın çocukları bir yatakta yatar dedemizin babamızın anlattığı hikaye, fıkralarla uyurduk. Bizi güreştirirdiler. Evlerde ailemizin yaptığı yiyecekleri, çerezleri yerdik. Az parayla çok emekle alınan ve üretilen şeyler.

Our neighbors used to speak Turkish and so did we. Actually, to be honest, we didn't know who was a Kurd and who was a Turk up until 20 years ago, and no one did for that matter. Such a question didn't used to be asked.⁷⁷

These narratives suggest that these men feel a discomfort as a result of the migration wave that occurred within the last 30 years, as many people from the surrounding villages and cities began to move to the city center. Moreover, within this rhetoric of loving Van and missing the old days, my informants easily likened the past with the present. As Kemal was talking about how Armenians had been provoked by the “foreign powers,” he stated that some other groups are also being provoked in the same manner today:

The places inhabited by Armenians in Turkey are 6 provinces which we call *Vilayet-i Sitte* (six provinces). The densest of these are Erzurum, Van, Agri, Kars and Adana in the south. You know they caused a lot of stir there. In that period, the tension accelerated. (Emphatically) You see, they are provoking our Kurdish citizens in the same way they did the Armenians back then. It is the same strategy; this is the point that upsets and scares us! To tell the truth, what we had in common with Armenians was only the fact that we all were the citizens of this state. But the Kurds and us have almost everything, 99 percent in common; it is only the language that is different.⁷⁸

This similarity was also implied by Kemal, who claimed that the Armenians wanted to have a separate state: “They wanted to have a separate Armenian state, just like Kurds want today.”⁷⁹ Thus, their memories and opinions about the Armenians coalesced greatly with their perspective and fears about the present. Within this scheme, the Armenians were seen as the betrayers of the past, in very much the same way as the

⁷⁷ Komşularımız Türkçe konuşurdu biz de Türkçe konuşurduk. Yani biz zaten açık söyleyim son yirmi yıla kadar kimin Türk kimin Kürt olduğunu kimse de bilmiyodu. Böyle bir şey de sorulmuyodu kimseye.

⁷⁸ İşte Türkiye'deki Ermenilerin meskun olduğu yerler vilayeti sitte dedigimiz 6 doğu vilayetindedir. Bunların en kesif olanları Erzurum, Van, Ağrı, Kars, güneye indik Adana'da da biliyorsunuz bir hayli hareketler mareketler yapmışlar. Şimdi o dönemde, işte bu gerginlik başlayınca, bakınız bugün Kürt vatandaşlarımızı (vurgulu) aynı yolla devlete karşı kıskırtıyorlar. Aynı taktik. Esasen bizi üzen korkutan taraf da bu!!Hani Ermenilerle bizim asgari müşteregimiz sadece vatandaş oluşumuzdu ama Kürt vatandaşlarımızla asgari müşteregimiz yüzde 99'dur. Bir dil konusunda fark.

⁷⁹ “Onlar Ermeni devleti istiyorlar, şimdiki Kürtler gibi.”

Kurds are seen today. Zeki told me that, as a teacher, he had taught in various villages in Van and added that he wished, now, that he knew some Kurdish. Towards the end of the interview, his wife also came into the room and began to listen to our conversation. She interrupted him and said furiously that it is a good thing that they did not learn how to speak Kurdish and added: “We hate them now.”

As we have seen above, these four informants' narratives were in line with the official discourse on the Armenian issue that strives to deny that there was a genocide. They were heavily preoccupied by the terms and criteria by which this issue has been discussed. They made references to archives and statistical information and they narrated their stories on a macro level. They were loyal to this discourse to such an extent that their own life stories were occluded by it. However, I believe that there is also something peculiar in the way they talked about the past and the present. This peculiarity seems to be derived from something they also indicated in our interviews: the political polarization that took place within the last thirty years. I think these narratives carry the trace of this political polarization within the city, since the Armenians are always remembered by them through the Kurdish issue and through their concerns on this issue. It may be that in this polarization, when the sides became clearly defined, they molded themselves and their memories in accordance with the official discourse.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I analyzed different ways the current residents of Van remembered Armenians. I chose to conduct my research in Van for two reasons. One of them is the fact that before the last Russian retreat in 1917, Van had a significant Armenian population and is still a locale where the material remnants of that period are more or less visible. In the memories of my informants, these material traces were frequently invoked to point to the Armenian past of the city. Secondly, unlike in other cities, the Armenians of Van had attempted to defend the city against the armed forces of the Ottoman Empire. For these reasons, I expected Van to be a locale where different interpretations of the past compete with one another depending on the subjective positionings of my informants. Indeed, my analysis showed that there was not only one single way of remembering Armenians. This thesis showed that, like all memories, those on Armenians were shaped through the present political conditions in which the current residents of Van lived. The most significant theme through which this multiple memory was communicated was the Kurdish movement; since in one way or another, it had a significant effect on the way Armenians were remembered and narrated in Van.

