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Syrian Armenian Refugees in Canada: War, Forced Migration, Resettlement, and the Collective Memory of the Armenian Genocide

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Syrian Armenian Refugees in Canada: War, Forced Migration, Resettlement, and the
Collective Memory of the Armenian Genocide

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

The thesis studies the experiences of the Syrian Armenian refugees of the Syrian war in Canada. What makes them different from other Syrian refugees is not just their religion and ethnicity, but also their history and the traumas they carry. Most Syrian Armenians are descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. The trauma of the Genocide is central to Armenian identity, and its aftereffects haunt Armenians worldwide. The Syrian Armenian refugees that Canada accepted are therefore going through migration, trauma, and loss for a second time. The first is experienced through collective memory, the second is first-hand. The thesis studies the social organization of this trauma in the Syrian Armenian community and explores how it becomes a lens to make sense of war and forced migration and a resource to draw upon to remove oneself from a war zone and to bring oneself all the way to Canada's safety. It argues that to understand refugee experiences and avoid generalizations that might lead to stereotypes, one needs to look beyond labels and take into account the biographies and histories of particular groups. Thus, this work joins scholarship that problematizes the mainstream definition of "refugee" as a passive victim in need of salvation by bringing to light the work Syrian Armenians did to be able to cross multiple borders and resettle in Canada. The overarching theoretical and methodological goal of the thesis is to empirically demonstrate how abstract notions such as transgenerational trauma, diaspora, refugeedom, political loyalty, and integration come to materialize in the everyday doings of ordinary people, and to show that they exist only in their actions, and inform their choices and their actualities. The investigation covers their experiences in Syria before and after the war, in other countries after leaving Syria, and finally in Canada. The research is located at the intersection of memory,

trauma, diaspora, genocide, and refugee literature and is based on eighteen in-depth interviews, conducted in 2020 with Syrian Armenians in Quebec and Ontario.

Keywords: collective memory; transgenerational trauma; refugees; war; migration; Private Sponsorship of Refugees; institutional ethnography

PREFACE

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, H. Tovmasyan. The data reported in Chapters 3-10 were covered by Ethics Certificate number REB20-0029, issued by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board for the project “Syrian Armenian Refugees in Canada: War, Forced Migration, Resettlement, and the Collective Memory of the Armenian Genocide,” on May 15, 2020.

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DEDICATION

In memory of my father

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AGBU: Armenian General Benevolent Union

ARF: Armenian Revolutionary Federation

BVOR: Blended Visa Office-Referred

CSQ: Quebec Selection Certificate

GAR: Government-Assisted Refugees

IE: Institutional Ethnography

MIDI: Ministère de l'immigration, de la diversité et de l'inclusion

PSRP: Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program

ROC-O: Resettlement Operations Centre in Ottawa

RSTP: Refugee Sponsorship Training Program

SSP: Sponsorship Support Program

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2015, following what was recognized as the largest refugee crisis in the world (World Vision 2019), the newly elected Canadian government adopted a policy of accepting Syrian refugees on a large-scale. By February 2017, more than 40,000 Syrians had been accepted into Canada (Hynie 2018:2).¹ Most media, scholarly, and policy attention has so far focused on Muslim Arab refugees from Syria. One group of Syrian refugees, who comprise nearly five percent, have received much less attention. These are Christian Armenians (CBC 2016), and what makes these people different from other refugees from Syria is not just their religion and ethnicity, but also their history and the multiple traumas they carry. Many of these Syrian Armenians are the descendants of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, who found refuge in Syria after 1915. The collective story of the Genocide and the trauma associated with it were cultivated for decades in Armenian diasporic communities all over the world and in the Republic of Armenia. Commemoration of the Genocide is institutionalized, ritualized and enacted from generation to generation, and the memory of the Genocide is central to Armenian identity (Panossian 2002; Tachjian 2009). The Syrian Armenian refugees that Canada accepted during the past years are therefore in a sense going through the experience of migration, trauma and loss for a second time. The first is experienced through collective memory and stories, and the second is first-hand. It is the refugee experiences of these Syrian Armenians that I study in my thesis.

¹ For figures of refugees in Canada as of 2020, see Government of Canada n.d.a.

I focus on the work of the Syrian Armenians who are sponsored to come to Canada through the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program.² The program is an avenue for ordinary Canadians (individuals or community organizations) to select and sponsor specific refugees. The Syrian Armenian refugees of this study were sponsored by Armenian organizations and individual Armenian co-sponsors. The program brings to light how translocal diasporic relations are being activated in people's work. It also allows to make visible the resourcefulness these people have, and their work from one destination to another, and all the way to Canada. It addresses their reluctance to be called refugees because of all the negativity, passivity and vulnerability attached to the term. This work contributes to deconstructing the perception of refugees as passive victims or people without biographies and histories, and starts with the experiences of Syrian Armenians in their pre-refuge lives in Syria, and follows the immense work they did in order to be in Canada. It also shows how the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide and membership in Armenian international community is activated as a resource to do the work of "self-rescue" (Kyriakides, Bajjali, McLuhan, and Anderson 2018).

Armenians have lived in Syria as a minority for more than a century, being strongly aware of their history and positionality as a group. The multiple vulnerabilities they carry and the collective identity as a diasporic group of a survivor nation – who are undergoing forced migration and losing homes the second time over – make their location and their experiences an interesting entry point to investigate such topics as transgenerational trauma, political loyalty, transnationalism, diaspora, home, and homeland, and, finally,

² Except for one participant.

forced migration and integration. Each of these topics has been in academic attention for a while now. Indirect group traumas in particular have been studied by scholars from different disciplines (Alexander 2004; Brave Heart, Chase, Elkins, and Altschul 2011; Deangelis 2019; Eyerman 2004a; 2004b; Hirsch 2012; Jacobs 2016; Shirinian 2004; Wohl and van Bavel 2011) who investigated its psychological effects, its transmission and its connections to identity and the construction of collective memory. The firsthand trauma of war, migration and genocides has been in academic attention, too. However, not much has been done on what happens when the first-hand traumatic event “meets” the transgenerational traumatic experience (or the memory of it) that a group knows only through representation and transmission. Does this transgenerational trauma then make those groups more vulnerable or more resilient? How do they utilize it to make sense of their lived experiences and how is the transgenerational trauma socially organized? My work is committed to shedding light on those questions, among some others.

Another broad goal of my research is to show how the social world around us comes to life in people’s doings. To put it more simply, I ask *how* and *where* certain abstract phenomena (sociological or interdisciplinary) — such as transgenerational trauma, transnationalism, diaspora, integration, refugeedom, citizenship, belonging, loyalty — happen. Do they happen independently of people’s actions or is there a large-scale organization and coordination, which determine our world and the role these notions play in it? Why do people do what they do and how do they participate in the coordination of large-scale organization that originates both locally and translocally as well as across time? How do we understand refugee experiences outside successful integration? Is it possible to understand those experiences in isolation, without taking into account the

history, the past and the present they are embedded in? How does history (and the past as people know it) come into play and how does it inform present-day experiences? What is home, homeland and how is it constructed by people living in diaspora?

These are some overarching themes and questions that my thesis addresses empirically, based on eighteen in-depth interviews with Syrian Armenians in Canada. The participants of my study are arguably carriers of two different traumatic experiences:³ transgenerational trauma and a first-hand traumatic experience. The first-hand traumatic experience in question is the recent Syrian war that Syrian Armenians as a minority group living in Syria went through, as well as the forced migration, the refugeedom and the loss of homes and lives. The transgenerational trauma is that of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 carried out by the Ottoman government against its Armenian population living on their ancestral lands of over two millennia. The memory of the genocide, the lost lives of 1.5 million Armenians and the ancestral homeland appropriated by the Turkish state is still the core of Armenian identity around the world and the base of Armenian “diaspora nationalism” (Smith 1989). It still haunts them in their everyday doings in various degrees.

Additionally, while the Armenian diaspora has been in the centre of academic attention, there is need to study the different diasporic communities with their distinct characteristics in mind to avoid homogenization, even though these people are considered as part of a larger group. Thus one needs to study the Armenian diasporic community of Canada on its own, and to see how (and if) it is transforming as Syrian Armenians are joining it during the last several years.

³ They carry both “embodied communicative memory and institutionalized cultural/archival memory” (Hirsch 2008:111).

In the introduction that follows, I locate my research in a spatial and chronological context. This is particularly important since the past is paramount to this group's present-day experiences. I begin with a short sketch of the history of Armenian people up to the present. I then discuss my location in relation to this research. Finally, I discuss briefly what each of the chapters of this work investigates.

Historical overview

The traumatic memories of the Genocide are turned into a coherent narrative as part of the Armenians' sense of selfhood and worldview.

(Shirinian 2004:36)

Armenians as an ethnic group have lived in the mountainous plateau between eastern Anatolia (now part of Turkey) and south Caucasus. The first Armenian kingdom dates back to the 6th century BCE (Panossian 2006; Migliorino 2008:7).⁴

Between the 4th and the 14th centuries, the Armenian kingdom (ruled by different dynasties) was invaded, occupied and divided between Iran, the Arab-Muslim caliphate,

⁴ Anthony Smith (1989:340) calls such pre-modern ethnic communities "ethnies." According to Smith, an ethnie is a unit of population with a common name, a myth of common descent, common memories, one or more elements of common culture (language, customs or religion), a sense of solidarity among the majority of the members, and a common homeland. Such ethnies are found in both the ancient and the medieval periods in many areas of the world (Smith 1989:340). This description of Smith applies to Armenians to different degrees, depending on time and location, and here I discuss some of the features of the Armenian ethnie to which Smith's definition applies.

and the Byzantine empire, with some periods of independence in between. For example, in the 10th century, Ashot II the Bagratid (914–929) succeeded in gaining enough independence to be recognized as king and to receive royal regalia from the Muslim caliph al-Mu'tamid (Walker 1990:29). What followed was a short period of peace and prosperity. In 1045, the Armenian Bagratid king fell under the pressure of the Byzantines, and the Armenian kingdom was incorporated into the Byzantine empire (Walker 1990). The last Armenian kingdom fell at the end of the 14th century (Hovannisian 1986).

The political configurations in the region began changing starting from the 11th century onward, with the influx of Turkic tribes from Central Asia. In Asia Minor the Turks established the Seljuk sultanate, which eventually encompassed the power centre of the Abbasid caliphate in Baghdad and controlled most of the territory of the Middle East, including historic Armenia. In the 13th century another Turkish polity, the Ottoman sultanate, was established in the Western part of Asia Minor. It gradually expanded, and in 1453 it brought down what had remained of the weakened Byzantine empire by conquering its capital, Constantinople (today's Istanbul). The western part of the territories of former Armenian kingdoms passed under the control of the Ottomans, while the eastern part was successively ruled by invading Mongols, the Ak Koyunlu tribal confederation, and the Timurid dynasty. After the rise of Iran's Safavid Dynasty in the early 1500s, eastern Armenia was once again conquered by Iran, and remained under its control until the early part of the 19th century, when the victorious Russian empire managed to annex the entire South Caucasus. The territories newly conquered by Russians included Armenia. It remained part of Russia, and then its successor, the Soviet

Union, for almost two centuries, except for the period of the independent Armenian republic during the years 1918-1920 (Panossian 2006; Bournoutian 2006).

Today's Republic of Armenia, which was proclaimed independent of the Soviet Union in 1991, remains under the political and economic influence of Russia. The western part of the former Armenian kingdom remained under Ottoman control, and today constitutes the eastern part of Turkey, known as Eastern Anatolia.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Historical_Armenia_by_Britannica_1994.jpg

Figure 1: Map of Historical Armenia (Wikimedia Commons n.d.a)

Before the Armenian Genocide of 1915, for several centuries, Armenians under Ottoman rule, as well as many other ethnic minorities, lived as second-class citizens. It is important to note that this was not an egalitarian society and Christian minorities, including Armenians, were treated differently both before the law and in terms of taxation system. For example, there was a head tax imposed on Christians, and they lacked certain of the privileges that Muslims enjoyed. Additionally, they were subject to day-to-day discriminations. In fact, anti-Christian sentiments blossomed in the 19th century, after the Ottoman empire introduced a series of reforms promising equality between the Muslims and the non-Muslims (the reforms were called *tanzimat*). The Muslim masses interpreted this as “beneficial to the Christians and undermining the tenets of the Şeriet (*Islamic Law*) and centuries of Ottoman tradition” (Astourian 2012:172). Depending on the particular time and the ruler, the limitations in place against non-Muslims were more or less strict, and depending on the circumstances, minorities were targeted to varying degrees.

Among the restrictions imposed were that as Christians, Armenians could not testify in court against Muslims, could not bear arms to protect their families and their property, and were referred to as *gâvur* (“infidel”), a derogatory term to mark their non-Muslimness (Astourian 2012:198). Mangassarian (2016) discusses how Armenians were barred from bearing weapons to defend themselves from their arms-bearing Muslim neighbours and were not allowed to give legal testimony. Speaking Armenian (other than during prayer) was forbidden in some areas under threat of having their tongues cut off (p.373). Here is how Kupelian and colleagues (1998) summarize the state of the Armenians under the Ottomans: “The Turks considered this non-Muslim minority of

Armenians as second-class citizens and for centuries subjected them to legal repression. For example, Armenians and other Christians had to pay special taxes, including child levies [...], and had to give Muslims and their herds free room and board for up to 6 months under the 'hospitality taxes' [...]. Armenians were subject to forced migration, enslavement [...], and repeated massacres [...]" (Kupelian, Kalayjian, and Kassabian 1998:192).

Today the idea of the Ottoman empire as an egalitarian state where Armenians lived in peace for centuries is nothing but propaganda and is unsupported by the historical record. The period of the collapse of the Ottoman empire, the time when the Armenian Genocide happened, has been subject to extensive research.⁵ There is much scholarship on various aspects of the Armenian Genocide, such as the sociopolitical context where it happened, and there is much work directed against its denial (Astourian 2012; Panossian 2006).⁶ There are different explanations, both in scholarly and popular and political discourse, as to why the violence and mass extermination of the Armenians happened at that time, after they had lived (oppressed or otherwise) under the Ottoman empire for centuries.

A widely accepted explanation for the Genocide is the attempts at the homogenization of the Turkish state (Hovannisian 1986). All the non-Turkic elements, and especially Armenians, were an obstacle to this process and had to be removed. The internationalization of the Armenian question has always been seen as a trigger for the

⁵ On the term "genocide" and its use and conceptualization by different scholars, see Appendix 1.

⁶ For a comprehensive list of the studies of the Armenian Genocide see Astourian (2012) and Panossian (2006).

Turkish leadership, urging it to want to get rid of Armenians and hence of the Armenian question altogether (Panossian 2006:235-36).

Thus, the Genocide of 1915 was part of a larger pattern of anti-Armenian violence in the Ottoman empire. In fact, it was preceded by two other waves of large-scale mass violence against Armenians: Sultan Abdul Hamid's massacres between 1884 and 1886, and the massacre of Adana in the region of Cilicia in 1909 (Astourian 2012). The death toll is estimated at 100,000-200,000 for the first one and at about 20,000 for the second one (Hovannisian 1986). Stephan Astourian (2011; 2012) proposes an interesting explanation for the violence against the Armenians during this period. He notes that what led to the massacres was the "niche overlap" between the Armenians, Ottomans, Kurds, and Muslim migrants from the Balkans and the Caucasus. In eastern Anatolia, the swift sedentarization of Kurds led to the usurpation of Armenian lands, while in Cilicia, Muslim refugees arriving from the Caucasus and the Balkans were allowed to purchase vast lands. In both cases the unarmed Armenian population became subject to massacres as a result of competition for land. The Armenian question, Astourian claims, "is as much a Kurdish and Ottoman Question, as it is an Armenian one" (Astourian 2011:56).

Alongside outright denials and even justifications, there are explanation for the Genocide which put the blame for what happened on the Armenians themselves. This is the so-called "fifth column argument," as discussed by Panossian (2006), namely that the Armenians of the Ottoman empire were seen as a threat to the empire since they could be (or were) supporters of foreign powers such as Russia or the European states (Panossian 2006). The argument has been further elaborated by claiming that some Armenians (a small number) deserted and joined the Russian troops who were fighting

against the Ottomans. The state could not accept its own subjects fighting against it and decided to “cleanse” itself of Armenians.⁷ This threat needed to be eliminated, the reasoning went, to avoid the situation in the Balkans (i.e., the formation of a nation state) in the territory of Anatolia, a land that Turks considered “homeland,” and which was the heart of their empire. However, Panossian (2006) notes that while the fifth-column argument is based on actually existing fears and perceptions of the Turkish leadership, in actual fact, the Armenian communities of the Ottoman Empire mostly supported the state they lived in before and during the first stages of the WWI: “This was the declared and practiced policy of the Armenian authorities and important parties” (p. 233).

Panossian (2006) argues that in the context of Turkish nationalism – where the Turkification and homogenization of the country had no place for non-Muslim minorities – the “Armenian ‘rebellion’, the fifth column argument, war conditions and other such explanations were pretexts to get rid of the Armenians, not the causes of the Genocide” (p. 236).

The annihilation of Armenians was planned in several steps. The first was to deprive Armenians of their leadership (about 600 people), so the Armenian intellectuals were rounded up on April 24th, 1915, and killed. The second stage was to get rid of the

⁷ Leo Kuper (1981) writes: “The involvement of governments and elites in many genocides is a reminder that human actors make choices and decisions, and carry out actions which constitute, or lead to, genocide. Genocide is not an inevitable consequence of certain social conditions within a society. There may be extreme pluralism in a society, with highly antagonistic, polarizing ideologies, division expressed in religion, segregation, employment, social network, and political party affiliation, a long history of reciprocal violence, and periods of highly escalated conflict. Yet the struggle may stop short of genocide” (p.56).

men, who were conscripted to the army, then taken to labour camps or labour battalions, forced to work under extremely harsh conditions, and later executed. Any remaining men who were not in the army were arrested and executed as well. The third stage was the death marches (which the Turkish state calls “deportations”) of the elderly, women, and children to the Syrian desert, during which they were murdered, kidnapped, robbed of what little food or other possessions they had, raped and killed by attrition — deliberate starvation, thirst, heat and disease (Miller and Touryan Miller 1991)⁸ — both by Turks and by *chetti* (killing squads composed of released prisoners) or “marauding Kurds, who carried off many of the girls to sell into sexual slavery and killed the young children” (Robertson 2015:51). The structured removal of the Armenian population from their ancestral lands and the forced marches through desert areas, far from inhabited areas and sources of water, brought death through starvation, dehydration, and exhaustion to hundreds of thousands (Dolbee 2020). Ironically, leaders of the Turkish state have called all of this “unfortunate” or “tragic events.”⁹

Those who made it to the destination continued dying in the camps in the desert outside Deir Zor and Aleppo, where the only aid provided were tents (Robertson 2015).

⁸ The killing was not carried out proportionally across the empire. Those who lived in big centres and under the eyes of the Western representatives had more chances of survival. Those who lived further in the east and on Armenian lands were eliminated both because the killings were far away from seeing eyes and because the killers had claims on the lands they lived on (The Armenian Genocide Museum-institute. n.d.b.).

⁹ Erdogan used even harsher statements. E.g., in 2014 he said: “The relocation of the Armenian gangs and their supporters who massacred the Muslim people, including women and children, in eastern Anatolia, was the most reasonable action that could be taken in such a period” (Bulut 2019).

The Minister of the Interior and one of the masterminds of the Genocide, Talaat Pasha, ordered severe punishment for any Turkish official assisting Armenians to “relieve misery” (ibid:51). A few of those people who miraculously survived the death marches or the direct killings found refuge in neighbouring countries or were absorbed by Turkish and Kurdish households, either as the only option for survival or forcefully. A very small number who made it to Syria and survived were sheltered by Syrians.

One and a half million people perished in the Armenian Genocide, which was half of the Armenians living in Turkey and a third of the Armenians worldwide (Miller and Touryan Miller 1991). The Genocide all but ended Armenian presence in Turkey. A small number of Armenians live in modern day Turkey, and reportedly there is also a number of “hidden” Armenians, people of Armenian origin who have converted to Islam and have been hiding their identity for generations: they only began coming out during the last decades. The estimated number before the Genocide was about 2 million, and in the 1980s, only 25,000 Armenians lived in Turkey (Hovhannisian 1986).

The Genocide also established the Armenian diaspora as we know it today. While Armenians have been living in different parts of the world since the 4th century CE (Abrahamian 2006:324), such as the Byzantine Empire, Iran, Cilicia, Northern Syria, and the Balkan Peninsula (ibid:325), a large part of the Armenian diaspora emerged at the beginning of 20th century as a result of the Armenian Genocide (henceforth, the Genocide; see Abrahamian 2006:350; Shirinian 2004:7). The first Armenian republic was established immediately in 1918. It included what is the current day Republic of Armenia and six of the provinces of Western Armenia (current day Turkey). The 28th US president Woodrow Wilson proposed to create a “viable Armenia” by giving Armenians an exit to

the Black Sea, but that never became reality, and the newly founded republic was short lived. In December 1920 the Soviet Army entered Armenia and it became part of the Soviet Union (The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute n.d.a.).

The Soviet Union was hoping to establish good relationships with the neighbouring Kemalist Turkey. On 16 March 1921 a Turkish-Soviet treaty of “friendship and fraternity” was signed (ibid), followed by the Kars treaty (between Turkey and the newly established Soviet Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia), where the Armenian question was completely ignored. In the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 (where the Armenian delegation was not present anymore), new borders of the Soviet Republic of Armenia were finalized, by dropping the claims of the Armenians to Western Armenian territories. These are the borders that are with us to this day.¹⁰ The Soviet Union gave two more historically Armenian territories, Nagorno Karabakh and Nakhijevan, to the newly

¹⁰ “An international conference commenced in Switzerland on the question of the Middle East, lasting until July 24, 1923. The participants of the conference were Great Britain, France, Italy, Greece, Japan, Romania, Yugoslavia, Turkey and the US as an observer country. The delegation of the Armenian Republic was not allowed to take part at the conference, as it no longer represented Armenia, which had been absorbed into the Soviet Union. The Lausanne Conference also discussed the Armenian Question, but the Turkish delegation led by Ismet Pasha and Riza Nur Bey decisively spoke against the idea of founding any Armenian state on the territory of Turkey. In the end Turkey managed to dictate its will to the Entente countries. As a result, the treaty included no mention of Armenia or of Armenians whatsoever. Thus, by the Lausanne Conference the Armenian Question was temporarily closed and the territories to be delivered to Armenia by the Treaty of Sevres disappeared within the ethnically cleansed newly-determined borders of Republic of Turkey” (The Armenian Genocide Museum-institute n.d.a.).

established republic of Azerbaijan,¹¹ once again, with the goal of pleasing Turkey. One of those territories, Nagorno Karabakh, is still disputed territory between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which gave rise to two large-scale wars between the two countries, in the early 1990s and in 2020.

Thus from the vast ancestral territories where Armenians had lived for more than two millennia, all that remains today as “homeland,” for those who live there as well as for Armenians worldwide, is a small landlocked country.

Immediately after 1915 and during the 20th century, waves of Armenian immigrants from a number of countries, including Armenia proper, continued arriving in the US and Canada. Among the events that triggered further migration were, for example, the civil war in Lebanon (1975-1990), the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the economic hardships that it brought. Most recently, it was the Syrian war. Today, Armenians live all over the world, and among the countries with the largest Armenian communities are Russia, Cyprus, Greece, France, Iran, Argentina, Canada, and the US. The Armenian diaspora is constituted of the Armenians living outside the Republic of Armenia (henceforth, the Republic).

Thus nearly 110 years separate the last wave of Armenian immigrants in North America from the first arrivals after 1915. They have come from different countries with different languages, different cultures, and different religions. Their practices therefore differ greatly, yet they all call themselves Armenian. Many of the third- and fourth-generation Armenians in North America do not practice the “traditional markers” of ethnic identity (Shirinian 2004:43), such as speaking Armenian (Bakalian 1993). Still, they

¹¹ For a detailed discussion of this see Walker (1990).

continue to maintain a strong sense of Armenianness, call themselves Armenian (*hay*), and feel very strong commitment to the recognition of the Armenian Genocide (*ibid*). It is hard to overestimate the role of the Genocide and its representation among Armenians, as its aftereffects haunt Armenians worldwide and shape their collectivity and identity.

What happened at the beginning of the century, and the trauma associated with it, left “indelible marks” upon the Armenian “group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways” (Alexander 2012:6). The memory of the Genocide is the most important basis for the construction of the Armenian national and collective identity, and it is institutionalized both in the diaspora and in the Republic (Panossian 2006:228; Stave 2015; Tachjian 2009:76). Bakalian (1993) notes that any news about Armenians is usually paired with the Genocide, which is the central element of Armenianness, and somehow Armenian culture and history are reduced to “Genocide and Martyrdom” (p. 360). The narrative of the Genocide is represented through media, stories, literature and is maintained by the annual commemoration on April 24th,¹² a national day of mourning. Every year on that day, thousands of people march with flowers, flags and candles to Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan (the capital of Armenia), where the monument to the victims of the Genocide stands. It is attended by political leaders, clergy, and high-ranking military officers. It is common for international celebrities of Armenian descent to visit Armenia on that day (Charles Aznavour was one of them). Other than April 24th, it is customary for foreign

¹² For the first time, April 24th was commemorated in the Republic was in 1965, at the initiative of a group of intellectuals. Shortly thereafter they received permission to build a monument, which is where the annual march of remembrance takes place.

leaders visiting Armenia to put wreaths at the monument and to plant trees in the park nearby. All this, of course, is documented and circulated to the population by different media. The schools hold events and gatherings dedicated to the Genocide annually, where children of all ages participate, singing and reciting poetry devoted to the memory of the victims. On that day, different television channels broadcast films and programs about the Genocide, and no cheerful programs are shown. Outside Armenia, April 24th is commemorated by church masses, marches, and protests in front of Turkish embassies.

The commemoration of the Genocide is institutionalized, ritualized, and reproduced from generation to generation. Moreover, it is also politicized leaders often try to win Armenian votes (one example is Barack Obama, who had promised to do so prior to his election, but never did). A personal observation demonstrates this point well. In Spring 2019 at the Armenian church in Calgary, one of the Armenian community leaders encouraged everyone to vote for Jason Kenney, because during his meeting with the Armenian Patriarch he had allegedly promised to institutionalize the commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

The victims of the Genocide are declared martyrs, and recently they were sainted by the Vatican. As Vahe Tachjian (2009) writes, “The image of the martyr-nation is sacralised, and the victims are transfigured and become subjects of admiration or even veneration” (p.76).

The narrative of the Genocide at this point becomes not just a story about a historical event that is passed from one generation to another (Neyzi and Kharatyan-Arakelyan 2010; Shirinian 2004; Suny 2015), but rather a practice people participate in.

History is represented through a ritualized commemoration, and what “Armenian” is, is reproduced and represented every year. For all generations of Armenians around the world, the Genocide seems to have become “the new master narrative” of Armenian-ness.¹³

Syria

Since antiquity, Syria has been an ethnically, religiously, and linguistically diverse region. Between the 16th century and WWI, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire. After the Ottoman defeat in WWI, its territory was divided into new nation-states under British and French control, and the newly created state of Syria passed under French control (Pearlman 2017). After the independence in 1946, several governments succeeded each other. In 1963, the Baath party seized control and remains in power to this day. The current president, Bashar al-Assad, is the son of Hafez al-Assad, who ruled the country between 1970 and 2000. The majority of Syria’s population are Sunni Muslims, and there are several ethnic and religious minorities, including Christian Arabs, Alawites (a Muslim minority group to which the Assads belong), Druze, Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, and Kurds (ibid).

During Hafez al-Assad’s rule, the slightest expression of dissent was censored. The Muslim population especially was under constant surveillance, particularly after the

¹³ In Alexander’s formulation, a “master narrative” is a story created through a “complex and multivalent symbolic process, that is contingent, highly contested, and sometimes highly polarizing” and includes meaning-making work (Alexander 2004:12).

failed coup by the Muslim Brotherhood of 1982. In response, al-Assad razed to the ground the city of Hama, where the rising had taken place (Pearlman 2017:xxxvii-xxxviii). A generation of young Muslims grew up with a parent or a relative in jail. Meanwhile, the regime was able to present itself as a friend of the religious minorities, and many Christians indeed believed that the Assads were the only power that could ensure stability and secularism in the country (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021:110).

Sometimes after the start of the Arab uprisings in 2011, they spread into Syria Against the common belief that Syria would be immune from them (Pearlman 2017:xli). One morning, in the Syrian city of Dar'a, there appeared on a school wall graffiti asking Assad when it would be his turn to leave. In response, the police rounded up all the male students and jailed them. When their parents inquired about the whereabouts of their children, they received a humiliating answer. The outraged parents and supporters took to the streets to protest, but the peaceful protests very quickly escalated into a full-blown war (ibid).¹⁴

The war started as a struggle for democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech, but the regime's propaganda (not entirely without grounds) represented it as a war sponsored by the Gulf countries and their petrodollars. The war, the regime argued, was threatening to ruin Syria's secular, multicultural structure and aimed to establish an

¹⁴ The Dar'a story about the schoolboys and graffiti appeared in major media outlets (e.g., BBC, CBC, al-Jazeera, etc.). It was interesting to learn from participants that they do not believe this story. Some of them told me that it was a made-up story, others claimed that in the era of social media there would have been some kind of proof, photographs or such. Later, during informal conversations with some non-Armenian Syrians, I heard the same doubts about the validity of this story.

Islamic state instead. Many of the Christians, including Armenians, felt that they had only one choice, to support the regime, as they and especially the Christians saw Assad as their protector (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021:112). This is not to say that Armenians and other minorities did not suffer from the war. They too have suffered the loss of life and economic hardships.¹⁵ In having to choose between a dictatorial but secular regime, and between a radical Islamic state (possibly no less dictatorial¹⁶), their choice has traditionally been with the former. Not without reason, Armenians and others do not necessarily share the simplistic black-and-white image of the Syrian war promoted in Western political and popular discourse: an evil Assad fighting his freedom-loving people. For this war is a clash of many parties, powers, and interests, and brutal as it is, the Assad regime is not the only threat to human life and dignity in Syria (Carpenter 2013).

