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BOOK REVIEWS



**THE ALEPPO RESCUE HOME:
1464 ACCOUNTS OF ARMENIAN
GENOCIDE SURVIVORS. EDITED AND
COMPILED BY EDITA GZOYAN.**
(AGMI Publishing House. Yerevan, 2022, 832 p.)

Among the aftermaths of the Armenian Genocide were a great number of Armenian children and women kept in Muslim houses, harems or Turkish orphanages. According to some sources their number was up to 200.000. Their fate and ways of ending up in Muslim

environment varied. But there was one common feature for all of them: the exclusion from the Armenian nation and in most cases the involuntary or forcible change of identity – from Armenian to Arabic, Turkish or Kurdish ones. And in the case of children those actions were subject to the second article of UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, paragraph E: Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Self-evidently this great number of survived Armenians could not be disregarded in the process of the Armenian nation's revival. Already from 1916–1917 the orphan rescue work was initiated on those territories of Western Armenia that had come under the control of the Russian army. Subsequently this process covered almost all areas of the Ottoman Empire. If at the first stage – 1916–1917 – the process of collecting the Armenian orphans was carried out by individuals, then later it became more organized and systematized, including the Armenian and foreign charity organizations, the Armenian Church and, after World War I, the first truly international organization – the League of Nations. As a consequence, the process of rescuing and collecting Armenian children and

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women from Muslim homes, harems and Turkish orphanages and returning them to the Armenian nation became a large-scale operation.

A big amount of literature – both academic and amateur – is available on the issue. But much of it has been written with a significant delay – up to several decades. Thus, it could be taken as a starting point to speak about the book *The Aleppo Rescue Home: 1464 Accounts of Armenian Genocide Survivors* published by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation. It is a collection of the testimonies of direct victims of the Armenian Genocide who have been rescued through the activities of the Aleppo Rescue/Reception Home.

The volume is edited and compiled by Edita Gzoyan, the Deputy Scientific Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation. It comprises 1464 accounts of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, who have been accepted by Rescue Home between 1922 and 1930.

The main part of the volume – accounts of the survivors – is prefaced by a short history of the book (pp. 9–10 in Armenian and pp. 11–12 in English) and an introduction (pp. 13–21 in Armenian and pp. 22–28 in English). A brief overview of the history of this volume presents some details, which help to have a better understanding of the process of its creation. The book has passed a long way to becoming reality – from 2014 to 2022. Everything started in Geneva at the archives of the League of Nations. 1464 accounts, encompassed in this book, were put in 14 notebooks. Unfortunately, 2 more notebooks were missing from the archive otherwise the number of accounts would be approximately 1700. It should be especially mentioned that the accounts are not presented “as is”. All testimonies have undergone through the following actions: making the handwritten text into typed one and verifying, correcting the spelling of the original accounts, identifying and clarifying the place names, transcribing the names and surnames of the survivors from English into Armenian and finally translating the account into Armenian. All this is sure to help the readers not “to get lost” or confused while reading the accounts.

This brief overview is followed by an introduction, which could be described as a standing-alone review article, that helps the reader to have a basic knowledge and general information about the context of the historical events mirrored in the accounts. It opens with the legal definition of the crime – the forcible child transfer of the group to another group – in this case from the Armenian community to a Muslim one. During the Armenian Genocide tens of thousands of

Armenian children and women were taken, stolen, bought and sold, ending up in harems, brothels, various Muslim households and orphanages. It is clearly shown that the genocidal policy of the Turkish government toward the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire was gender and age-specific, and the accounts are another important proof of that. If going a step further it can be stated that the forcible child transfer, forced marriages and sexual violence and sexual misconduct were the structural components of that genocidal policy, which is briefly presented in two separate sections. In particular, at the beginning of World War I, the Turkish government established a network of orphanages with the aim of collecting Armenian children. And this process was legally secured by government decrees and orders. Armenian children were also distributed among the Muslim households, factories, workshops, etc. For the smooth process of assimilation they were deliberately sent to villages or towns with zero Armenian population and no foreigners. On the other hand a special policy was adopted by the Turkish government to prompt the Muslim population to adopt the Armenian children.

