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GENOCIDE DESCENDING: HALF-JEWS IN POLAND AND HALF-ARMENIANS IN TURKEY

Serafim Seppälä

All the consequences of Armenian genocide and Jewish *Shoah* are still not fully realised or comprehended. In addition to the systematic annihilation of populations and cultures, the fates of the survivors continue to be a tragic reverberation of the genocidal events. In both cases, most of the survivors escaped to other countries and later became subjects and objects of a number of biographies and studies. However, not every survivor fled. In both genocides, there were also a remarkable number of victimised individuals who survived the massacres through negligence of the murderers, or by being taken to families, and continued to live in the country of the atrocities, changing or hiding their religious and cultural identity or becoming victims of forced change of identity.

The existence of these peoples in Poland and Turkey remained a curious unrecognized subject that extremely little was known of until recently. In this article, the present situation of both of these groups is discussed in comparative terms in order to outline the character of their identity problems. The comparison is all the more interesting due to the fact that obvious differences between the two social contexts underline the significance of the common factors in the post-genocidal experience.

The setting: similar paradigm, dissimilar situations

Armenians in post-genocide Turkey disappeared from the public scene, and the same can be said of Jews in post-war Poland. In both cases, there was an active and tolerated community in the capital,¹ in addition to an unknown number of survivors scattered in various places.

In both groups, the survivors represent typical cases of persons who may be survivors in the biological sense yet thoroughly victimized in cultural, religious and psychological terms. Having lost their traditional relations, religions, feasts, dances, songs and the whole cultural context, and in most cases marrying from the other religion, they went through an instant assimilation, at least in terms of social interaction. In other words, they were left alone with their nightmares – on the character of which we know something through the studies on the survivors in the diaspora.²

In Turkey, the (ex-)Armenians had to prove they were Muslims and thus good Turkish citizens, but even this did not prevent them being seriously harassed. In a similar way, the (ex-) Jews in Poland had to prove they were good Poles, which in the era of cold war meant

1. In Istanbul, the number of Armenians has been in tens of thousands; In Warsaw, there were 5 000 Jews in the late 1940's yet the number was in considerable decline until 1990's.

2. E.g., Aida Alayarian, *Consequences of Denial: The Armenian Genocide* (London: Karnac Books, 2008); Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

being good communists, and this did not prevent them from becoming victims of the purges of 1968, resulting in most cases in the survivors' emigration to Israel.

Armenian survivors in Turkey had to carry the additional burden of being a constructive part of the society that generated the destruction of one's own culture. Yet some managed to marry Armenians of similar backgrounds and thereby managed to keep some layers of memory and fragments of identity and traditions inside the family, resulting in curious *underground identity*. Even in their cases the lack of proper communities, religious institutions and schools resulted in thorough assimilation into the main stream of society, and due to the all-embracing fear, silence fell on the topic even inside the family.

In Turkey, most Armenian survivors were young girls abducted into families with no possibility whatsoever to lead an Armenian life, not to mention delivering the lost identity to their children. Memoirs of those survivors who later managed to emigrate sometimes contain detailed descriptions of life as an abducted child in Muslim families.³ In Poland the danger was less immediate; nevertheless it was typical that Jews wanted to prove their Polishness by distancing themselves from any sign of Judaism.

As a result, the assimilated ones in both instances were considered as lost cases by all sides. This was evident not only for practical reasons but also for the theoretical framework of identities on all sides. That is to say, even though Armenian and Turkish histories and literatures diverge completely on the portrayal and interpretation of the history, both narratives firmly agree on the existence and importance of a decisive line between being an Armenian and being a Turk. In a parallel way, Jewish and Catholic/Polish world views continued to view each other as radically different categories. Jews viewed Poles as Anti-Semites, often with good reason, lately with less reason.⁴

For all sides the narratives functioned according to the paradigm of either-or identities. Roughly speaking, American Jews and American Armenians treated the lost cases in parallel terms in their memoirs and studies, seeing the Polish and Turkish identities categorically and self-evidently as non-Jewish and non-Armenian respectively. In a telling testimony, an Armenian from Ankara became interested in his Armenian identity after Hrant Dink's murder, and on his trip to Israel he went to the Armenian quarter of Jerusalem, entering an Armenian shop: "The shopkeeper gave me the cold shoulder when I said I was an Armenian from Turkey. They probably see us as people who take side with Turkey."⁵

Several decades after the genocide, it was known that there were a big number of people with Armenian genes in Turkey, and an unknown number of Jewish genes in Poland, but identities, communities and peoples were considered as lost forever.⁶ In the prevailing

3. Rapes seem to have been common, and the children could be given dirtiest jobs – even cleaning the buttocks of the master, like in document 170 in Svazlian Verjine, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: NASRA, 2011), 345.

4. For an illustrative discussion on the absurd measures taken and surreal fears sensed by Jewish heritage traveller groups in Poland, see Erica T. Lehrer, *Jewish Poland Revisited. Heritage Tourism in Unquiet Places* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 63–74.

5. Ferda Balancar (ed.), *The Sounds of Silence III: Ankara's Armenians Speak* (Istanbul: International Hrant Dink Foundation Publ., 2012), 42.

6. This applies to the last Jews themselves, like in the pessimistic encounters recorded by Niezabitowska

traditional *either-or* identity paradigm this was unavoidable.

In fact, one can say that both of these two genocides were enabled and to some extent caused by the historical contrast of identities, and the new post-genocide identities of the survivor communities in Armenian and Jewish Diasporas were defined by the same dividing lines. This in turn created the sense that any attempt to diminish the dividing lines would endanger the memory of destruction.