After Aleppo, which was the main Armenian centre, was razed to the ground, many Syrian Armenians left the country for safer places. They migrated to Lebanon, Armenia, and later to other countries which already had established Armenian communities. Hay Doun in Montreal, the Armenian Community Centre of Toronto, and the Armenian General Benevolent Union in Toronto, together, have sponsored about 4000 Syrian Armenian refugees' arrival in Canada. Before the war, Syria was home to about 100,000 Armenians, 60,000 of whom resided in Aleppo, the centre of Armenian economic life. Many Syrian Armenians are the descendants of those who survived the 1915 Genocide

¹⁵ Mollica and Hakobyan (2021), quoting Poladyan (2017), report that between 2011 and 2017 the death toll of Syrian Armenians was 225 (p.120).

¹⁶ Cf. Mollica and Hakobyan 2021:112, who discuss other Syrian Christian communities' position vis-à-vis the Assad regime as well.

and made it to Syria. Syria, which has always been a multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious country, became a place where the Armenian community thrived and had a relatively comfortable life, especially during the Assad regime. Not only were Armenians treated very well and were welcomed into all the aspects of socio-economic life, but they also enjoyed some kind of cultural autonomy. For example, between 1964 and 2001 there were between 33 and 80 Armenian schools in Lebanon and Syria, where a large number of subjects were taught in Armenian (Migliorino 2008:162, 202), as well as Armenian churches, periodicals, and cultural centres. Proximity to the homeland, both historical and symbolic (i.e., Western Armenia, Cilicia for some, and the Republic) was mentioned by some of my participants as a privilege they had enjoyed while living in Syria. While some of the above-mentioned privileges (e.g., Armenian language schools) were later lost, the comfortable life had continued, with the state exercising rather loose control over the Armenian community and allowing them rights (both officially and unofficially), which, as stated by the participants, had not been granted to other minorities (there is a detailed discussion in later chapters).

The recent war stripped them of much: lives, churches, schools, businesses, homes, and neighbourhoods. Among those losses was something truly significant to the Armenian community: the bombing of the memorial church of Deir Zor. According to some participants and some scholars as well, this was likely ordered by the state of Turkey. This, and the targeting of the Armenian neighbourhoods and businesses brought the 100-year-old fears and the memory of persecution to a new level of reality. This reality, lived and relived through different channels and woven into collective identity, is discussed in the subsequent chapters.

Where do I stand in “the collective” of all of this? How does this concern me personally and how does my positionality inform my seeing and understanding what happened to Syrian Armenians before, during and after the war?

My Story or the Story of Others that I Live

I am standing at the entrance of a long dim corridor, unable to pass. The corridor is flanked by four apartments and leads to ours, which is at the very end. Men’s heads are protruding from the walls on both sides and in my dream, I know there are no bodies on the other side of the wall. They are just heads severed from their bodies, the blood still fresh on them. They are moaning in pain and their eyes are half closed. I am standing there, unable to pass between them, afraid that they could reach me... I know that these bodiless heads belong to Armenian men killed during the Genocide.

I remember the first time when I had this dream (or the first time I remember having it) was in the village where my grandfather is from. The village borders Azerbaijan. This was before the Soviet Union collapsed and the war between Armenia and Azerbaijan had not yet started. I must’ve been less than seven years old, as that’s when I went there the last time. The fact that the village was next to Azerbaijan, and the “Turks” (that’s what Armenians often call Azeris, without much distinction¹⁷) so close by, was apparently

¹⁷ There may be two reasons for this: the fact that Azeris speak a language that is closely related to Turkish, such that they are mutually intelligible; and the close political ties and mutual sympathies between Turkey and Azerbaijan. In fact, this sentiment is shared by (at least some) Turks and Azeris as well, which is expressed in the motto put into circulation by the late president of Azerbaijan, Heydar Aliyev, who called

bringing terrors alive in my young head. With some variations, I had this dream (and others too) time over time later in my life and well into my adulthood.

The feeling was always the same: horror, the inability of crossing some border to go where you live, where you are now: crossing through your past to get to your present. Why was I having these dreams? Why was I – a child born 65 years after the Armenian Genocide and with no direct link to those who died in it or survived it (none of my direct relatives have been its victims) having these dreams? Why were they so real? Why was I afraid of Turks? Why did a single historical event, however horrific it might have been, haunt me many years after it had happened? Those are questions I asked myself at least 30 years after I remember having the first of those dreams.

I learned about the Armenian Genocide when I was about five years old. I remember something was on the TV in the living room. At that point my family (my father, my mother, my sister and I) were living with my grandparents, two aunts and an uncle in a two-bedroom apartment, which meant that we the children watched pretty much everything that the adults watched, as there was only one living room and one TV set. The official (and family) censorship during Soviet times was more concerned with nudity or occasional kisses on the screen than with violence. So that day I saw pictures of the events of 1915, which I continued seeing every year, on and around April 24th, for the next 20 years until I moved out of Armenia. I remember I approached my father and asked him what it was. He put me on his lap and told me that the Turks had killed 1.5 million

Turkey and Azerbaijan “one nation, two States” (Öcal 2023). The motto was repeated by Turkey’s president Erdogan, in his 2020 speech at the parade in Azerbaijan’s capital Baku, commemorating the Azeri victory in Karabakh (Memri TV 2020).

Armenians and that those are photos of the events. It was April 23. Was it the first time I was hearing about it, or was it the first time I *remember* hearing about it? The next day I went to the monument of the Armenian Genocide and climbed the hill (most of the time being carried by my father) with a huge crowd carrying flowers. People also carried pictures of relatives lost to the Genocide and it made everything so much more vivid and real. My father told me that the twelve pillars that made up the monument symbolize the twelve provinces that Armenia has lost (now in Turkey), and the eternal fire in the centre is dedicated to the victims. I was mesmerized by the idea of eternal fire, but the emotion that dominated me was fear. I calmed myself with the thought that as long as I had my father, I was safe.

And so it went on: the dreams (where the Turks are coming and I don't know where to hide, it is the Deir Zor desert and I am there, sometimes with my child, dead people killed in the Genocide around me), the movies about the Genocide, the marches on April 24th, stories and books about losing a homeland, longing for places I have never visited and the constant fear that the Turks are only several hours away. All of this became an inseparable part of my life. Soon after that the massacres in Sumgait (a town in Azerbaijan) happened, where the Azeris attacked, tortured, mutilated, and killed the local Armenians, and we had new Armenian refugees running from Turks and new photos and banners carried on April 24th. And what was history that had happened before my grandfather was born, became a reality that happened in my lifetime, and the ongoing Karabakh conflict with the Azeris kept it alive for another 30 years.

As a teenager, my crazy and unachievable dreams (of becoming an actress, a singer – none of these a possibility in my patriarchal family –, then a director, a teacher,

or a writer), included one that perhaps I could become someone important to be able to bring back the lost Armenian lands (a dream among many Armenian boys), or at least achieve the international recognition of the Armenian Genocide. I ached for the lost lands and felt angry that Big Politics was always able to fool the Armenians.

Bringing back the lands or longing for them was not only a child's dream. I remember that during my university years there were trips organized to Western Armenia (the formerly Armenian-populated territories of Turkey where most of the massacres happened). One of the individuals who organized these was a young professor from the department of Turkish studies at Yerevan State University, who told me that when they got there, many very serious and respectable people who had come with him (mostly university professors) "went crazy." He said that something weird was going on with the people and they were doing strange things. He described to me how one of them lay on the ground and began crying and kissing the earth. We loved Western Armenia, those lands we had never seen. We were haunted by our past and the Genocide was a big part of it. And there were some among us who tried change the reality.

While I was at school, the then Armenian minister of education, Ashot Bleyan, decided to forbid performances dedicated to the Genocide in the lower grades.¹⁸ This created a flurry of negative public reaction and once more, we learned of the importance of the Genocide in our lives.

From my school years I remember Turkish notebooks with the words *Okul Defteri* ("school notebook" in Turkish) on their cover, Turkish-made plastic bags with beautiful pictures in bright colours, and Turkish chewing gums, all of them of much better quality

¹⁸ He also visited Baku, and in general was for reconciliation, which was regarded by some as treason.

than what we had in Armenia. The debate over whether we should buy Turkish products was, and still is, ongoing in Armenia. So we all felt both guilty about using them (which we nonetheless did) and scared (what if they have poisoned the chewing gum to get rid of Armenians?). The guilting of those who use Turkish products or spend holidays in Turkey happens to this day. I remember one such incident from my years as a student. The course was “The History of the Armenian Diaspora,” and our professor – a man with a great deal of theatrical flair – was telling us about another horrible episode from the history of how Turks have mistreated Armenians. He finished his lecture by picking up a notebook with *Okul Defteri* on its cover from a desk in the front row, raised it high and exclaimed: “and I leave this on your conscience!”

But then there was also a big debate among young people in Armenia whether the Genocide (and the past in general) should be more important than “us,” and whether it should determine our entire lives. We were there, we were alive, we needed jobs, money, and we were in a very bad relationship with our two neighbours, Turkey and Azerbaijan. An open border with Turkey might give a boost to the very weak Armenian economy, and some people suggested that perhaps it would make sense to put the burden of pursuing the international acceptance of the Genocide on the shoulders of the Diaspora – most of them direct descendants of its survivors. Whereas we, in the Republic, had better take care of what was better for us. After all, those people were dead, and we were still alive. There was even a colloquial word among young people: *tseghaspanel*, “to genocide.” Those who thought that ditching the struggle for the Genocide was the right thing to do sometimes said to those who were adamant about keeping the Genocide an important part of our lives: “come on already, you genocided us with your Genocide!”

My first encounter with a group of Diaspora Armenians was in Syria, where I was studying Arabic as part of my university program. Each of them had a story. I don't remember the exact content, but the Genocide was always there. April 24th was near, and as far as I remember, the Armenian church and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) party organized the annual trip to the Deir Zor desert, a place which turned into an Armenian mass grave in 1915. I remember the long trip: white sand everywhere, stories of the Genocide told in the bus, and for a second it seemed that I saw human caravans marching miserably to their death over those eternal sands. The church built there had a display of bones of people who had died there. But there was no need for the display. The entire territory was filled with bones. There were holes in the desert, perhaps mass graves that were never covered, and some of the young men in our group went into them and started collecting bones in a plastic bag to take them to Ejmiatsin (the religious centre of Armenia), in order to properly bury them there. They never did it, of course, and I wonder how, in our 18-year-old minds, we were thinking of crossing the border with a sack of human bones.

Some Lebanese Armenians who were visiting there with us jumped into the holes and one of them joked: "Say hi to your grandpa." I was really surprised and thought "what a horrible person!" Now I think that perhaps their reality was more intertwined with the Genocide than ours, so they had learned to joke about it (or perhaps he visited there annually and was not as affected as a first-time visitor would be).

My first real encounter with a Turkish person was in the US. I was teaching Arabic, and one day I entered the class and among all the students I saw her, a friendly-looking young woman with a very open smile. "She is Armenian," I thought, "finally!" I had been

feeling very lonely and I was desperately looking for Armenians. “And what’s even better, she is definitely from Armenia!” (This meant she and I would have more in common culturally: we could usually tell a Diaspora Armenian from one from the Republic by their dress and hair style.) With a pounding heart I quickly scanned the list of the names, looking for one ending in *-yan* (the overwhelming majority of Armenian last names end in this suffix), but I froze when among all the Browns, Stanleys and Johns I found “Aydın,” clearly a Turkish last name. After a couple of days, she (then a PhD student) emailed me and offered to go for a coffee. I went with heaviness in my heart. Should I bring “it” up, or should I pretend there is no elephant in the room? The second choice felt like being a traitor. I was so relieved when she started talking about Hrant Dink, an Armenian-Turkish intellectual and activist who promoted the recognition of the Genocide, and was murdered by an ultra-nationalist Turk. She also spoke about the Genocide, and actually called it a “Genocide.” We also talked about many other things that evening. She is a valued friend to this day.

It was with mixed feelings that I discovered that both by appearance and by culture the closest people to us were the Turks. Every time I saw someone on the street and I thought they were Armenian (by the dress and body-language), they turned out to be a Turk. I have had Turkish friends since then, most of them academics and all of them loudly acknowledge the Genocide. Many of them write to us on April 24th to say that they remember and they hope one day the Turkish leadership will too. At this moment hope is all I have as an Armenian in this regard.

The Karabakh conflict; the Baku and Sumgait killings; the massacre of civilians in Maraga by Azeri troops; the killing of Gurgen Margaryan in 2003 – an Armenian army officer hacked to death in his sleep in a hotel room in Budapest by his neighbour, an officer from Azerbaijan; the Azeri attack on Armenia in 2016; the recent Karabakh war of 2020, and everything in between was somehow a continuation of the Genocide, and it all stoked fears of the Turks (and the Azeris).

So it was everywhere. Not always explicitly, not always as “genocide,” but it was there. It was coming at us from all the history books, schools, TV, at the university and in regular conversations. The names of the three organizers of the Genocide were known by every child of my generation and there was a whole repertoire of songs, poetry, prose, and movies that we grew up with, all about a lost homeland, a brave struggle, the heroic history of the Armenian guerrillas from the early 20th century. Many boys who were born around that time were named after famous Armenian freedom fighters from a hundred years back — Andranik, Gevorg, Serob, etc.

Did we realize that the past affects us so deeply and that it becomes part of our everyday life? We sometimes heard that we are a small nation and we do not have the luxury to forget the past. Many a “great” nation had once lived and was no more. So, to continue existing, we had to be in a certain way, and that way, I guess, was: to live our past, including our past trauma, in our day to day life.

Has the reality around the past changed in Armenia since I was young? It is really hard to say, as the Genocide and the lost lands are intertwined with so many Armenian realities. My friend recently told me about her young son trying to find ways to build a big enough truck to fit Mount Ararat on it, so he can bring it back home. The giant two-peaked

Ararat, once part of historic Armenia, is now just across the Turkish border, and is painfully visible from Yerevan. It is one of the most prominent visual symbols of the lost homeland. Boys grow up with a discourse about the need to be brave and strong, part of which is “not being afraid of the Turks.” Every year on April 24th, many Armenians change their Facebook profile pictures to include the words “I am a descendant of the Armenian Genocide,” “I remember and demand,” “Recognize the Armenian Genocide,” etc. In 2020, due to Covid 19, the March on April 24 was cancelled, and the government organized a “remote march.” Everyone (including Armenians from abroad) could send their names to an online address, and they were projected onto the Genocide memorial.

Of course, my story does not represent everyone’s story, or not to the same extent. There were and still are some who believed that it is time for a reconciliation or that it was time to move on from our victim identity toward a victor’s identity (this was before the disastrous defeat in the 2020 Karabakh war). However, the society at large is still very sensitive toward “forgiving the Turks” or giving up claims to lands (both lost and disputed). Often, this is tied to the discourse of being a “traitor,” and is manipulated in order to discredit public figures.

I first wrote the above piece before the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and before Armenians had lost control over more of their ancestral lands to Azerbaijan (which was backed by the state of Turkey). As I am writing this now, in January 2023 in Calgary, 120,000 Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh have been surrounded and blockaded by Azeris since 12 December 2022. They are running out of vital supplies — food, medication, infant formula. After the war of 2020, the Armenian population of

Nagorno Karabakh was connected to the Republic of Armenia by a thin corridor controlled by Russian peacekeepers. With the war in Ukraine and Russia's weakening role in the region, Azerbaijan's moves have become bolder, especially now that Europe relies on the gas that it's receiving from (or through) Azerbaijan. The cutting off of the only corridor connecting Nagorno Karabakh to Armenia is preventing vitally needed goods to reach the Armenians inside, who are refusing to leave their homeland of more than two millennia. The possible Genocide of those people (whether by attrition or by direct killing) becomes a fear that many Armenians around the world and in Armenia live with these days, keeping the genocide as part of the Armenian reality as close as ever.

My Contribution and an Overview of the Chapters

My first introductory chapter sets the historical scene and briefly talks about the events that became embedded in the memory and the identity of the Armenians both in the Diaspora and in the Homeland. Through a personal story, I also position myself in the first chapter — as an Armenian who grew up with a similar story but a different experience from that of the Syrian Armenians of Canada I have interviewed. My second chapter is an extended literature review and a research context. There I selectively present the literature where the chapters of this thesis thematically belong. My third chapter outlines the theory and methods that have informed my work. In chapters four through nine I investigate the refugee experiences of Syrian Armenians and explore how their collective identity, their present and their past, inform their experiences. A big part of this is the memory of the Armenian Genocide, the lost lives and land, and the collective understanding of what it means to be Armenian. I did my research with a strong conviction

that isolated experiences of a group both temporally and spatially are not enough to comprehend the complexities of human experience. Hence, my research of Syrian refugee experiences does not start with a certain point after their immigration and in a Canadian city, but rather with their history, their lives in pre-war Syria, their experiences through the Syrian war, countries they had taken refuge in, and in Canada. As such my research is intersectional and multidisciplinary, as discussed in the following chapter. What also makes my research innovative is that it focuses on an understudied group among Syrian refugees, namely Christian Armenians (hitherto, most work has been done on Muslim refugees, as noted), thus looking at the Syrian conflict and Assad's regime from a novel standpoint. This challenges the approach to studying Syrians' or any groups' experiences in a homogenizing way, because although they may be escaping the same war, they do not have the same experiences.

By telling a story of the Syrian war which differs from the mainstream narrative, my thesis contributes to our understanding of the complexity of this conflict and explores the different standpoints and groups involved. It also challenges the approach to studying refugees as victims without due attention to their particular pre-war histories. Instead, as mentioned, my work focuses on the social history of this particular group, whose refugee experiences may be informed by their pre-war lives and their positionality in their former societies.

This work is an interview-based study with 18 participants, which uses Institutional Ethnography (IE) as a combination of theory and method to shed light on a number of questions investigated in different chapters, as discussed below. Each of the chapters sheds light on how what people do in multiple locations is coordinated by larger social

relations across time and space. Hence, I investigate these social determinants in the doings of people as they live their lives before, during and after the war. Each chapter is committed to bringing into view how institutionally mediated, large-scale relations come into being and how all of this is socially organized. In other words: I explore how transgenerational trauma, diaspora, refugeedom, immigration, belonging, home, and homeland are organized, and what people do for them to happen.

In particular, my fourth chapter investigates the social organization of the past, collective memory and the transgenerational trauma as they come to life in ordinary people's doings. The fifth chapter investigates how the same trauma and collective memory manifest themselves in political engagement and disengagement, loyalty, citizenship and belonging. Ultimately, it brings to light a story of war and pre-war Syria that is different than the mainstream narrative known in the West. The sixth and seventh chapters investigate refugee experiences embedded in policies and laws – both national and international, and trapped between borders and institutions and state and non-state actors. As all the chapters, it shows how the shared narrative of the past also becomes a network to inform those experiences. Chapter eight explores the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program from the standpoint of the Syrian Armenian refugees and investigates it outside the “successful way of integrating people” framework. Again, as in every chapter, the role of transgenerational trauma as a space where belonging is constructed is discussed. Finally, chapter nine investigates what belonging or the lack of it, home and homeland involve for the participants, how they conceptualize these, and, once again, how a shared past, collective memory and transgenerational trauma come to being in

their doings and speech. My final, tenth chapter is a conclusion and offers a brief summary of the findings and contributions of my work, both empirically and theoretically.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH CONTEXT AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Studying the stories of the Syrian Armenian refugees, who are third- and fourth-generation descendants of Genocide survivors and members of the Diaspora, requires interdisciplinary research. While the Genocide, prevalent in my participants' lives, is not the focus of this thesis, its haunting effect across generations and the collective memory of a shared past — two aspects that are often central and attached to diasporic existence and identity — are. Therefore, I have engaged in my work with literature that studies genocide, collective memory and intergenerational trauma, diaspora, and refugees.

Each of these topics is studied across disciplines using different (often contested) theories, concepts and methods. Since my project of inquiry, as discussed in the next chapter, does not start with a conceptual frame but rather with people's experiences, I have not used any of the theories discussed below as a framework. Instead, I have engaged with them as thematic fields where my work belongs and scholarship to which my work will be a contribution. I particularly discuss works which have informed my own thinking about the research I do.

In this chapter, I discuss this literature in three interconnected pieces: (1) literature on refugees, and particularly on the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP), (2) literature on diaspora, home and homeland, and, closely connected to the latter, (3) literature on collective memory and collective (often, cross-generational) trauma. I engage here with works that present a coherent picture of the main trends in relevant fields. More work is discussed or used in the individual chapters, which I do not include here for the sake of keeping the coherence of the narrative. Finally, since individual chapters might

belong in different literatures thematically, I sometimes repeat material from the literature review as reminder for the reader.

Immigration and Refugees

The history of Canada is intertwined with the history of immigration and settlement. The discussion around immigrants has traditionally happened in terms of whether the immigrants will economically benefit Canadians or burden them, and newcomers are measured in terms of “fitting” into Canadian society in order to be accepted into the country (Li 2003). The recent refugee crisis, and Canada’s coming forward as a settlement country, has spiked new interest about immigration, refugees, and the programs Canada particularly uses for this. This does not mean that until recently refugees did not receive any academic attention. Already in the 1980s, Anthony Richmond theorized population movement and how to study refugees. In his seminal work, “Sociological Theories of International Migration: The case of Refugees,” Richmond (1988) arrives at the following conclusion, having reviewed the sociological and social psychological theories of international migration: explaining population movements by either sociopolitical or economic determinants is rather limiting¹⁹ as it divides the

¹⁹ Richmond (1988) writes: “In the modern world where states, religious leaders, multinational corporations and supra-state agencies (such as the IMF and the World Bank) are involved in decisions which affect the lives of millions of people, the majority of population movements are a complex response to the reality of a global society in which ethnoreligious, social, economic and political determinants are inextricably bound together” (p.20).

movements between voluntary and involuntary (e.g., refugees). Rather, a multivariate approach which goes beyond the two above-mentioned determinants is necessary, and there is both constraint and enablement of varying degrees in any human behaviour. Richmond rightly notes that wars and unrest are among the reasons for large-scale refugee movements, and points out the interdependence of political, economic, and social factors (ibid). Since introducing a sharp division between “voluntary” and “involuntary” or “free” and “forced” movements does not do justice to representing the decisions and choices that migrants make (even if they are limited), recognizing a “continuum” where everyone has some amount of choice and is constrained to some extent is a better way to approach this. The new paradigm he suggests is to look at the movement of the international population as “reactive” and “proactive” (p.20), where the reactive ones have fewer choices and are more constrained than the proactive ones. Refugees fall in the reactive migrant group. Richmond discusses the main reasons why refugees, or “reactive migrants,” move. The typology of reactive migrations that he proposes is as follows: political, economic, environmental, social, bio-psychological. Any of these can be a major or a secondary determinant and could be paired with another to create multivariate reasons for moving (Richmond 1993:18).

Richmond’s points are well taken. But what does a refugee or a “reactive migrant” do with those “fewer choices” if they have to move? Are those choices ready for them to choose from or do they create them through different actions and by drawing upon different forms of capital that they have? How are different forms of this capital activated and used? How do different groups of people who fall under the same legal category and are eligible for the same program – but who are in fact embedded in different social

realities – utilize this category to achieve their goals? Some of those questions are taken up and studied by the recent scholarship on refugees and some others I try to answer in my research.

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees: A Canadian Program

The interest around refugees both in academia and outside it was sparked by the recent Syrian war — which caused what is considered the largest refugee crises of our times. In 2015 the Liberal Party won the elections partially due to its promise to resettle more refugees at a faster pace (Smith 2020). Giving in to the domestic pro-refugee sentiment, especially after the tragic death of Alan (also reported as Alyan) Kurdi — a Syrian boy who drowned together with most of his family during an attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea in a rubber boat, Trudeau’s government stood behind the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and announced Canada’s contribution through the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GSRI) (Smith 2020). Its goal was to export the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees program (est. 1979) as a “Model for the world” (Smith 2020:286) to other countries, in this way contributing to the solution of the refugee crisis. Trudeau’s government reversed the allocations that were traditionally given to the refugee sponsorship. As a result, the private sponsorship program received double the target allocated to government sponsored refugees (Labman 2020).²⁰

²⁰ Labman writes that the 2019-2021 plan was to resettle between 9500 and 11000 government assisted refugees and between 17,000 and 23,000 privately sponsored refugees (2020:304).

With time, the GRSI's goal was downgraded to the more modest exchange of expertise, training and support (Smith 2020) (the effectiveness of the initiative and the program itself, both domestically and internationally, is discussed later). This was the moment when the interest toward PSRP both nationally and internationally spiked and to this day there is a growing literature covering different aspects and impacts of the program (Reynolds and Clark-Kazak 2019), including the bureaucracies attached to it, its legal aspects, its successes and failures, the motivations of sponsors, the relationship between sponsors and refugees, the integration of the refugees, etc.²¹ Special journal issues and book chapters are dedicated to it.²²

As had happened earlier with other groups of refugees, the Syrian refugees also became subject to discussions of “cost” vs. “benefit,” among other issues. This represents refugees in a more vulnerable position as the “costs” are obvious for refugee resettlement, while the “benefits” are not visible in the foreseeable future. Manjikian (2010) notes that in the public discourse refugees are often seen as “bogus claimants” who take advantage of the system (p.51, citing Valverde and Pratt). In keeping with this discussion, refugees (particularly Syrian refugees) have been constructed as a threat to the welfare system, the country's economic security – not only in Canada but in other Western countries as

²¹ Gingrich and Enns (2019) write that to this point most of the literature on private sponsorship was focused on “program evaluation and history and falls within the context of Indochinese refugee movement” (p.11).

²² Here are a few examples: the Canadian journal *Refugee* has dedicated a special issue to PSRP; Labman and Cameron (2020) have edited a book called *Strangers to Neighbours: Refugee Sponsorship in Context; Canadian Ethnic Studies* dedicated an issue in 2018 to Syrian refugees where PSRP's certain aspects were discussed.

well (Hynie 2018). Winter and colleagues (Winter, Patzelt, and Beuregard 2018) look into mainstream print news media in Canada and Germany (*The Globe and Mail* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, respectively) to show how the construction of Syrian refugees in these news outlets is informed by the country's position towards refugees in general. In both news outlets, Syrian refugees are represented either as a threat or as victims who need active saving, and this plays well into the discourse of "true Canadians" and their "virtuous helping behaviour" (Hynie 2018:5, 6). In general, the questions with which early Canadian scholarship engages are how refugees are perceived by the hosts (e.g., Scott and Safdar 2017), and how a Canadian identity is constructed as a nation that welcomes refugees (Hynie 2018). Much research to this point has mostly focused on the hosts. It explores how the hosts see the refugees, their expectations of the refugees, how they construct them either as a threat or as victims who need saving, and what the hosts feel when expectations are not met (Guo and Wong 2018; Hynie 2018).

Bringing refugees into the country is the first step in a whole chain of challenges that begins once they are in Canada where, Hynie (2018) writes, they are seen either as a threat or as victims. Meanwhile, Hynie is perhaps representing two extremes in public perception, while perhaps it would be more realistic and inclusive to imagine them on a spectrum between the two extremes. The survey study of Scott and Safdar (2017) explores prejudice against Syrian refugees through the lens of multiculturalism, assimilation, and interculturalism. Tyyskä and colleagues (2017) undertake similar research, using theories of orientalism, neocolonialism, neoliberalism, and feminism. By analyzing the content of the major Canadian media outlets (*The Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *National Post*, *Huffington Post*, CBC, and CTV) they explore three major themes:

how the Canadians are represented; how the refugees are represented; and how the Canadian refugee resettlement processes are represented. According to their findings, the refugees in these outlets are represented as vulnerable, needy and lacking agency; the refugee men are constructed as a threat to security; while the Canadians (both the government and the public) and their values are constructed as humanitarian and generous (Tyyskä, Blower, DeBoer, Kawai, and Walcott 2017:4-5).

All of the above are important subjects that help us understand some of the experiences of refugeedom,²³ but they do not allow us to understand the depth and the extent of this phenomenon and everything that comes with it.

The discourse on refugees in Canada includes the notion of “making new citizens” through bringing them to Canada. Apart from governmental initiatives to bring refugees to the country, private sponsorship is another way that allows a group of Canadians to join in sponsoring a refugee to migrate to Canada. This affects not only the refugees but also the sponsors and co-constructs or “remakes the citizenship of Canadians” (Macklin, Barber, Goldring, Hyndman, Korteweg, Labman, and Zyfi 2018). The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP) has received particular attention (Government of Canada n.d.d). As mentioned above, in the 2016 New York declaration, Trudeau’s government announced Canada’s contribution via the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI) (Smith 2020). According to Smith (2020) its goal was to champion the Canadian private sponsorship program (and to export it to Europe and South America), which was praised

²³ Some scholarship has started using the word refugeedom as a “human condition” (see for example Riga, Langer, and Dakessian 2020). Here I use it to emphasize the entirety of the experiences that refugees go through, as well as their complexity.

as an important model for resettling refugees around the world and contributing to the solution of the refugee problem,²⁴ as it offers new avenues, other than state sponsorship, for individuals and groups around the world to get involved in contributing to the settlement of refugees. Despite the Canadian government's dedication to it and its efforts to push it forward, it is often claimed that it is not clear that private sponsorship offers any better outcomes for integration (Smith 2020:297). While there was a tangible interest toward the Canadian program the international community (from government to social activists) on all levels from, not only did it not become a model for the world, but it was never exported to Europe. CPSRP did not work for European countries for complex reasons, including different goals when it comes to the refugee crisis, different domestic needs and attitudes, different laws and policies, as well as different geographies. For example, Canada's isolated location from the countries of origin allows it to bring refugees selectively and in a more controlled way, while it is not the case with European countries (Smith 2020). As a result, CPSRP did not go beyond the exchange of experience and learning.