Most of my informants had been politicized by pro-Kurdish movements and have had detailed memories on Armenians which they narrated fervently. For them, talking about the Armenians and massacres they went through was not a taboo. Their fervent narratives that zoomed in on the past showed that contrary to what some historians might envision 1915 was a subject that was not something belonging to the past. By analyzing their narratives, I tried to indicate that they provided a local and micro story of the past which fed upon their life stories and their experiences of everyday violence.

The most mentioned stories on Armenians were those of violence, and these stories were narrated in the language of the present victimization of Kurdish people. By imaginatively reframing these memories in the context of the present, they created subversive narratives that went beyond the denialism of the official discourse. They argued that, in their childhood years, they listened to the elderly who proudly narrated the way Armenians were murdered or/ and pushed out of the city. However, when they experienced similar state violence during the last thirty years because of the war between the PKK and the state, they came to perceive the past in a different light and reinterpreted the transmitted memories in a drastic way. With this new reinterpretation, they began to view the heroes of the past as perpetrators of atrocious deeds. They, to a certain extent, tried to distance themselves from their predecessors arguing that they were “ignorant” and motivated by a desire to obtain material gain which they believed mainly belonged to the Armenians. Thus, they have established an image of the hardworking and prosperous Armenian in opposition to their predecessors. The “ignorance” they attributed to their predecessors seemed to be related to the conviction that they were open to manipulation by the state. In that sense, they also implied that they were different from the previous generations. They expressed guilt and sadness for the fate of the Van Armenians and did it without necessarily depicting them as a passive people who did not fight to escape their destruction. The state, the shadow of which was present in almost all the narratives, functioned as a mediator that linked the fates of these two peoples. Moreover, even though the state was narrated as the ultimate perpetrator, they still expressed responsibility for their grandparents' deeds.

In the second chapter, I stated that both the previous pro-Kurdish party DTP and the current BDP, explicitly brought up the Armenian issue and even called the government to recognize the Armenian genocide. My informants' memories were probably influenced by these discussions in the party circles. Moreover, the infringement of the initial tacit contract between the Kurds and Sultan Abdulhamit II (Later, the CUP leaders) with the Turkification policies of the Republican era (see Chapter II) might also have played a role in their memories. In a way, to talk about Armenians as the victims of the past is also to denigrate the state and its violent means from which they suffered during the last thirty years due to the war between the PKK and the state. However, I tried to show that the motivation behind their narratives was

not only to make a political statement. When they began to identify themselves as victims and were politicized by the Kurdish movement, they seemed to develop a new understanding of history. I tried to show that they created a history that did not proceed in chronological time, but a history which had the feeling of loss as its constitutive element. In that way, their narratives collapsed the past suffering of Armenians with that of their own and the loss of Armenians began to be regarded as their own. I argued that, even though they transformed the limits of grievability by reading their own history and the Armenians' history side by side, a proper mourning seemed impossible. This might have something to do with the ongoing policy of denial and the continuation of their own experience of state violence. Another related aspect that led them to remember the Armenians and talk about their heritage in such a preoccupied way might be related to the fact that they also have graves in unknown locations in which their beloved ones were buried without a proper ceremony. I argued that their uneasy relationship with the past and their melancholic attachment to loss had creative potential that led them to comprehend time, history and human vulnerability in new ways.

This impossibility of closure might explain why my informants were intensely preoccupied with the past and sought ways to come terms with it. Many of them told me that they tried to befriend with Armenians, and apologize to them. Some of them even gave their children Armenian names. I argued that they recalled the past nostalgically, but that sense of longing was not something that covered the problematic and unequal relationships between their predecessors and Armenians. They had a sense of reflective nostalgia that revealed itself through individual memory fragments; a sense of longing which does not pragmatically recall the past but situates the past in the present. They challenged the perspectives of the elderly who, in their opinion, did not feel a similar sympathy towards Armenians. However, as far as I understood, from the few interviews I conducted, the political subjectivities of the informants seemed to shape their selective memory and the emotions that accompanied that memory rather than the effect of a generational difference. Those who were politically and religiously more conservative did not share the same sympathy towards Armenians and narrated stories in which Armenians were depicted as perpetrators or massacred for justifiable reasons under wartime conditions.