The problem as such is of course inescapable because of the traditions of religious self-definition: one cannot be Christian and Muslim at the same time, and one cannot be Christian Catholic and Jewish in the religious (Halakhic) sense. And moreover, according to all traditional interpretations of Islam, a Muslim cannot even become Christian (without facing a death penalty).

Ironically, long after the destruction and annihilation of communities, traditions and identities, there were Turkish conspiracy theorists afraid of the re-emergence of hidden Armenians in Eastern Turkey, and in the same way the Polish anti-Semites were worried about Jewish conspiracies when there were no longer Jewish communities in existence.

Change of spirit: from destruction and negligence to protection and restoration

When everything was already considered lost, something happened. One could say that the spirit has changed strikingly in Poland, and to considerable extent even in Turkey, especially in Kurdish areas.⁷ “A process of de-assimilation has begun”, states a Polish-Jewish professor of philosophy Stanislaw Krajewski, adding that it is “a novelty in the history of Jews in Poland”. The latter remark indicates that something is in fact better today than during most of the history. Rather similar voices have emerged from certain parts of Turkey. “Until 10 years ago, we used to conceal our identity from everybody, but being an Armenian is no longer dangerous”,⁸ says Mehmet Arkan, a Muslim of Armenian origin in Diyarbakir.

In Poland, there has been an unprecedented rise of interest towards Judaism. This applies to Polish intellectuals attracted by the extensive amount of Jewish influence on the cultural history of Poland, as well as to many ordinary Poles reminiscing about their lost Jewish neighbours and neighbourhoods.⁹ In places like Chmielnik, city planners have faced the fact that the problem of a ruined synagogue in a beautiful old city must be solved somehow, and fortunately destruction is not a serious option. During the last five years, a respectable number of synagogues and cemeteries have been renovated and Jewish museums opened. The renewed synagogues function either as Jewish museums (Zamosc, Chmielnik,

& Tomaszewski . See Malgorzata Niezabitowska and Tomasz Tomaszewski, *Remnants: The Last Jews of Poland* (New York: Friendly Press, 1986).

7. There is a growing number of intellectuals and Kurdish politicians (e.g. candidate for presidency, Selahattin Demirtas) who openly speak for the Armenian cause, or at least actively show tolerance.

8. “Turkey’s Secret Armenians,” *Al-Monitor*, February 19, 2013.

9. e.g. Elzbieta Skromak, *Żyd, mój sąsiad; dialog kultur w przedwojennym Rozwadowie* [The Jew, My Neighbor: The Dialogue of Cultures in Pre-War Rozwadów] (Stalowa Wola: Muzeum Regionalne w Stalowej Woli, 2013).

Dabrowa Tarnowska), communal cultural centers (Szczeczeszyn, Zarki, Modliborzyce) or, in the most fortunate cases, as synagogues (Krakow, Chachmei Lublin Yeshiva).

It is well-known that in Turkey there are thousands of Armenian churches and monastery buildings in decay, some dating to the earliest Christian times. However, Aghtamar¹⁰ and Surb Kirakos in Diyarbakir have been renovated,¹¹ and other projects of renovation are more or less under consideration. There have been preliminary talks even about restoring the famous yet totally ruined Surb Karapet in Mush region. So far the endeavours have not been much more than political manoeuvres for the protection of the image of Turkey, with no serious concern on the cultural legacy the destruction of which still continues.¹² Nevertheless, even this suffices to give an impression that the bottom may have been reached and the second post-genocide century might be better than the first one for the last landmarks of West Armenian civilization.

As regards to the buildings, Poland is certainly far ahead. It is true that many of the renovation projects have been more or less funded by Jewish organisations in the diaspora, but remarkably, such projects may be initiated and carried out by Polish Christians as well, and there does exist true interest for the Jewish cause. In Turkey, a successful restoration implies difficult legal processes, yet some cases (Surb Kirakos, Aghtamar) are similar enough so that certain parallelism may be seen in emergence. It must be admitted, however, that what is a painful exception in Poland (e.g. the cross and church in Auschwitz-Birkenau) is an overwhelming rule in Turkey (mosques in the places of churches and monasteries). What is happening to the buildings is a good indicator of the situation of people, to which we now turn.

Sparks of souls re-emerging?

The concept of *gilgul*, transmigration of souls, became popular in medieval Jewish mysticism. According to this peculiar doctrine, each human soul is a sum of sparks from the souls of people of former ages – spiritual genetics, so to say. The idea of *gilgul* has often occurred to me when dealing with the stories of half-Jews of Poland or half-Armenians of Turkey, whose genetic ancestry seems to call them back to where they have come from. Perhaps even more mystically, there are also cases of authentic Poles in process of converting to

10. Aghtamar is officially a museum, and liturgy may be held there only once year, but the matter is currently under discussion. At the moment it seems possible to have additional ceremonies with a special permission. See Siranoush Ghazanchyan, "Akhtamar Church to be allowed to celebrate Mass more often," *Public Radio of Armenia*, 18 Jan 2016, <http://www.armradio.am/en/2016/01/18/akhtamar-church-to-be-allowed-to-celebrate-mass-more-often/>; "Armenian Acting Patriarch comments on the permission to hold Masses in Akhtamar Church more often," *Public Radio of Armenia*, 21 Jan 2016, <https://www.armradio.am/en/2016/01/21/armenian-acting-patriarch-comments-on-the-permission-to-hold-masses-in-akhtamar-church-more-often/>

11. The currently renovated Surb Kirakos church was recently awarded with a Grand Prix of the European Union Prize for Cultural Heritage/Europa Nostra Awards. Nevertheless, the Turkish government had no role in the actual project: most of the funding was raised by the Armenian diaspora and the rest by the local Kurdish municipality.