Not being universally applicable was not the only shortcoming of the program. It also raises questions and criticism, namely, whether PSRP is bringing the more

²⁴ According to Craig Damian Smith (2020), 85% of the refugees are hosted by the global South. He writes: "In 2018 the international community resettled fewer than 92,000 out of the 1.2 million refugees in urgent need, meaning only 0.3% were offered this durable solution. In short, while invaluable to those who are selected, resettlement plays a very small role in international burden sharing" (p. 289). This means that the international community and interested parties are still in need of effective solutions for refugee resettlement. As such, I believe, any research toward resettlement and integration is a step toward finding a solution and is social activism.

vulnerable candidates for resettlement, or whether by privatizing a humanitarian issue, states are not simply looking for an easy way out of the commitment to contribute to the solution of the global refugee crisis. Despite the criticism and the need for a constant improvement of the program, it has been successfully implemented for many years in Canada (due both to its history, its 70 years of experience, and people's voluntarism), and according to scholarship (Smith 2020), PSRP as a community-based sponsorship is an important way of social network building and doing it in a more welcoming way (ibid:298; Labman 2020). Its shortcomings and gaps definitely merit scholarly attention.

The PSRP is studied by Macklin and colleagues (2018) who discuss the private sponsorship program from the point of view of the sponsors. Central for my research is how "the project of resettling refugees as future citizens [remakes] the citizenship of sponsors" (p.38). The importance of the work is twofold. First, it discusses the motivations and expectations of the sponsors, including into this discussion how the interaction of the Canadian person and the refugee happen. Secondly, it shows how the public discourses – including notions such as "true Canadian," "a country of immigrants," "multiculturalism" – actually inform and frame people's doings and sayings, and how "citizenship" and "Canadianness" are "made" and "remade" (Macklin et al. 2018).

The more recent Canadian scholarship on refugees sheds light on the following: the context of refugee sponsorship (Lenard 2020), starting from the history of PSRP (Cameron 2020); the uniqueness of the program as the only "refugee naming" program (Lehr and Dyke 2020) and the program in the wider context of the refugee regime (Bradley and Duin 2020); different cases of refugee sponsorship (Enns, Good Gingrich, and Perez 2020; Pearlman 2020; McNally 2020) and its challenges (Kyriakides, McLuhan,

Anderson, and Bajjali 2020; Lange 2020; Macklin, Barber, Goldring, Hyndman, Korteweg, Zyfi 2020; Thériault 2020); programs that were created to provide assistance to the sponsorship parties (such as RSTP and SSP), including legal advice (Lange 2020); and the program as a “model for the world” to tend to the refugee crisis around the world (Smith 2020), along with its compatibility with the other countries, its benefits, and shortcomings. It makes an important shift in looking for the reasons of successful integration outside the refugees themselves or outside the attributes that are ascribed to them. Some of these new directions are the pre-arrival relationships (Kyriakides et al. 2020), institutional aspects of the program and the relationship with the sponsors, the sponsoring groups’ positionality and history (Gingrich and Enns 2019; Enns et al. 2020), pre-arrival differences, and the different resources groups possess (Hynie, McGrath, Bridekirk, Oda, Ives, Hyndman, Arya, Shakya, Hanley, McKenzie 2019). Among these directions are the importance of the place of settlement, e.g., rural locations as opposed to large cities (Haugen 2019), how they advantage or disadvantage the integration of the newcomers, the expectations of successful integration within a certain time framework and the existing realities around this (Lenard 2019), as well as the integration of youth, involving youth through the World University Services of Canada (WUSC) Student Refugee Program (McKee, Lavell, Manks, and Korn 2019). This body of scholarship, as noted, is important as it shifts the attention to the relations in which the refugees are embedded.

Among those works several are more relevant for my research and I discuss them in more detail in my literature review or in the body of my thesis. Very influential for my work is the article by Kyriakides and colleagues (2018). They use Edward Said’s (1978)

discussion of Orientalist discourse as an interpretive lens to understand the victimization of refugees and the active making of their refugee selves by the receiving party. Kyriakides and colleagues look at whether refugees accept the new identity or reject it. Private sponsorship and interactions between sponsors and refugees give insight into the deconstruction of “victimhood” and the construction of “persons of self-rescue” (Kyriakides et al. 2018). While the media and policy focus on the victim-saviour dichotomy, the article shows that sponsor-host interactions create spaces where a different sense is created. “The identities and behaviour of refugees are affected but not defined by conflict and war” (p. 61), and hence their pre-refugee selves should be included in the discussion. The strength of this work is its emphasis on reconstructing the public discourses around refugees and exploring how refugees themselves construct identities differently from the assigned ones. The methodological and analytical strength of the work is in including the voices of both sides in the discussion – the sponsors and the newcomers – and in accepting the subjectivity of “successful resettlement” (Kyriakides, et al. 2018:63) and what it can mean to different sponsors, as well as using the conceptual framework of Said’s Orientalism in showing how the “East-West,” “refugee-host,” and “deserving-threat” dichotomies once again create a “non-Western other” (Kyriakides, et al. 2018:61).

Later work by Kyriakides and colleagues (Kyriakides et al. 2020) looks further into the rejection by newcomers of the assigned role of refugees, as it carries little agency. The authors suggest a new explanatory framework outside the agency-vs.-structure explanation. The stories of their participants, they state, illustrate that “accepting, negotiating, or refusing the refugee label was not the full status story for persons

displaced by conflict, who had experienced (and successfully overcome) the threat of imminent social and possibly physical death” (Kyriakides et al. 2020:200). The act of drawing upon their pre-conflict social roles (parent, partner, or provider) helped them to claim a status beyond refugees. The pre-arrival work they did by drawing on their roles (as resources), compared with the assigned status of refugees (with the expected passivity and limited status-claiming opportunities), makes the importance of the “worth transaction” for the authors obvious. Those instances between the host and the newcomers where the “transaction of worth” happened, and where refugees were able to claim status that was associated with their pre-conflict selves, the authors claim, is key to successful resettlement (ibid:198). The authors rightly emphasize that “successful” resettlement is a subjective notion that can vary according to each of the parties involved in it — refugees, hosts, and government. What it means to the refugees, however, is its least studied aspect (ibid). The authors, as a result of their study of “sponsor/sponsored” interactions, offer a new analytical framework to shed light on the dynamic of interactions between hosts and refugees and to understand “success” as defined by the “principal actors” of private sponsorship. The interaction – which starts between the sponsors and refugees before the refugees’ arrival in the “third digital space” (e.g., via WhatsApp, Skype, Facebook) – allows both the sponsors and the refugees “the transaction of worth” and realistic expectations: “resettlement uncertainty was reduced, and the esteem congruent with pre-conflict social roles and identities was made visible” (p. 209).

The centrality of this scholarship in my research has three elements: first, it provides more flexible and non-objectifying names and categories that come from the participants themselves rather than being ascribed to them. Secondly, it shifts attention

from what people are *said to be* to what people *do* (e.g., how people have used what they were in their pre-conflict social roles to self-rescue, as well as claiming identities other than “refugee”). Thus it creates an important shift in the scholarship toward processes and people’s work as opposed to naming, labeling, categorizing and generalizing them.

Finally, central to my work is that individuals and groups act in accordance with their social biographies and their past as well as their present. Studies that approach groups in an isolated point of time (e.g., studying Syrian refugees as refugees in the Canadian context only), risk incorrect generalizations. As such, Kyriakides and colleagues make an important shift to include the pre-conflict aspects of the groups into the discussion. While their scholarship is not an IE work, it is an important piece that can be built on while doing IE research.

In the case of Syrian Armenians, the concept of “persons of self-rescue” could work particularly well for two reasons. First, many among my participants rejected the term “refugee” as applicable to them, as by their own accounts they had not received anything and had done everything on their own (as opposed to, they pointed out, the state sponsored refugees who received help). Second, the term “person of self-rescue” creates grounds for inquiry into the everyday work individuals did to be in Canada by actively operating within a context provided by a number of entities and systems: government laws and policies pertaining to entry, residency, and immigration; the UN and NGOs involved in refugee assistance; local labour and housing markets; and community and personal connections, especially those organized among Armenians. The IE approach allows me to study this work and to show how those actualities were concerted with relations of coordination that derived from other geographies or other times. In a sense,

my research develops the points elaborated by Kyriakides and colleagues further, to study the actual work Syrian Armenians have done to make self-rescue possible, and the large-scale social relations this work was embedded in.

Another work that studies the active role and agency-taking by refugees is by Lalai Manjikian. Her interesting study of refugees in Montreal sheds light on refugee proactiveness and contribution to society during the resettlement period. Manjikian (2010) argues that the delay of integration and the “in-between” status (p. 51) of the refugees (waiting for the Canadian officials to grant them citizenship), reproduce a certain kind of inclusiveness and citizenship performance. While there is social exclusion and discrimination and challenges they face in their day to day lives, they also create sites of engagement in their communities through volunteering and as such produce what Manjikian calls “alternative citizenship, such as informal citizenship” (Manjikian 2010:55).

Macklin et al. (2020) study the private sponsors, and how private sponsorship, being in many respects similar to the family sponsorship category, and evoking the kinship model, creates spaces for paternalism, power imbalance, authority and hierarchy between sponsors and refugees. Their work is based on interviews, observations, and surveys of Canadian sponsors in Ottawa and is based on sponsor voices, whereas the point of view of the refugees is not present. Macklin and colleagues point out that citizenship, kinship, and humanitarianism are among the reasons for Canadians to step forward, and under the burden of the one-year commitment, to lead the newly arrived Syrians from the status of refugees²⁵ to “self-sufficiency.” The authors point out that the sponsors mention responsibility taking, hard work and satisfaction with what they do, as

²⁵ The authors mention the passivity and dependency attached to it.

part of their findings. Interesting here is that for the sponsors, sponsorship in this case is very personal: they take a very hands-on approach and they see themselves personally committed to people who are strangers to them.

The sponsor involvement described in this scholarship offers a sharp contrast to the cases of my participants and their sponsors. While unlike the above-mentioned scholarship, I take the perspective and the stories of the refugees (rather than the sponsors), it also appears that the commitment of the co-sponsors and even the organizations that helped Armenians to come to Canada was not directed toward concrete or even abstract people but to group membership, i.e., being Armenians. It did not necessarily translate to longer lasting relationships (unless the tie between the individuals or families had been strong already) but it was an obligation to saving fellow Armenians (cf. Macklin et al 2020).

An important contribution to understanding integration are studies engaging with the experiences of employment among Syrian refugees. Senthanaar and colleagues (Senthanaar, MacEachen, Premji, and Bigelow 2021) study the employment integration experiences of Syrian refugee women who came to Canada through various programs (e.g., Government-Assisted Refugees (GAR), Blended Visa Office-Referred (BVOR), Privately Sponsored Refugees (PSR) and refugee claimants). The study finds that different cohorts coming through different programs have unequal opportunities for securing jobs and therefore for successful integration. The research comes forward with policy recommendations on how to make the resettlement positive for all the refugees (Senthanaar et al. 2021).

Gingrich and Enns (2019) further suggest shifting the focus from the people and their ability to integrate into the institutional structure the refugees are embedded in, to exploring their relationships with sponsors. This shift from studying people to studying the relations they are embedded in is central to my own work. Gingrich and Enns do this by studying the case of the Mennonite Central Committee's history and its engagement with PSRP. Their scholarship joins the scholarly literature that tries to understand refugee experiences, integration, success, acceptance not as something that is attached to their selves but as informed and determined by surrounding small- and large-scale issues.

The literature above is a big step away from studying refugees themselves as reasons for and sources of the above-mentioned issues. However, most of the literature, whether that studying the issues that refugees encounter, or that studying the host society's motivations and attitudes toward them, often shares one feature. It discusses the resettlement of refugees and the acceptance or rejection of refugees. Thus, refugees and their actions are everywhere absent, they merely become the object of inquiry. My work turns this lens and takes the standpoint of refugees, studying the system in which they are embedded in multi-local sites and with different agents (state and non-state alike). It shows us how the immigration system,²⁶ state policies, refugee settlement, and diasporic ties work both within and outside Canada. As such, my work contributes both

²⁶ As Vic Satzweich (2015) mentions in his *Points of Entry*, not much is known about the Canadian visa offices and how decisions are made. While his book covers this gap and is dedicated to the visa officers and their day-to-day decision-making processes, we still do not know much about how those overseas processes happen from the perspective of the refugees. My research takes a small step in that direction and makes a modest contribution to understanding what those processes look like for the refugees.

theoretically (in understanding how certain concepts come to life, are produced, and what they produce, in people's actions); and empirically (by providing a detailed ethnography of the everyday lives of Syrian Armenian refugees by casting a larger view — from citizens to resettled refugees and everything in between). This is important to our understanding of the work, skills, and capital that the refugees use in order to be in the country of resettlement as opposed to studying refugees once they have already arrived in Canada, where they may be presented as vulnerable and dependent.

The scholarship discussed above is important to set the scene for any work on refugees, especially work on privately sponsored ones, as it sets the scene for the history, the past and the present of the sponsorship program, while exploring its success and failures. It also offers new avenues for research and casts a larger view on successful integration, rather than putting the responsibility for this on refugees themselves. What often remains behind the scenes, however, is the tremendous work people do to remove themselves from the zones of conflict and persecution and to reach safer destinations.

We often tend to think about the refugee programs or the decision of this or that country to bring refugees as a salvation operation, and those behind the decision-making and programs (whether state or non-state), as saviours. I suggest instead that we should see such programs and actors as a context where the actual work of self-rescue happens. The contributions of the above-mentioned scholarship and seeing the refugees as persons of self-rescue are an important change. Still, I would like to explore the notion further through an IE lens. This will allow us to recognize what exactly “self-rescue” work involves, as well as understanding how this work happens in the context of institutionally mediated processes and texts of the ruling relations which coordinate this work. My hope

is that this thesis will help to refocus our gaze and make the tremendous work of self-rescue visible, and will explain the institutional processes and the coordinating relations involved.

Diaspora

The term “diaspora” has been applied to different groups of people sharing all or some of the core elements with so called “classic diasporas” or “ideal type” diasporas. Such groups have been vastly diverse, ranging from communities of expatriates to LGBTQ individuals to violently dispersed groups of people, and to groups who simply had an orientation toward their homeland. These have unevenly shared different features of classical diasporas, such that to describe this or that group with the term “diaspora,” a special case has had to be made. The Armenian diaspora, meanwhile, by all accounts and by the consensus of the majority of scholars, is described as a classic diaspora (Cohen 2008).

It is no easy task to do a literature review for the field that engages with diaspora or diasporic communities. Not only because diaspora is a very contested concept (Grossman 2019), but also because it is not a singular field. Studies dealing with diasporas span multiple decades and have gone through multiple stages (see Cohen 2008). Different disciplines using multiple approaches have studied diaspora and various subject connected to it. From literary studies to cultural studies to social sciences and diaspora studies, scholars have engaged with defining, redefining, narrowing down, widening the term diaspora, delimiting its features (Safran 1991) or finding its boundaries

(Clifford 1994). Scholars have also studied the histories and destinies of particular diasporas and have explored their “making” and “unmaking” (Van Hear 1998).

One of the chief ontological debates in the field of diaspora studies is one between two trends, found in the works of various scholars — though not always in pure form. The first trend views diasporas as “discreet entities or groups” that are “out there” (Grossman 2019:1264, the quotation marks are in the original), clearly (or not) definable and measurable. The second, according to Grossman, is a constructivist view where diaspora is conceptualized as a type of consciousness, a context, an experience, and as an interpretive frame (for this classification, a discussion of and references to the original authors, see Grossman 2019:1265).

In what follows I discuss representative works elaborating these two positions. Because my work is concerned with Armenian diasporic communities, I will conclude with an overview of some representative works on the Armenian diaspora. I begin my discussion with the etymology of the word diaspora, followed by a discussion of how diaspora is defined and described by the most prominent scholars in the field. The review is not exhaustive, and there are many important works across disciplines that I was unable to engage with for limitations of space and time. I have tried to include works that illustrate the general trends and have informed my thinking and my work.

Definition and Features

The most inclusive work on the etymology of the word diaspora is Stéphane Dufoix’s *The Dispersion: A History of the Word Diaspora* (2017). Dufoix shows how this term,

conceived as it was in a specific spatio-temporal context and with particular reference to the Jewish community in the third century BCE, became detached from its context and went through semantic metamorphoses, acquiring what he calls a “global destiny” (p. 1). Dufoix offers a detailed and engaging account of the history and usages of the term. The etymology of the word derives from the Greek word *diasporá*, which means “dispersion.” While it was originally used with reference to the Jewish community (as an equivalent for the Hebrew word *galuth*), its scope has widened to cover many more communities, including the Armenian, Irish, Black, Greek ones, and recently also the Palestinian one.

A number of scholars have listed partially overlapping characteristics that a community has to possess in order to be called a diaspora. According to William Safran, “Today, ‘diaspora’ and, more specifically, ‘diaspora community’ seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people — expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*” (Safran 1991:83). To qualify for being a diaspora or an “expatriate minority community,” he suggests that its members have to satisfy several of the characteristics below.

- 1) They, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral,” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland, its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants will (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal

consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.
(Safran 1991:83-84)

Building on Safran, Clifford (1994) notes that the main features of diaspora are: 1) dispersal; 2) myths and memories of homeland; 3) alienation in the host country; 4) a desire for a return to and an ongoing support of the homeland; 5) and a collective identity which is defined by this relationship (Clifford 1994:305). Yet he also notes that it is impossible to offer a clear definition of diaspora or to delineate its features. Instead, he proposes to examine diaspora as a loose collection of “responses to dwelling-in-displacement” (Clifford 1994:310). Cohen suggests other criteria for defining diaspora, among them 1) dispersal and scattering, 2) collective trauma, 3) a troubled relationship with the majority, and 4) promoting a return movement (discussed in Anthias 1998:562).

Van Hear (1998: 6) notes that in order for a population to be a diaspora, it has to satisfy three conditions. 1) It must be dispersed from its homeland to two or more new territories, 2) its presence abroad must be enduring, and a movement between homeland and new host may take place, 3) the separated populations that comprise the diaspora must engage in some kind of exchange (social, economic, political, or cultural) among themselves.

Cohen (2008) builds on Safran’s classification, noting that the dispersal from the original centre is often accompanied by the memory of some kind of traumatic event, a memory of historical injustice, which brings people together. In the “homeland” category he also includes “imagined homeland,” such as for the Kurds and Sikhs, in whose case homeland was a later construction (Cohen 2008:6). Another feature is solidarity with co-ethnic members in the community and in other countries as a result of mobilized collective

identity (one of many things that diasporas do). Cohen sees diaspora as a term to be used for describing “transnational bonds of co-responsibility even where historically exclusive territorial claims are not strongly articulated” (2008:8). He calls this “deterritorialized diaspora” (ibid). Cohen discusses how the homeland-diaspora dichotomy became loose and the concept of home became fluid and vague and “generously interpreted” (p. 10) to be a place of origin or settlement, a transnational, local and national place, imagined virtual communities, a matrix of unknown experiences, or intimate social relations, etc. (p.10).

Cohen proposes nine defining features of diaspora (2008:17) that are paraphrased here: 1) Flight from homeland, sometimes traumatically, to two or more regions; 2) leaving the homeland in search of employment, trade, or to pursue colonialist goals; 3) a collective myth about a homeland, which speaks about its location, its past, its suffering and its achievements; 4) an idealized picture of the real or imagined homeland, a collective effort toward its maintenance, defense, prosperity, or even creation; 5) the development of or a return to homeland, which is collectively reaffirmed (even though many remain content to keep a virtual connection with it); 6) a strong ethnic identity that is based on history, a common language, cultural or religious heritage; 7) a troubled relationship with the host society, often based on the feeling of a possible impending calamity; 8) a feeling of commonality with members of one’s diaspora in other regions; 9) “The possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in host countries” (p. 17) that have a tolerance for pluralism. Based on those features, Cohen categorizes diasporas as follows: victim

diasporas²⁷ (discussed later); trade diasporas, labour diasporas, imperial diasporas, and deterritorialized diasporas.

In 2019, Grossman published a study of the use of the term “diaspora” in scholarship (Grossman 2019). Based on the most-cited articles in the field, he offers six main characteristics of diaspora as found in diaspora studies scholarship: 1) dispersal or immigration; 2) being outside one’s homeland; 3) community; 4) group identity; 5) homeland orientation; 6) transnationalism. All those are interrelated and often persist in a cause-and-effect relationship.

Moving from Set Boundaries to Fluidity

A towering figure in diaspora studies, and studies on the Armenian diaspora in particular, is Khachig Tölölyan, the founding editor of *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*. In his “Diaspora studies: Past, present and promise,” Khachig Tölölyan (2018) defines diaspora as follows: “A collection of transnational migrants becomes a diaspora when its members develop some familial, cultural and social distance from their nation yet continue to care deeply about it not just on grounds of kinship and filiation, but by commitment to

²⁷ As victim diasporas, Cohen discusses the African and the Armenian diasporas. These kinds of diasporas, among other features, also have undergone a “dispersal following a traumatic event in the homeland” (2008:2). He writes: “A strong ethnic group consciousness, a troubled relationship with host societies (less evident among non-Middle Eastern Armenians), a sense of empathy with other co-ethnic members, and the possibility of an enriching creative life in the diaspora — all apply in large measure to the two victim diasporas considered here” (Cohen 2008:58).

certain chosen affiliations” (p.27). Elsewhere (2005), he also emphasizes the importance of the passage of time (a number of generations) for a dispersion to become diaspora (p.36). Tölölyan (2007:108) describes diasporas as sometimes having their own separate agendas, which, however, are able to mobilize if needed, to pursue common interests.

Because, until the 1930s, the nation state was the “supreme form of polity,” diaspora, Tölölyan argues, “could mean second-class citizenship” (Tölölyan 2018:23). As a result of political, social and cultural developments during the next several decades, the term “diaspora” became used and applied widely to other groups, and its meaning expanded. He makes an important argument about diasporic identities, saying that people have moved from exilic nationalism into diasporic transnationalism. Diasporic identity is now part of multiple identities, and it is not fixed. Third- and fourth-generation Americans with ancestry that goes back to dispersed groups do not necessarily consider themselves bound to the land of their ancestors, even though they still feel inclined to help it when possible. His argument is that “we must be careful not to locate the diasporan’s home in the ancestral homeland too easily” (p.27) as not every diaspora member considers the ancestral homeland as home.²⁸ An anecdote cited by Safran illustrates this well: “A cartoon appeared in *Le Monde* several years ago, showing an old man who says: ‘I have never lost hope of returning to my homeland some day. However, I no longer remember where I came from’” (Safran 1991:91).

The shifting and unstable, and at times deterritorialized, nature of homeland has been the subject of a number of important studies. Connor (1986) notes that the borders of homeland are not fixed and can become extended, with people spreading out and

²⁸ As I show later in my data.

extending the territories where they live. Homelands can be considered those places where according to myth people used to live, or ones where people have lived for a relatively short time. Both the territory and the notion of homeland are not fixed. People's attachment to homeland is a result of perception rather than historical facts. The world is divided into "perceived homelands" to which various indigenous ethno-national populations claim ownership rights (p.18).

The proliferation of different and diverse definitions of diaspora has given rise to a criticism of treating diaspora as a thing "out there." In 2005 Brubaker published an article titled "'Diaspora' diaspora," which launched a lively debate lasting for over a decade. Tracing the term diaspora in semantic, conceptual, and disciplinary space, and analyzing the elements that are understood to be its core, Brubaker suggests that diaspora be treated not as a bounded entity but rather a claim, an idiom, or a stance. He claims that the term was vastly stretched to accommodate diverse scholarship, and he calls this dispersion of the meaning of diaspora the "'diaspora' diaspora" (Brubaker 2005:1). The upshot of Brubaker's critique is that the term has become so polyvalent that it has come to mean everything and nothing. He thus rightly notes that "the universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora" (p.3).

The three core elements, according to Brubaker (2005), that are consistent throughout the literature on diaspora, are (1) dispersion in space, (2) homeland orientation, and (3) boundary maintenance. Dispersion is the least contested among these, he notes. It refers to anything from traumatic or forced dispersion to any kind of dispersion (whether entailing crossing state borders or not) (p.5). The second criterion, orientation toward homeland (real or imagined), is still a matter of multiple interpretations.

Earlier studies (e.g., Safran) give it greater importance, and more recent studies (Clifford 1994; Anthias 1998) de-emphasize it. For Clifford (1994), it is not so much about returning to one's roots that are located in a particular place as "an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations" (pp. 305-306, cited in Brubaker 2005).

The third criterion, boundary maintenance, includes a distinct identity as defined against the host society. It is this criterion, Brubaker argues, that "enables one to speak of a diaspora as a distinctive 'community', held together by a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by relatively dense social relationships, that cut across state boundaries and link members of the diaspora in different states into a single 'transnational community'" (p.6). He adds, however, that along with this, hybridity, fluidity, creolization and syncretism are also emphasized. To illustrate this, as he calls it, "counter current," Brubaker cites Stuart Hall's (1990:235) statement: "[D]iaspora experience . . . is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (Brubaker p. 6).

An interesting question that Brubaker raises about boundary maintenance is whether it can persist over time. Does it continue over generations, he asks — assuming first-generation migrants do maintain boundaries? Brubaker concludes his discussion by engaging with the question whether diasporas are entities or a stance. His position is the latter: namely, that diasporas should not be treated as entities or bounded groups, and no numbers should be assigned to them. Rather, he proposes to look at diaspora as "a category of practice, project, claim and stance" (p. 13).

With regard to viewing diaspora as a claim, a space, or an interpretive framework, it is interesting to note here the “dialogue” between Lily Cho and Khachig Tölölyan (2018) in the latter’s “Past, Present and Promise.” Tölölyan engages here with Lily Cho’s (2007) argument about whether diaspora can be an object of analysis as opposed to a condition of subjectivity (Tölölyan 2018). Cho proposes to understand diaspora as a subjective condition “marked by long histories of displacements and genealogies of dispossession” (cited in Tölölyan 2018:25). Cho argues that diaspora is not a “function of socio-historic and disciplinary phenomena,” but that rather that it “must be understood as a condition of subjectivity and not as an object of analysis” (ibid), informed by the effects of globalization, migration, colonialism, and imperialism. Tölölyan finds her argument crucial, as “[t]here is indeed no place called diaspora, though there are sites of habitation and memory” and there is “no legal, juridical, bureaucratic category named diaspora” (ibid). However, he insists that diasporas *should be* objects of analysis as they are “neighbourhoods and networks, chains of connection and exchange, as weak victims of persecution but also as wealthy practitioners of what I call ‘stateless power’” (ibid).

Vertovec (1997) notes that diasporas are studied and understood as a social form, as consciousness, and as a mode of cultural production. Some of the traits of the former include a special relationship attached through special ties to history and place, a conscious maintenance of collective identity with reference to “ethnic myth” (common history, common origin, geographical ties to a location), institutionalized communications and ties across borders and with the homeland, solidarity with co-ethnic members, alienation or some kind of difference from the host country, and often divided loyalties and political tension (Vertovec 1997:279). In addition to this, it includes “triadic relations”

(quotation marks in the original) among “(a) globally dispersed yet collectively self-identified ethnic groups, (b) the territorial states and contexts where such groups reside, and (c) the homeland states and contexts whence they or their forebears came” (ibid). The particularity of the second definition (i.e., diaspora as consciousness, state of mind or experience) is that people are marked by a kind of duality: being both in their geographical location and away from it, and an awareness of multi-locality and multiplicity. Finally, Vertovec discusses diaspora as a mode of cultural production, which involves the production and reproduction of certain kinds of identities, products, and persons through film and other media (1997).

Closely connected to the concept of diaspora (and sometimes even diffused within it) is the concept of transnationalism. Tölölyan (1991:5) considers ethnic diasporas as transnational communities, and Vertovec (1997) writes that any deterritorialized or diasporic population is transnational. Vertovec (1999) defines transnationalism as “multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation states” (Vertovec 1999:447). In the case of transnationalism certain relationships remain strong regardless of borders, laws and distances and exist in a virtual “arena of activity” (447). These activities are beyond borders, both material and symbolic, and among them great attention is given to economic transactions. He classifies transnationalism, as discussed in the literature, under six major categories: “social morphology” (p.449); a “type of consciousness” (p.450); a “mode of cultural reproduction” (p.451); an “avenue for capital” (p.452); a “site of political engagement” (p.453); a “(re)construction of ‘place’ or locality” (p.455).

As we see, like diaspora, or rather along with diaspora, transnationalism is fluid, evolving and hard to contain in set borders both conceptually and actually. It is important, however, to note when speaking about diaspora and transnationalism, that even though there is an overlap between the two concepts, they remain different. Transnationalism is a broader notion, and it can encompass diaspora, but not vice versa (Wong and Satzewich 2006).

The next subject, which is closely connected to diasporas, and to the Armenian diaspora particularly, is victimhood, and Cohen counts trauma among the features of diaspora (discussed in Anthias 1998). Victim diasporas are those who were dispersed from their home countries after a traumatic event into two or more destinations (Cohen 2008). Some of the examples are the dispersal of the Jews from Babylon, the enslavement of Africans, the Armenian Genocide and massacres, the Great Famine in Ireland, and the Nakba of the Palestinians. Victimhood is their “predominant” character, but they can have characteristics of other kinds of diasporas as well (Cohen 2008:4). While the Armenian and the Jewish diasporas are most commonly compared with one another, Cohen (2008) makes a comparison between the Armenian and the African diasporas and discusses them in relation to the victim diaspora narrative. Both the Armenian and African diasporas were created as a result of tragic and traumatic events. Both Africans and Armenians were dispersed from their homelands in several directions. They both maintained a collective memory about their homelands.²⁹

²⁹ Torosyan and Vardanyan’s (2020) recent article challenges the homogenized approach to the Armenian diaspora as a victim diaspora. They rightly point out that while before the collapse of the Soviet Union, the

The question of how memory (whether traumatic or not) is used to construct diasporic identities forms one of the central elements in discussions of diaspora in another body of scholarship. Memories have been viewed as forming an important element of the identities of the modern nation states, and traumatic memories — more than ones of a glorious past — are said to possess vast bonding potential (Schwartz 1995:267; cf. also Shirinian 2004:35). Vijay Agnew notes that memories of imaginary homelands, can serve as an antidote to struggles of the present (2005:10).

