

Harutyun Grigoryan, *Իմ կենսագրությունը* [My Biography], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide*, 10. Editor, author of the preface and references Regina Galustyan. Yerevan: AGMI, 2023, 304 pp.

Regina A. Galustyan,
Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute Foundation, Armenia

This memoir, titled *My Biography*, volume 10 in the series, is Harutyun Toros Grigoryan's account of his personal experience of the struggle to preserve his identity as an Armenian going through the genocide.

The author was born in the village of Avrdnik, Kghi district of Erzurum province, in 1898. Relatives took Harutyun and his sister, after the death of their father and mother, to an orphanage belonging to the German mission in Mezre. At the age of eight, he was transferred to its Beri branch. Two years later, he was brought back to the one in Mezre. Tired of orphanage life, he decided to escape to Datem with a friend. After his friend was accepted by his relatives in Datem, Harutyun was left alone.

He became a servant in different Armenian houses to earn a living, until Gabriel Ulohochyan's family accepted him. Harutyun remained with this family for four years. Apart from his household duties, he studied at the local Catholic school. He found his uncle's (father's brother) daughter (his cousin), Shushan, and her daughter Mariam when he was fourteen years old, learning from them that his sister, Varder, had died. With his cousin Shushan's advice and Gabriel Ulohochyan's encouragement, Harutyun began to learn the blacksmith's trade. This became an important factor in his life.

Harutyun Grigoryan was deported with his blacksmith master's family in 1915. The life of an orphan was disrupted again. As a survivor, he recalled, "At the time of the Kharberd Yeghern [Genocide], I was 17 years old and had a good memory." The province of Kharberd, called "the slaughterhouse province" by contemporaries, occupies an essential place in the history of the genocide due to its central geographical location.¹ Caravans of displaced Armenians from Trabzon, Erzurum, Sebastia, and Ankara all passed through it. Kharberd was where temporary camps existed, as well as sites of mass killings.²

The intellectuals in the province of Kharberd were arrested in May-June 1915 following the general procedures used in the implementation of the Armenian Genocide. The men were drafted into the army, posted to local army labour battalions, then killed. Caravans of women and children were exiled to Mesopotamia at the end of June. The first caravan of about 2,500 people left Mezre on July 1st, 1915, traveling in the direction of Diyarbekir under the leadership of Adam Pasha. It reached one of the Armenian Genocide

1 Leslie Davis, *Սպանդի նահանգը: Ամերիկյան դիվանագետի զեկրուցագիրը հայկական ցեղասպանության մասին, 1915-1917 թթ.* [The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917] (Yerevan: Dall, 2001), 181-182.

2 Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 381.

mass killing sites in Kharberd, Lake Tsovk (Goljuk), the next day. The second caravan of about 3,000 people left Mezre on July 2nd, heading towards Malatya.³ This caravan of deportees comprised notable families from Kharberd, including the Fabricatorians, who are mentioned in this memoir several times. Harutyun Grigoryan was in the first caravan, whose members were forced to walk to the desert of Der Zor, the main concentration camp for Armenians.

In his biography, Harutyun Grigoryan provided information about the nature and geographical location of his native Dalem and Kharberd, as well as interesting ethnographic and dialectal information and details of the customs of the Arab population of Der Zor and Ras ul Ain. The memoir helps us understand the daily life and problems of the newly formed Armenian community in Syria. All the details provided add interest to the narrative. The historiographical value of the memoir consists of material relating to the actual course of the Armenian Genocide and the methods used in its implementation. The author provided information on almost every aspect of the crime. This eyewitness account of the Armenian Genocide is an addition to its factual documentation: it places the individual at the center of the crime carried out by the state.

After describing the arrest of Mezre's intellectuals, the massacre of Armenian men, and giving facts about the state policy of expropriation of Armenian properties,⁴ Harutyun described the months-long exile. Each sentence in the memoir substantiates the statement established in historiography: that the Turkish government used deportation as a method of exterminating the Armenian nation.⁵ Henry Morgenthau, US Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, clarifies, in his memoir:

When the Turkish authorities gave the orders for these deportations, they were merely giving the death warrant to a whole race; they understood this well, and in their conversations with me, they made no particular attempt to conceal the fact.⁶

Describing the passage of a caravan from one place to another and the changing of the Turkish military escorts, Grigoryan quoted the words of one of the soldiers:

There is no order to slaughter. The order is only to prolong the journey. No one asks how many people died on the road. They didn't hand you over to us after counting so that they could receive you from us by counting.⁷

3 Ibid., 393.

4 See also: Uğur Ümit Üngör, Mehmet Polatel, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (London, New York: Continuum, 2011), 66-68.