12. Cf. "1,600-Year-Old Armenian Cemetery Ruined In Mush," *Asbarez*, June 29, 2015, <http://asbarez.com/137317/1600-year-old-armenian-cemetery-ruined-in-mush/> (accessed 30 June 2015).

Judaism, oftentimes as a result of serious reflections on the legacy of genocide. This unusual phenomenon could be well interpreted with the help of another key concept from Jewish spirituality – *tiqqun olam*, healing of the world.

Attempts to define general principles in these processes easily fail to do justice to the cases, so unique the stories of returning souls are. Many instances sound unbelievable, like the famous case of Polish skinhead and anti-Semitic Pawel Bramson who at the age of 24 discovered that his parents were Jews who had converted to Catholicism – and the same case with his wife!¹³ In Turkey, there seems to be more and more half-Armenians bubbling up from different layers of the society. To name one, Mehmet Ali Arslan, a brand new Member of Parliament of Turkey, is of Armenian origin.¹⁴ Moreover, there have also been anti-Armenians with Armenian ancestry, just as there have been anti-Jewish activists arising from Jewish backgrounds. Sometimes this is a conscious attempt to prove the authenticity of one's non-Jewishness or non-Armenianness. However, the most interesting cases are those who are unaware of their background, like Bramson, but who somehow are deeply disturbed by Jewishness or Armenianness and channel this sense of insecurity into open hatred.

The chief rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich defines his mission as an enterprise “to revive the Jewish identity of individuals”,¹⁵ arguing that there are “thousands of stories about men and women of all ages and backgrounds” who are “returning to Judaism”.¹⁶ But are they really? Schudrich himself estimates that in one year there were “more than a hundred people” who came to him to *discuss* their Jewish roots, in addition to perhaps dozens who went to other rabbis. It means less than one per cent, and how many of these shall in reality return?

Media coverage and public interest focus on those few who really adopt the Jewish – or Armenian – religion and become converts. It is rather obvious, however, that most of those who are “returning” never fully reach the terminus by converting in the actual sense of the word. Remaining somewhere in-between, they may start to identify and even define themselves as Jews and adopt a wide selection of Jewish customs and activities. This does not automatically make anyone a Jew in the traditional (Halakhic) sense of the word, especially if one's mother was a non-Jew. There are thousands of such people who fall somewhere between the poles: they are not Jews, but also it would be misleading to describe them as non-Jews.

The situation of the Jews of Poland, and the development of recent decades, has been summarised illustratively by Schudrich:

13. Adam Easton, “Jewish life slowly returns to Poland,” *BBC News*, April 20, 2012, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-radio-and-tv-17741185> (accessed 1 July 2015); Katarzyna Markusz, “Sneak peek at a hard-hitter in the upcoming S.F. Jewish Film Festival,” *JWeekly*, June 14, 2012, <http://www.jweekly.com/article/full/65535/from-neo-nazi-skinhead-to-a-black-hatted-jew/> (accessed 1 July 2015); “Polish man journeys from skinhead to Orthodox Jew,” *CTV*, March 28, 2012, <http://www.ctvnews.ca/polish-man-journeys-from-skinhead-to-orthodox-jew-1.788440> (accessed 1 July 2015).

14. Arslan represents People's Democratic Party (HDP).

15. Michael Schudrich, “Giving Back to the Jewish People,” in *Poland: A Jewish Matter*, ed. Kate Craddy, Mike Levy, and Jakub Nowakowski, (Warszawa: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2010), 62.

16. *Ibid.*, 57.

Back then, in 1973, it was believed that there were no Jews left in Poland except a few thousand elderly. By 1990, there was some thought that maybe there were some younger Jews, by the mid-1990s we knew there were many more Jews than were previously believed but it was not clear if they wanted to express their Jewish identity. Today we know that some are expressing their Jewish identity and the challenge is to give them ways to express their identity in a meaningful way to themselves.¹⁷

The estimation can be verified by the interviews made in the 1980's. "We are definitely the last", the interviewers heard in many occasions. "Jews as a community, or even a mini-community, will no longer exist in Poland. We are on the way out."¹⁸ Contrary to all expectations, the situation started to change just a few years after these words were documented. Consequently, during the post-Soviet decades, "thousands of Poles have discovered that they have Jewish roots and nobody knows how many thousands they are", as Jessica Zwaiman Lerner states.¹⁹

Something parallel has happened in Turkey, especially after Fethiye Cetin's book *Anneannem* (2004) that brought the fate of Armenian grandmothers into discussion. Furthermore, Hrant Dink's murder in 2007 made many to take sides in the matter. The situation gave rise to a sense that the Armenian issue should be encountered either openly like in Dink's journalism, or destructively, like in the national ideology behind the murder, and many consciously chose the former option.²⁰

As a result of the increase of interest and courage on Armenian heritage, we know today much more than ten years ago. Interviews, articles and books about the descendants of Turkey's Armenians have started to appear. The stories contain obvious parallels with the instances of Jews in Poland. In both cases, one's origin is oftentimes realized just by chance; there are also cases of dramatic deathbed confessions.²¹ Reactions of the descendants vary considerably. An ideal example of this is found in an article discussing the situation of people who have discovered their Jewish ancestry in Poland. The author is pondering upon the reasons why a grandchild would like to become Jewish:

Rabbi Schudrich says they have a number of deathbed confessions. He tells the story of this girl who found out she was Jewish after a deathbed confession by her grandmother. At 16 years of age she was curious and attended

17. [Rabbinical Council of America], "Rabbi Michael Schudrich. Chief Rabbi of Poland," March 18, 2014, <http://www.rabbis.org/news/article.cfm?id=105571> (accessed 8 Oct, 2015).