Memories ignite our imaginations and enable us to vividly recreate our recollections of home as haven filled with nostalgia, longing, and desire; or they compel us, as witnesses and co-witnesses, to construct home as a site and space of vulnerability, danger, and violent trauma. Memories can be nostalgically evocative of imaginary homelands and places of birth and origins as well as an antidote to the struggles of the present. Others who had wounds of memory inflicted on them consequent to horrific dislocations and dispossessions may find travels to the past an involuntary, albeit necessary, journey to come to terms with their present selves. (Agnew 2005:10).

Armenian diasporic communities are constructed around memory and victimhood.

Below I include some important works on the Armenian diaspora.

The Armenian Diaspora

What it means to be Armenian in Canada today is complex in a very different way than it was in the past [...] Rather than mimicking traditional Armenian culture—either as it existed up to 1915 or borrowed from Armenia since then—as a way to reclaim the lost heritage after the Genocide, Armenians have invented new cultural material and new ways to incorporate what

majority of the Armenian diaspora was indeed the result of a traumatic experience such as the Armenian Genocide and as such did fall into the “victim diaspora” category, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the majority of the Armenians who lived and worked within the Soviet Union but outside Armenia, became diasporic and do not fall into this category. Similarly, those Armenians who left Armenia to find jobs rather correspond to the labour diaspora category. Torosyan and Vardanyan suggest a new category that is more appropriate, namely, a “transforming Diaspora” (p. 61).

they have chosen to recover. Through the process of recovery, they bestow new and special meaning today to an element or event from the past. This recovery, of course, is dependent on the memory, and what is remembered is imagined. Inevitably, memory, the imagination, and the role of culture are crucial to any collective identity in the Armenian diaspora. What I find exciting is that the Armenian diaspora has not become the battle ground to build the future blindly as the projected image of the lost past. (Shirinian 2004: 2-3)

Jokes abound in the Armenian community about 'shish kebab Armenians.' These are Armenians whose only tie to the race is fondness for their ancestors' food. These homes may contain the requisite picture of Mount Ararat on some conspicuous wall, but the Armenian language is not spoken in the home and religious ties are to Protestant, not Armenian Apostolic Churches. On the opposite end of the spectrum are Armenian homes where the mother tongue is still spoken, the children have been sent to Armenian schools, the entire family goes to April 24th commemorations of the genocide, and family discussion, as well as social life, are centered in the Armenian community. (Miller and Miller 1991:30)

The birth of the Armenian diaspora³⁰ dates back to the end of the 6th century CE, when the Byzantine emperor Maurice deported several thousand Armenians from the historically Armenian territories then under Byzantine control, currently in eastern Turkey (Cohen 2008). In later centuries Armenians have also left the homeland and lived outside Armenia, forming different diasporic communities. Still, the majority of the Armenian diaspora as we know it today emerged as a result of the Armenian Genocide of 1915.

Safran (1991) discusses the Armenian diaspora as the closest to the "ideal type" of diaspora. Like Jews, Armenians have a strong commitment to their community, language, history, origin, and a collective memory of homeland, betrayal, and genocide. In their host societies Armenians were high achievers who contributed to the host society. They were committed to their communities, language, and church but this did not prevent them from being integrated into their host societies, speaking the local languages, and living without forming ghettos (Safran 1991). The question of exogamy is easier in Europe

³⁰ It should be noted that in Armenian-language scholarship two different words are used to refer to, respectively, the Armenian diaspora that had existed before the Genocide, and the one that emerged after, and largely due to, the Genocide of 1915 (Abrahamian 2006:328-29).

and North America than it is in the Middle East, but in general, it is not encouraged, yet practiced with increasing frequency (see O'Grady 1981). The question of the Armenian homeland has and continues to be complex and is discussed below.

Armenian diasporas are not homogenous. Each has formed around specific institutions and organizations, with members and identities that differ from one country to another (Cohen 2008). When discussing the non-homogeneity of the Armenian diaspora, one should keep in mind that it is “neither a unified social formation nor a monolithic polity” (Tölölyan 2007:108) and the term is used to refer to dispersed Armenians living outside the homeland,³¹ whose number is estimated at about four million (p.109). It is important not to forget that the Armenian diaspora came to be as a result of different historical events in different times (Tölölyan estimates that over half of present-day diasporic Armenians are descendants of the survivors of the Genocide), and possess different amounts of traditional markers of “Armenianness” (including knowing the language, being connected to the institutions and/or community, having a homeland orientation, commitment to the homeland or even considering themselves Armenian). “Armenian identity is one of several identities that compete for their time and attention; and Armenia is a place for which they have sympathy and in which they take an interest” (ibid). A minority of those people are completely “diasporic” (quotations in the original, ibid:110) in their commitment to and concern for the homeland and Armenian communities everywhere, and their identities and loyalties are not uni-local. “What distinguishes diasporic ethnic Armenians from other ethnic Armenians is a combination of three

³¹ Russia has the largest Armenian population in the world, estimated, variously, between one and three million (Kasbarian 2009:363).

characteristics: they care about kin in the homeland and elsewhere, so their concerns are multi-local and transnational; they create, staff and finance institutions that actively enact their caring, including through lobbying; and they make sustained efforts to ‘diasporize’ the consciousness and identity of their ethnic kin through cultural, social and political actions” (ibid:110). Tölölyan emphasizes that it is important to remember that they are also heterogenous compared with each other. Thus, the Lebanese Armenian diaspora, the Iranian one, the Russian one, and so on, will differ from one another both in the varieties of Armenian they speak (*if they speak Armenian*) and their customs. According to him, sometimes their differences stem from their socio-cultural environments. Some diasporas are well established, others are evolving, while others (as we saw in Syria) have an unclear future. Still, there are some factors that may allow us to speak of the Armenian diaspora as one entity. These are, firstly, those elements of culture that are shared across various Armenian communities, such as religion, music, and the notion of the genocide. Secondly, these are the transnational discourses circulating between elites and institutions (ibid: 110).

A number of organizations — political, religious, charitable — operate across the Armenian diaspora, creating a sense of unity and allowing at times for a political mobilization. The best known are the Armenian Revolutionary Federation party, the Armenian Church (an independent church representing a distinct branch of Christianity), the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU), the Armenian Assembly of America, the Armenia (Hayastan) Fund, the Armenian Relief Society, the Zoryan Institute, and numerous smaller organizations. Interestingly, membership in some of the latter is based

on the regions of the Ottoman Empire from where ancestors of the Armenians have escaped.

Like the notion of diaspora, identity, homeland and the idea of return undergo a continuous process of construction (Pattie 1999). Pattie rightly notes that the concept of homeland is not very simple for Armenians as it is not necessarily a place that has a firm geographic location: it is now the Republic of Armenia for most of the Armenians (“previously a small, relatively forsaken corner of the ancient homeland,” *ibid*:83), but also the lost villages and cities of today’s Turkey where Armenians lived before the Genocide, as well as the ancestral home in the historical Armenia as a whole (stretching from the ancient Armenian capital Tigranakert in today’s eastern Turkey/Anatolia to Nagorno Karabakh in the South Caucasus). The latter two are known to most Armenians of the diaspora through memories only.

The “real” Armenian culture is imagined as pre-dispersal and pre-modern, and everything else in diasporas is seen as its “watered down” version (Pattie 1999:85). The loss of this culture is then seen by some as a threat to Armenian identity. Armenian identity — also seen by the nationalists as a unified thing — is also rather diverse throughout the diaspora. The question of whether there is a certain way of being Armenian is highly contested, as is the idea of homeland, including where it is and what it is. The emergence of a new homeland in the form of the now independent Republic of Armenia has made these questions even more contested. And as it replaces the old homeland (in the Ottoman Empire, today’s Turkey), the diaspora also changes and is gradually replaced by a new one (Pattie 1999). For generations of Genocide survivors, the Republic of Armenia is only a symbolic home, as for them their true ancestral home remains in

what is now eastern Turkey. And even so, for many it is only a “spiritual homeland,” as they have no intention of ever returning there (Bakalian 1993:347).

The idea of return is not the only aspect of the new diasporas that have become symbolic. The fluid and historically contingent nature of diasporic existence, as well as its diverse features, are explored on the example of the Armenian community in the US. In her *Armenian Americans: From being to feeling Armenian*, Bakalian looks into generations of American Armenians and explores how the traditional markers of culture and ethnicity (language, religion, customs) become gradually diminished, and how American Armenians’ ethnicity turns into a symbolic one. The Armenian diaspora today represents a more diverse community, especially after waves of later immigration from different countries, including the Republic. Later generations of American Armenians do not necessarily speak Armenian at home, practice religion, go to church regularly, or practice other customs of Armenian culture, including food, the celebration of Armenian holidays, visiting the historical homeland, etc. (Bakalian 1993). Nonetheless, the sense of a strong belonging to an Armenian community is intact (87%), as is the commitment to the question of the Genocide, with the most attention paid to Turkey’s denial and the need for its recognition of the Genocide (85%) (Bakalian 1993). What is important here is that the traditional ways of being diasporic yield their place to more flexible, hybrid ways of being diasporic and are being replaced by multiple, competing identities.

Identity is an aspect of diasporic existence which comes up time and again both in emic and in etic discourses on diaspora. Often identity is represented (increasingly so in the mainstream Armenian public discourse in Armenia) as an “unearthing” or a “rediscovery” of a true self that has been long hidden. One should, however, beware of

such a simplistic approach to identity, and to diasporic identity in particular. As noted by Stuart Hall, the construction of diasporic identities constitutes an invention rather than a re-discovery, an active construction which is informed by the historical context in which diasporas exist (Hall 1990).³² Thus the performances and constructions of Armenian cultural identities by members of individual Armenian communities can best be understood when viewed in the broader contexts of the societies and countries where they are embedded.

For example, Payaslian (2010) argues that the Armenian diasporic identity in the USA was constructed and imagined in the context of the Armenian-American realities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, in seeking acceptance in the mainstream American society on the one hand and needing to preserve a distinct Armenian identity on the other. For this purpose, certain characteristics of the Armenian nation, past and present, were imagined and constructed in a way that would bridge the Armenian culture with the American one (i.e., Christianity), while others were highlighted, reimagined and even sacralized to keep future generations of Armenians homeland-oriented. Further political events — including the Sovietization of the republic of Armenia, the loss of the Armenian provinces to Turkey — have continuously shaped Armenian identity in the USA. Citing Kim Butler, Payaslian (2010) writes: “The Armenian experience confirms Butler’s assessment that ‘diasporan representations of the homeland are part of the project of

³² Hall defines cultural identities as seeing and recognizing “the different parts and histories of ourselves, to construct those points of identification, those positionalities” (Hall 1990:237).

constructing diasporan identity, rather than homeland actuality”³³ (p.125). Little by little memories, imagination and homeland became deterritorialized. Payaslian further notes that diasporic imagined communities are not fixed or given, and that they are actively forged. He points out that the identity of further generations was heavily affected by their symbolic Armenianness, both in order to construct their “diasporan imagination of homeland” (p. 125) but also their participation in the community.

With passing generations and with the relationship with the Republic of Armenia changing, homeland-diaspora connections also change. While for the first generation the homeland and return were geographical, territorialized and real, for the third and fourth generations, the return is merely a myth, and the homeland is deterritorialized and turned into a concept that is expressed in certain performative actions.

Concluding Notes

What are diasporas after all? Grossman (2019) suggests that we should see diasporas as actual social formations but also as a type of consciousness, and he strongly argues that it is difficult to separate one from the other. Diasporas *are* actual communities of people who are bound together with a type of “shared memory.” To make it even more specific, we can say “the memory of a certain narrative that is the base of the group’s identity,” rather than a type of “consciousness,” which is a vague concept. This shared memory unifies the different communities of Armenians all over the world, both outside

³³ Cited in Payaslian (2010) as Kim D. Butler, “Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse,” *Diaspora* 10:2 (2001): 189-219.

and within the homeland. For many, it is a symbolic homeland or part of the homeland they once had. Binding together groups and individuals, separated often by language, lifestyle and culture across time and space, it cuts across the borders of several countries around the world and thus becomes a space for transnational practices. This community (with a constructed narrative, memory and even a constructed homeland at its base), this diaspora, is made possible through actual *social organizations and institutions*, such as schools, cultural clubs, centres, diasporic political leadership, churches, as well as multiple texts, images, and ceremonies (commemorative or otherwise). The social organizations and institutions reproduce and maintain the memory, and the memory ensures that the latter has a purpose to exist and mobilizes people around itself. As such, diaspora is both a construct and an actual “out there” social organization.

Having a working definition that is specific enough, as Grossman (2019) argues, will allow us to communicate across disciplines. Still, I would like to keep in view the fact that no definition can be universally used even if we are talking about different communities of the same (larger) diaspora. The different diasporic communities of the same diaspora might possess one or more of the characteristics Grossman lists (dispersal or immigration; being outside one’s homeland; community; group identity; homeland orientation; transnationalism), in different degrees at different times and in different contexts, depending on the political, social, cultural, and historical aspect of the countries where they live. For example, the Armenian diaspora in Russia might be more reserved in showing a homeland orientation or at times may not show it at all, for fear of not seeming loyal to Russia or because of actually existing laws forbidding this. In contrast, the Armenian diasporas of France, say, or the USA, or Canada, openly display

their devotion to homeland. In Muslim majority countries, Armenians often consciously resist any ties with certain groups among the host societies, but readily form ties with others.³⁴ Thus in Syria, Armenians have somewhat strong ties with the Christian population (even though they still prefer interacting among themselves and having limited relationships with “others”), but not with the Muslim population. In Western Christian-majority countries (France, USA, Canada) ties with the host society are stronger. This is to suggest that groups do not operate independently from their context and that there can be no universal definition across disciplines or even within the same one. As already mentioned above, constructing diasporic identities is an active process that can only be properly understood within a particular historical context (Hall 1990).

Several important points arise out of this discussion. First, there can be different ways of defining diaspora. A definition does not necessarily have to be a concept, it can focus on “features” or “borders.” With this in mind, scholars can see which aspects of the extensively conceptualized, described and sometimes even prescribed definitions help to understand the specific community they are studying. What I prefer for my own work, when possible, is using the adjective “diasporic” as applied to *processes* — rather than the noun “diaspora” as applied to *entities* — in order to escape the fallacy of essentialization and instead, to analytically describe the processes, practices and the actual work of the people and communities which can be described as diasporic. After all, a person or a group becomes “diasporic” or part of diaspora when they engage in certain

³⁴ Cohen (2008) also mentions that one of the features of diaspora — the troubled relationship with host society – is less evident among non-Middle Eastern Armenians.

activities and through their doings (including speech and performative action; see Kaya 2018).

If we must have a concept, however, taking Grossman's definition of diaspora as a starting point, I would like here to elaborate my own approach to studying the Syrian Armenian community. I would loosely define diaspora as a community with memory at its centre, which is imagined but also homogenized to some extent through institutional practices and texts, and is thereby able to last and be reproduced. All the six characteristics of diaspora that Grossman proposes apply to the Armenian diasporic communities both in Canada and in Syria (and many other Armenian communities), in each case to a different extent. It is also very important to mention that Armenians from different communities (as groups but not necessarily as individuals) describe themselves as "diaspora Armenians" — there is in fact a special term, *spyurkahay* (literally, "diaspora-Armenian"), used both by the diaspora Armenians and by those in the homeland (the Republic) when referring to those living outside this homeland (Cohen 2008). This makes the need for a conceptualization secondary, and "what actually being diasporic involves for these people" becomes the primary question. Additionally, there is a need to study the Armenian diasporic communities separately, each in its particular historical context rather than as a homogenized entity or group, as even within the same diaspora there may arise significant differences from one community to another (Torosyan and Vardanyan 2020).

Most of the literature studying diaspora that I surveyed, while crucially important, remains conceptual in its orientation. What I would like to do in my work is to shift the focus from definitions and frames onto people's doings, and to trace how the diasporic, the commemorative, the ethnic, and the transnational are embedded in people's everyday

actualities, and how these are connected to the doings of other people — ruled by relations that are local, translocal, and mediated by institutional practices.

Collective Memory and Trauma Across Generations

What happens when a group undergoes (or believes it has undergone) an atrocious history? How does this impact it? How does it impact the group members who did not undergo the atrocities themselves personally – whether contemporaries or later generations? Why and how can the representation of an experience, no matter how horrific, affect individuals and groups, and what does being traumatized mean? Is this phenomenon also sociological or cultural? How do we access and study this secondhand trauma? Those are questions that became a focus of inquiry for scholars in more than one discipline, such as psychology, epigenetics and medicine, sociology, literary theory, and more.³⁵ Relevant to my research is literature from the last two disciplines, and here I engage with some of it as a research context where my work thematically belongs.

Caruth (1991) defines trauma as follows: “In its most general definition, trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (p.181). Below I engage with literature

³⁵ Epigenetics studies how the social experiences of trauma result in changes in the expression of genes in individuals whose mothers have experienced trauma during pregnancy; see Yehuda and Lerhner 2018; Bezo and Maggi 2015. It does not have a bearing on my work as I only study the social organization and the cultural and social transmission of trauma.

that is interested in indirectly acquired group traumas. Some of this scholarship focuses on the fact that this response is not natural but is rather constructed through socio-cultural processes. The organization and transmission of this socio-culturally constructed phenomenon is what I shed light on in this chapter.

My focus is transgenerational trauma or the memory of it as a *process*, which is socially organized, happens in people's actions and is coordinated by the actions of others both locally and translocally. I study how this coordination informs people's experiences and how they happen the way they do. I use the term "transgenerational" to indicate that it spans more than one generation, and the choice of the word "trauma" indicates the haunting effect of the trauma/memory/narrative³⁶/historical event. To understand the memory work that happens to make group trauma (intra-, inter-, and transgenerational) possible, I start with the notion of collective memory and move to the conceptualization and usage of group trauma by different scholars.

Perhaps the earliest step in exploring the social aspect of remembering is the work of Maurice Halbwachs. Halbwachs (1992) argues that no individual is able to remember outside the network of ideas and mental structures imposed on them by the society in which they live. Memories are acquired, recalled, recognized, and localized in society (ibid). Thus, the individual is only able to recall something as long as they place themselves in social frameworks of memory. The past is not preserved in our minds but is actively reconstructed on the basis of the present. Furthermore, collective memory is not constructed by simply adding individual memories to one another. Rather, it is

³⁶ Vygotsky's claim (1929), as cited in Olick and Robbins (1998), of memory taking a narrative shape and being influenced by cultural experiences, allows us to understand the memory/narrative pair.

constructed based on “collective frameworks,” which are “instruments used by the collective memory to reconstruct an image of the past which is in accord [...] with the predominant thoughts of society” (p. 40). In modern parlance, one would call this the predominant discourses of society. When a member of a group remembers something, he or she names it and categorizes it according to the conventions and discourses prevalent in his/her group, thereby shaping his/her memories. Collective memory is furthermore intimately tied to our sense of identity. People reshape their memories and force them into the frameworks of the current situation. Memories of individuals living in the same group resemble each other because members of this group have shared interests and live in similar conditions. The group is interested in these memories and can recall them at the same time, using similar cultural templates (ibid).

In the introduction to his translation of Halbwachs’s *On Collective Memory* (1992), Lewis Coser (1992) notes that Halbwachs distinguishes two kinds of memories: autobiographical and historical. Autobiographical memory is what one remembers from personal experience. Historical memory is a mediated form of memory that we acquire through historical records, but also photographs, listening, or forms of commemoration (p. 23-24). Historical memory is a group memory, where we shape or construct the past collectively through interaction. At the same time, the emphasis here is that we shape the past through the concerns of the present (p. 34). Olick and Robbins also bring attention to the fact that Halbwachs makes a distinction between “autobiographical memory, historical memory, history, and collective memory” (1998:111).

Autobiographical memory is memory of those events that we ourselves experience, while historical memory is memory that reaches us only through historical records. History is the remembered past to which we no longer have an “organic” relation—the past that is no longer an important part of our lives—while collective memory is the active past that forms our identities. Memory inevitably gives way to history as we lose touch with our pasts.

Historical memory, however, can be either organic or dead: We can celebrate even what we did not directly experience, keeping the given past alive for us, or it can be alive only in historical records, so-called graveyards of knowledge. Though collective memory does seem to take on a life of its own, Halbwachs reminds that it is only individuals who remember, even if they do much of this remembering together. (Olick and Robbins 1998: 111)

The last part is particularly important, as it shifts attention from the concept of collective memory to the act of remembering and to those who do that. It also lays the groundwork for my approach of studying collective memory, its reproduction and transmission, in individual people's actions.

The notion of collective memory was criticized by Sontag (2003), who finds that there is only one kind memory, and it dies with the person. The rest is representation and a "stipulating" (p.86). Other critics prefer "more specific terms to capture the ongoing contest over images of the past: official memory, vernacular memory, public memory, popular memory, local memory, family memory, historical memory, cultural memory, etc." (Olick and Robbins 1998:112).

Collective memory is further studied by Aleida Assmann (2008a; 2008b; 2010) and Jan Assmann (2010), who differentiate between communicative and cultural memory. Communicative memory is biographical, factual, and generational and it can be passed on by witnesses of the event to further generations. Cultural memories are beyond generational and are transmitted through cultural symbols (ibid.).

Aleida Assmann (2008a, 2008b, 2010) offers further nuance to explain memories as either individual or collective. Individual memory is similar to communicative memory (autobiographic and episodic) and exists in the network of other memories, as well as the memories of others. The collective one is better studied if we approach it through the following categories: political, cultural, and social. The first two are known to us through

representation and mediation such as archived materials, literature, memoirs, photography, rituals, symbols, and ceremonies. Social memory, according to her, is generational memory; it is communicated within the family, neighbourhoods and other groups, orally, through photographs, and other media. What differentiates it from political and cultural memory is that it is not stored and transmitted by professionals (propagandists, artists, writers, etc.), but through word of mouth and in the intimate spaces of personal interaction. Thus, for Assmann, what is termed collective or cultural memory varies, depending on its modes of preservation and transmission, and on the uses it is put to.

In the wake of literature about collective remembering came the literature on collective forgetting or collective amnesia. Barak (2007) and Haugbolle (2005) have studied the politics of remembering and forgetting in post-civil-war Lebanon, as pertaining to the particular spaces where remembering and forgetting happen. In particular, they explore how memory and forgetting differ between spaces that are private (homes, neighbourhoods) and between public ones (TV, media, film). Imposing certain laws, sanitizing the media and the curriculum or separating the war from society were some of the tools to achieve collective forgetting. In Lebanon's case, *who* was a party to remembering the war or forgetting it was closely tied with the role that person had played in it. Thus, former war-criminals-turned-politicians were directly and personally invested in the project of forgetting. Üngör (2014; 2015) studies how remembering and forgetting, depending on the form of memory (e.g., social as opposed to political), are simultaneously organized and happen in the same society as carried by different actors, the government

on the one hand, and people on the other. Gao (2015) also studies collective remembering and forgetting in post-war China as discussed later in the chapter.

Memory is conceptualized and studied in relation to the past and to history, but the important takeaway here, as Olick and Robbins (1998) note, is not to approach memory as an “an unchanging vessel for carrying the past into the present” or a “thing” but rather a process that works differently at different times (p. 122, citing Zelizer 1995). This is what I take as central to my work, and my approach is to study the shared collective memory among Armenians as a process which is evolving, changing, embodied and continuously reproduced in the actions of people in coordination with others and mediated by institutions.

A structure³⁷ which transmits traumatic experiences and knowledge is what Marianne Hirsch calls “postmemory” (2008, 2012). On the example of how the Holocaust has been “remembered” and memorialized, she defines it as the “remembrance” of an event in a mediated form, through the stories of one’s parents, through family photographs, etc. (more precisely, a connection to the past not by actual remembering but by imagining, creating, etc.). She also notes that “postmemory,” although mediated and never direct, may sometimes be so strongly internalized that at times descendants may exhibit bodily symptoms of trauma experiences by their parents (Hirsch 2012:84).

Postmemorial work [...] strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression. Thus less-directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone. (Hirsch 2008:111, italics in the original).

³⁷ Hirsch (2008) makes clear that it is a generational “*structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience” (p.106) rather than an idea, method or movement (italics in original).

Postmemory is the continuation (and a rupture) of memories that are not one's own, but become memories "in their own right" (Hirsch 2008:107). While postmemory is not identical to memory (as it is "post-"), Hirsch notes that "it approximates memory in its affective force" (p.109). Hirsch distinguishes between "familial" (vertical and intergenerational) and "affiliative" (horizontal and intragenerational) structures of transmission. Familial is the one where the children of parents who have witnessed and experienced a traumatic event become the bearers of this postmemory. In the case of affiliative transmission, the second generation who identify with the victim group (but who are not directly the children of survivors of the traumatic event) become its bearers. Hirsch mostly focuses on two phenomena – photographs and literature – rather than state-organized propaganda or memorialization, and explores the more personal and intimate aspects of this phenomenon (2008; 2012).

The theory that explains collective trauma, and is most suitable for my work as a research context, is the theory of Cultural Trauma developed by Jeffrey Alexander (2004; 2009; 2016). According to him, before this theory, the commonsensical understanding of trauma had a naturalistic approach, which Alexander calls "lay trauma" theory (Alexander 2004). According to it, "traumas are naturally occurring events that shatter an individual or collective actor's sense of well-being. In other words, the power to shatter — the 'trauma' — is thought to emerge from events themselves" (p.2).

According to Alexander, lay trauma theories do not take into consideration that there is an interpretive grid which the "facts" go through and that this grid is socially and culturally constructed. Alexander instead argues that events themselves are not inherently traumatic. They need representation to become so. Events can be represented

to be traumatic before or after they happen or even without happening, something he calls “imagined” traumatic events. “It is the meanings that provide the sense of shock and fear, not the events in themselves. Whether or not the structures of meaning are destabilized and shocked is not the result of an event but the effect of a sociocultural process. It is the result of an exercise of human agency, of the successful imposition of a new system of cultural classification. This cultural process is deeply affected by power structures and by the contingent skills of reflexive social agents” (Alexander 2004:10).

Alexander argues that not all disruptive events become traumatic, for trauma is not the result of a direct experience of pain by the collective. Rather, traumas emerge as a result of representation. “Collective actors ‘decide’ to represent social pain as a fundamental threat to their sense of who they are, where they came from, and where they want to go” (Alexander 2004:10). All this is mediated by social, institutional, and cultural processes. Between the event and its representation lies the “trauma process.” Members of social groups produce representations (“claims”) about social reality, and the claim is the first step to constructing a trauma. Collective agents or social groups who make claims are called “carrier groups.” These carrier groups can be generational, national, or institutional, each representing, respectively, the interests of one generation, nation, or one social sector against another (p. 11).

The representation of trauma needs a framework of cultural classification. In some cases, it may tell a new story and create a master-narrative. There are four important features to a master narrative: a. The pain (i.e., what actually happened to the group?). b. The victim (i.e., who was affected by the traumatizing pain?); c. The relation of the victim’s trauma to the wider audience (i.e., do members of the audience identify with the

group that has been victimized?); d. The attribution of responsibility (i.e., who is the perpetrator?) (Alexander 2004:13-15).

One interesting debate among cultural trauma scholars is the extent of the historical event, as opposed to the representation, for cultural trauma to happen. Among scholars who have studied cultural trauma, Ron Eyerman puts emphasis both on the event itself and on its representation, and shows how a shared trauma is linked to identity construction (Eyerman 2001; 2004a; 2020). Indeed, it should be much easier to “make” an event that had a severe impact on the group to be perceived as traumatic rather than as something peripheral.

Cultural trauma theory in recent years has been taken up to explain and explore transgenerational trauma in a number of groups (both among victims and perpetrators). The trauma of the Holocaust has received perhaps the most academic attention among these. Alexander (2009; 2016) provides a detailed analysis of how and why the Holocaust became a trauma not only for those directly impacted by it, but also for those who were not. Alexander notes: “For an audience to be traumatized by an experience that they themselves do not directly share, symbolic extension and psychological identification are required” (2009:5). So, for the Holocaust to be constructed as it is today much sociological and cultural work was done. One way in particular in which this was done is that it was fitted into a familiar storyline with an antagonist, a protagonist, and a universally acknowledged evil. Had the allies lost the war or had the Soviet armies liberated most of

the camps (not just the eastern ones), Alexander argues, the Holocaust “would never have been discovered,” and “coded as evil” (ibid:9).³⁸

Studying newspapers and other written documents after WWII, Alexander says that the dominant discourse at the beginning was not about the Jews but rather about the evil Nazis and the good American GIs. The evil was considered Nazism itself rather than the killing of the Jews, which was only one of the consequences of Nazism—the ultimate evil. Certain kinds of political, social, and cultural events had to happen to turn the Holocaust into what Alexander calls a universal “trauma-drama.” “History does not wait; it demands that representations be made, and they will be” (Alexander 2009:9).

While not all massacres, genocides and tragedies become recognized by the world or by their perpetrators — which often prevents one from empathizing with the victims and their sufferings — the Holocaust became the symbol of evil against which other tragedies are measured (e.g., the Armenian Genocide is often called the Armenian Holocaust).

As in the case of the Holocaust, the shaping of the narrative of WWII in Japan began immediately after the defeat (Hashimoto 2011), and through its representation and construction, the cultural trauma of the Japanese people was later established.