5 *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916*, ed. Wolfgang Gust (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2014), 523, 526.

6 Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1918), 309.

7 Harutyun Grigoryan, «Իմ կենսագրությունը» [My Biography], notebook 1, AGMI scientific archives, Sec-

The survivor also testified to the existence of sites on the deportation route where mass killings took place, outside of which the soldiers accompanying the deportees did not even allow the Kurds and Arabs to attack them, claiming that “there is no order from the padishah.” Grigoryan gave examples of violence inflicted on Armenians on the road (abduction of children, sexual harassment of women, etc.), stressing that the caravan was intentionally driven through waterless places; he described the effects of road and weather conditions on the deportees:

No shoes remained on our feet. We would tie a piece of cloth under our feet so the sand wouldn't burn them; we didn't even have any cloth left, exchanging bread for old or new pieces. While walking on the road, we would tread on the grass to not burn our feet. The place we were in was a desert.⁸

Many of the episodes he presented show the use of deportation as a method of slaughter. On his way to Der Zor along the Euphrates, Grigoryan saved an Armenian boy from drowning. The boys of his age tried to convince him to go to the survivor's mother to get a reward:

I refused, saying that I had done a good deed; I had saved an Armenian. I didn't want a gift, but no one paid attention to me. They dragged me to his mother. When they revealed the situation, she picked up a stone and threw it at me: “Why didn't you let him die? At least it would relieve him from these sufferings. He would die once and be released, but exile is suffering and death every day.”⁹

Upon arrival in Der Zor, non-disabled Armenian men were taken to a place called Salean and offered work on the construction of buildings for very little payment (two *kurush*). Hunger forced Grigoryan to agree,¹⁰ as the government had set a monthly allowance of 30 *kurush* for the exiles, which was allocated for only two months.¹¹

Grigoryan, presenting the events that happened to him sequentially, showed the situation in the concentration camps of Der Zor and Ras ul Ain (famine, epidemics, etc.) by mentioning daily death tolls, allowing the reader to imagine the extent of the disaster inflicted on the Armenian people through the genocide. He testified that in Der Zor, infected people were quarantined in an area over the bridge outside the city and were not

tion 8, No. 8, File 31, 95. The pages of references are as in the original Armenian handwritten memoir, not the published version.

8 Ibid., 107.

9 Ibid., 111.

10 Ibid., 113.

11 Ibid., 117. This testimony is also provided by Khatchig Mouradian. On this issue and on the conditions of the deported Armenians in Aleppo and Zor region see Khatchig Mouradian, *The Resistance Network: The Armenian Genocide and Humanitarianism in Ottoman Syria, 1915-1918* (Michigan State University Press, 2021), 22-24.

allowed to enter it. Poor sanitation and lack of food and medication contributed to the humanitarian disaster. Grigoryan presented the expression of a group of women: “Death is better than starvation. The bullet will kill once, but hunger melts and wears us down every day, every hour.”¹²

Parallel to all this, the government continued the deliberate killing of the Armenians who reached the concentration camps. The police, after catching Grigoryan, sent him with another group of Armenians from Der Zor to Sheddadiye¹³ to face his death:

A day and a half away from Der Zor, the carnage began. Crying, lamenting, asking for God’s mercy was no use. There was no killing using bullets. They simply said “one bullet is one *kurush*, you’re not worth one *kurush*, why should we waste money?” They would kill us with a sword, sickle, axe, stick, or a piece of iron. They opened the bolt of the railway line, replaced it with a stick, and hit us with it.¹⁴

Grigoryan fainted after being hit on the head. The following thought expressed the psychological hopelessness of a survivor of a massacre: “When I opened my eyes [after the massacre – *R.G.*], I saw that all the Armenian people were lying down.”¹⁵

Harutyun Grigoryan also addressed the issue of Arab complicity: direct participation in murders, assimilation of Armenian women and children, and exploitation of the latter. Giving several examples in his memoir, the author unwittingly highlighted the ambiguity of physical “rescue”.¹⁶ Grigoryan recalls that the Arab master did not provide him with food while exploiting him. When he complained, he got the following answer: “This is how Armenians should be treated. If you were a Muslim, we would look after you better.”¹⁷ After beating him numerous times for not working instead of him, Harutyun’s master’s neighbor warned him:

If you tell anyone that Ahmed beat you, I will kill you with one bullet. Who’s going to ask you? You are Armenian. They’ve killed so many Armenians in Der Zor. Who did ask that they will ask you?¹⁸

Grigoryan managed to survive the slaughter in Sheddadiye and escape to Aleppo. From there, he undertook a long and dangerous journey back to his homeland. He passed

12 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 1, 127.