18. Malgorzata Niezabitowska and Tomasz Tomaszewski, *Remnants*, 15.

19. Jessica Zwaiman Lerner, "Rabbi Michael Schudrich on the opportunity for renewed Jewish life in Poland," *Jewish Times Asia*, December 2010/January 2011, <http://www.jewishtimesasia.org/one-to-one-topmenu-45/rabbi-michael-issue-december> (accessed 2 July 2015).

20. "The fact that he spoke out about those things was a turning point for Turkey." Ferda Balancar (ed.), *The Sounds of Silence. Turkey's Armenians Speak* (Istanbul: International Hrant Dink Foundation Publ., 2012), 43.

21. e.g. Ayse Gül Altınay and Fethiye Cetin, *The Grandchildren. The Hidden Legacy of "Lost" Armenians in Turkey* (New Brunswick & London: Transaction Publishers, 2014), 99.

a session the rabbi offered. “She told me at the end of the session she felt something come alive in her that she had never felt before. This *Pintele Yid* – the spark of the Jewish soul.” That is “the most logical and simplistic answer.”²²

Something parallel is described by a leftist non-religious descendant of Armenians in Diyarbakir, who after having entered the church was surprised by a certain feeling of lightness. He tried to explain this by pondering whether there could have been some kind of spiritual energy of the ancestors present: “This may not be scientific, but that’s my explanation.”²³

It is also striking that even when there was no explicit talk whatsoever on the matter, evidently *something* had been delivered to the next generations. An Alevi woman from East Turkey (aged 30) came to know that her father’s side was of Armenian origin. After consideration, she concluded that something had been transmitted between the lines: “Both my mother and my father carried with them the oppression of the past and they passed it on to me, and it defined my childhood.”²⁴ It is telling that this heritage was defined in negative terms:

For me, having Armenian roots means this: you know that there were people in your family who were continuously oppressed on account of their identity. And you grow up carrying that sense of oppression with you.²⁵

Problems of recovering identity

Even for those who manage to go through an actual conversion, it is not easy to become an Armenian. A recent publication describes the setting in a church in Boyacıköy during the Sunday service. Some twenty new converts are vehemently crossing themselves, but “when the notes of the hymns rise to the brick roof, they hesitate, stumbling over the words”. In addition to the usual problematics in adopting a new religion and a new way of thinking, there are linguistic difficulties and social barriers, not to mention the obvious dangers from Islamists and nationalists alike. Even the Armenian bishop, stressing that they are not actively converting in the manner of the evangelical missionaries, remains cautious of the new phenomenon:

More and more people are breaking the silence and knocking on our doors. The atmosphere of democratization is favourable here, but the fear is still present: the subject is still politically sensitive. We’re not quite sure how to handle it.²⁶

For those who do not convert, the setting is even more obscure. The Islamized Armenians of Turkey are a curious sub-group that officially does not exist. Their identity is constructed in

22. Jessica Zwaiman Lerner, “Rabbi Michael Schudrich.”

23. Ferda Balancar (ed.), *The Sounds of Silence II. Diyarbakir’s Armenians Speak* (Istanbul: International Hrant Dink Foundation, 2013), 199–200.

24. Ayşe Gül Altınay and Fethiye Cetin, *The Grandchildren*, 156.

25. Ibid, 153.

26. Laure Marchand and Guillaume Perrier, *Turkey and the Armenian Ghost: On the Trail of the Genocide* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2015), 57.

negative terms: not a real Turk, but also not a true Armenian. There is even no appropriate name for the group. Armenians oftentimes speak of “Islamized Armenians”, which in many cases is anachronistic, since the term refers accurately only to the situation during the first generation. It is misleading to call “Islamized” someone who has one non-Islamic (grand-) grandparent. In most cases, there is only 1/4 or 1/8 of Armenian genes involved, due to the big number of abducted young girls in 1915. And as one might expect, things get much more obscure when we turn to the non-genetic factors of Armenian identity.

How to call them, then? Who are they? It is characteristic for this new phenomenon that the classical clear-cut divisions between Turks and Armenians, or Poles and Jews, are no longer enough to define identities in a functional way. This creates a paradoxical situation due to the fact that the religious definitions remain clear as ever: one either is a Jew or Catholic, Muslim or Christian. To adopt one religion means to deny the other. But what should then be done to the growing number of cases who define themselves somewhere between the categories, or who feel at home in both of them?

In Diyarbakir, Mehmet Arkan became aware of his family’s Armenian identity at the age of seven and affirms that he does not feel less Armenian for being a Sunni Muslim and performing Islamic prayers!²⁷ According to traditional either-or paradigm, this would be impossible – and such a statement would not have made any sense in pre-genocide Armenian culture, for which Arkan undoubtedly feels genuine affinity. However, if one becomes acquainted with the pre-genocide Armenian culture, its thoroughly Christian nature becomes obvious.