I also argued that the rumors on the descendants of Armenians operated as an open secret. Many people told me that everybody knew those who had Armenian origins even though they hid it. I had informants who openly talked about their Armenian predecessors as well as those who preferred to hide it. As I stated before, many people pointed out that in the last thirty years a change took place in the attitudes of people towards Armenians. However, the fact that some people still preferred to keep their Armenian ancestors a secret shows that this change might not be as widespread as they argued.

I also tried to present the tense relationship people have established with the remnants of Armenians. Even in the instances when there was a lack of transmission of memory, the material traces left by the Armenians figured as mnemonic devices. These remnants were invoked in many of the interviews as a means to actively imagine a past of which my informants did not have any autobiographical memory. Many informants talked about violation of these remnants by treasure hunters in a disapproving manner, arguing that these were further violations against the heritage of an already victimized people. I think that this increased sensitivity might also be one of the ramifications of the changing perspectives of my informants in the last thirty years.

In the last section, I presented the narratives of four men which were mainly in line with the official discourse of denial and were communicated through the terms and criteria the Armenian issue is discussed by nationalist historians. They had close connections with an association called TEİAD that can be seen as a local institution that aims to reproduce this discourse of denial. They strictly argued that “they” were the real victims of the 1915 who suffered from the attacks of the Armenian armed bands. They talked about the period before 1915 through a sense of restorative nostalgia arguing that the Muslims and Christians had lived peacefully side by side. For them, this golden age was destructed because the great powers wanted to divide the country and the year 1918 was specifically recounted as the year of revival. They argued that the restored peace after 1918 was soon broken again when the Kurds were provoked by the great powers just like the Armenians. Thus, the 1990s, to them, was a period when the city began to lose its culture due to the incoming internally displaced Kurds.

This study, I hope, contributes to oral history and memory studies since it demonstrates the changing perpetrator memory in the present. With its focus on a

specific locality and at a specific political/historical time, it depicts how different groups in Van based on their selective remembering constructed the past and related to it depending on their own subjective positions. It shows us how the Kurdish issue put its mark on the different forms of remembering Armenians and on the different ways of making sense of the past in a place where the perpetrators of the past have begun to identify themselves as the victims of the present.

In the introduction to this thesis, I tried to explain how the republic of Turkey has a troubled relationship with the past and the criticisms that were raised by various scholars who elaborated on the way in which history *works* in the context of Turkey. I argued that history is not what happened, but what is said to have happened. However, the various strategies through which the people remember the Armenians in Van also show us that history is not only about narratives. Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues that while many historians today agree that history is a discourse on the past, the question of how the narratives on the past are produced is usually ignored (1995). He argues that not all narratives on the past can constitute history, since:

What had happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of the reasons why not any fiction can pass for history: the materiality of historical processes set the stage for future historical narratives (Trouillot, 1995: 829).

Therefore, history is composed of different layers: silences, narratives, traces, superstitions, secrets and rituals that we cannot date, yet, belong to the history and can be part of the historical discourse depending on the workings of power. In this study, all of these layers were at work through the ways in which people made sense of the past and remembered Armenians. With their tense involvement in these traces within the current power relationships, they showed that the materiality of the historical processes that ended up with the eradication of Armenians of Van was one of the layers through which the past could pass as history for my informants. This study shows that the past might be unfinished business; the past can act on those who cannot easily decouple themselves from it. In Van, the sufferings of the past and of the present are intermingled to such an extent that the geography, the material traces, the superstitious beliefs and the

terms through which people talk about loss and suffering seem to carry the traces of the destruction of the Armenians as well as the ongoing difficulties the Kurds experience. This study also has its shortcomings. One of them is the fact that my main group of informants consisted of individuals who are politicized by the Kurdish movement and live in the city center where they regularly meet and have conversations on politics, history and life in Van. They recommend books on various social theories and movements to each other and discuss them extensively. As far as I understood, pro-Kurdish politics is quite popular among the young generation. However this popularity is also apparent, to a lesser extent, among their parents whose perspectives on politics, society and sense of history were significantly challenged by their sons and daughters. In this respect, to a certain extent, I believe that my informants represent an important segment in Van. However, I did not have enough interviews with people who were conservative in terms of religiosity and/or were sympathetic towards the AKP except a few whom I talked to in some of the villages of Gevaş. The limited time together with the fact that I was unable to speak Kurdish constituted the main barrier. Some middle-aged women in villages were much more proficient in Kurdish than in Turkish. Many of the elderly men and women knew very little Turkish. Moreover, many of my informants to whom I spoke in Turkish often told me that most of the jokes, stories and idioms had deeper meanings that resisted translation.