³⁸ Elsewhere, Alexander (2016) also writes, “As a symbol of radical evil, ‘Holocaust’ became engorged, overflowing with badness. Now dramatized as the signal tragedy of modern times, this engorged evil became a drama that compelled eternal return, in Nietzsche’s sense. As with the Greeks and their tragedies, the immersion of Western citizens in the Holocaust drama provided catharsis, moral clarification, and perhaps even grace. The Holocaust legend was told and retold, dramatized, filmed, novelized in hundreds and eventually thousands of aesthetically compelling ways, in response not only to emotional need but moral ambition” (p.8-9).

Hashimoto shows how the memorialization of a lost war is happening every year through different media and how the trauma is being transferred from generation to generation. Unlike other cultural traumas, the Japanese trauma is not based on one kind of narrative; it has complex memories and complex trauma building narratives. The shared component is that Japanese people have suffered enough and that they condemn the war and militarism. The three narratives include victims, heroes, and perpetrators, but they are all woven together to shape the group identity and consciousness of a collectivity – a peaceful people who are against war –, the same way as other traumas have shaped the collectivities of other groups.³⁹

Ron Eyerman (2001; 2004a) explores the cultural trauma of slavery among African Americans. He studies its role in the construction of African American identity between the Civil War (1861-1865) and the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) and looks at it not as an experience but as a collective memory that has informed the identity-construction of a people. He argues that there is a difference between individual trauma and trauma as a cultural process. Even though not every African American experienced slavery directly, he argues, its remembrance became a basis for creating a collective identity. He notes that the collective memory of slavery served as a “primal scene” that had the

³⁹ Hashimoto (2011) writes “Wars, massacres, atrocities, invasions, and other instances of mass violence can become significant referents for subsequent collective life not because of the gruesome nature of the events per se, but because people choose to make them especially relevant to who they are and what it means to be a member of that society. Some events therefore become more crucially significant than others, because we manage to make them more consequential in later years for our understanding of ourselves and our own society” (p. 30).

potential to unite all African Americans in USA, regardless of whether they had had any knowledge of Africa or whether they had personally experienced slavery. Thus, it is not the trauma of slavery itself that he studies but “the memory of slavery and its representation through speech and art works that grounded African American identity and permitted its institutionalization in organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909–10. If slavery was traumatic for this generation, it was so in retrospect, mediated through recollection and reflection, and, for some black leaders and intellectuals, tinged with a bit of strategic, practical and political, interest” (Eyerman 2004a:61).

Perhaps the most impressive work in the literature on cultural trauma is Gao Rui’s, because it shows not only how and why a cultural trauma happens after an event, but also how it *does not* happen after a traumatic historical event. Gao (2015:109) argues that even though most historians agree that the Chinese war of resistance against Japan was the “single most devastating event” in the history of this era, the memory of it has remained individual and private because of what he calls “cultural amnesia.” Echoing a similar idea, Iris Chang (2011), the author of *The Rape of Nanking: The forgotten Holocaust of World War II*, writes: “The Rape of Nanking did not penetrate the world consciousness in the same manner as the Holocaust or Hiroshima because the victims themselves had remained silent” (p. 11). Alexander (2012) argues that the reason that it is not widely known around the world (and even in China outside Nanjing) is because the adequate trauma process did not happen (p. 30).

Gao (2015) explains that the reasons for this amnesia are many (including the geopolitics of People’s Republic of China of that time). The main one, nonetheless, is that

in Maoist China the war trauma narrative was suppressed by the trauma of “class struggle” (p. 110). Among different ways of representing and creating the cultural trauma of class struggle were rituals, bodily practices, annual commemorations, and texts. Gao talks about a whole literary genre, where “remembering the bitterness of the past as opposed the neatness of today” (Yi Ku Tian) was to make people identify with the victims of the “old dark” times and make a bridge between the traumatic past and the happy present (Gao 2015:113), as well as ritualistic and bodily practices (including theatrical performances), institutionalized commemorations, and history textbooks that allowed the class struggle to become the identity-defining trauma. In Gao’s (2015) words, “[T]he intense trauma-drama of class struggle occupied the core of this era’s cultural trauma. That is, perpetrators in the old society were epitomized as an absolutely evil class enemy. Further, the unspeakable suffering of the proletarian victims was represented symbolically and emotionally as suffering shared by a broad group of people, united regardless of national boundaries in a new universal class collectivity” (p.111).

I would like to remind the reader that not all traumatic events, no matter how horrendous, become cultural trauma. In order for an event to become cultural trauma, it needs representation and a narrative. Moreover, the culturally mediated remembering of the trauma must become relevant to the society affected by it, by being represented as damaging to this society (Smelser 2004:36). Similarly, Vahe Tachjian (2009) shows how Armenian intellectuals of the post-Genocide period negotiated what was fit to be part of the newly constructed Armenian identity. Everything that could be associated with Turkishness (music, language, musical instruments) was rejected. In this regard it is interesting to see how the role of female survivors was negotiated and censored. Many

of these survivor women had had to turn to prostitution (see Ekmekcioglu 2013; Üngör 2012) to avoid death marches and deportations: others became household sex-slaves to Muslim men, and many of them had children with these men. There was a debate around whether these women were “fit” to be included in the national narrative. According to Tachjian (2009), the image of the Armenian woman was that of a heroine: “The typical Armenian heroine is often considered to be the woman who taught her child the Armenian alphabet in the sands of the desert; or the woman who, weapon in hand, defended Urfa against the executioner at the cost of her life; or else the one who threw herself into the River Euphrates from a high cliff so as not to fall into the hands of the Turks and be raped” (ibid 76-77). Still, Tachjian argues, the majority of the women likely did not conform to this heroic and idealized image. Nonetheless, despite the unease with the existence of women who had turned to prostitution or had married Muslim men, organized efforts were made to bring them back and reintegrate them into the community (ibid 71). From my experience in Armenia, I assert that while the heroic image of the Armenian woman killing herself to avoid sexual predation is widely known, the public is mostly unaware of the existence of women who did not conform to it, and turned to prostitution or married Muslims. Apparently, they did not have the “moral standing” to be included in the national narrative of trauma.

Other scholars have used the cultural trauma theory to study the identity construction of Serbian people based on the memory of the 14th century lost Battle of Kosovo (Spasić 2011), new identity emergence among the Iranians in the West after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the hostage crisis (Mobasher 2006), and the social crisis

after the 2007 assassination of Armenian-Turkish journalist Hrand Dink in Turkey (Türkmen-Derviřođlu 2013).

While there are varying details in how cultural trauma is discussed (e.g., whether the intensity of the event had an impact on the cultural trauma's emergence, whether it was the event or solely the representation, etc.), in general, cultural trauma scholars agree on its main aspects: cultural traumas are not naturally occurring events; they are made through social processes; and they arise when a shock to the routine happens (whether or not the reason for the shock is real or imagined, and as long as it is interpreted as a shock to the routine).

Onwuachi-Willig (2016), however, extends the theory, by showing that sometimes a trauma arises when there is no shock at all, but when violent injustices against a particular, subordinated, group acquire a routine character. And when, moreover, the cases of violence, fully expected by said group, are institutionally affirmed and publicized by the media. Onwuachi-Willig takes as a case study the 1955 murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year-old African American brutally killed by two white men. In this case, the not guilty verdict handed the murderers by the court was fully expected by the African American community, and was part of a long series of extra judicial killings directed against them. The author writes that in this case "it was not any shock to the routine but rather the judicial affirmation of African Americans' routine exclusion from full citizenship and legal protection (as represented by the not guilty verdict for the two known murderers) that formed the basis for the group's cultural trauma" (ibid 337).

Apart from cultural trauma, some theories engage with lasting effects of traumatic events. For example, historical trauma is seen as an after-effect of colonialism or post-

colonial psychology (Duran and Duran 1995). Some expressions of historical trauma are depression, based on communal, familial, and social disruption, confusion between ancestral pain and colonial values, chronic existential grief, and a continuous experiencing of trauma because of racism and discrimination in day-to-day life and no opportunity for healing (Stamm, Stamm, Hundall, and Higson-Smith 2004). Brave Heart and colleagues (2011) write:

Historical trauma (HT) is defined as cumulative emotional and psychological wounding across generations, including the lifespan, which emanates from massive group trauma (Brave Heart 2003, 1998). To our knowledge, the concept of historical trauma among American Indians first appeared in the clinical literature in 1995 (Brave Heart 1998). Historical trauma theory frames lifespan trauma in the collective, historical context, which empowers Indigenous survivors of both communal and individual trauma by reducing the sense of stigma and isolation. (p.283)

Intergenerational traumas are studied not only for their effects and aftereffects but also for how they create certain kinds of identities, from victim identities, to ethnic, national or even resilient identities (Brokenleg 2012). Another term describing shared trauma is used by Vamik Volkan. Volkan (2001) defines “chosen trauma” as a “shared mental representation of a massive trauma that the group’s ancestors suffered at the hand of an enemy. When a large group regresses, its chosen trauma is reactivated in order to support the group’s threatened identity” (p.79). Over generational transmission, those shared chosen traumas then become what links the group members, and the reality of the event or the “historical truth” (p.88) is not as important anymore.

Extremely influential for my work is Janet Jacobs’s scholarship, as she focuses on the process of trauma transmission. Jacobs explores social structures through which the “traumatic transference” happens among successor generations of Holocaust survivors (2016:149). Jacobs (2010; 2011; 2016) discusses how the commemoration,

memorialization, and transmission of transgenerational trauma and the construction of identity happen through narrative, memorial sites, and ritual.

Narratives and rituals in families of survivors often linked the identities of the children to those of their parents. Furthermore, they enabled survivors to construct particular versions of their selves. When talking about narratives, two types in particular stand out, ones that represent them as victims, and ones that give them agency. The latter type of narratives is particularly meaningful to descendants, for they emphasize the heroic actions of their parents or grandparents in times of danger (Jacobs 2011⁴⁰). Gender, according to Jacobs (2010:152-56), becomes a lens through which the Holocaust is memorialized and remembered. For example, Holocaust monuments construct the suffering of victims in a gendered way: the nude, helpless woman, and the weak and effeminate male.

Speaking about the role of rituals in first- and second-generation post-Holocaust families, Jacobs (2011) discusses how ritual was a “site” (p.342) where the memorialization happened and trauma was transmitted through generations. The most vivid example of this was Yom Kippur, which was the main occasion for memorializing the tragedy of the Jewish people. The rituals were kept regardless of whether people were religious or not, for in post-Holocaust families, they had a new meaning. They both connected the children with their parents but also separated the identities of the survivors from those of their children. Often, the younger generations, while still performing the rituals related to Jewish holidays (thus perpetuating the identities of their ancestors),

⁴⁰ Cf. Arlene Avakian’s (2006) discussion of her grandmother’s story also shows that the grandmother constructs herself not as a victim of the Armenian Genocide but as someone who has strong agency.

make a point not to celebrate them the same way their parents did. As an example of another ritual in memorizing trauma, is Hashimoto's (2011) discussion of the commemoration of Japan's defeat in WWII on August 15. It is attended by the Japanese emperor, high officials, people, and is highly ritualized (for similar performances in China, see Gao 2015).

Similarly, the collective story of the Genocide and the cultural trauma associated with it were cultivated for almost a century in Armenian diasporic communities all over the world and in the Republic of Armenia. Commemoration of the Genocide is institutionalized, ritualized, and reproduced from generation to generation (Tachjian 2009:76; Panossian 2006:228). The narrative of the Genocide is not just a story about a historical event but is a nationally and transnationally participatory act.⁴¹ While the narrative is not the only avenue for transmission, it is impossible to underestimate the role of the narratives as a transmission "vehicle" of trauma (Jacobs 2011:359). Arlene Avakian (2006), an Armenian-American feminist scholar, writes about how her grandmother, a genocide survivor, tells the story of her experiences: "I have lived with her story of the genocide for more than fifty years" (Avakian 2006:46). Canadian-Armenian scholar Lorne Shrinian (2004) writes: "I [...] did not experience the Armenian genocide first hand, yet I am an inheritor of the terrible memories of this tragedy. In a real sense they have become mine" (p. 34-35).

Cultural trauma theory is an important starting point for my work, as it is process oriented and focuses on the social and cultural aspects in collective trauma. It shifts the attention from naturalistic views onto representation and the constructed aspect of

⁴¹ The ceremonies around the commemoration are described in the next chapter.

collective trauma. Whether the terms used (cultural trauma, historical trauma, collective trauma, chosen trauma, etc.) are the best ones to describe what happens to the generations of the survivors or not, what is unarguable here is that the object of inquiry is a culturally mediated and socially interpreted phenomenon with representation at its centre. It is trauma in a sense that it has a haunting effect on individuals as group members and it can be transgenerational as it spans more than one generation. This is a place for me to build my research and to build an inquiry of how the experiences of the Syrian Armenians happen and why they happen the way they do. My work moves away from engaging with traumas, representation, and interpretation as concepts, separate from people and without due attention to what people actually do for this to happen. I focus on how individuals and groups participate actively in shaping, transmitting, and reactivating such transgenerational traumas, how those traumas are socially organized, how they materialize in people's experiences, and how what people do is coordinated with the doings of the others and through institutionally and textually mediated ruling relations.

Having discussed scholarship about collective traumas, I would like to say a few words about my own approach. First and foremost, I want to acknowledge that collective and indirect traumas are different from individual traumas. Scholars who study (indirect) collective traumas often move from physical and psychological effects toward social aspects of such traumas: the social and cultural processes that generate them, their transference, social structures through which this transference happens, their remembrance, commemoration, and narration, as well as identity construction around such traumas.

As an institutional ethnographic work my thesis is less concerned with definitions and the borders of the phenomenon in question – especially since most (if not all) of these scholarly conceptualizations are meaningless or alien to the participants. My goal is to shift the focus from concepts to demonstrating empirically how this particular phenomenon (regardless of whether we call it trauma or something else), happens in people’s day to day doings, how it coordinates them, and how it connects them to others across time and space. I study lived experiences of people and sets of practices they participate in, being located in certain places and at certain times while coordinated by a relation that originates in other places and at other times.

At the same time, I realize the need to utilize a language that will a) be descriptive enough to name this phenomenon and b) allow my work a membership in the relevant scholarship. A descriptive way to refer to this phenomenon perhaps would be “transgenerational collective trauma-memory.” The “transgenerational” here indicates the span across generations. The “collective” indicates both its constructed aspect (with representation at its base) and distances it from individual (and/or psychological) trauma. And “trauma-memory” shows that we are talking about a form of memory that is traumatic in nature and can be so in its aftereffects. Whether this trauma-memory affects individuals in terms of symptoms that psychological literature on trauma and its effects discusses, is outside of my expertise.

My focus is thus on the social structures that make the transference of this transgenerational collective trauma memory possible, as people participate in them, as well as studying this phenomenon as a form of coordination. How all of this and more comes to life in the doings of ordinary people while coordinating their everyday

experiences is where I turn my attention. For simplicity, across my thesis I interchangeably use either “trauma-memory,” “transgenerational trauma,” or “trauma” – shorter versions of the above-mentioned descriptive term.

This trauma-memory materializes itself in these people’s everyday world in different forms, some of which include having feelings of a void, displacement, victimhood, distrust, hate, fear, the inability to completely live here and now (as opposed to being here and there), a feeling of alienation, strong feelings of longing and not belonging, feeling the need for self-preservation, as well as seeing contemporary events through the lens of the past and as a continuation of this past. It also provides them with a strong sense of identity as Armenians and group belonging.

Summary

In this discussion, I have brought together three different themes, each of them studied by researchers in different fields. IE does not start its inquiry from the academic literature, aiming to find and fill a gap in it, or try to empirically demonstrate the validity of a certain concept (and definitely not the validity of people’ s experiences as they do or do not conform to an existing concept). However, engaging with this literature was very important for me. First, this literature allowed me to avoid studying what I came across in my interviews in isolation, and it provided me with a language and a way of thinking about what I was studying. Second, the scholarly literature, especially the one about genocide or refugees, is part of the discourses that in turn become relations (or ruling relations) in which the experiences of my participants are embedded. Finally, while many things were

discoverable following IE literature, some others were better illustrated by the intersecting knowledge of those fields.

The literature discussed above is fascinating, and the recent tendency in it to study the social world as evolving processes rather than entities is extremely important. However, a gap in this scholarship still exists and that is the absence (or, as Dorothy Smith says—disappearance) of people in studying the social world. The abovementioned theories often lack the explicit recognition that these transgenerational traumas are embedded in people's actions and are possible *through* and *in* people's everyday doings. Oftentimes trauma, representation, and interpretation are discussed as concepts that are separate from people or without due attention to what people actually *do* for them to happen. This literature does not discuss how people, as individuals and as groups, actively participate in shaping, transmitting, and reactivating such traumas, how those traumas are socially organized, and how what people do is shaped by social determinants — coordinated by the doings of others and through institutionally and textually mediated processes. All of this, to my knowledge, remains unstudied as people, in conceptual and theoretical elaborations, frequently disappear. My work therefore is committed to filling this gap, by shifting the lens from the conceptual and the theoretical to the actual, by bringing back the people and making visible the work they do for the social to happen.

Similarly for literature on diaspora. While engaged in theorizing the concept of diaspora, the literature in this field drifts away from people and their actions. The subject of inquiry in the most prominent scholarship is whether diaspora is an entity, an idea, or consciousness. I depart from this approach and focus on processes as people engage in

them (in multiple locations) for *diaspora to happen*, and on how their doings are coordinated through and in discourses and institutional processes.

Finally, and as seen in the previous chapter, the refugee literature in general has focused on the structure-agency dialogue, while the recent scholarship on Syrian refugees has focused, on the one hand, on the Private Sponsorship program itself, and on the other hand, on the sponsors and their motives, as well as on issues of integration. Very rarely do studies focus on the fact that refugees as social groups have biographies, histories, and certain ways of doing or not doing, as informed by different social determinants. As such, studying refugees starts from the point where someone is already a refugee — with little or no attention to their past.

Located at the intersection of several fields — genocide studies, memory studies, diaspora and transnationalism studies, and refugee studies — my project requires of me to cast a larger view in order to understand the social determinants of the work my participants do, and to see how this work is organized by those determinants in different locations. My participants then are not just refugees, descendants of genocide survivors, or diaspora members. In studying their stories and starting from their standpoint (i.e., standing where they stand and looking at what they see from their location as opposed to looking at them and studying them as objects), brings into view what they do not see (and that in which they participate) from where they stand, that is, the discursive and institutional and other relations, which shape their lives. The complexity of the position they have (as Syrians, Syrian Armenians, Diaspora Armenians, Armenians, descendants of genocide survivors, etc.) comes into being within social relations.

People are not one thing; they are embedded in social settings which include complex relations through time and space. Starting from a position which takes into account this complexity allows us to study the multiplicity of these relations, and by bringing back people and making their work visible, it becomes possible to see the abovementioned social concepts as existing only in people's actions, thus shifting the lens from the conceptual to the actual.

As in any institutional ethnographic study, through my work I, too, hope to contribute to social change. With many genocides yet unacknowledged and nearly 80 million displaced people around the world, work which contributes to understanding how people are trapped between these realities and how their lives and everyday actualities are informed by institutional processes — immigration, refugee policies, truth and reconciliation and reparation processes, immigration laws and rules of state or non-state entities — is necessary if we are interested in social change in any of those spheres.

CHAPTER 3: THEORY AND METHODS

In chapter two I discussed the major theoretical frameworks used to explain collectively but indirectly acquired traumatic memories, as well as scholarship in refugee studies and diaspora studies. While it is important to map the research context with which my research engages in the wider thematic sense, here I want to turn my attention to the conceptual and methodological project that has informed my work. I discuss Institutional Ethnography (IE) as a method of inquiry and show how it has informed the work of different scholars (including mine) as well as the practical challenges I have met during my research.

Institutional Ethnography as Alternative Sociology

IE was developed by Dorothy Smith when she was searching for a “feminist research strategy” in the seventies (Smith and Griffith 2022). In Smith’s (2005) usage, institution refers to “complexes embedded in the RULING RELATIONS” organized “around a distinctive function” (Smith 2005:225, the caps are in the original). While IE shares many similarities with constructivist research (e.g., a similar ontology) and in a sense can be categorized as part of it, it does not place itself under its umbrella (McCoy 2008). The uniqueness of IE is that “IE’s social ontology demands an explication of the materialized social relations that coordinate what actually happens in the practices of people — that the researcher problematizes” (Rankin 2017:8). IE starts from the actualities in people’s lives rather than with theories, concepts, or schools (McCoy 2008:702). The social is the (multilocal) coordination itself that is discoverable in people’s local doings (Smith 2005).

In general, the existing sociological practice (which Smith was trying to change), was that at some point in generalized abstraction, people were disappearing, and people's doings were replaced by essentialized entities which were separate from them.

The way IE goes against the mainstream sociological tradition of starting from theory is that it does not seek to fit people's experiences in already existing theoretical frames, nor does it seek to find in people's experiences what theory dictates: "Actualities as experienced and fitted to the theoretical shell become no more than instances and examples of the author's generalizing. People as subjects are displaced" (Smith and Griffith 2022:29). For example, traditionally the conversation has been about "immigration" rather than talking about "people immigrating," thus rendering people and their doings invisible. In Smith's sociology people and their actions are present at every stage, and the social happens in their actions. In IE, the social is embedded and discoverable in people's "ongoing, coordinated, mutually adjusted activity" (McCoy 2021:38). This kind of approach emphasizes processes (where people are present) rather than entities (where they are not) (ibid). What people participate in, however, is often beyond their knowledge and goals, and is ruled by larger relations that originate "elsewhere and elsewhere" (Smith 2005). These power relations, which Smith calls "ruling relations,"⁴² are what organize people's everyday life, imposing certain "objectified modes" (Smith and Griffith 2022:7) upon people. To be able to investigate them, one therefore should start from ordinary people's everyday experiences and from people's working knowledge of their own circumstances.

⁴² For my project I use the concept of "extended translocal relations of large-scale coordination" (McCoy 2006:111) alongside "ruling relations."

The shift, from studying people, explaining human behaviour (p.10), and generalizing about them, to studying the coordinative relations in multiple locations — as people participate in them and are ruled by them — is the cornerstone of IE (Smith 2005). Its main objects of inquiry are institutional processes or power relations, “the extraordinary yet ordinary complex of relations that are textually mediated, that connect us across space and time that organize our everyday lives – the corporations, government bureaucracies, academic and professional discourses, mass media, and the complex of relations that interconnect them” (Smith 2005:10). IE does not try to replace people’s knowledge but rather to start from their standpoint (the social position in which there are hooked within larger relations) and their knowledge, and extend it to what might not have been visible from the local and bodily actualities of the subjects (i.e. the people).⁴³ A central and important part of IE is its ontology: “Individuals are there: they are in their bodies; they are active; and what they’re doing is coordinated with the doings of the others” (Smith 2005:59). To “[i]ndividuals are there” McCoy (2021) adds “in time and place” (p. 36), as a further specification of what “there might be” (ibid).

IE is interested in *how* social relations exists in people’s everyday doings. Thus, the ontology of IE is grounded in the “actual” rather than in the “conceptual.” McCoy (2021) calls this a “materialist ontology” as it is rooted in people and their doings and not

⁴³ McCoy (2005) takes the standpoint of the HIV+ patients living in poverty to analyze health care delivery in the Canadian health care system. Starting from their experiences and their accounts rather than established topics and interests in the scholarship allows McCoy to enter the world of the patient the way they know it and the way that makes sense to them (including how they conceptualize good care, trust, prejudice and respect), and the way it affects their bodily experiences and their social location.

in “ideas about people” (p:36). The ontology of IE views “the social as concerting people’s activities”⁴⁴ on a large-scale as “this occurs in and across multiple sites, involving the activities of people who are not known to each other and who do not meet face to face” (DeVault and McCoy 2012:382).

IE keeps people present at every stage of its research. Smith and Griffith (2022)

write:

The grounding of the ethnography is always the actual practices of actual individuals as they go forward in actual settings and at actual times in coordination with others. At the same time, the research reaches beyond what individuals know and experience to discover how the social relations extending beyond individuals and beyond the everyday enter into and organize our lives. (p.13)

As such IE is a project of discovery that starts not from a theory that is applied to people and their experiences but rather from people’s experiences, and it is in these experiences that the next stages of research are discovered (e.g., how what happens in people’s lives is hooked into larger social relations). It is the researcher’s decision, then, where to finish the project or how many of the coordinating relations to investigate. IE creates a map of social relations, and Smith and Griffith describe IE as “more like cartography than explanation” (p. 20), a complex dialog that happens between the researcher and the participant to produce a map of what has been learned and exploring the coordination rather than imposing theory-based interpretations (ibid). IE is dialogic, and it consists of two dialogues. The first dialogue is when the ethnographer starts

⁴⁴ McCoy (2021) explains this activity as not only the physically observable doings or interactions but also “thinking and feeling and other activities of consciousness, as well as the deliberate withholding of outward action” (p.38). She also includes the learned, habituated doings often happening beyond the individual’s awareness (ibid).

learning from the experience of the informants (which itself is dialogic), and the second is when the ethnographer decides what to write down as a result of discoveries from the data (Smith and Griffith 2022).

Language is central to institutional ethnography. Smith (2005) uses Bakhtin's idea of the dialogical nature of language and utterance. For Bakhtin, the system of language is not separate from speech (*langue* vs. *parole*) but exists inasmuch as it is each time reproduced in utterances (which may comprise both written speech, literature, and actual conversation). In the same way, the social system or social rules do not exist independently, but they exist inasmuch as they are reproduced and instantiated by people in their everyday actions. The implication is that we should not study social structure as something frozen, but as a process, as a result of the doings of individuals on a daily basis (as Smith puts it, "in motion"). Language is where the social happens as it coordinates people's subjectivities and is a space where the ethnographer can find people's ideas and concepts in their everyday doings. As such, language creates interindividual territories (Smith 2005:77). It is a zipper that brings society together.

"Discourse" and "text" are IE concepts that can draw our attention to the coordination of people's lives. As forms of language, texts and discourses mediate the coordinating relations, and interindividual territories are based either on shared experiences or texts. Texts are taken up not as entities independent from people and their doings but only as they are activated through the doings of people.

Texts are replicable materials that are available to more than one person at more than one time in different locations and are how the coordination and ruling of people's lives happen. Similarly, IE uses the concept of discourse as "translocal relations

coordinating the practices of definite individuals talking, writing, reading, watching, and so forth in particular local places at particular times” (Smith and Griffith 2022:34). The coordination happens in the following way: the texts produced by certain people are activated (e.g., read, learned from, used as guides) in other locations and in their own experiences. While participating in discourses, people reproduce and change them. Discourse then is an active engagement site, where actual people participate in actual locations (e.g., offices, cultural centres, hospitals, conferences, etc.) (ibid). People (in multiple locations), including the ethnographer and the participants, can share the same discourses, can participate in and be ruled by them.

Discourse is not a theory here but rather a window to direct researchers into the relations that rule and coordinate people’s lives and doings while people participate in these relations. While situated in their bodies at particular locations at particular times, people read texts that are written by others at different locations and different times, thus activating through those texts different discourses that can be both local and translocal. In this sense discourse is what directs the researcher to investigate how the coordination and ruling happens in multiple locations and how the institutional practices are organized. Discourses are embedded in texts, we engage with them when we activate the texts by reading them, but we still continue to engage with them outside the texts (e.g., we participate in marches, sing songs, visit churches, get involved in supporting this or that group, chose our country of asylum informed or coordinated by the discourse what being Armenian means/involves). We participate in what Smith and Griffith (2022) call a “shared textual community” (p.36). We are engaged with discourses in everything we do and that is where the discourses happen. Smith and Griffith use discourse to mean “specialized

practice in reproducible texts that constitutes for participants a world in common. It is actively created and distributed textually to engage with those who become participants. It constitutes aspects of people's worlds as known, establishing a conceptual order that identifies and connects what become objects of knowledge, and it organizes for participants what is to be said, written, or otherwise represented; and in doing so it also excludes" (p. 39).

Texts and representational practice, as forms of modern-day ruling, are further explored by McCoy (2018). Her work combines interviews with college administrators with study of texts that organize their administrative decisions (at Fulton College in Ontario in the 1990s), thus bringing into view how study of texts which regulate institutions helps us understand the organization of work (McCoy 2018).

The meaning of "work" here is broader compared with how it is traditionally understood. It means every conscious effort that someone does which takes time, regardless of whether it is paid or not. Smith and Griffith (2022) include thoughts and feelings in the category of work but "they are understood and learned because they are involved in and are part of people's doings" (p.66).

IE work by Various Scholars

To this day, IE has been used mostly by scholars interested in the areas of education (McCoy 2018 and 2021; Smith 1998; O'Grady 2017), health (Mykhalovskiy 2011; McCoy 2009; Campbell and Rankin 2017; Corman 2017), immigration (Ng 1999), and social services (de Montigny 2011; DeVault 2000). These works have investigated local

experiences and ruling relations. They not only shed light on people's lived experiences but also on institutionally mediated processes that are not observable from the local standpoint of the participants. Most of them have also contributed to social activism and change by bringing to light invisible aspects of people's experiences, and especially in such cases when people's "everyday activities are being organized against their own interests" (Rankin 2017:1).

While most of this work is outside of the thematic borders of my thesis, it closely informs my work methodologically and analytically. I hereby selectively present some of the scholarship that has shaped my understanding of IE.

George Smith (1998) uses IE in an exploration of the experiences of gay young men at school. Taking the standpoint of the participants, Smith's study explores how their experiences are organized by the discourse of "fag." Rather than studying the participants, Smith uses their stories as a window into the organizational aspect of the discourse and how it coordinates everyday life in the school. His analysis focuses on how language (speech) "concerts antigay activities, articulating to the wider organization of gender and the school as a regime" (p.309). In the first stage of his study, Smith describes the treatment of gay men at school and the effect of that treatment on their education and their lives. As in most IE projects, it does not stop at describing the youths' experiences but moves to investigate the large-scale (often translocal) coordination that people participate in, in this case education and the school regime. Since his data are narratives, his focus is on language, on how "language makes available the social organization of settings" (p.311) and how local usage of language to talk and describe heterosexuality opens a window into how gender is generally organized. While IE usually does not use

this vocabulary, George Smith (1998) rightly notes that these kinds of studies allow us to move the analysis from the micro to the macro-level.