A 34-year old Muslim woman in Turkey ponders her self-definition after finding out (as a teenager) that she, as a matter of fact, is a descendant of an Armenian priest and music teacher from Mush, father Yeghiše:

I know that I have Armenian origins. A part of me is Armenian. I am totally at peace with this. I don’t define myself as Armenian or as a Turk but I have to admit that the answer to my question, “Who am I?” took some time to mature.²⁸

What, then, is this answer of hers? She admits that she was brought up as a Turk, her family is Turkish, her name is Turkish, and that she is “a Turk anyway”, and everything about her is “Turkish in fact”. Yet there is the other half in her, too, and oftentimes these two sides function in contradictory terms: “While my Turkish part feels embarrassed, my Armenian part feels terrible anger.” The anger and hatred is so strong that one has to actively learn to deal with it in order to be able to carry on ordinary life.

Neither Turkish or Armenian history, nor academic scholarship, has valid categories for such “half-cases”, not to mention religions. Tragically enough, such cases usually have no possibility to experience or even obtain genuine knowledge about the traditional way of life that their ancestors led. Due to the nonexistence of Armenian (or Jewish) life in quarters and villages that used to be Armenian (or Jewish), there is a curious and tragic sense of

27. “Turkey’s Secret Armenians,” *Al-Monitor*, February 19, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/02/turkey-secret-armenians.html#> (accessed 1 July 2015).

28. Ferda Balancar (ed.), *The Sounds of Silence. Turkey’s Armenians Speak*, 86.

emptiness and absence all around. For that very reason, however, the annihilated culture in a paradoxical way remains constantly present through its absence. In Turkey this applies to both sides: the topic is an untreated wound for Turks, too.

The situation results in *broken identities*, in which some fragmentary aspects of the lost Armenianness – or Judaism – are cherished and respected by the descendants of survivors, but the traditional way of life as a whole remains unknown. This means that the definitive constituents of Armenianness and Jewishness are basically alien and replaced by aspects that are more or less random and even post-genocide.²⁹ In the traditional paradigm, national and religious identity was a harmonious whole, even though consisting of various ingredients; in the half-cases, identity is rather a composition of miscellaneous elements that are incompatible according to the standards of the traditional identities and the paradigm behind them.

In the cases of broken identities, the Armenian half is undoubtedly real, but extremely fragmentary. After the historical continuity is broken, there is no longer a way to know what it was like to be Armenian in the original cultural setting that used to be exceptionally rich and colourful, flavoured with dozens of peculiar communal feasts and fasts annually, in addition to an endless number of local songs, dances, rituals and customs. This in turn results in what could be labelled as *imagined identities*: one may think that he is Armenian even though there are only tiny and fragmentary random parallels with Armenianness as it was before the genocide, or what it would be now without the genocide.³⁰

In a society like Turkey, this may lead into situation in which a half-Armenian possesses only the negative aspects of Armenian identity: the sense of being oppressed and endangered. Or, in a more open society like Poland – and perhaps Istanbul – one may try to pick up some of the best parts of the ancestral identity: a half-Jew may have Judaism as a kind of hobby, enjoying Jewish literature and concerts in Jewish festivals (the number of which is increasing in Poland).

Nonetheless, such pursuits are not an insignificant phenomenon. The famous festival of Jewish culture in Cracow has been scorned – oftentimes by the diaspora Jewry – as being Jewish culture performed by non-Jews to non-Jews.³¹ Such a blame is in fact an outcome of the traditional paradigm of “either–or” identities and fails to take into consideration the fact that many of the “non-Jews” actually come from the half-Jewish background, and such open festivals are the easiest and sometimes the only way to achieve at least some taste of the lost ancestral life, as well as of modern Judaism.

The public interest, especially the articles based on interviews of the most interesting cases, typically concentrate on those few who managed to convert to the religion of their

29. E.g. one may know, say, Easter eggs but not the totality of *paregantan*, Great lent, Great week and Easter night with its hymns, songs and games, to which the eggs belonged.

30. How much better the situation is in the Post-Soviet Armenia, or in the diaspora, is another question. Correspondingly, the religious, communal and social life of the Jews in London or Boston cannot be the same as it was – or would be – in Bukowsko or Frampol.

31. See the discussion in Janusz Makuch, “I Was Neither a Jew Nor a Catholic,” in *The Fall of the Wall and the Rebirth of Jewish Life in Poland: 1989–2009*, ed. Shana Penn, Konstanty Gebert, and Anna Golstein, (Warsaw: Taube Foundation for Jewish Life and Culture, 2009), 62.

ancestors. This is to create narratives of partisans who went to other side and returned victorious, in accordance with the traditional either-or identity paradigm. The reality is that most of the people who find themselves from somewhere in-between do remain somewhere in-between. They may react to their genetic background either by underlining aggressively their present Islamic [or Catholic] religious identity, or by becoming friendly towards Armenians [or Jews], as is the case with many Kurds [and Poles] today.

In Poland – and elsewhere – more and more people with some Jewish ancestry seem to end up into a curious loose category of something like “hang-around members” of the Jewish community. They are unable or unwilling to go through the actual conversion (for males, with circumcision) to become Jewish in the Halakhic sense, yet they feel deeply sympathetic for the Jewish cause, and may be more committed to the Jewish activities than those who are officially Jewish. It can also be that they are unable to leave Christianity, the Catholic side of their identity, even though they also genuinely “feel like Jews”.