13 See the approximate number of Armenians killed in Sheddadiye in *The Armenian Genocide*, 712.

14 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 1, 132.

15 Ibid.

16 Harutyun Marutyun, “The Issue of the Rescue of Armenians by Ottoman Subjects During the Armenian Genocide,” *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies*, vol. 26 (2017): 39-61.

17 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 1, 169.

18 Ibid., 144:

through the towns of Nisibin, Adiyaman, Malatya and finally reached Daterm, which had been almost completely destroyed and then Mezre. Here, the survivor found his foster mother and the relatives who managed to escape deportation by converting to Islam. He got married in Mezre and, after working for some time for Muslim masters, opened his own workshop.

It seemed to him that Der Zor's events were in the past, and with honest work, it would be possible to restore the routine of life. These hopes, however, weren't justified. After another incident, when he refused to share his professional experience with a Turkish craftsman, false testimony was given against him. Harutyun settled the issue with a bribe: "The case would become much bigger if they take me to the police station because I am Armenian. They could not bear that an Armenian had a good job and a fine life."¹⁹

It should be noted that the author of the memoir did not express any political views regarding the Republic of Turkey or the Turkish people. He simply narrated the story of his life, specific episodes of which proved the genocidal state policy of the Ottoman Empire followed by the Republic of Turkey's anti-Armenian policy. It could be seen even in the daily life of the survivor: "Being Armenian is a big disadvantage for us; we cannot even go out at night."²⁰ After being returned to the police station, Harutyun Grigoryan asked what crime he had committed. The police chief answered: "Your crime is being Armenian; don't you know that?" Grigoryan was threatened with death for demanding payment for the repair of a stove in the house of a new official in Mezre appointed from Constantinople:

I have lived my life; my living is unnecessary. They hit me in Der Zor, but I didn't die. Will I die now? Instead of dying every day, I will die only once. This isn't a life we are living. Wherever we go, they say the same thing because of being Armenian.²¹

After being thrown into prison once again, Harutyun ponders: "What is my crime? Just being Armenian, nothing else."²²

The targeting of Armenians was noticeable even to Grigoryan's fellow Muslim craftsmen. As the Turkish barber Reshid told the commissioner who came to Harutyun's workshop to arrest him again: "In Europe, anyone who creates an invention is given a gift, but here you fine him for being Armenian."²³

Grigoryan brings many episodes of the dehumanisation of Armenians in his memoir, with forcing deported people to walk naked being one example. The description of women's experiences in the memoir deserves special attention. Grigoryan showed the

19 Ibid., 197.

20 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 2, 19.

21 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 1, 199.

22 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 2, 56.

23 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 1, 197.

psychological dilemma faced by Armenian women on the way to deportation and in the concentration camps and their methods of survival, from earning bread to fulfilling certain social duties. He provided examples of how exhausted, starving Armenian women in the caravan were forced to abandon other women giving birth and newborn children. A girl from Grigoryan's caravan in Ras ul Ain agreed to marry a Turkish policeman. After describing that step as "voluntary", the author elaborated, that the girl was convinced that there was an order to massacre all Armenians, but whoever became a Turk would be saved. He mentioned that there were other Armenian women who married Turks in Ras ul Ain and not deported.²⁴ He talked about a girl named Margaret who married an Arab "to save her life."²⁵ Grigoryan also narrated a case when an Arab sheik fed the people in the caravan, admitting that he had an Armenian wife and would like to take another from that caravan if anyone agreed. Grigoryan noted that no Armenian woman paid any attention to that proposal.²⁶ Examples of such marriages described in the memoir seem to have been a survival strategy in the absence of any other option for survival in a genocidal environment rather than a voluntary act.