George Smith's work carries much relevance to my own inquiry of how discourse and narrative organize many aspects of my participants' lives. One such interesting point is how being diasporan is organized both within the group and outside of it, how people activate it by their day-to-day work, and how the ideology of "diasporan" both coordinates and is produced by certain actions of Syrian Armenians.

Like Smith, who looks into how the ideology and discourse of "fag" coordinate peoples' lives, I likewise look into how the discourse of trauma and its narrative organize the lives of Armenians around the world, how this narrative itself is produced and activated in the actions of Armenians in multiple locations, and how they are at the same time coordinated by it. The remembering of this "trauma" happens actively in people's everyday and is mediated by texts, media and actual bodily (and mental) activities. The same discursive ruling also happens during other instances of my participants' lives, not just when being diaspora members or remembering the trauma. For example, the discourse on refugees (translocal, international, and perhaps Canadian local) coordinates how they feel and act about being or not being a refugee and how they themselves activate the often negative connotation of the term.

Comprehending and participation in what is going on in a local setting is not just in the minds of one person, or of several individuals, but is a dialogic coordination of and in speech among those involved. Gay students or students identified as gay in the give-and-take organization of this ideology are drawn into it. They are not just passive participants. The language of harassment pulls them into the ideology through the dialogic and accusation and response-even if the latter is merely an inner reaction. They are yanked into the game of identifying "fags" and forced to play, whether they want to or not. (Smith 1998:322)

The focus on the dialogic to understand the social world where the participants' work is embedded helps me to investigate the reluctance of the participants to call

themselves refugees. Their stories give the researcher a look into the wider refugee discourses and help to understand what is said or done by way of participation in wider social relations (located in language).

Another IE work that pays attention to the discursive environment is Michael Corman (2017). Corman studies the social organization and the coordination of the work of paramedics in Canadian cities. He uses IE to inquire into the work processes of paramedics in the social context where the work occurs. Corman does not stop at observing the paramedics, interviewing them, and describing their work, but also moves to investigate how what paramedics do at certain locations is coordinated by “text mediated forms of social organization” (p.605). Corman offers a detailed analysis of the complexities of the work of paramedics and shows how this work is structured by different institutional processes and policies. The orientation of this work is a contribution to activism and social change. Other than the medical factor, Corman concludes that the discursive environment (as well as the sociopolitical environment) becomes what coordinates people’s (in this case) patients’ thinking and doing, which in turn also affects the work of paramedics. Here, as in my work, the shared discursive environment coordinates the doings of participants.

Studying the local in order to bring into view the broader sociopolitical, cultural, economic issues is what Marjorie DeVault (2000) does in her “Producing family time: Practices of leisure activity beyond the home.” Her article studies the spaces where families go to spend time together, in order to investigate how notions such as modern family, family outing, and family practice in general are organized by wider social relations (gender, class, etc.). While the article’s main focus is to bring into view the invisible work

of the mothers and fathers during the outing with their children, it does so “in a way that keeps the context in view” (p.487). The inquiry is into how parents participate locally in practices that are organized by non-local actors, such as educators, social workers, writers, administrators, journalists, and entrepreneurs. All those actors create and maintain the image of a modern family as well as spaces for family recreation and set the discourse on family and parenting. As such, studying the family outing in the local zoo creates an opportunity to study its wider context and to investigate “the family as a socially organized practice” (p. 499).

Timothy Diamond’s (1992) *Making Gray Gold* focuses on a Chicago nursing home, where he discovered that part of the work done by nurses and caregivers remains invisible because it is not “charted” and is as such “non-existent.” The work brings into view how the wider relations of ruling coordinate what happens in the local setting of a nursing home. Diamond’s is a detailed and vivid ethnography of how people’s everyday work and life experiences are intertwined with the power relations that are rooted somewhere else. Diamond’s work informs my ethnography because I too try to create rich descriptions of people’s experiences (emotional and physical), but also locations, events, and practices.

McCoy (Mykhalovskiy and McCoy 2002) uses IE to study the lived experiences of HIV/AIDS patients. By talking with them, McCoy identifies the translocal ruling relations, institutional processes, and the discourses in the context of which the everyday work of the participants happens. Learning from the experiences of the people she interviewed, McCoy’s research extends what is known to the participants into what is not visible from their bodily locations and to “piece together a larger picture” (DeVault and McCoy 2012:385). McCoy (2009) studies the everyday work (and consciousness) of HIV patients,

focusing particularly on how the work of taking pills, while private, is socially organized, and is “evoked in common ways through standardized pharmaceutical treatments and widely circulating discourses of adherence” (p.128). McCoy’s work, through 21 individual interviews and 16 focus groups, examines how people do the work of adherence and how this is coordinated by the concept of standardized clock time, inner experience of time and medication schedules (McCoy 2009).

Roxana Ng (1999) studies the actualities of thirty immigrant women from Asia who work from home, in order to bring to light the realities of their lived experiences. Her work debunks the romanticized image of work from home in public media, promoted by the government and employers alike, showing that it is not the actual picture and that reality varies from one case to another. Through IE research on homeworker garment makers, Ng shows how their work, advertised as comfortable and flexible, is shaped by the relations of gender, education, occupational strata, class, and the family responsibilities of the workers (Ng 1999).

The above scholarship is relevant to my work as it studies the social determinants of the work ordinary people do in their everyday lives. It brings the social, political, and cultural aspects of the everyday world into view as happening in people’s doings. It shifts the understanding of the social as happening separately from people to viewing it as happening in and through people’s doings. Below I show what my work does and how it contributes to IE scholarship.

The Discourse of a Shared Traumatic Experience as a Relation of Coordination Across Multiple Sites

While my research in part explores relations and experiences in the institutional complex around immigration, it also takes new directions and follows McCoy's scholarship and initiative in widening IE into new directions in addition to the fields of health, education, immigration and social services (McCoy 2021), and focusing on translocal relations of ruling and mapping "the social determinants of people's everyday experience" (McCoy 2005:794).

With many other IE researchers, my goal is to explain how what happens, happens in people's doings, and how that "happening involves extended, translocal courses of action that pass through multiple settings" (McCoy 2021:703), i.e., how it is coordinated/organized/ruled by "distinct social forms" (ibid). People's actions reproduce and are produced by relations of ruling that are rooted translocally. Unlike other IE work, however, which takes the standpoint of the participants in set local settings and studies the way they are hooked into larger coordinating relations, my research looks into a case when the setting itself is multi-local and the social position of people is changing and fluid. As such, people engage in different power relations from site to site and from one social position to another. For example, my participants started out as Syrian Armenians and descendants of genocide survivors, then they assumed the position of refugees in Lebanon, then that of "repatriates" in Armenia, and finally became "newcomers" or refugees in Canada. Exploring these shifting positions allows me to bring into view new,

and shifting, ruling relations, as people engage in them with their actions, and to study their work in its complexity.

I find the concept “social organization” helpful in investigating how what people do in coordination with others happens in their daily actualities, and as an ethnographer I observe how the social world happens in the doings of ordinary people (which might be impossible to observe in a local setting). My inquiry is how what people do in local settings is the result of larger and translocal social relations concerting their doings. I investigate in my research how what people do is the result of those larger social relations (including professional, ethnic, transnational, etc.) which we can study only in people’s doings and not in abstraction. My object of inquiry are not the Syrian Armenians (whether as refugees or as third generation Genocide survivors or Diaspora members or repatriates) but rather how what they do at the intersection of those social positions (or at each of them separately) is coordinated by institutional processes and discourses. Very prominently influential for my work is Smith’s (2014) “Discourse as social relation: Sociological Theory and the Dialogic of Sociology.” Smith sees discourses as “spheres of activity” and as “social organization” that “regulates in and through local practices” (Smith 2014).

I look into how the shared narrative of the past and the story of the Genocide becomes a coordinating relation of Armenians both locally and translocally. Starting from the standpoint of the participants, their lived experiences, and their working knowledge of their circumstances, my aim is to study the world the way they know it from their social locations, and then to extend it to what might not be visible to them. Since I was particularly interested in discovering how the narratives and discourses about the Armenian genocide become a relation of coordination (or social determinants) across

time and space, I recruited Syrian refugees who had at least one Genocide survivor grandparent.

How I Approach Intergenerational Trauma and What One Can Achieve Using IE

In my literature review I have provided a detailed discussion of how transgenerational trauma is studied, conceptualized, and used by different scholars. In my own work I want to move away from concepts and give people and their doings central stage. Thus, I move away from engaging with trauma, representation and interpretation as concepts that are separate from people. Instead, I explore what people actually *do* for trauma to happen. I see shared transgenerational traumas as arising in a form of coordination across multiple sites. I focus on how individuals and groups participate actively in shaping, transmitting, and reactivating such transgenerational traumas, how those traumas are socially organized, how they materialize themselves in people's experiences and how what people do is coordinated with the doings of others and through institutionally and textually mediated ruling relations. I provide a rich account about what people have done and continue doing within their families and communities, and how they engage with the larger transnational space of discourse production to maintain, reactivate and transmit such traumas. I further look at how such traumas, being attached to their identities, become in a sense an institution, membership in which provides certain resources both locally and across borders.

My research is based on 18 interviews conducted with Syrian Armenians, and one interview with a professional who assists refugees and works in Armenia. My original plan

was to interview Syrian Armenians accepted to Canada (with at least one genocide survivor ancestor), as well as doing participant observation in the Armenian cultural centres in Montreal and Toronto. I received my ethics clearance in May 2020 — right at the start of the pandemic and all the restrictions it brought with it, and I had to modify the original plan and settle with interviews only. Below I discuss my approach to interviewing, followed by a description of the process of recruitment, interviewing, and transcribing, and some of the challenges I faced at each stage (mostly as side effects of the pandemic).

Interviewing in IE

I started my project by investigating Syrian Armenians' "everyday/everynight life in a methodic way" (Campbell 2006). I started with their working knowledge of their experiences with the goal of understanding how people's experiences happen as they do. The place to enter their experiences was talk (interviews). While interviewing is commonly used in social sciences to learn about people's experiences, DeVault and McCoy (2012) suggest an alternative goal to interviewing: to use participants' accounts to investigate "relations of ruling" (p.381). In IE interviewing is how we learn about the large forms of coordination which go beyond the participants' accounts. This is in line with the ontology of IE, which sees the social as concerting people's activities.

I and my participants had a shared intertextuality (discourse) about our past, about the Genocide, and about a shared (and lost) homeland. As I studied the social relations coordinating Syrian Armenian lived experiences, I moved between the fluid positions of insider and outsider, depending on which particular aspect of the study I was engaged

with (Grahame and Grahame 2009). This had, both, advantages and disadvantages. I took the standpoint of my participants in order to discover the institutional complexities in the context of which refugee work, the transgenerational genocide-survivor work, and the work of being diasporan happened.

The research I planned allowed me to write an account of my participants' day-to-day experiences and to investigate the larger social context where these activities were embedded. I followed DeVault and McCoy's (2012) lead in generating accounts with my participants where the translocal processes could be traced to learn about and describe "social processes that have generalized effects" (p.383) (as opposed to generalizing about groups of people).

One of the major areas where IE research allows the researcher to access areas of social experience that are otherwise inaccessible is its attention to *work* and *process* as opposed to entities or concepts (i.e., as noted above, by studying the "work of being diasporan" as opposed to studying "diaspora"). In particular, this method allows the researcher to explore the work of participants where no adequate language to describe it exists.

The implications of this for my own work are paramount. For example, Marjorie DeVault (1990) discusses the inadequacy of the existing language for discussing women's experiences. DeVault writes that most people in society interpret their experiences the way the dominant language and meanings are imposed and socialized in them. And often the language does not have the right vocabulary for the marginalized groups (e.g., women) to express their lived experiences. The same applies to other marginalized groups, such as refugees or ethnic minorities. In order not to distort the

experiences of these groups, the role of the researcher is not to impose sociological meanings and expect the participants to talk about them, but rather to start from how they understand and talk about the *work* that they do (as opposed to talking about *concepts*) (DeVault 1990). This way we are able to trace the social organization in their stories and can find clues for understanding social relations (Smith 1987:187-89 cited in DeVault 1990). I should note that this approach is useful not only when a language does not exist, but also when the participants do not accept the existing language.

I became acutely aware of this when talking to my participants about being “refugees.” Their hesitance, rejection and sometimes surrendering to the concept made me look for a different word that would do justice to the enormous work that they had done to be in Canada and continued doing here. However, it also made me look into the discourse of refugees as it informs their actions (as well as feelings and consciousness). Other than the discourse of the refugees, I also focused on the discourse of what it means to be Armenian, with the Armenian Genocide as its central piece, to explore the ruling relations.

Recruitment and Challenges

I prepared the recruitment materials in three languages (Armenian, English, Arabic) and I promised a small remuneration (CAD 35). The recruitment of participants over a distance was challenging. I spread the word through social media and connections and personal acquaintances who had connections among the community. The latter passed on the information to those who they thought might be potentially interested in the study: some

posted my recruitment flyers on their social media pages; others individually sent the information to their connections in Canada or personally told them about the study. At that point I started receiving calls and emails, expressing interest in participating. For many the interest was lost as soon as I informed them about the consent form (as they often called it, “the paperwork”). I also lost potential participants when they learned that they could not do the interview right away but needed to follow some steps as well as filling out papers. Others called and asked about the research, and in most cases, it was obvious that my phone number had been the only thing they had read on my flyer. Those who called made sure they told me who had given them my contact information, and everyone said that they would be happy to help.

For many, knowing that it was confidential and that no-one would ever know that they did the interview, and filling in the oral consent form with the “pseudonym” section, brought a certain amount of tension and distance. It all of a sudden transferred the informal conversation and their desire to tell me about their lives into an alien space with a level of seriousness and paperwork, which as I heard later, made the whole thing “suspicious” and “ridiculous.”

Other challenges that affected the recruitment came after the interviews, when the friends of the interviewees called and asked, “Did such and such call?” and “How did the interview go?” When I did not answer the question, saying that it is confidential, many said something like “Oh, they told me they did, I just wanted to see whether it went well and if I was able to be helpful to you.” I thanked everyone for helping to pass on the information, but people expected more specific feedback such as, “Thank you, your cousin did call,” and a more personal “thank you” with at least the number of people who

had called “thanks to them.” Also, sometimes during the initial phone conversation or during the interview itself, the participants said, “You know, such and such, who gave you an interview on this day, is my friend/cousin/relative/neighbour, etc.” This made me realize the disjuncture between the participants’ understanding of the process, the ethics protocol, and my own constraints.

Additionally, I started wondering if all the efforts that I, as a researcher, had put in to protect the anonymity of the participants were really going to help, as I was not the only person who was aware of the participants’ doing interviews, and they continued discussing this and sharing the information among themselves.

There were people who called and told their stories of migration and life in Canada and spoke about all the topics that I was interested in informally, but never made it to the formal interview. While signing papers may be an everyday routine in Canada, it is not as routine a procedure in Armenia or Syria. Those informal conversations were still helpful for me, not just because they reassured me that the group of people I spoke with “on record” were representative of the Syrian Armenian refugees who had made it to Canada, but also because during those conversations I had more opportunities to notice and learn about the institutional processes.

Those who committed to the formal procedure of signing mostly did not give much importance to it (so it was I who was drawing their attention to certain parts of the consent form). Those who refused to read and sign the consent form and therefore to participate (if they gave me an explanation), said they did not feel like going through the trouble. One feedback that was particularly articulate was: “We pay money to others to do our paperwork, why would we want to do four pages of paperwork for \$35?”

Interviewing

Out of eighteen interviews, eight were done using video and the rest were via telephone. Five of the participants were male, thirteen were female. One participant was in his sixties, three in their twenties, the rest in their thirties and forties. The first two phone interviews were the shortest (under one hour), while others lasted for about an hour; the video interviews lasted for one hour fifteen minutes or so, and one of them was done over two meetings, following the participant's request, and took about an hour and a half in total. This tells me that perhaps in person, face-to-face conversations are still the best way to conduct interviews. Two of the interviews were in English, one in Arabic, and the rest were in Armenian.

The interviews started with the oral consent form (where I read the form out loud, registering their choices on the form and registering their verbal consent), turning on the recorder, and asking if there were any questions. Following the recommendation of the Ethics Board, we had a short discussion about how the privacy of the participant would be protected if someone entered their room. A sign (whether a hand gesture or a voice signal) was chosen to stop the interviews. Those precautions were usually met with a burst of laughter, and some participants comforted me by saying not to worry, as no-one would come in. The question on the consent form about whether they would like to stay anonymous, often received the answer, "All I am going to say is true and only true, so I do not need to hide." If eventually the decision to stay anonymous was taken, the participant either left me the choice of their pseudonym or chose one for themselves.

Some of them chose names that were not really the most likely names for Syrian Armenians. Since the Oral Consent Form, which includes the participant's name, and the interview itself, were recorded separately, I decided not to use the participant's name in the interview recording, to ensure extra caution and anonymity. Except for a few interviews, in most I address participants with the Armenian formal "you" or the Arabic formal *hadratak*, in order to avoid the person's name in the recording as much as possible.

Here are the main topics and questions that I explored in the interviews: *Life in Syria Before the War* (What was your life like in Syria before the war?), *The Arab Spring and the Syrian War* (What was the Arab Spring for you?), *Life between Canada and Syria* (What happened when you left Syria and how did you end up in Canada?), *Coming to Canada and life as a Syrian Refugee* (What does being a refugee involve for you?), *The history of being Armenian and the narrative of the Armenian Genocide in their lives* (What does being Armenian involve both in Syria and here in Canada?).

Later, I decided to start the interviews with the last question and the story of how their families came to be in Syria, especially since the Genocide, the notion of being deprived of a homeland, and living among "others" in Syria were prominently present in each interview, and pointed toward their participation in a global Armenian network. I looked into this as a social position from where I could investigate the larger translocal coordination of being Armenian at every subsequent stage of their story. This was also an easier opening for the personal life narrative to start with, as they had heard and told this story during their lives, as opposed to their personal stories of war and migration. All the participants were 3rd- or 4th-generation Genocide survivors, either from both sides or from one. One participant had a non-Armenian grandmother and a couple of participants

had grandparents from Kessab (in Syria), where there were Armenian settlements for centuries and up to this day (and between the 12-14th centuries it had been home to the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia),⁴⁵ so their ancestors had been on the territory of modern Syria well before the Genocide, but still went through deportations during the Armenian Genocide and then returned to Syria.

Every participant had a story to tell about how they had learned about their family's past and what that had been like for them. Everyone remembered growing up with the Genocide story from a very young age. Family storytelling was later accompanied by stories at school and Armenian centres, trips to Deir Zor and the commemoration of the Genocide in Armenian churches. It had been an important part of every participant's life to some extent. Many participants talked about the current Syrian war in comparison with the Armenian Genocide; others drew this parallel after they were asked if they saw any similarities between their grandparents' experience and their own. The part that seemed to have nothing unusual was their life in Canada, which, judging by how they spoke of it, was a safe and protected life, and they did not have anything extraordinary to report. Life in Canada was the last piece of the interview and at that point there was not much time left anyway, so the choice was left to the participant to tell what they would like to say, without me asking very detailed questions.

Some questions I asked were: *What does being a refugee involve for you? What kind of relationships do you have with your sponsors? What is your relationship with the Armenian community? What did they do to help refugees? Where do you live? Do you have jobs? Are your children in school? In general, how is it going?*

⁴⁵ Mollica and Hakobyan 2021.

The common narrative was arriving in Canada, having short-term help or no help at all from the sponsor (mostly because either they did not need any or did not feel comfortable asking). This section allowed me to enter into the investigation of the Canadian Private Sponsorship program, immigration, and integration and to explore what each of them is from the standpoint of the refugees.

My overall goal was also to give opportunity to the participants to narrate a bigger life story rather than just telling the challenges of being refugees on Canadian soil, which allowed the participants to construct multiple identities rather than limiting them to being refugees only (together with all the baggage that comes with the word, whether negative or otherwise). All the more so that in the case of the Syrian Armenians, being a “refugee,” a “Diaspora Armenian,” or a “home-less” person was not an altogether new idea — even if they were experiencing it personally for the first time. Ethnic belonging also was not a single identity for the Syrian and diaspora Armenians.

Already during the interviews, the existence of a large-scale organization and coordination were apparent. One such case was that the sponsoring organizations were all Armenian, both in Toronto and Montreal, and all the co-sponsors were Armenian, too. The few cases of support that came up had also been received through Armenians. Some of these Armenians were Syrians themselves, some not, but they were all Armenians and shared the understanding of what it meant to be Armenian, including the memory of the Genocide. The literature on the Armenian diaspora supports the idea of the Genocide being one of the most (if not the most) important signifiers of Armenian identity around the world (Avakian 2010; Bakalian 1993), and that Armenian diasporic communities are “activated” or mobilized when the Armenians, whether in the homeland (Tölölyan 2007)

or around the world, need it. (I have anecdotal evidence, both from Canadian Armenians and officials working with the government of the Republic of Armenia, that diaspora Armenians collected money to support Syrian Armenians in Armenia, as they had done previously with the Iraqi Armenians.) The Armenians that participated in the PSRP to bring the Syrian Armenians to Canada, whether ones working in various organizations, the Armenian church, or members of the Armenian community,⁴⁶ through their actions became part of the diaspora's transnational web that worked in coordination to make the immigration possible. It is in and through the actions of these people that we see transnationalism, ethnicity, diaspora, immigration, and transgenerational trauma (otherwise abstract notions) happening (and activated) while being produced by them.

Whether or not there were personal interests or special agendas involved in the participation of Armenian organizations and individuals in assisting the immigration, they still participated in large-scale social relations (including government, immigration, international law, etc.) and reproduced what might have not been in their motivations or knowledge. The question of how, when, or if the Canadian Armenian diaspora members had participated in the process of private sponsorship (perhaps through donations large or small) and what resources the centres used to get the permission from the government to process the sponsorship (as they had previously done with Iraqi Armenians), or to deliver help to those in need, was not something that was visible from the standpoint of my participants.

⁴⁶ A person who works in a Canadian law firm assisting refugees to come to Canada told me during a phone call that some of the Armenian clergy personally raised money or donated from personal means to make sponsorship of the Syrian Armenians possible.

Similarly, in trying to better understand the ruling relations in which my participants had been a part, I decided to interview an official assisting refugees in Armenia, to understand how it was that Armenia, a “homeland” for the Syrian Armenians (an idea clearly and loudly expressed in the interviews) did not become home for them. Were the reasons exclusively economic, or was there something else? This question can shed light on the process of “making and unmaking” diasporas, understanding transnationalism and diaspora, the relationship with homeland and home, and in the particular case of Syrian Armenians, to what extent homeland narratives fit the actual homeland. While, obviously, those who went to Armenia did so being ruled and motivated by the discourse of “homeland” they grew up with, I wanted to understand what they actually did to be there and to integrate, and what were some of the processes that made the settlement and integration unsuccessful.

The interview with the official was planned to be short (30 minutes or less), but it lasted for about an hour. The main question was, *What did your work assisting Syrian refugees involve?* along with some detailed questions such as, *Where do you live? What kind of assistance did you provide? Can you describe a typical day of work assisting Syrian refugees? How many Syrian Armenians did you work with? Were there any challenges in this work for you? Do you know of any cases of Syrian Armenians who have left Armenia? Why do you think it happened?*

Throughout my interviewing and my writing, I tried to keep “the Institution in view” (McCoy 2006). I also reminded myself during interviewing and analysis not to see the data as instances of a preformed idea, but rather that “[i]t’s never instances, it’s always processes and coordination. It’s all those little hooks. To make sense of it, you have to

understand not just the speech of the moment, but what it's hooked into" (Griffith 1999 focus group, cited in DeVault and McCoy 2012:392; cf. also Campbell 2006).

Working with the Interviews

When planning the research, I made a decision not to interview more than one person in the family, to have a diversity of stories and experiences. In retrospect, however, I realize that the stories men told were different from those of women, because of the different domains they had occupied. For example, few of the women had worked while in Syria, as most of the women were stay-at-home mothers and wives, and therefore the war they had seen and the work processes they had been involved in were different from those of the men. I had noticed some of those differences already during the interviews but I became aware of them more prominently when transcribing the interviews. The interviews were carried out in English, Arabic, or Armenian,⁴⁷ whichever language the participants preferred. Most of them preferred Armenian, while code switching between Armenian and Arabic during the interviews was common.

The English interviews I transcribed verbatim. The Armenian or Arabic ones I translated into English, contextually and taking into account various cultural sensitivities, rather than literally. Since it was not the participant's talk in its original form anyways, I did some editing to achieve coherence. This includes omitting repetitions that did not change or add anything to the context (e.g., emphases, emotions, insisting). I made all of

⁴⁷ The variety of Armenian that the Syrian Armenians speak is different from my native variety, spoken in the Republic, but the two are mutually intelligible.

these choices very carefully for each interview, mindful not to lose anything while translating and editing. In some parts, where I thought something was lost in the translation, the original word was kept, and an explanation was provided in parentheses. Sometimes I added words in square brackets in order to add clarity without interfering with the original text. Some minor parts of a couple of the interviews were lost because of the bad internet connection. I transcribed some interviews in full, and others in part.

The transcripts were anonymized. They also included a short description (about one paragraph) of some interview details (such as emotions, the setting, etc.), the age, the gender, and the city of origin for each participant. Here are a few examples: “a woman in her thirties from Aleppo,” “a man in his 40s, a father of two, originally from Aleppo.” Or, “when she was telling about the trip to Armenia, she became emotional.”

Since the stories that the participants told me were often nonlinear, not only chronologically but also geographically (this includes one or more trips to Lebanon and/or Armenia, or even within Syria from one neighbourhood to a safer one), I found the stories sometimes confusing. Therefore, when writing the chapters I followed a chronological order rather than the order in which they were told to me. In some cases, I charted their chronological order. Here is an example.

Before 2011	Lived in Aleppo. Since 2001 (when Bashar came to power following the death of his father) Aleppo had changed/improved. Married since she was 16 years old, had two daughters. A housewife, only husband worked.
2011	Problems had started elsewhere but not in Aleppo, the participant continued living her normal life (going to parties, night life, etc.)
2012	The war came to Aleppo, but they stayed as they believed it will be over soon.

2012-2013	Still in Aleppo, living between two houses (hers and her friend's, which was in a safer neighbourhood)
2013-2015	Living in Beirut (Lebanon) in her aunt's house, while the husband was still in Aleppo working and sending money
2015	Papers submitted to Hay Doun and after two months they came to Canada
2015	Living for two weeks with a neighbour and then renting their own place and moving out (husband started working from the first week)
2020	Works for an Armenian organization as a coordinator

Summary of a life story of a woman from Aleppo

I have three types of data incorporated into my analysis: paraphrases of the participants' talk; shorter excerpts from my participants' speech; and chunks from interviews, which include both my questions and participants' responses. The latter I chose in such cases when I believed my question brought some clarification that was otherwise not very obvious.

Summary

I use Institutional Ethnography as a combination of theory and method to study the social world as it happens in people's everyday doings, as they participate in institutionally mediated, large-scale relations of ruling. My project, as many other IE projects, has two goals: first, to learn and to describe the lived experiences of 3rd- and 4th-generation genocide survivor Syrian Armenians who became refugees and migrated to Canada

because of the recent Syrian war; and, secondly, to investigate how at every stage of their journey their actions were hooked into and were shaped by larger power relations through institutional processes. While it is the task of any IE researcher to investigate and bring to light the social relations that coordinate people's experiences in a local setting, the ruling relations I was exploring were decidedly multi-local and multi-temporal. So the work I had to do was to trace and describe the coordinations in their multilocality and as they changed with the localities of the people as well. Thus, I investigated the social relations that organized the same people's experiences in different settings.

Lastly, an important decision regarding the participants was taken. While originally pseudonyms were used so the reader could trace the participants through the chapters and be able to understand the wholeness of their story, I still had a concern that pseudonyms were not enough to protect them from being identified. Many of my participants were in one way or another connected to each other. This was a small community, most of them living in the Montreal area, sending their children to the same schools. The stories were specific, and I believe that if one put all the fragments of one story together, it would be easy to know who is who. It is also important to note that some of those people still had family or relatives back in Syria, which meant they were somewhat vulnerable before the Syrian government or other parties. Therefore, I decided not to use any names or pseudonyms in order to make it harder to put a complete story together and to avoid any possible identification. My participants are therefore mentioned in the thesis as, e.g., "a woman from Aleppo," "a woman from Damascus," "a man from Damascus," "a woman from Damascus," or a "a man from Qamishli." I also provide additional information when necessary, such as "a mother of two," "a young single man,"

or a “divorcee,” depending on the context. I realize that this change perhaps partially stripped the thesis of the vibrancy of its characters, or made the excerpts somewhat confusing, but it offered a higher level of protection to my participants. The only case when I use pseudonyms is chapter seven, for three stories, Hourig’s, George’s, and Carmen’s. I took this decision based on two factors: first, each person’s journey was presented to the reader as a story, which meant using a pseudonym would not change anything; secondly, those stories were not about the Syrian government or rebels but rather about their struggle across borders. As such, they were “safer” stories compared to other parts of their experiences. Since the reader still cannot put together this piece of their journey with the rest of their stories, I believe this was a safe choice.

Finally, I want to mention that my work is based on and starts from the experiences of eighteen people, seventeen of whom came to Canada as privately sponsored refugees. It is in no way representative of the stories of all Syrian refugees, nor of all Syrian Armenian refugees. Yet I hope my work will resonate both with those who came to Canada after similar experiences of the Syrian war and refugeedom, and also those communities in general who are haunted by the transgenerational trauma of past atrocities.