Some say that it is simply too late for conversion. If one recovers his/her Jewish ancestry at the age of, say, 45, and then one is to spend at least five years to gradually remodel the identity, at that point it may be no longer possible to raise a Jewish family, and conversion as a private exercise would feel like a half-way enterprise in any case.³² This is one variety of post-genocidal tragedies resulting from dealing with the absence.

In practice, however, the actual Halakhic non-Jewishness may be of little importance, since such cases may be considered as “Jews enough” by the so-called real Jews – especially in a country like Poland, where the broken identities are common among the Jewish flock and the community is secularised in any case. As a matter of fact, the exceptions have become the rule among the Jews of Poland.

Common features

After these somewhat general considerations I now turn to discuss certain more detailed and more concrete aspects in the material published in the interviews and articles on these two (loose) groups. It is to be noted that the groups in question are in many ways so dissimilar that their very comparability may well be questioned. For that very reason, however, it is all the more striking that the deliberations of central European intelligentsia and those of Anatolian peasants may appear amazingly similar. In spite of the divergence in situations, the second or third generation experiences and attitudes, at times even their verbal depictions, appear largely equivalent.

Representatives of both groups describe a sense, or perhaps rather a *state*, of deep loneliness. In practical terms this could imply a concrete lack of relatives. Konstantiny Gebert reminisces how when reading novels, “cousins” or “uncles” felt like imaginative characters, until he went to school and realized that the others really had such big families.³³ Similarly, a woman (aged 48) in Turkey was pondering why her father had no relatives, and

32. These observations are based not only on literature but also on my own discussions with such cases in Poland and other European countries.

33. Konstanty Gebert, *Living in the Land of Ashes* (Krakow, Budapest: Austeria, 2008), 14.

her story was even entitled “Why did my father have no aunts, uncles or cousins?”³⁴

The problem, however, is significantly deeper than mere lack of relatives or ordinary loneliness in the every-day sense. Among both groups, there prevails a profound sense of being detached from the mainstream. This is often indicated between the lines, and at times depicted explicitly, depending on one’s psychological talent and ability to reflect and analyse oneself. The following description by a woman in Turkey, 53 years old, is illustrative of the situation:

The thing that seems to have bothered us the most is not to have a place we can call ours, not to know where we are from. [...] Wherever we went, we had to work very hard to make friends; we were very generous but still, when the door closed, we were alone. We were alone on holidays. We had nowhere to go. We had no relatives, no land, no trees.³⁵

In Poland, Gebert summarizes an equivalent situation even more compactly: “We had no Christmas, only a tree.”³⁶

From the psychological point of view, one of the most interesting aspects is the combination of bizarre tensions and deep insecurity concerning the identity described in both groups. This in turn is connected with an evident lack of discussion on the matter even inside the family – an extreme indicator of the *presence of absence*. The internal silence also partly explains why people in so many cases are shocked when finding out their own family history. Tragicomically, in many cases in Turkey the truth had been known all the time by others, such as neighbours and colleagues, yet silenced inside the family! It is striking how similar moods the following quotes express. The first one is again by Gebert, second by a half-Armenian woman in Turkey (aged 53):

Some of us knew, some of us suspected, and some denied strenuously that we were...Jewish. What that term actually meant, nobody seemed to know for sure.³⁷

I can’t say exactly when I noticed it. There have been fragments of this story at the back of my mind for as long as I can remember. There’s something different about us, but what is it?³⁸

It is remarkable that in both cases the weight of the lost identities and legacies was present even when there was no clear awareness of one’s Armenian or Jewish roots.

In Turkey, many Armenian grandmothers lived their lives without saying a word about their Armenian background or Armenian culture in general. They did not only keep their secret but could even remain silent when the secret was no longer a secret: some remained

34. Ayse Gül Altınay and Fethiye Cetin, *The Grandchildren*, 46.

35. Ibid, 184.

36. Konstanty Gebert, *Living in the Land of Ashes*, 14.

37. Ibid

38. Ayse Gül Altınay and Fethiye Cetin, *The Grandchildren*, 183.

quiet even when their descendants already knew and tried to pose questions.³⁹ This cannot be due to fear alone but rather to the exceptionally deep-rooted frustration and bitterness because of the denied way of life they never could have among their own.⁴⁰ In a similar fashion in Poland, Agnieszka Markowska tells about her grandmother after finding about her Jewish background: “When I showed her what I discovered, she still denied she knew anything.” Likewise, mother of Olga Danek (28) is said to have “known the family secret but felt it was too dangerous to acknowledge”.⁴¹ Such descriptions are to be found from both groups.

Many of these symptoms can be labelled under the concept of problem of *dealing with the absence* of the annihilated life and culture. Brilliant descriptions of the sense of presence of absence are given by Perroomian in her analysis of the Post-Genocide artistic literature by Armenians in Turkey. This is all the more revealing, considering the fact that in Turkey the references to the disappearance of Armenian culture had to be as implicit as possible. Consequently, the most powerful message is the one between the lines. One could write about pomegranate trees no longer casting their shadow, or about one’s mother begging for “bread, bread, bread” – but the actual cause of this state of affairs remains unsaid.⁴²

Yet also in Poland, where one could reflect on Auschwitz more openly, the presence of absence is literally behind any corner. The post-genocide experience is characterised by a deep sense of bitterness that operates in many levels. “Auschwitz still has the power of poisoning human souls,”⁴³ as Gebert has it. The ways how this poisonous bitterness have been experienced in the diaspora are well-known and much studied, but in fact the present groups represent even more painful situations, given that they have lived as detached individuals in the authentic setting of the once-flourishing culture, yet unable to gain a proper comprehension of the character of the life annihilated from the immediate surroundings. They have a curious feeling of *being unable to be what one should be*, due to fact that without a community there is no way to lead traditional Jewish or Armenian way of life.

