

Archival Wounds

My grandmother Hripsimae, a child survivor of the Armenian Genocide, never shared the story of how she ended up in Aleppo. Perhaps she couldn't remember her own expulsion from her homeland or even the murder and disappearance of her conscripted father.

As with other victims of mass violence, there was silence around the past.

When I began to research the affective and embodied experiences of Armenian Genocide survivors, I combed the archives for traces of my grandmother.¹ Instead I found traces of others who communicate what my grandmother was unable to say.

Under a pile of *paper cadavers*, I find a still-breathing twelve-year-old girl.² During the genocidal campaign conducted by the Ottoman Empire under the cover of World War I, Mariam, a toddler, was deported with her family, abducted with her mother from a caravan of deportees, and sold for twenty pounds by a slave dealer to an Arab. Nine years later, she was rescued but could not remember her own surname.³

The League of Nations archives in Geneva holds nearly 2,000 intake records of victims who fled to the Aleppo Rescue Home run by Danish humanitarian

*History Department, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA, 99362, semerdve@whitman.edu

1. This short essay is part of a larger exploration of the embodied experiences of the Armenian Genocide in *Remnants: Embodied Archives of the Armenian Genocide* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023)

2. Kirsten Weld, *Paper Cadavers: The Archives of Dictatorship in Guatemala* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

3. Mariam's story can be found in "Registers of Inmates, the Armenian Orphanage in Aleppo" 1922–1930 (hereafter "Registers"), inmate 577, July 6, 1924, United Nations Archives (UNA) at Geneva, Switzerland.

and League commissioner Karen Jeppe. She and her staff recorded short biographies of victims within nicely bound marble-covered notebooks designed by an Armenian printmaker. Grid boxes uniformly list on a single page the handwritten name, patronym, hometown, date of arrival, and a photograph.⁴ The records illuminate the post-genocide topography within which Armenian Christians were absorbed in Muslim households within Ottoman lands where they were adopted or forcibly assimilated into and often abused.

The sepia-toned photographs compiled to register and identify orphans and trafficked women after World War I have a texture even after I digitize them. As I read accounts of abuse, shuffling through intake records, ripples pop off the page. Is the ripple just poor resolution from century-old images, or are these faces scarred and distorted from years of abuse? Are this boy's eyes accidentally closed, or infected with the trachoma that ravaged so many who arrived? A nearly blind six-year-old birthed from a Kurdish captor was described as: "Achkhen very weak syphilis the eyes and ears are bad."⁵ Armenian Physician Vahran Katchperouni listed communicable diseases but also sexual diseases like gonorrhea among the women and girls he was treating at the Home.⁶

Like the century-old photographic paper, teenagers are visibly aged. Hands swollen and backs deformed from hard labor narrate their stories of servitude. Boys kept in stables with the animals, abused in unspeakable ways, wear rags and tufts of fur as clothing. Elias is emaciated from dysentery, his little ribs protruding from his skeletal frame.⁷ He was rescued but didn't survive but four days in the Home. Others escaped servitude to "become human beings (again)" (figure 1).⁸

Wounds narrate stories of escape and survival. An unnamed mother bears a deep scar on her left arm from what may have been the stroke of a scimitar

4. While some documents have not survived, nearly 2,000 records cataloging registered victims from 1922 to 1936 are archived at the UNA and at the Danish National Archives (DSA) in Copenhagen.

5. Satenig Loosbaronian and her daughter Achkhen, inmates 1337 and 1338, "Registers," UNA.

6. Vahran Katchperouni, "Rapport médical de la Maison de Réception de la ligue des nation á Alep, 1925-1926," 5, 12/49505/4631, UNA.

7. Elias, inmate 887 in "Registers," December 6, 1925, UNA.

8. Jeppe, "Account of the Situation of the Armenians in Syria," Baalbek, August 24, 1922, De Danske Armeniervenner, Box 10, Folder A, Danish National Archives, Copenhagen, 12. This phrase is used again by Jenny Jensen, Jeppe's associate; see Jenny Jensen, "Brev fra Aleppo," *Armeniervenner*, 5, No. 5-6 (May-June 1925): 17, Danish National Library, Copenhagen.