CHAPTER 4: THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF TRAUMA TRANSMISSION: AN OLD TRAUMA, A NEW WAR AND REFUGEEEDOM

The Memory of the Genocide in Syria

In 1999 I traveled to Syria to study. I noticed that among the Syrian Armenian community the Genocide was loudly present. The Genocide was a known reality not just among the Armenians of Syria. During our first grocery shopping in Damascus, the vendor asked where we were from. We said we were Armenians (Ar. *Arman*). Due to the large size of the Armenian community in Syria (about 70,000), they were known to everyone, while the name of our country, "Armenia" (Ar. *Arminia*) always confused people: "Almania?" (Ar. "Germany") "Romania?" In the end everyone concluded that we were from Russia. So, when we were asked where we were from, we always told our ethnicity rather than the country's name.

The vendor, eager to show hospitality and warmth, greeted us with the usual *ahlan wa sahlán* ("welcome") and then continued very proudly: "Armenians are our brothers, we saved you from the Turks during the Armenian Genocide." One of my friends joked: "We got all the way here [i.e., to Syria], but still did not get rid of the Genocide." Was our history haunting us across borders? That year in Syria, having spent time among Syrian Armenians, I realized how omnipresent the Armenian Genocide and the Turks were in their lives, much more so than among Armenians in the Republic. However, even in the Republic, the Genocide was a common term for comparison in Armenian talk and text. There were all kinds of "genocides" in the public discourse: "a cultural Genocide," "a white

Genocide” (often referred to the migration that started after the Soviet Union’s collapse, mostly caused by economic reasons, government corruption, and the Karabakh war), and several other “genocides” in informal language as well.

When the Syrian war began, new comparisons with the Genocide began appearing in the media (e.g., Alia Malek 2012). While in this war the Armenians were not the *main* target (Armenians, their churches, and their neighbourhoods came to be targeted as the war progressed), nevertheless, it was seen by many as a second Genocide, and the presence of military groups of Turkic origin, such as “Sultan Murat” (and especially since that it was named after an Ottoman-era ruler), made this comparison feel even more real. This is how, being affected by intergenerational trauma myself, and very well aware of how one’s worldview can crystallize through the lens of a trauma that is unhealed and still unrecognized by the perpetrator, for my doctoral research I decided to study the Syrian Armenian refugee experiences and the traumatic memory of the Armenian Genocide in it.

Were these experiences in any way going to be seen through that lens, especially considering that the Syrian Armenians (the majority of them) are third- or fourth-generation Genocide survivors? How would they talk about their experiences through the war and about leaving their homes one more time, in relation to what they knew from their grandparents’ stories? Were these stories still held up as “ultimate evil” in comparison with their personal stories and hardships, or does the intergenerational trauma vanish when real-life experiences kick in? Or does it, on the contrary, become stronger? Can someone else’s trauma be strong enough to be compared with your own? How does one group’s tragedy become *the tragedy* for others to be compared with— both the ones that

come after and the ones that happened before? Kay (2015) writes: “Now existing in the shadow of a more recent, larger, and better-documented genocide, the Armenian Genocide would often be (not entirely correctly) referred to as the ‘first genocide of the twentieth century’ [...] For better or worse, similar to other genocidal events that would follow, from the 1940s on the Armenian experience would be compared and contrasted, defined and described, explicated and extrapolated upon through the prism of the Holocaust” (p.121).

Reading the literature about different genocides, tragedies, and massacres of other people, I have often noticed how there are frequently comparisons with the Holocaust, as if validating the horror of the tragedy in question.⁴⁸ So the Armenian Genocide being the “Holocaust” of the Armenian history, does it become a yardstick for every other tragedy big or small, seen in relation to it? My ultimate goal was to understand how this trauma was socially organized for people, how it happens, how they participate in it (i.e., who does what), and how it manifests itself in people’s day-to-day life as well. With these thoughts in mind, I began interviewing my participants. Before providing more details on the interviews, I would like to briefly reiterate my approach to transgenerational trauma as compared to others, and what I do differently in this chapter.

While the Armenian Genocide is well studied by many, there is a mere handful of writings on its aftereffects on later generations. This literature makes an important contribution to understanding the genocide and its effects and aftereffects as a lasting

⁴⁸ E.g., in her article about the genocide in Rwanda, Helen M. Hintjens (2001:26) writes in the very first paragraph: “Like the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide is now part of the history of humanity, and deserves attention for that reason alone.”

phenomenon for later generations (Boyajian and Grigorian 1986, 1998; Miller and Touryan-Miller 1991; Kupelian et al. 1998; Altounian 1999; Dagirmanjian 2005; Karenian, Livaditis, Karenian, Zafiriadis, Bochtsou, and Xenitidis 2011; Kay 2015; Aftandillian 2016; Mangassarian 2016; Gasparyan and Saroyan 2019).⁴⁹

Most of this literature points out the existence of trauma both firsthand and intergenerational,⁵⁰ focusing on the psychological effects and symptoms of the genocide, war, death marches – and the denial of those – among survivors and their children. It explores the possible mental health problems, and in some cases offers treatment, coping mechanisms, and therapeutic solutions. Similar scholarship on the Holocaust is often used as a comparison. As opposed to the post-Holocaust situation, a major contributor to the lasting effects of the Genocide on the survivors and subsequent generations is the continued denial of the Turkish state. It is widely agreed that the denial is the last stage of the Genocide, or as Joyce Apsel (2000) puts it, the “Denial of Evil History is Final Blow.”

The above-mentioned works contribute to understanding the psychological effects of historical atrocities, especially ones that are unresolved and unacknowledged — an important step in studying the past and understanding how it informs the present and the future. However, the sociological approach I take is different. One point to illustrate this is that most of the above literature is interested in cause-effect relations: the event on the one hand and the symptoms and effects on the other. For example, after providing a very detailed discussion of multiple traumas and their symptoms among Armenian children,

⁴⁹ See Appendix 2 for a summary of this scholarship.

⁵⁰ The transmission method usually is described as happening within the family (see Gasparyan and Saroyan 2019).

Gasparyan and Saroyan (2019) finish their article by noting: “The number of trained mental health providers is slowly increasing in Armenia, which is important to block the transmission of trauma across generations, as well as in response to the current geopolitical climate” (p.296).

In my work, rather than discussing collective trauma and its transmission as an affliction with symptoms to be treated, I see it as a set of complex processes that are culturally and socially constructed, in which Armenians around the world participate — often in coordination with others (and in institutionally mediated ways) both locally and translocally, to transmit, recreate, and reactivate the trauma-memory of the historical event. This participation also creates an interpretive lens or a “template,”⁵¹ a belonging that not only informs their everyday lives and choices but also is utilized in certain situations as a resource. While its effects, as psychological or clinical studies (as mentioned above) show, are real and omnipresent (albeit to different degrees) for later

⁵¹ Miller and Miller (1991) write: “[T]raumatic events such as genocides — but one might also include natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes, and famines, or lost wars and uncontrolled epidemics — potentially serve as the axial point for group and generational self-understanding. Conversations that link generations radiate around these events. These traumatic events become the template through which generations relate to each other and through which group self-understanding evolves. These events are the object of interpretation, reinterpretation, dispute, rejection, embrace, and/or denial. But whatever else they may be, they are not ignored. They define the parameters of communal conversations, thus providing the components from which collective identity is built, even if the ordering and interpretation of these events are highly idiosyncratic” (pp.:35-36). While Miller and Miller are right, and these kinds of events can become the central point of a group’s identity and self-perception, it is important not to forget that those are not naturally occurring events and they all are socially and culturally mediated.

generations, it is still important to study the traumatic collective memory of a historical event as a process rather than an inherited “aspect” of people’s selves springing as if naturally from the event itself. My overarching questions both here and throughout my thesis are: How can the past or a shared memory of it inform people’s everyday doings? What do these processes look like? What do people actually do to participate in them? In terms of understanding collective memory, I follow Olick and Robbins’s conceptualization and

[...] refer to distinct sets of mnemonic practices in various social sites, rather than to collective memory as a thing. This approach, we argue, enables us to identify ways in which past and present are intertwined, without reifying a mystical group mind and without including absolutely everything in the enterprise. (Olick and Robbins 1998:112)

I use the same approach to collective transgenerational trauma-memory, and below, I map this process and the social organization of it.

The first question I asked my participants was, “How did your ancestors settle in Syria?” This question was in a way an entry into the Genocide story, as all of them had either one or more grandparents who had settled in Syria after the Armenian Genocide. I asked the participants what they knew about this and when and how they had learned about it. I did not collect the Genocide stories per se, but rather how they had come to learn about them and how present they were in their lives. The majority of the interviewees, however briefly, told me the story they had learned; others just told me how and in which circumstances they heard those stories. How did those stories affect them?

The Genocide and comparisons with it also emerged during other parts of the interviews that were unrelated to it. For example, many of the participants, when speaking about their own experiences, compared those to the Genocide, others mentioned the Genocide while talking about Muslims and their own life in a Muslim country.

The respondents usually started their stories by telling me where (i.e., which region in Western Armenia, i.e., today's eastern Turkey) their grandparents were from. In fact, according to Aftandilian (2016), regional (provincial) identities are arguably strong among the survivors and their descendants, something that happens in other diasporic communities as well (see Winland 2007:109). Most of the grandparents had been very young children when it happened, but each of them had their story. A few had been what my participants considered old enough (11-14 years old) and remembered more than others. Each of them had a story of how they survived the massacres, often after witnessing the slaughter of their family members, and how they had endured the death marches and reached Syria through many ordeals. Many of those children lost family members on the way to Syria, some of them were reunited later, others were still looking for loved ones,⁵² and some had given up hope. Then the conversation continued on to how the participants had come to learn about this and what effect the story had on them growing up.

I have organized the chapter below in the following way. First, I show how transmission of the trauma-memory is organized; then I discuss the spaces where this takes place; and finally, I show how it materializes in people's lives.

⁵² For some respondents, the Genocide did not come to their life only through stories or commemoration, but also through active search for family members.

Drawing on my data, I group the spaces for trauma transmission into several categories. First, storytelling (in the family, outside the family – community, cultural centres, schools, etc.). Second, the commemoration of April 24th and the rituals around it (getting together in cultural centres on the eve, singing songs, telling stories, going to cemetery, organizing marches, visiting churches, and taking a trip to Deir Zor). The latter is an important part of the transmission, and I discuss it in more detail, as it is also a physical and not just a symbolic site related to the Genocide: it still holds human bones scattered all over the landscape.

Finally, based on my data I suggest a new “space” where the trauma is reproduced and reactivated. That space is the new traumatic experience, which in this case is the Syrian war. To demonstrate how individual traumatic experience can become a space for the collective trauma’s reproduction and reactivation, I show how the respondents talk about the similarities between this war and the Armenian Genocide.⁵³

As mentioned above, I also show how the memory of the Armenian Genocide, being transmitted and reactivated through all those spaces, was omnipresent in those people’s lives and in a way became a parallel lived reality, informing the participants’ seeing/feeling in one way or another. And that is how the current Syrian war is seen

⁵³ The Karabakh war of 2020 became another such example. Both on the official level (the Armenian prime minister’s speech), and on the level of ordinary people (both in Armenia and in the diaspora) many parallels were drawn between the current war and the Genocide (and even the Holocaust). Particularly the visual representation of these parallels was very widely used. Turkey’s president, Erdogan, who was seen as the main perpetrator of this war (along with Azerbaijan’s president Aliyev) was portrayed both as Hitler and as Enver Pasha (one of the main architects of the Armenian Genocide). During this 44-day war, the Armenian Genocide was once more a central discussion topic.

through the lens of the collective historical trauma, and at the same time becomes a space for reactivating the old trauma. Does this mean that once a collectivity has such a powerful narrative that it becomes a lens for them, they also see and interpret things collectively and in a similar way in general? Does this mean that they — having the same fears, the same stories about certain historical experiences — will also have the same expectations and approaches toward their own lived experiences? Is this the reason why the Armenian community was generally satisfied with Assad’s rule despite its obvious disadvantages? Is this why the Armenian community sees no discrimination in Canada and no difficulties living here, as the reality for them did not change in the sense that they came from one foreign country (they grew up with a strong presence of their homeland, Armenia, in their imaginations, and did not see Syria as their homeland) to another one, where, if anything, their life is easier due to the absence of the “Muslim country” factor? And all of this, despite the fact that, economically, their situation is more challenging. Those questions will be discussed in the next chapters. This chapter is thus limited to exploring the organization and materializing of trauma in the lives of Syrian Armenians, the spaces for trauma transmission, and the reactivation of the trauma.

*Spaces for Trauma Transmission*⁵⁴

Family Storytelling

⁵⁴ Miller and Miller (1991) describe similar experiences of transmission among their participants who grew up in the US or Lebanon.

One of the main spaces where the transmission of the trauma of the Armenian Genocide took place was storytelling. The stories came into the lives of the participants through their parents or grandparents, and later also from outside their homes. Usually, the stories started either with a survivor grandparent coming to their home (if they did not live with them already), or them going to their grandparents' homes. A routine family activity could open the "Genocide door" into the present and into their lives. A middle aged man from Damascus remembers how he came to learn about the Genocide.

My grandmother lived with my uncle but came to stay with us for a couple of days. I was a young kid, I don't remember exactly how old, but I remember that we were kids and were eating and we left the leftovers on the table, like rice or other stuff, so I saw my grandmother collect each grain of rice one by one and eat them. I started laughing, why would grandma do that? She looked at me and said: "if you saw the famine and hunger we saw, even you would eat ..." I asked my mom why she said so, and she told me about the Genocide and their migration and that they were hungry for days and many died from hunger in front of her eyes, so she knows the value of food, she would not allow even one grain of rice to fall down, she collected it and ate. (A man from Damascus)

A mother of two from Aleppo tells a similar story about how she had learned of the Genocide.

One day my grandmother came to visit us. I was four or five. Of course, I knew what April 24th was, but not in detail. I knew it was a commemoration, we were mourning, we went to the cemetery, we lit candles, we went to church and participated in the ceremony with the club. You know, when you are little, you don't feel the pain like that, it is just a tradition in the family that you do in the family. But then I was five or six and my [paternal] grandmother came to visit us, and she was very short, and when she sat, she always put a little chair and put her feet on it. Her feet were very small, like a child's feet. Without thinking much, I asked her, "Grandma, why are your feet so tiny?" and she got upset and did not want to answer, yelled and did not want to answer, she got upset and took her bag and left. My mom explained to us that since she walked the whole *Jardi champan* [HT: in Armenian this literally means "the road to the slaughter," i.e., the death marches to the Syrian desert] to Deir Zor, the bones of her toes were worn out. She did not have toes, so when she walked, she supported herself with her ankles, as she did not have toes. That's why her toes were small. From there I started learning more details about what had happened on the road of the Genocide, and from year to year I have learned more, but from a very young age it was imprinted in me [by this event or story] that the Genocide was a very ugly thing. (A woman from Aleppo)

Like the abovementioned participant, another woman from Aleppo also had not only heard but also seen physical traces of the Genocide: "She had a knife scar on her back, I have seen it. Until her death we stayed together. She was my mom's grandmother."

Another woman from Aleppo told me that those story-tellings usually happened in the evenings, when, after she had done the homework, they sat together as a family before bedtime and “that’s when she [the grandmother] told them.”

For others also, the stories came into their lives as “fairy tales” or “bedtime stories.” Spending the night in the grandparents’ home and asking them to tell a bedtime story was how several of the participants had heard about these stories for the first time in their lives, or after already having some general knowledge about what April 24th meant. A man from Aleppo in his 60s told me that when he stayed overnight with his grandparents, six years old at that time, he always asked for a bedtime story, and whatever story his grandparents told him, “There was always a bridge in this story to the past” and to what they had had to endure. The story below is similar:

Since we were children, we used to hear the Genocide story like [other children hear] fairy tales. My paternal grandfather lost his wife and children during the Genocide and came to Syria alone and then remarried there. My maternal grandparents too were Genocide survivors. He had been a guerrilla fighter and had been fighting in the mountains. One day the Turks attacked, collected all the women and shot them dead. My grandma took a bullet to her arm, and she threw herself down with the dead bodies. She remained there, wounded, for two days until she was sure that the soldiers were gone. She came out, injured, my grandpa saved her. Then they came to Syria. Her whole life, we saw that her one arm was different. When we asked, she said there is a bullet in there. That bullet stayed there, she did not accept it to be removed and she said always: “I want to take the bullet with me to the grave,” and that’s what she did. (A man from Damascus)

Circling back to what Jacobs calls “traumatic transference” among “successor generations” (2016:149), we see here that not only can narratives, rituals, and memorial sites be structures for this kind of memorialization and transmission (Jacobs 2010; 2011; 2016), but also bodies, as in the case of the abovementioned participant’s grandmother.

A young man from Aleppo also learned about the Genocide at a young age. He does not remember exactly how he had heard about it the first time, but he says he was a member of the Armenian club, which meant he had heard about and participated in

commemorations of the Genocide. But he remembers that on Saturdays he stayed with his grandmother so he could go to the Armenian club in the morning. Already having heard stories from others, he wanted to know if his extended family (*gerdastan*) had such a story and asked his grandmother to tell him her story (at this point he had already heard that there was a story related to his great-grandmother). The grandmother told him about her mother's story.

Her name was Houshig. From the whole family, she and her sister survived. They hid among the corpses and they put mud on themselves and pretended to be dead. They were about 4-5 years old. At night they got out from between the corpses and ran away. They saw a house and they wanted to go in but they were scared. Then there was a couple who took them inside, and they didn't tell them they were Armenians. The husband made rice and, in the pot, they saw a human hand. They did not lie down that night [after not having slept for a whole day already] and they ran away at night again. On the way, the police caught them and took them to an orphanage. The Turkish soldiers in the orphanage tortured and harassed and abused them, so they managed to run away again. Through many adventures, they crossed the Turkish mountains and lost each other. Eventually, she got to Kessab and there she stayed and later they found each other. (A young man from Damascus)

It is interesting that this man did not hear this story over and over from his grandmother or at home in general. It was outside home that he heard more of both the grandmother's story and the Genocide story (as he had been a member of the Armenian club). He also told me that his great-grandmother's story was published in an Armenian magazine. We see here that the main channel for him to reinforce and to reactivate the narrative was not the familial channel but rather communal and institutional ones. The woman below, as well as others, frequently pondered these stories before sleep:

The child is scared of such stories. When they tell such stories a child is in fear. I always imagined at night how this happened, how these children suffered, how they remained without their parents. It is hard to hear and remember such things. [...] I always remembered those stories, and it was very hard for me. I felt so sorry for those kids who remained without parents. (A woman from Aleppo)

For many participants, including the following two women from Aleppo, there is no particular day or moment that is associated with hearing these stories for the first time.

For many, hearing these stories was a routine that stretched over long periods of time. The first woman says she was five or six when she first heard them, but remembers that her grandmother told these stories all the time, and the second one knows the storytelling happened a lot.

She always told these stories, “Come, she said, *yavrum* [my child], come! Let me tell you what happened to us, what they did to our Armenians.” She always talked about this. (First woman from Aleppo)

I think, I don’t remember it exactly, I can’t say like you did, that this is exactly how I learned, but I think I learned about it in school and later my family members told us about it. (Second woman from Aleppo)

Two contradictory characteristics that Genocide survivors have, according to the literature, is either excessive storytelling or the opposite – silence. Both are found in the accounts of my participants. Those who had spoken, had spoken “a lot” and “all the time.” This happened, the participants told me, “whenever we went to our grandparent’s house,” routinely, while growing up or living in “this atmosphere,” and so on. There were also specific times when these stories were told, such as early in the morning, or in the evening when the family was gathered, at bedtime, or when the other grownups visited each other. Some others remember the exact places where those stories were told by a grandparent: “He sat in the balcony and told these stories all the time.”

As mentioned, excessive storytelling among some survivors was replaced by silence or an unwillingness to talk in others. Three participants remember such silence:

My husband’s grandmother was pretty big during the Genocide, 9 or 10, and remembered it very well. I remember there was someone like you who was doing research, they wanted to ask what she’d seen during those days. She got scared and did not talk. She thought that if she talks, the Turkish gendarmes would come and take her away and we were in Aleppo and she was old, 92 years old, but she was afraid and did not talk. Others of her age spoke, but she did not. She was afraid, as she had lost a sister, a brother, in front of her eyes, it still remains with her, she has not gotten rid of it, she has not healed. (A woman from Aleppo)

The grandmothers sometimes got upset, they did not want to tell anything or to talk. There were others [grandmothers] who called us particularly to make us sit down and listen to them. That was there too. (A man from Damascus)

They saw a lot during the Genocide, but they were in such pain when they told about the Genocide, that they could not, there was a knot in their throats and they could not continue. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman's grandmother had been very young during the Genocide, and had marched with her mother during the death marches. The grandmother came to stay with them sometimes for several days, and early in the morning, when the participant woke up, she began telling her stories. The participant was around ten years old when she heard those stories. She cried when telling me about them.

She [the grandmother] always cried and said she had a sister, one year old, and she could not walk. "My mother had had to leave her under the tree, because they forced us to walk," sorry [she starts crying, then continues, sobbing]. She said, "I don't know, we have no news of her, whether my sister is alive or dead or if someone took her. We marched and came here." I heard this from my grandmother with my own ears, in her own voice. (A woman from Aleppo)

When they did not hear those stories from the survivors themselves, they heard them from their parents who had in turn heard those stories from *their* parents. A man from Aleppo never saw his grandparents but heard the story from his father many times. They gathered as a family, together with his brothers, and then he told the stories. This man lost his father when he was only 14, but then he heard the stories from other people and now he passes them down to his own children.

Until this day we transfer the same stories to our children, so they know how they [the Genocide survivors] were treated, how it all was, "put yourselves in their shoes." Today, we, in a way, not exactly the same way, ran from Syria, we were almost in the same situations, we can't of course compare with the Genocide, but I always tell the kids: "See what the great-grandparents went through and what we went through when we left Syria, these are similar stories, theirs was even more terrible."⁵⁵ So those left us with terrible memories. (A man from Aleppo)

⁵⁵ Aftandilian (2016) discusses a case of an Armenian American soldier who participated in the liberation of the Nazi camps in WWII. The soldier shared that seeing the camps and the human bodies and atrocities had made him visualize what the Armenians had suffered at the hands of Turks (p.207).

A woman from Aleppo similarly reports transferring those stories to her children:⁵⁶

We became interested in these kinds of details. Often the subject came up and later, when we got married and had families and children, we encouraged our mothers to tell those stories to our children. The same thing happened, they [the children] also became interested. They also asked questions. So those subjects were always present in our homes. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman from Aleppo also learned about those stories from her grandmother, whose father and uncle were slaughtered. She (the grandmother) was 15 at that time. She did not speak Armenian, she spoke Turkish and that's how the participant learned Turkish when she was a child.

She told us, "We went on marches, we walked, they wanted to take me, the *gesher* [the bad/ugly ones],⁵⁷ the Turks. They were told I am engaged. The uncle, the boys, wherever there were boys, they [the Turks] took them and slaughtered them. And we heard those voices." She told me that she went through these bad times and she cried. And I taped her when I was a child. Now where is this tape and what happened to it, I no longer know. (A woman from Aleppo)

This woman does not remember how old she was when she heard the story for the first time; she knows that the grandmother died when she was 10 and when she taped her voice, so the first time had to be before that. She continues:

Once my sister and brother sat down and asked her: "Grandma, tell us about the Genocide, so we can tape your voice." Where is that tape now, I don't know. She told and cried. Every time she told it, she cried, she reached halfway and stopped. She did not continue [...]. We always asked about the Genocide, she started crying every time, she cried and called "*aman, aman!*" [an exclamation used both in Armenian and Turkish as a sign of pain or surprise, similar to "Oh Lord!"] and she became silent, *khalas* ["that's it," Ar.]. She did not finish. (A woman from Aleppo)

⁵⁶ It is interesting that she is not directly transferring (e.g., telling the story herself), but rather she is facilitating a cross-generational transmission, from grandmothers to grandchildren.

⁵⁷ This is how ISIS, FSA and other groups in Syria were also referred to by many of the participants. More on this below.

Along with the familial transmission there was also communal, non-organized transmission happening. While not all the grandmothers felt the desire to share those stories (as one man put it, “They sometimes got upset and did not want to tell or talk”), there were others who made the neighbourhood kids sit down and listen to their stories.

So the communal channel along with the familial one was how participants entered the trauma spaces, and sometimes one thing led to another. A respondent told me that it was by chance that she came to learn that the neighbour of her in-laws was Armenian. This neighbour told her that even though she was married to a Turk now, she was Armenian (she had married a Turk when she was young in order to survive), and she had her own story.

Other than these accidental⁵⁸ or non-accidental instances of community storytelling, there was another way of transmitting those stories, through what one of the participants called “a more organized way”: schools and Armenian cultural centres. There, conversations, stories, and accounts about Armenian history were constant. At times when the Armenian schools did not have as many class-hours allocated to the Armenian language and history as they used to, other classes were used to substitute for the lack of time, to transmit stories of Armenianness.⁵⁹ Many of the respondents were members of the Armenian cultural centres, and gatherings and talks there were part of their routine.

⁵⁸ Accidental in the sense that the meetings, the conversations, and the resultant transmission of stories were not planned.

⁵⁹ Some participants told me that the arts and crafts classes sometimes were used to teach about Armenian history, culture, and the Genocide (to make up for the changed curriculum and to find extra time to teach “Armenianness”), thus creating unofficial or “hidden” spaces for identity construction.

A woman from Damascus told me that they talked about what happened to the Armenians (the Genocide and the lost lands) at school all the time; students often told the teachers that their family also had stories, and they were encouraged to share those. Armenian history, in which the Genocide and stories about a lost homeland were central, was omnipresent. These institutionalized, organized and more “academic” ways of transmission outside homes were collective ways for people to learn and to bring individual knowledge into the domain of shared knowledge.

April 24th and Deir Zor as a Space of Trauma Transmission and Reproduction

April 24th is a national day of mourning, as discussed earlier. As in Armenia and other diasporic communities, April 24th has always been annually commemorated among the Syrian Armenians and as such, it was an important ritual space where the traumatized identities of the Armenian community were constructed and reproduced. It was also an expression of the freedom that they held as a minority.

Even during the short “bromance” between Erdogan’s and Assad’s governments, when anything that could pose an obstacle on the way of the new partnership was prohibited, April 24th was still commemorated, only without much pomp. In periods when genocide-related books, movies, and celebrations outside the inner circles of Armenians were discouraged or prohibited,⁶⁰ Armenians still commemorated April 24th by visiting

⁶⁰ Mollica and Hakobyan (2021) note that during the Turkish Syrian rapprochement, publications on the Armenian Genocide or ones with anti-Turkish orientation were banned in Arabic, but were possible in Armenian, when circulating inside the Armenian communities of Syria (p. 153-54).

Deir Zor, by church masses, by going to cemeteries and cultural centres. The difference was the scale and the meaning attached to them. As mentioned by a man from Damascus, national things were forbidden but cultural and personal matters were fine.

A man from Damascus: You know, when the Syrian government started having good relations with Turkey, Erdogan would come every month. It started in 2007. To be fair, the government did not put any pressure on our freedom of belief, events, schools, churches. Only on political grounds did the intelligence services put pressure on us, they were warning us: "don't you dare do something that will spoil our relationship with Turkey."

HT: Did that concern the Genocide and its commemoration?

A man from Damascus: Yes, the Genocide and other political things. Some publications and books were forbidden. Once someone published a book and had the privilege to distribute it in the Syrian market. Then the intelligence services collected copies of the book from the market and banned it. Then there is a law in Syria that if some organization needs to do an event, they need to have the approval of the intelligence services. When it came to songs and dances and cultural events, they were approved of, no problem, but if there was something to disturb the relationship with Turkey, it would not be approved. It lasted until the war started. There was some strictness. So, I mean if we needed something among us Armenians it was okay, as long as we did not involve Arabs.

HT: So, you could go to church that day, it was not forbidden? To get together with Armenians?

A man from Damascus: Well, national gatherings were not allowed, more personal things were fine, no one would say a thing. But in the past, we would go [to Deir Zor] in 7, 8, 15 buses. I remember, in 2005 the whole of Syria gathered in Deir Zor, it was packed, 30-40 thousand people were there. From Damascus we went there in 15 buses.

HT: Were they all Armenians?

A man from Damascus: Yes, Armenians, but there were non-Armenian journalists, we also took them with us.

HT: But it was not possible after 2007?

A man from Damascus: No, national things were not allowed, but we could still go.

Other than this period of time, as mentioned in the excerpt, the commemoration of April 24th, whether by visiting Deir Zor or not, remained one of the important events, and this is when many learned about the Genocide for the first time, and reproduced the trauma-memory of it annually. I was told that the attitude of the Syrian Arabs was always respectful in this regard. I heard from the participants that not only did the Arabs support Armenians and admire that they did not forget their past, but they also participated on these days. For example, when they went to Deir Zor, the Arabs put up stands with light

food and drinks for the Armenians in their tents. At other times, according to a participant, they threw rice on the Armenians when they were marching. Journalists and public figures also participated in these commemorative acts.

A woman from Aleppo tells:

When we were children, we got together on every April 24th and went to Deir Zor, so as a child I remember that. I thought those days people went out for a walk, so one day I asked my mom if they were going for an outing, she said no, and she started telling me that there was a Genocide, and that's how it started to be told in our family. I became interested, so I asked both my maternal and paternal grandmothers about those stories and they told me. Of course, when I started going to school, to the Armenian centres, I learned about all these in a more systematic, academic way until I graduated from my secondary school [...] I was 4 years old, we already knew that on April 24th there had been a Genocide. Maybe not in detail, but I already knew. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman in her twenties from Aleppo told me she remembers learning about the Genocide sometime close to April 24th and that it was painful. They were watching a movie around April 24th about the Armenian Genocide. She became very upset and was greatly affected by it, and her grandmother told her: "You know, this happened to everyone, even our family has such stories," and she started telling her the family stories. She also recalls many activities around April 24th, articles in the newspapers, going to church, drums (she had been a Girl Scout), and trips to Deir Zor in grade six, organized by the school.