A study extending over a longer period of time would have been advantageous as it would have made me more familiar with both the language and the geography. Then, the spatial organization of the city and its connections to its surrounding villages might have revealed further issues about the power dynamics of the locale which would have their traces in remembering the past. I would have known more about the relationship between different classes and different groups as well as rural/urban differences within this specific local.

The Brukan family is an interesting group that migrated from Tsarist Russia to Van and to other cities like Iğdır and Kars. The head of this family who served as a member of the parliament for fifteen years starting with the early 1960s, Kinyas Kartal, wrote a booklet titled “Erivan’dan Van’a Hatıralarım”⁸⁰ in which he narrated his

⁸⁰ My memories: From Yerevan to Van

memories and admonished the youngsters to be careful of the enemies of Turkish nation. However, it is also worth noting that many people in Van told me that Brukan family is a Kurdish family. His being a member of the Parliament and a respected person of Van were mentioned to me by the four informants who had connections to TEIAD. Many of the Kurdish people I met in Van, however, told me that this expansive family who migrated to Van had benefited greatly from the land that formerly belonged to the Armenians. I believe that this family constitutes a group whose accounts on the Armenians might be very different from the narratives I had collected in Van, especially considering their migration to Van from the beginning of the 20th century to the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

There is also another group of self-identified Turks, who migrated from Iran to Van after the establishment of the Republic. While they called themselves the Küresünni, the locals usually called them Acem. This is an interesting group since many of my Kurdish friends told me amusing stories about them. These stereotypical jokes reminded me of the jokes told about *Laz* people. However, different from the jokes narrated about Laz people, “Acems” are mocked for their slippery political positionings. Therefore, their life stories, social status and memories should also be studied.

Even though I had some female informants, my informants were mainly men. One of the reasons for this disproportionate gender composition was the fact that, like in many places, history and the past are assumed to be under the monopoly of men, at least this was what I encountered most of the time. Another reason was that my initial circle of friends were men and the people that they recommended me to talk to or the people around them were also men. Due to these factors together with the language barrier, my study lacks insight about the ways of remembering and narrativity that might be specific to different gender groups.

Further studies can bring fresh insights about the politics of remembering in Van by being attentive to the issues of class, gender and the memories of the aforementioned groups. The section on materiality should be developed by further research and a more affective analysis might contribute to our understanding of the feelings which accompanied my informants' narratives. Moreover, studies conducted in different

localities will surely contribute to the differential politics of memory that are specific to certain locales. They might pave the way for a comparative analysis and shed light upon the way different people in various places make sense of the past.

Following my research a number of questions arise. Currently many activists (especially those who work for Human Rights Associations) and even some of the members of the parliament (especially from BDP and to a small degree CHP) talk about establishing truth commissions in order to face the devastating events that took place in the last thirty years in Turkey. With my fieldwork in mind, I think, one of the questions that should be put forth is the following: Is it really possible to come to terms with the crimes of the last thirty years without trying to candidly face the tragic fate of the Armenians? Considering the intermingling of the victimization of the Armenians with that of the Kurds in the narratives of my informants, can these two issues really be decoupled? Is it really possible to reconcile with the present without reconciling with the past? Other questions have to do with the power of my informants' narratives: Can their melancholic attachment to the past pave the way for a subversive and effective politics at the realm of the current politics as well? Or would they be marginal within the power dynamics of Turkey, which still seems to be unable to provide a solid ground for discussing and facing the catastrophe Armenians went through? What can we do in order to provide such a ground; as researchers and as those who feel that they have a word to say? Let me finish this thesis as I started it; with Nazım's urge to narrate everything he knew about the Armenians and the feeling of despair that led him to take refuge in silence: Is it really too late to try to come to terms with the past even though some of us profusely feel it in the present; have the need to talk about it in such a fervent and preoccupied manner?

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