When describing a personal episode, Grigoryan also mentioned the shelter in Aleppo. Several shelters operated in Aleppo under the auspices of the League of Nations, the Near East Relief Organization, the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), and other national and international humanitarian organizations in the post-WWI period. The Union of Armenian Women of Aleppo also opened a shelter in February 1919. The president was Aleppo's locum tenens priest, Rev. Harutyun Yesayan, and the Armenian Prelacy of Aleppo provided the building for the institution.²⁷ I believe the shelter the author referred to is this very facility. Funded from different sources, all these institutions had one common overarching goal: the liberation of Armenian women and children enslaved by Muslims during the genocide. That goal was achieved through negotiation, bribery, and ransom, as well as by encouraging Armenians to flee on their own.²⁸

The rescue of Armenian orphans and thousands of women became possible due to the efforts of these organisations. It was these remnants that revived the Armenian nation after it suffered genocide. Although the author had a negative attitude towards both the prelacy and the shelter, such institutions should, however, be evaluated in the context of their Armenian preservation activities.

Through Grigoryan's memoir, we are dealing with another phenomenon: the corruption of Turkish officials. We regularly encounter episodes of bribes being given to state officials and power structure representatives. Although the sentence "he pocketed

24 Ibid., 105.

25 Ibid., 133.

26 Ibid., 108.

27 Vahe Tachjian, "Post-War Aleppo, a Place of Fear and Trembling for the Armenian Refugees" in *The Armenian General Benevolent Union One Hundred Years of History*, vol. I, 1906-1940 (Cairo, Paris, New York, Chirat, 2006), 83.

28 *The Aleppo Rescue Home: 1464 Accounts of Armenian Genocide Survivors*, ed. Edita Gzoyan (Yerevan: AGMI, 2021), 28.

one *mejid* and everything was fixed”²⁹ is written in only one place, this idea is present throughout the narrative. This phenomenon had become a window of salvation. Many Armenians were saved from the genocide simply by bribing the person in charge of the deportation of a particular region.³⁰ This was the reason that Interior Minister Mehmed Talaat sent a particular order to the governor of Aleppo, dated October 22nd, 1915, stating once more that “The rights of Armenians on Turkish soil, such as the rights to live and work, have been eliminated, and not one is to be left – not even the infant in the cradle.”³¹ Talaat explained that, contrary to the government’s decision, the patriotic feelings of some officials in the Aleppo region had given way to material interests. Due to this, some Armenians were not sent to their final places of deportation. The interior minister, therefore, ordered the local governor to accomplish the task he was given.³²

A Danish historian, Matthias Bjornlund, dealing with the relief activities of the Danish branch of Women Missionary Workers (WMW) (Danish: *Kvindelige Missions Arbejdere*) in Kharberd during the First World War notes that bribery was one, if not the main, factor preventing the missionaries from being expelled from the country. WMW employees in Kharberd could set aside sums of money for bribing Turkish officials from that received from Denmark and the USA through the Constantinople office of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. As Bjornlund writes: “Luckily, many local soldiers and officials, including the *vali* Sabit Bey himself, were corrupt.”³³

In addition to bribery, the blacksmith’s craft became a means of exploitation and survival for Harutyun Grigoryan. In the case of some professions, the only Armenian craftsman of a given region was forcibly converted to Islam and made exempt from deportation. Armenian deportees, especially minors, were used as free labor. While the boys were taken to boarding schools and workshops, girls were made servants in urban Muslim families under the guise of adoptees.³⁴ Armenian children served as free labor

29 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 2, 51.

30 There are many examples in survivors’ memoirs. See for example Disaster Survivors, 1915 Աղէտ և վերածնունդ [1915 Disaster and Revival], (Paris: Araks, 1952), 33.

31 Taner Akçam, *Killing Orders: Talaat Pasha’s Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide* (Palgrave Studies in the History of Genocide), 1st ed. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 184.

32 Ibid.

33 Matthias Bjørnlund, “‘If I Die, I Die’: Women Missionary Workers Among Danes, Armenians, and Turks, 1900-1920,” *International Journal of Armenian Genocide Studies* 4, no. 2 (1919): 76. Many foreigners in Kharberd province speak about corruption of state officials. Tacy Atkinson, wife of Dr. Herbert Atkinson, a missionary stationed at Mezre describes in her diary, that Mezre’s kaymakam took bribes from the deportees and ordered them to hide in their hospital, which, however, brought only temporary salvation (Tacy Atkinson, “*The German, the Turk and the Devil Made a Triple Alliance*,” *Harpoor Diaries, 1908-1917* (Princeton, New Jersey: Gomidas Institute, 2000), 48). Grace Knapp, a missionary stationed in Bitlis, describes a scene during which the policemen releases the women that gave them money from the caravan, who then try to run away. However, they were followed and after a short time, they were found and placed in the next caravan (Grace H. Knapp, *The Tragedy of Bitlis* (London: Taderon Press, 2002), 44).