In short, the identities of half-Armenians and half-Jews contain rather similar characteristics and are constituted by largely parallel experiences. The problems and the human reactions to them appear essentially similar, in spite of the variation in situations.

Some diverging trends

There are also several aspects that can be considered as dissimilarities, even though the phenomena are based on somewhat similar dispositions. Basically, a sense of *fear* is an

39. See Ayse Gül Altınay and Fethiye Cetin, *The Grandchildren*, 46, 72–73.

40. For a compact analysis of the reasons for silence in both diaspora and Turkey, see Rubina Perroomian, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915: The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2008), 110–112.

41. Graham-Harrison, “The third-generation Polish Jews rediscovering long-buried roots,” *The Guardian*, January 25, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/25/third-generation-polish-jews-rediscovering-roots> (accessed 19 June 2015).

42. For discussion and examples, see Perroomian Rubina, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915*, 22–24, 113–118.

43. Konstanty Gebert, *Living in the Land of Ashes*, 154.

important common factor. Polish Jews are still cautious about showing their Jewishness, even though the present situation would admit remarkable openness. Indeed, there are cases of Jews who do show their Judaism openly without encountering any kind of problems. Yet somewhere in the background the fear still remains, and the Jews are used to be quiet about their identity. The chief rabbi admits that he cannot say for sure that “it won’t happen again”.⁴⁴ The remark is characteristic for the post-genocide existence in which the reality is thoroughly stained by ethical pessimism and certain distrust in the everyday reality, shadowed by the unrelenting possibility of new atrocities.

Nevertheless, there is a fundamental difference between the two cases. In Turkey, fear still dominates vehemently. Disinformation on Armenians is everywhere present, and threat of harassment, even persecution, is still in the air. Even in 2010’s, the most of those who were interviewed in a project by Hrant Dink foundation did not allow their cases to be published at all, and those who did, wanted their names to be changed or omitted. In Poland the identity discussions are open and provoke no danger.

Therefore, it is no surprise that every Armenian who was interviewed in another recent project had sensed deeply depressive moods due to the fear, sorrow and silence. To be an Armenian is a painful secret and depressive burden, sensed even by third or fourth generation Muslims.⁴⁵ It is telling that one young Muslim “cried for days” after having heard that he is Armenian.⁴⁶ There is no excitement whatsoever of absorbing oneself to the medieval literature, art and other forms of cultural richness, as it may be the case for many in Poland. The pre-genocide Armenian culture is non-accessible for the half-Armenians in Turkey (outside Istanbul), and its qualitative and quantitative richness remain in darkness.

Even today, one century after the genocide, those who stand out as too Armenian may encounter problems and may be oppressed so that they have to change their home-place. (Diyarbakir seems to be a happy exception.⁴⁷) Armenianness has meant apparent physical danger till 2000’s. This being the case, it is no wonder that the converted Armenians traditionally have had a strong need to show one is a “real Muslim”. In Poland the situation was parallel but the content almost the opposite: a Jew had to prove he is a good Pole by being a good communist.

A significant outcome of the fear and threatening atmosphere is that the awakenings are taking place one or two generations later than in Poland. It is not unusual that, like in the case of Cetin, the stories of Armenian grandmothers emerge when they themselves are no longer present.

Consequently, it is clear that the half-Armenians in Turkey know much less of Armenian culture and genocide than their fate-mates in Poland. This is an evident outcome of

44. Michael Schudrich, “Giving Back to the Jewish People,” in *Poland: A Jewish Matter*, ed. Kate Craddy, Mike Levy, and Jakub Nowakowski, (Warszawa: Adam Mickiewicz Institute, 2010), 58.

45. See Ayse Gül Altınay and Fethiye Cetin, *The Grandchildren*, xi–xiii.

46. Ferda Balancar (ed.), *The Sounds of Silence II*, 54.

47. See Vicken Cheterian, “Armenian Life Returns to Diyarbakir,” *Al-Monitor*, October 16, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/culture/2013/10/turkish-armenians-rediscover-roots.html#> (accessed 1 July 2015); “Islamized Armenians are baptized and learning the language – diaspora minister”, December 25, 2014, <http://news.am/eng/news/245835.html> (accessed 1 July 2015).

the continuation of oppressive anti-Armenian policy in Turkey. In Poland, there is a huge amount of intellectual literature on Polish Jewry, their history and cultural contributions, and the number of new publications is still increasing. Moreover, in Poland the archives have served to reveal Jewish ancestry for some, while in Turkey there is hardly any documented information available on Armenians' roots in public archives.

The half-Armenians of Turkey may know about their immediate family background but they are almost totally unaware on the historical truths concerning the genocide, or Armenian culture and history in general. Up to our times, it has been very difficult to gain even basic information about Armenian history and culture in Turkey. Interestingly, the internet is changing the setting somewhat: to have some taste of Armenian village life in Ottoman times one needs just to find and click *houshamadyan.org*. Whether the descriptions of *paregentan* festivities relieve the sense of loss or make it worse, however, is another question.