FIGURE 1. Elias, a survivor from Urfa, arrived at the Rescue Home with a gaping stomach wound and dysentery. He had been burned with rags in an attempt to cure his dysentery with traditional medicine. The emaciated boy died four days after his arrival in Aleppo. Elias, inmate 887 in "Registers of Inmates, The Armenian Orphanage in Aleppo," United Nations Archive at Geneva, dated December 6, 1925.



FIGURE 2. An unnamed Armenian mother recuperating at Karen Jeppe's Rescue Home reveals a deep wound on her left arm. The photograph, held in Karen Jeppe's private albums, contains no accompanying information about the woman and her wound. Karen Jeppe albums, թԱԿ-1, Armenian Genocide Memorial Institute, Yerevan, Armenia.

(figure 2). Traces of Adelina's story was archived. She was abducted when she was about eight years old and kept as a slave along with her sister in the house of a Chechen (figure 3). From there she was "sold to a Kourd [*sic*] for six Turkish gold pounds"; she was forcibly married to the Kurd and bore him a child. Five times she fled; five times she was brutally punished. When her Kurdish husband was away on business, she found her way to the Rescue Home, leaving her child behind. Her photograph shows a large bandage across

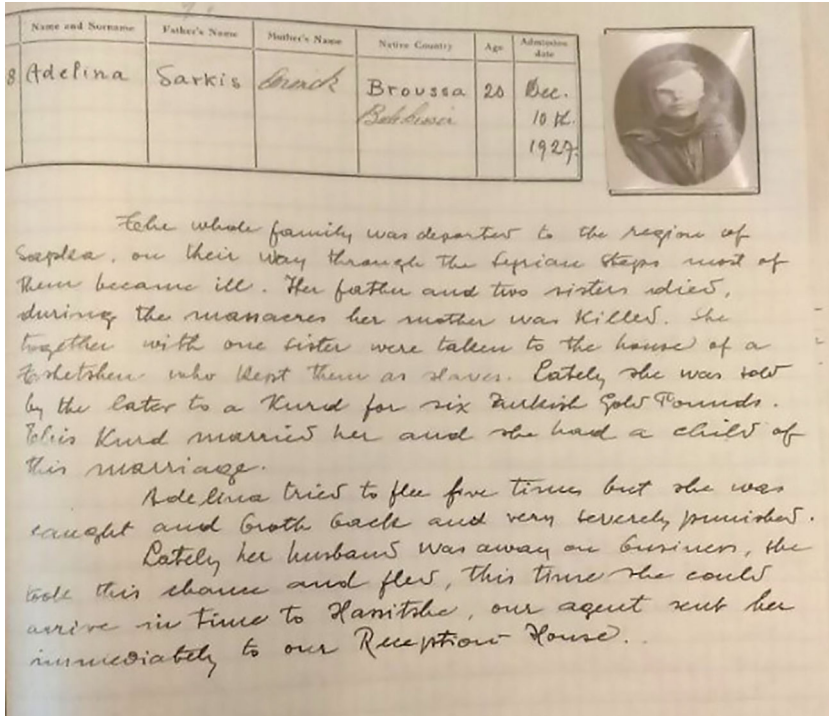


FIGURE 3. Adelina is one of many women and children whose story was captured in the Rescue Home Registry. Like many other inmates, she arrived bearing a wound she sustained during her harrowing escape out a window. Adelina, "Registers of Inmates, The Armenian Orphanage in Aleppo," United Nations Archive at Geneva inmate 1478, December 10, 1927, UNA.

her face. We learn she “fell from the house on the way to us. Suffered much.”⁹ Soon after, Adelina gave birth to another child; she gave it up for adoption.

The reunion with these lost women and children during the course of my research sometimes moved me to tears as I learned some who I thought had survived lived only days, weeks, or months after finding freedom. The painful, partial but insistent textures of archival remnants they left behind in humanitarian records tell us what they would not and could not say.

I grieved over what I discovered and what I didn't in the archive.

I never found my grandmother.

9. Adelina, inmate 1478, “Registers,” December 10, 1927, UNA.