And in case of a girl or a young woman the very commonly utilized methods were forced marriages and different kinds of sexual violence and misconduct. Two documents are presented which prove the intentional nature of forced marriages orchestrated by the Turkish government. The first one is dated December 30, 1915 and the second one – April 30, 1916. The former reads: "...the children be placed in orphanages and Muslim villages in which there are no Armenians or foreigners, and that the young women and girls be married off to Muslims, so that they will be raised according to Islamic principles". And in the second document "...the giving in a marriage of young and widowed women" is clearly mentioned.

A special section is dedicated to the international response, in particular, the reflection of the issues of forcible child transfer and forced marriages in official documents. Among those Article 4 of Mudros armistice, Article 142 of the Treaty of Sèvres are mentioned. The logical development of the topic of international response is the next section – The League of Nations and Protection of Women and Children in the Middle East. It is the brief overview of the activities of the League of Nations in protection of Armenian children and women after the active phase of the Armenian Genocide. In the case of women it was done in the context of the issue of trafficking included in the humanitarian mission of the League of Nations. It is specially mentioned that the League of Nations classified women and

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children in the same category and marked them as “requiring special treatment and extra protection”. The League had been involved in the issue of deported women and children in the Near East based on the Article 23c of its Covenant, and the responsible body was the 2nd Committee of the League of Nations. As a result of its efforts, the Assembly of the League of Nations adopted a resolution (December 15, 1920) which ended up by the creation of the Commission of Enquiry for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East (February 22, 1921). The main goal of that newly formed body was “informing the Council as to the present situation in Armenia, Asia Minor, Turkey and adjusting territories regarding deported women and children”. The Commission consisted of three members – Dr. William Kennedy, Miss Emma Cushman and Madame Gaulis later replaced by the famous Danish missionary and social worker Karen Jeppe.

The last part of this brief historical overview is dedicated to the Aleppo Rescue/Reception Home which was established in 1918 by the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (American Near East Relief since 1919) and then administered by the League of Nations and the Nansen Commission for Refugees. Thousands of liberated Armenians found shelter in the Reception Home run by Karen Jeppe. It is there that the liberated Armenians were interviewed, and those interviews were registered in the aforementioned notebooks. They were conducted between 1922 and 1930. And now the 1464 accounts are available in English and Armenian for the researchers and all those interested in the issue.

The main part of the book – 1464 accounts – is a valuable source on the History of the Armenian Genocide, presented in the bottom up format. It is not the general history or large scale pictures, but rather the mosaic made by 1464 “pixels”. It is not an impersonal narrative that can be found in textbooks and most academic volumes but rather the story of the Armenian Genocide told by the victims themselves, presented from their perspective. And this effect is getting even stronger when considering the fact that the vast majority of the survivors’ accounts are accompanied by their photos. Those accounts can also be considered as one of the earliest examples of the oral history regarding the Armenian Genocide.

These usually short, laconic accounts form a big picture which tells not only about the fates and histories of escape and rescue of the survivors or about the efforts of the Rescue Home personnel in order to help them (finding the relatives, training them in crafts, etc.). An attentive reader can see a more general picture

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of the process of the Armenian Genocide; find out the elements of the genocidal policy of the Ottoman Empire, including the clear trend of collecting Armenian children by Turks, Kurds, Arabs, etc.

Many details can appear while reading the accounts. For example, some survivors were convinced during their stay with Turks, Kurds or Arabs that all Armenians have been annihilated. And it was a kind of surprise for them to learn that there were still many Armenians alive and that they could join them and return to their people. There were also cases when liberated survivors did not want to stay and returned to the Muslim families where they had spent the previous years.

If one made an attempt to find a suitable motto for this highly valuable volume it could be the slightly paraphrased slogan from the iconic poster of the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (Near East Relief) made by W.B. King in 1917 – Lest they perish. In this case it would be “Lest they vanish”, vanish in the abyss of oblivion. This collection of accounts can help many descendants of the Armenian Genocide survivors to collect some information about their ancestors, and this is not just a theoretical probability. In the process of creating the book one of the visitors of the Armenian Genocide Museum asked for any information about his ancestors. The only things he knew were their names and birthplace. And quite luckily the information about one of them could be found among the accounts in question.

Summing up it should be mentioned that the reviewed volume is an important contribution to the corpus of already available literature on the history of the Armenian Genocide with a special focus on the personal histories of the Armenian Genocide survivors. The only serious remark that can be made about this book is that it should have been published much earlier.

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