34 *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures: Family Law and Politics*, vol. 2, ed. Suad Joseph (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005), 6.

on farms and in the households of Turks, Kurds, Arabs, and Circassians.³⁵ Before being killed, aged men and young people “were dispersed along the roads of the empire where they break stones, requisitioned for the needs of the army, occupied with work for the benefit of the State.”³⁶

Armenian men drafted into the army were posted to labor battalions and, after carrying out construction work, were killed or simply died of exhaustion.³⁷ Armenian women who had reached their final places of deportation were employed in special workshops in Aleppo for their daily bread. They were forced to sew military uniforms and other items needed by the army.³⁸ Grigoryan’s life was a prime example of the genocidal mechanism of exploiting Armenians at the state level. Even in the post-genocide period, Grigoryan, as a sought-after blacksmith, encountered problems getting paid for his work.

In the general atmosphere of the anti-Armenian policy in the Turkish Republic, it became impossible for Harutyun Grigoryan to stay in Mezre any longer. He moved to Aleppo and started working alongside the blacksmiths of the Aleppo railway station. He joined the French army as a blacksmith to avoid imprisonment due to a fight in the prelaycy.

Harutyun Grigoryan responded to the call of the Soviet authorities in the 1940s and took the road to repatriation in September 1946. Grigoryan’s family arrived in Batumi with a group of repatriates on October 2nd; they went from there by train to Yerevan, arriving in the city on October 22nd, 1946: “I walked to the square saying to myself our ancestors died saying “homeland, homeland.” How lucky we are that we came to see the motherland with our eyes and will live here.”³⁹

Harutyun Grigoryan wrote his memoir, including every detail, clearly and precisely, giving the names and the locations of geographical places, settlements, and streets. Dialogues give a unique tone to the narrative. The memoir has a unique style; it also allows the reader to recognize the author. Harutyun Grigoryan is principled and fair-minded, with a great zest for life and a code of conduct. He was proud of his national identity, religion, and profession. This was, apparently, also due to the importance of blacksmiths’ role in Armenian community life and the respect they enjoyed.⁴⁰ Grigoryan believed in honest work, and even the genocidal environment could not undermine that belief. His granddaughter, Varduhi Grigoryan, also confirmed this during a conversation with the editor. She fondly remembered her paternal grandfather’s relationship with her

35 Taner Akçam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: the Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 338.

36 *The Armenian Genocide*, 652.

37 *Ibid.*, 343, 620.

38 Disaster Survivors, *1915 Disaster and Revival*, 418; Disaster Survivors, Տէր-Զօր [Der Zor] (Paris: P. Elekean, 1955), 58; Mouradian, *The Resistance Network*, 27.

39 Grigoryan, *My Biography*, notebook 3, 27.

40 For the role of blacksmiths in the Armenian socio-cultural system see Aghasi Tadevosyan, *Դարբինը հայոց ծիսակարգում (Պատմաագագրական հետազոտություն)* [The Blacksmith in the Armenian Ritual (Historical Ethnographic Research)], in *Hay azgagrutyun ev banahyusutyun: Nyuter ev Usumnasirutyunnerm, Vol. 23*, ed. D. Vardumyan (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2007), 105.

father, as well as the unique caring attitude of the grandfather and grandmother towards their grandchildren.

Harutyun Grigoryan completed his biography in 1975, dying a year later. It is not known when he started writing it. It is inscribed in three notebooks, which are kept in the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute's archives. The memoir has not been previously published, although ethnographer Verjine Svazlian has included an abridged and heavily edited version of the survivor's memoir (or interview) in her collection of survivor interviews.⁴¹

Grigoryan's linguistic style and speech is direct, without rich artistic expressions or unnecessary adjectives, which gives additional value to this testimony to the Armenian Genocide. The dryness of Grigoryan's speech and cold-hearted descriptions of violent scenes are due not to the author's character but to the fact that violence was routine. This is a phenomenon in which the genocidal elite legitimizes murder, robbery, sexual violence, and other acts aimed at exterminating the targeted group and, through repetition, makes it a daily procedure. It "desensitizes" both the perpetrator and the victim and facilitates genocide.⁴² This, however, could not suppress Grigoryan's and many other survivors' moral qualities, sense of empathy, and assisting their kin, but left a psychological mark on them that is so visible in this memoir.

41 Vejiné Svazlian, *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Yerevan: "Gitoutyou" 2011), 209-214.

42 Timothy Williams, *The Complexity of Evil: Perpetration and Genocide* (New Brunswick, Camden, Newark, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 2020), 159-161.