The question of numbers

One concrete result of the undefined and uncertain identity situation is the fact that it is still impossible to give any reasonable or even rough numbers for these groups. In Poland, there are tens of thousands of Catholic, or atheist, people with Jewish ancestry. However, one could say that most of those who are Jews do not really know whether they are Jews or not. Schudrich commented on the question of numbers in June 2015 in a most rabbinic manner:

When asked how many Jews there are in Poland today, he answers, "Pick a number; double it. It is too small." Then he adds, "I don't know, but tomorrow there will be more." Estimations say there are somewhere between 30 and 50 thousand people who have Jewish roots, "Of which the majority know it and want to do something about it, although there can be many more than could be discovering their Jewish identity."⁴⁸

What the rabbi does not like to say, however, is that there is an essential difference between "wanting to do something about it" and becoming a Jew in the actual sense of the word. One individual can perhaps move somewhat between two religions and identities, but the ultimate choice is inescapable in the case of his/her children: baptism or circumcision? Or could it be both? There is an evident parallelism here with the fourth century Jewish-Christian demarcation problematics on which St. Jerome sharply commented that those who try to be both Jews and Christians are neither Jews nor Christians.⁴⁹ It seems that there is a need of new categories, but any new category would be unable to do any justice for any of the religions involved.

However, the latest estimation of the actual number of "declared Jews" in Poland is set at seven thousand.⁵⁰ This seems to be from three to six times less than the number of what we have called "half-Jews", which alone shows how relevant the latter category is.

48. Jessica Zwaiman Lerner, "Rabbi Michael Schudrich."

49. Jerome: *Epistle 75 (Letter to St. Augustine)*, 4:13. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series, Vol. 1. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887).

50. Elżbieta Mostowska, "The Question All Tourists Ask: How Many Jews Are There in Poland?" August, 2015, <http://www.sztetl.org.pl/en/cms/news/4799,the-question-all-tourists-ask-how-many-jews-are-there-in-poland-/html> (accessed 1 Sep 2015).

In Turkey, due to the large number of kidnapped Armenian girls and the exponential population growth, the numbers are at minimum in the hundreds of thousands, to say the least. One recent estimation set the number around three million, another to 4–6 million.⁵¹ Even though such numbers may have a considerable genetic truth imbedded in them, they are of little practical relevance. Most of these people have only 12.5% or 25% of Armenian genes, and their identity is completely Islamic (Turkish or Kurdish), so there is in fact not any lost Armenianness whatsoever left that they could or should return into, regardless of the amount of information they may have about the background of their grand(-grand) mother. At best, many of them may be able to develop some true sympathy for the Armenians and Armenian cause.

The news concerning hidden crypto-Armenians who take baptism and truly return to the Armenian faith are fascinating, and in their own way they serve as historical healing process after a century of genocide and silence – but they deal with individuals or extremely tiny groups (mostly crypto-Armenians who managed to retain some of their Armenianness by marrying with similar cases). For every such “Neo-Armenian” who is baptized, however, there are tens of thousands of those who will never be baptized. Yet some of them consider themselves Armenian, and many of them do not consider them as non-Armenian.

Conclusion

The last ten years has witnessed an unprecedented rise of interest and growth of information on the descendants of the Armenian and Jewish genocide survivors in Turkey and Poland. After decades and generations of silence, both communities show signs of re-emergence and slow revival. A lot of public interest and media coverage, however, has focused on the relatively small number of converts who have adopted the ancestral Jewish or Armenian religion. Nevertheless, most of those who discover their (often partial) Armenian or Jewish ancestry in fact remain somewhere in-between the identities. They constitute groups that have neither names nor established criteria of identity. In this article, terms “half-Jews” and “half-Armenians” have been used to refer to those whose identity is broken in a way that does not fit into traditional “either–or” identities. The tragedy of the broken identities is the inability to know the *whole* of the lost traditional life-styles in Shtetls or Armenian villages.

According to the books and interviews published during the last years, it is evident that the Half-Jews in Poland and Half-Armenians in Turkey have experienced existential and identity crises in parallel terms, in spite of the obvious differences in their cultural contexts. In both cases, interviews of the survivors show similar dispositions of problems concerning identity, family heritage and dealing with the absence of culture that once flourished.

51. In a conference on Islamized Armenians, organised in October 2014 by university of Bosphorus in Istanbul, Haykazun Alvrtsyan's estimation was 2.5 million, in addition to half a million in diaspora and 300,000 of these in Germany alone. “2.5 Million Islamized Armenians Estimated in Turkey,” *Asbarez* 29 Oct 2014. Next week in Armenian radio, however, Abdul Gafuri from Diyarbakir set the number at 4–6 million. See Aida Avetisyan, “More hidden Armenians reveal their true identity in Turkey,” *Public Radio of Armenia* November 5, 2014, <http://www.armradio.am/en/2014/11/05/more-hidden-armenians-reveal-their-true-identity-in-turkey/> (accessed 1 July 2015).

The parallelism of the Polish-Jewish and Turkish-Armenian experiences shows something essential of the character of the post-genocide existence. This fact alone has obvious potentiality to contribute ingredients for the philosophical discussions on the ontology of genocide. Post-genocidal trauma is of collective nature and for that reason essentially deeper than “ordinary” private traumas of loss and damage.

Genocide by its deepest essence is an ontological attack in three levels: an aim to annihilate people’s past, present and future. Consequently, post-genocide existence is broken, shattered and scattered by nature. This brokenness is reflected in a silent yet dramatic way in the identities and psyches of the remnants of the survivors.

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