In Deir Zor, where the largest number of survivors lived, and there were also the remains of the dead, there was also a museum and they explained in detail all that was in that museum and they tried to keep the spirit of Armenianness in us. (A woman from Aleppo)

A mother of two from Aleppo told me that by the time she was four or five years old she already knew about April 24th.

Of course, I knew what April 24th was, but not in detail. I knew it was a commemoration, we were mourning, we went to the cemetery, we lit candles, went to church and participated in the ceremony with the club. You know, when you are little, you don't feel the pain like that, it is just a tradition in the family that you do as a family. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman from Aleppo also remembers: Every year on April 24th, they showed us movies. And we went to Deir Zor a lot. We looked at the bones and listened to the stories. We looked at the images, pictures on the walls.”

I was told by a different woman that stores, schools and businesses in Aleppo (not just Armenian-owned ones) were closed on that day. On the eve of April 24th, a ceremony at the church was held, and after that there was storytelling. It was a *sgatun* (mourning house) for them. The cultural centres always commemorated April 24th, explained another woman.

So, every night on April 23rd until morning, we stayed at the club for the Genocide stories, the Dashnaktsakan *fidayi* [ARF guerrilla fighters who had fought the Ottoman government] stories, we told them [the stories] and sang songs, we mourned and, in the morning, we went to the cemetery. (A woman from Aleppo)

These accounts demonstrate the symbolic meaning of April 24th and the rituals around it as a space for trauma transmission and reproduction. It is also the day when many children (some of my participants and myself) learned about the Genocide for the first time. But other than that, and as many participants noted, one of the commemorative rituals of April 24th, if not the central one, was a trip to Deir Zor, which I discuss below.

Deir Zor

When I talked about the space for trauma transmission above, I mostly talked about symbolic spaces. But there were also physical sites both in Syria and around the world wherever there are Armenian communities. Numerous monuments, churches, graveyards, Armenian cultural centres, Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan, Deir Zor in Syria, are among sites that are symbolic and at the same time physically represent the Genocide.

The Deir Zor museum and its surrounding play a central role, as Deir Zor is not just a space for trauma reactivation and transmission, but it was also the actual site where many Armenians found their death during the Genocide. In the desert, where the visitor could still see the uncovered holes full of the bones of those tortured by violence, famine and typhus, stands an Armenian church-museum dedicated to the victims of the Genocide. Many of the participants visited Deir Zor more than once, some went there with their schools or families, and with the Armenian centres. The visitor to Deir Zor is mentally transferred to those terrifying days. Here, narratives are squeezed from the traumatized minds of an Armenian visitor and find flesh in the exposed bones that lay scattered in the sand to this day. A woman from Aleppo shares her feelings about this site:

We were digging the earth and retrieving the bones from there. It was very-very bad. When you see it under the glass [in the museum] it leaves a scientific impression, you know what I mean — washed, neat and clean and under the glass, but when you see it in the earth, blackened and dried, you realize that it is the blood, you feel very horrible.

I myself remember having similar feelings when visiting Deir Zor. I went there in 2000, and to this day, I think it was the most powerful site among the ones that commemorate the Genocide.

Even though there are many books and films about the Armenian Genocide and the lost homeland, I have not deliberately generated data on them. However, I want to briefly mention a couple of incidents when my interviewees spoke about those ways of trauma production. One is my respondent's note about a book by Andranig Zaroukian.

It is not easy to read Andranig Zaroukian's *People Without a Childhood*. All that would fill us with hate toward the Turks. Perhaps years later, when you are older and more mature, perhaps you can say that this is the government's mistake. If a Turk one day comes across, how am I going to behave or treat them? This anxiety was always in us. But those stories always created hate in us toward the Turks. I can truthfully say this. (A woman from Aleppo)

The next one was a picture of *anmoruk* (forget-me-not) a symbol of the Armenian Genocide and its memory, on the wall of one of the female participants. In recent years the image of this flower has been designed as a symbol for the commemoration of the 100-year anniversary of the Genocide. Now it is a widely used symbol – there is jewelry, paintings, clothing items with this image. During the Zoom interview, I saw a painting on her wall: the tricolour Armenian flag with a forget-me-not flower on it. I asked her what it symbolized for her. She became emotional, cried and said: “It has a forget-me-not on it, Hasmik.” Haunted by the same trauma, I needed no further words.

The Presence of Trauma

Above I discussed the main ways in which the transmission of the intergenerational trauma-memory happens. Here I want to demonstrate how and in what form this trauma-memory materializes in my participants’ lives. For simplicity, I conditionally group my findings into several categories: experiencing certain emotions, feeling a stronger bond with their Armenian identity, having a feeling of identity-loss, the feeling of a lost homeland, and distrust toward Turks or Muslims. These are fluid and at times overlapping categories. I discuss very briefly the experience of certain emotions, the feeling of identity-loss and the feelings of a lost homeland in this, and the feeling of a stronger bond with their Armenian identity and distrust toward Turks or Muslims in the next two sub-sections.

Most clearly articulated among the stories about the effects of the Genocide was longing for one’s homeland, one’s lost home, lost lands, and lost identities. Perhaps this was more pervasive than sadness for the lost lives. Many of the participants pointed out

that in their everyday it was a painful realization that they were living in a foreign land. It is remarkable that the respondents talk about Syria as a foreign land, or at best as a second homeland, perhaps sometimes as a home, but almost never as homeland (*hayrenik* in Armenian). Similarly interesting is that they spoke about Armenia as their homeland, even though not everyone had visited the Republic, and those who had, had not found the homeland of their imagination. Yet it was their homeland, the only one they had. What was lost to Turks, or still under Turkish “occupation,” was for them part of the whole homeland. Often those stories were mixed with anger, pain, hatred or dislike toward Turks, or even Muslims in general. The woman from Aleppo, an excerpt from whose account we saw above, talked about that hate and anxiety. Below she elaborates about her emotions.

First of all, being deprived of a homeland was very hard for us. It is not a small thing to be deprived of a homeland and to be a minority in a foreign country, even though the Syrian people have been very hospitable toward us and they gave us more rights than to other minorities, to be honest. But it was not easy for us to have the feeling of being cut off, deprived of our homeland. And also, there was the feeling of revenge, the desire to take revenge and, honestly, hate toward the Turks, always. Because it was impossible to hear all that and simply forgive the Turks. Especially when we were growing up, and in literature we read about the life of our intellectuals and what our intellectuals have written. [...] I can truthfully say this. [...] So, you would walk in Aleppo through the Armenian neighbourhoods, hearing Armenian, you would enter the Armenian school and there all the students would line up and pray in Armenian, “Our Father,” but after that there is a ceremony of the flag in Arabic. Under the Syrian flag we would sing the hymn of Syria in Arabic. Of course, we are grateful to that people, but every time when the hymn was sung I would get emotional as to “why these 600 students that are lined up here should not be in front of the Armenian flag and should not sing “Our Homeland” [Armenia’s anthem]. Why are we here, what kind of fate is this, why are we forced to be here? I am telling it, this does not mean we did not love Syria, but it was not home for us. It was not home. (A woman from Aleppo)

Among other losses haunting them are markers of a lost identity: their last names, their language, or their religion. In some cases, they had to change these to survive, in others they were changed as a result of the deportations. One of the respondents told me that their grandparents’ names were changed as they crossed into Syria. They were asked their names but since they did not understand Arabic, they thought they were asked where

they were coming from and gave the name of the region, city or the village they were from. So, the Arab official wrote down those names as their last names. This way many Armenians lost the *-yan/-ian* suffix at the end of their last names, which is a marker of Armenianness for many.

One woman described the challenge of not having an Armenian name.

I think the story of the Genocide affected everyone's lives. Personally, in my life the hardest thing was my name, because in the Armenian school there were not many who did not have Armenian names and those who did not have Armenian last names were always asked whether they were Armenians. So, I always asked, "Why is it that *my* last name had to be different?" When I was little it was a pain for me, but growing up I feel proud because it represents the history of my extended family. (A woman from Aleppo)

As we see, later the respondent found a new meaning to construct her "lost Armenianness," her name had the history of her family in it, and as such became meaningful to her.

The second one was the issue of language. Some of the survivors did not speak Armenian. One female respondent told me how her great-grandfather was forced to forget Armenian in order to survive. His family was slaughtered and strangers (Armenians) saved him. On the way to Syria, they told him not to speak Armenian in order to hide his identity. "How many times he was beaten to forget Armenian," she told me. Later, when she and her siblings heard Turkish from their grandmother (his daughter), they asked her why she spoke Turkish, "the language of the enemy." Many others also told me that the language of their grandparents was Turkish; the adults spoke Turkish among themselves but spoke Armenian to the children. Others watched Turkish TV and warned the children to "learn it, to know it, but never speak it, as those had massacred us." I should note that for many Armenians after the Genocide, the only language that they knew was Turkish, and the unwillingness to speak the language of their executioners, which was the only

language they spoke, was in a way also a loss of identity⁶¹ and put people in search of a new one.

At home, we always heard them [stories] and we also heard them at school. At school the teachers always reminded us that we had a past, and we were proud of that but at the same time it was painful. What was the reason that we were in Syria and not in Armenia? You know, since our childhood I asked if our mother tongue was Armenian, why we were not in Armenia and why we were here, we were always curious about that. Our parents, teachers, they always reminded us that we were Armenians but we were forced to live in Syria because that's how it happened, our destiny was like that. (A young woman from Aleppo)

The above excerpts demonstrate how the trauma of the Genocide is omnipresent in people's lives not just in the form of stories, but also in the form of feelings of deprivation. But the trauma that deprived them of a homeland and identity (or some of its markers), in some cases also became a reason for a stronger identity.

Feeling "More Armenian"

Another way that transgenerational trauma manifested itself in the lives of Syrian Armenians was feeling *more* Armenian. Perhaps this was the most common answer that I got to my question: "How did the Genocide story affect you?": being more attached to their Armenianness, loving their language, being proud of what they are. They were able

⁶¹ Tachjian (2009) writes about the decision of the Armenian elite to boycott "everything Turkish" after the Genocide, and about numerous men and women in Aleppo and Syria who were Turkish speakers. It is unimaginable to try to boycott not just products, but the language you are most comfortable with. Whether these people were able to change the language and speak Armenian like in the case of some of the respondents, or whether they continued speaking Turkish as other respondents told me they did (as a result, feeling as "traitors of the nation"), it had to be a very difficult choice and a traumatic experience.

to stay “good Armenians” because their parents, grandparents, and teachers “kept telling us about things that had happened, which they had heard from their parents. I had the good luck of knowing, I have searched, I have read.” This knowing made them feel very sad, angry, but it also made them remain Armenian.

How shall I say this? Our schools and our clubs made the Armenianness, the tricolour [Armenian flag] to course in your veins. We grew up with the national spirit, so our stories were always told, spoken, we were always demanders.⁶² Always! When I was in school, I was taking Armenian history, our stories, I mean, in the end they were forbidden, but it continued in the clubs. [...] How it affected me? I am very Armenian-loving [there is a separate word for this in Armenian, *hayaser*], I love, I worship my language and now my only effort is that my kids — they already speak Armenian very well, very fluently, in every way, reading and writing — my only effort is that they do not forget and become even more advanced, there is no language sweeter than our language, I think. They tried to get rid of Armenians but they will not succeed [laughs]. (A woman from Aleppo)

A man from Damascus also reported that those stories gave him a stronger bond with his ethnic identity. Many participants thought that cherishing those stories, remembering them, writing them down, and passing them down was how they helped the Armenian cause. During the interviews or the initial phone call that I had before the interviews, I was often asked if through my research I hoped to help the Armenian cause, something that was very important to many Armenians.

I mean as Armenians, we always protected our patriotism. There in Syria, well perhaps maybe in other countries, it does not matter who marries foreigners, but in our parts [in Syria] Armenians married only Armenians. And in the opposite case, if someone had a boyfriend or, without the family's approval, went out with anyone from another ethnicity, they would look at it very negatively and I am like that too. (A woman from Aleppo)

When asked what marrying a Muslim had to do with the Genocide for her, she answered: “You know we are Christians, we want to preserve that.” Marrying a Christian Arab

⁶² This is a term that Armenians use to indicate that they demand justice for the Genocide and the lost lands.

happened very rarely, but it was more acceptable than going out with a Muslim, according to the respondent (an opinion shared by others too).

It is interesting how a woman from Aleppo talks about the marriage of a Genocide survivor girl at the age of 11 to her, the Aleppan woman's, mother's uncle, after I asked her if knowing about the Genocide affected her.

Immensely, very-very much. When I looked at her face, I remember, one day I was still little, when I asked my mom, "Mom, this auntie was 13 when she had her child, do we also need to have children when we are 13?" "No, my girl!" she said. "Her situation was completely different, etc., they rescued her from the Genocide and quickly married her to my uncle so they could save her from the Turks." She always said this. And my mom's aunt would always say that her two sisters — my mom's two aunts — their hair was tied together, there are eyewitnesses — and they were thrown into the river. (A woman from Aleppo)

We see here that marrying an 11-year-old girl off was seen as salvation from "the Turks." Wanting to stay Armenian, to preserve the Armenian language is present in the interview with a mother from Aleppo.

A woman from Aleppo: Today I am a mother and I say to all mothers: While the Armenian mother lives, the Armenian language should not die. Because we see in foreign countries, even in Aleppo, if the mother is Armenian, how is it possible for the child not to know Armenian? It gives me such pain.

HT: Would it be correct to say that these stories of the Genocide made you want to be more Armenian?

A woman from Aleppo: Absolutely, absolutely! And as I said, growing up and during the last year of my studies, this war and being in a Muslim country affected me greatly. [...] The fear was not mostly toward the Muslims but rather toward the Turks, because when we hear the stories that these were Turks who did it, and that's how it was repeated for our ears, but I consider them both (the Turks and the Muslims) the same.

In this and some other excerpts we see distrust toward Muslims, and I discuss it below in greater detail.

Distrust Toward Turks or Muslims

Among the common effects of the memory of the Genocide were perpetual fear, distrust, and dislike toward Muslims. Whether for the differences they had with Muslims in their everyday lives, or the reported harassment of the Armenian girls and women by Muslims in case they dared to dress a bit differently (i.e., in a less conservative manner), or because the perpetrators of the Genocide were followers of this religion, most of the participants had a certain attitude toward Muslims. It was common, within the same interview, to talk about the Muslims of Syria as kind and hospitable people who were respectful toward Armenians and who never showed any negative attitude toward them, and then minutes later to say that after all they were from the same religious group as the Turks, who had massacred them.

When speaking about the armed groups bombing their homes during the Syrian war, the participants described them as “not our Muslims,” who would never do such things, but as “other Muslims” who had come from other places and countries. It seemed that there was some kind of struggle going on, to balance these two “realities” together in one’s life: what they heard from their grandparents on the one hand (and what they witnessed during the Syrian war), and what they had seen having lived with Muslims in Syria for decades. One of the respondents told me that his grandfather had taught him to never trust Muslims, even though he had been talking about Turks. The respondent agreed that “they” (the Muslims of Syria) had accepted them into their country, but Armenians were hard working and they made a good life as a result of hard work and thanks to their own skills. In other words, they deserved what they got. Muslims were often jealous of them, he said, and it never crossed their minds that Armenians were

better off than Muslims because they worked harder than them.⁶³ Another respondent described the Arab Spring as “when everything Muslim started,” and many Armenians saw the Syrian war as a sectarian competition for the country, its resources, and its leadership. The “Muslims” (mostly referring to the Sunnis), I was told, wanted the whole country to be theirs; they were not satisfied with what they had, and they wanted others (including the Armenians, other minorities and Alawis) gone, and they did not even hide it. The Armenians, on the contrary, it was claimed, never had such a desire (this subject is discussed later). The difference between Muslims and Armenians was not mentioned purely in the context of the uprisings.

We know the difference between Armenians and Muslims, there is always the anxiety that the Muslim person has really different views compared to us Armenians, without even knowing that we were Armenians. So, we, as young girls, were always in fear, always more protected by the family. And that’s the reality we grew up with and saw. (A woman from Aleppo)

After the war started, this woman saw more and more Muslims in Armenian neighbourhoods and realized that “it was their country, it was obvious that we were refugees.”

The distrust toward Turks or Muslims came up in different contexts. A man from Damascus recalled the period when the relationship between Erdogan and Assad became very strong, and the Mukhabarat (the intelligence services) warned the Armenians not to do anything to jeopardize the relationship with Turkey. He says:

They [the Mukhabarat] came often and talked to me and it was clear they were just coming to see what I was doing. Their reasoning was that, you know, we need to improve our relationships, economic and stuff, and you will benefit from that too. The country will flourish, including

⁶³ It is interesting that an older participant brought this up. Perhaps he, unlike people from younger generations, was familiar with the situation which Hourani, writing in 1947, describes with regard to Armenians in Lebanon in his *Minorities in the Arab world*: “They [Armenians] are also disliked [by Muslims and Arabs in general] for having come into the country destitute and being now prosperous” (p.67).

economically. I told them, “Whatever you want to do or say, I want to tell you something, after all, you are going to regret.” I told them that. Some of them contacted me later and said, “What you said was right.” I said, “You are going to regret, because we know the Turks well. We know them better than you do, you are being fooled.” (A man from Damascus)

A woman from Aleppo told me:

Because you [addressing me] were in the country [Armenia] and we were deprived from that and the feeling of being deprived creates a stronger counter-feeling (*hakazdetsutyun*) in a human being. I mean when I went to Armenia and communicated with the Armenians of the Republic (*Hayastantsi*) I did not feel as much hatred against the Turks [among the Armenians of the Republic] as we have, because we carried the direct consequences of their [the Turks'] actions. That's why it should not be the same. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman, talking about the similarity between the Genocide and their lived experiences (i.e., the experiences of present-day Armenians experiencing the civil war and refugeedom), also showed distrust toward coexistence with Muslims, a motive that came up in interviews with other respondents as well.

Perhaps the similarity is that Armenians are refugees again. But it is not the same. Today they [the Armenians] came by airplanes and not marching through Deir Zor. They did not suffer the way their ancestors did. But they are a generation that left their countries and migrated and came here. Not because Armenians are wanderers (*taparakan*) but it is because of the country they lived in. It is a Muslim country that led them to be in this state. What I think, and I am sure that not only now but even after centuries, as long as Armenians live in any Muslim country, one day even if not they themselves but their descendants will be wanderers. So, the Armenian people will know they need to get out and not stay among Muslims. (A woman from Aleppo)

Compare this to a story by a man from Aleppo:

A man from Aleppo: There is only one thing that I want to tell and I want you to mention this in your book. To be honest, we Armenians, since the Genocide until now, we have not learned that. Unfortunately, we are a nation of wanderers (*taparakan*) and it is not going to change after this either. Unfortunately, there were 55,000 Armenians in Aleppo and they had achieved a lot, great positions, they had successful businesses, they made a lot of money, but we still have not learned this thing from 1915 [the year of the Genocide], and we still are struggling a lot and we will continue, because to this day it continues and will continue, as they are people who still remain in the Middle East, unfortunately I can't blame them, as the homeland's situation is even worse. Even here, you, me. It was too bad that those huge businesses, these numerous companies, were closed in Aleppo and the Armenian people, who for decades had achieved that, there is a big question mark, from the beginning, when 1915 happened: why did they not learn from that, think about that, and why did they not move away from there? I can't say that whatever happened [now] is good, and they will learn from this, because it will actually be worse in the coming years, nothing good will come out of this. The Armenians will continue spreading all over the world, but in fact it was really bad and in my father's case, he was an employer [a boss] for 30 years and all he had, all he has built – right? – is lost in this kind of situation. So, I blame them. Why did you not feel that 100 or 75 years

ago this thing [the Genocide] happened, and believe me, there were many successful businesses that were among the top 10 in the Middle East, in the Middle East!

HT: A small clarification: so, you are saying that you blame them, meaning Armenians, because they did not understand that they should have left the Middle East earlier?

A man from Aleppo: Yes, not when the war started in Syria, not that, but from the beginning of, like, when in 1915 these people were massacred and were removed from their countries, and became wanderers in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Aleppo, okay there were massacres, but after that the homeland became independent,⁶⁴ after that why did they not move?

HT: So, you are saying why did they not go to Armenia and why did they stay in Arab countries?

A man from Aleppo: Yes! Honestly, what I see and what I have read, I see this as a second Genocide for us, to be honest, whatever happened in 1915, also happened in 2011, it was a Genocide. Of course, the numbers were not as big, but still it was like a Genocide. There was no one left in Aleppo. Today in Aleppo, in the entire Syria, there are barely 5000 Armenians left.

HT: So, you see a connection between 1915 and today's war?

A man from Aleppo: Yes, yes!

HT: What is that connection for you? Armenians migrating/being fleeing again?

A man from Aleppo: Yes, yes...

The trauma-memory that lives in Armenians (and not just Syrian Armenians) manifests through complex feelings. One manifestation is the feeling of not having stood up against Turkey's everlasting fascism against Armenians throughout history. The recent racist remarks of Erdogan⁶⁵ and the hunt against Armenians in Europe, particularly in France and Germany, by the Turkish far-right nationalist group "Grey Wolves," reminded many Armenians why boycotting Turkey and being so sensitive toward everything Turkish, as

⁶⁴ The Republic of Armenia became independent from the Soviet Union in 1991.

⁶⁵ In 2020, Erdogan used the expression "leftovers of the sword," which usually refers to minorities in the Ottoman Empire, and particularly to Armenians (Bulut 2020). Naturally, this raised strong feelings among Armenians and especially among Genocide survivors.

well as their powerless hatred, are still alive.⁶⁶ So naturally, for many of those who had any relation to anything “Turkish” in one form or another, there was the feeling of anxiety or discomfort. Similar feelings were shared by a young man from Aleppo who lives in Toronto now. He told me that he does not claim that he is a pure Armenian, as there are Turks in his surrounding, but his one Turkish friend knows about the Armenian Genocide and agrees that what the Turkish government did was totally wrong. So, he has good relations with him and he even speaks Turkish with him. Many other respondents also spoke about how hard it was to live with the anger, hatred, and the realization of being “the other” in a foreign land. It is noteworthy that, for many, the Syrian war confirmed that they lived in a foreign land, that they were “the others,” that history and fate still haunted them a hundred years later, and that it made them better understand what their ancestors had gone through.⁶⁷ Below I briefly discuss how respondents saw similarities between their situation and Genocide survivors, and how this war became a space for trauma reactivation and reproduction.

⁶⁶ Vahe Tachjian (2009:67-68) writes: “The newspaper, *Hussaper*, published in Cairo, Egypt, set the general tone of this campaign from 1918 onwards. Garo Balian (1918) wrote on the front page:

‘Hatred is our heart’s invincible armour and the pledge of our nation’s salvation. The Armenian who doesn’t know how to hate the Turk is a traitor to the nation. But hatred mustn’t remain a word without meaning. We must declare a boycott, in our daily existence and throughout our lives, of Turkish language and music, which have craftily, like German spies, dared to invade our temples and the thresholds of our homes. Boycott Turkish customs, Turkish production, and, finally, boycott everything that is Turkish!’”

⁶⁷ Aftandilian (2016) writes “For the Armenian-American soldiers who liberated the concentration camps in Germany and Austria, the war brought home to them in a very graphic way what their own parents had gone through” (p.207).

Similarity with their Situation

There was no one way the participants saw this trauma in relation to their lives and what was happening to them. Many referred to the Genocide as something against which to “measure” their experiences of forced migration and losing a homeland, being refugees again, being in a foreign land, being cut off from their roots and extended families. However, most of them, even when finding similarities, agreed that what they went through was not as horrible as what their grandparents had gone through.

Hasmik, these are the second massacres [*yerkrord jard*]. I can only say this to you, yes, during the first ones they ran away barefoot, this second one, they left on airplanes, this is the only difference. At least they [the Syrian Armenians] could take their clothes when they left. These are the second massacres, there is nothing I can tell you. Once again, everyone started from zero. It is Armenian destiny to build their nests, to see them ruined, to go somewhere else and build them again. That's it. (A woman from Aleppo)

A young man from Aleppo also used the term *erkrord jard* (“second massacres”), drawing parallels between the events of 1915 and 2011, even though he acknowledged that in terms of numbers they cannot be compared. Not everyone used such strong language to refer to the Syrian war, not everyone necessarily saw it as a second massacre or a second Genocide, but they felt that their and their grandparents' fates were shared. “The Armenian destiny,” “a wandering Armenian,” or “history repeating itself” were the expressions I heard most often. Even those who differentiated very strongly between the moving forces and motivations of the Genocide and the Syrian war, those who pointed out that unlike in 1915, here Armenians were not the main target, even they found that the “outcome was still the same” for them. They lost their homes. Of course, for some, their homes remain as they are, with most of their belongings inside and untouched, so

in this sense they can still go back to them. But for others their homes were either taken away, controlled by “terrorists or whoever they are” (according to a woman from Damascus), or destroyed altogether. Participants often told me how within Aleppo they had to move to a relative’s or a friend’s house, as some Armenian neighbourhoods were destroyed or occupied by the “ugly ones.”

In the case of the Palestinian Nakba⁶⁸ (al-Hardan 2016), as it is told by the Palestinian refugees in Syria, it seems that each family’s individual experiences were different. The same could be said also about the Syrian war and its effect on the Syrian Armenians, but not with regard the Genocide story. Could it be due to the lack of an organized social or cultural process that the Nakba and the Syrian war did not become a collective “homogenized” trauma? In the case of the Palestinians in Syria, perhaps there were no resources or enough efforts invested in this process, and in the case of the Syrian Armenians — there has not been enough time. For the latter, there is perhaps another reason as well. The powerful collective trauma narrative of the Armenians, which is one of their core identity markers (if not *the one*: see Bakalian 1993), smaller traumas (in terms of their scale and impact for the Armenian nation collectively) might not have enough cultural importance to become *The Trauma*.⁶⁹ On the other hand, perhaps the existence of the master narrative as an interpretive lens for people’s firsthand experiences might also have brought the lived experiences of the refugees closer to the national trauma,

⁶⁸ “Catastrophe” in Arabic.

⁶⁹ Gao (2015:111) writes that the Nanking massacre in Maoist China did not become cultural trauma, because “class struggle” was constructed as *the trauma* for everyone. In her words, “the intense trauma-drama of class struggle occupied the core of this era’s cultural trauma.”

and in turn made their firsthand lived experiences of the Syrian war a space for the 100-year-old trauma to be reproduced. And the comparison between the two helps the individuals to understand their experiences in relation to what they already knew.

A man in his 60s from Aleppo, going through war and migration, and unsuccessfully trying to get help from the Republic of Armenia, felt his experiences to be similar to those of the survivors of 1915, when people were left unprotected: “We had a state and we didn’t have a state.” By “state” he refers to the Republic of Armenia, which was too young, too weak and according to some, not enough committed to Syrian Armenians. Otherwise, in his words, “what business did we have here [i.e., in Canada]?”

Interestingly, comparisons between “now” and “then” did take place during the interviews, but when the question was asked directly (“Do you see a similarity between the Syrian war and the Armenian Genocide?”), the participants started reflecting on it and did not always find specific examples. To demonstrate this, below I am presenting a large segment from my interview with a young woman from Damascus.

A woman from Damascus: When I was young, hearing the story... It’s different when you are young, because you don’t understand it. I think now, when I am older, my parents are still back home in Damascus, so I am here with my brother, but almost every year I go back home and I visit my parents and one of the last times my mom gave me the CD [with a recording] of her story, and when I heard it again as an adult, it made a whole lot of difference because you understand [...] what actually happened. When we were young, it was just like we went to the desert, we died [note here the first-person pronoun “we”], it’s sad, it upsets you, but when you are older and you hear the details of the story, I think it just reminds you of human cruelty. It’s kind of similar to the situation happening now in Syria, it is just, it’s sad. I mean the things that they had to go through are difficult.

HT: Absolutely. So, do you think there are similarities between what you went through and what your grandparents went through?

A woman from Damascus: In a way yes. Yes and no. Because when we were living in Syria, we had a great life. I am not gonna lie, we had a great life, we were living very comfortably. But I can’t say we were not living in a bubble. Because we had the Armenian community, we had our friends at school, we lived in the capital, so life in a city and the capital is different than anything that’s happening around us in rural areas, which we don’t know about, right? So, when the war starts you start hearing for example about the names of towns that you never knew existed and then you start hearing about what’s going on with people, [things you] never knew would happen. Yes, there are similarities, not in my experience, because I can’t say anything like that happened to me, thank

God, but I know that it happened to people I know, not close friends but people I know well and all the stories they hear from. So yes there are similarities. (A woman from Damascus)

Sometimes similarities were mentioned not in relation to my question, as in the case of a middle-aged man from Aleppo.

Of course, they [the Genocide stories] affected me. These were horrible stories and horrible experiences. Every time we remembered them [the stories], they hurt us a lot. Until today we transmit the same stories to the children, so they know how they [the grandparents] were treated, how it was. Put yourselves in their shoes. Today, we, in a way, not exactly the same way, fled Syria. We were almost in the same situation. We can't of course compare with the Genocide, but I always tell the kids: "See what the great-grandparents went through and what we went through when we left Syria, these are similar stories, theirs was even more terrible. So those left us with terrible memories. (A man from Aleppo)

For some, the similarity between the Genocide of 1915 and the Syrian war was the involvement of the Turkish element (as discussed later in the thesis). Even though the Syrian war, and the fighting parties in it, did not specifically target the Armenians (or even when they did, hurting the Armenians was not the main goal), many Armenians felt particularly targeted. Here is a segment from my interview with a male respondent from Damascus:

HT: Any similarities with today's war? [referring to the Genocide]

A man from Damascus: Of course! There were these armed groups that were pro-Turkish and there were groups who were of Turkish origin: Syrian or from other countries like Turkistan.⁷⁰ Soldiers who came from China, Uyghur, those of Turkish origin who joined these armed groups and were financed by Turkey and in demonstrations, this was filmed, they were yelling, threatening us that "whatever the Turks left unfinished [i.e., slaughtering Armenians], we are going to finish. Be ready, we are going to behead you," and so on. So, we saw that and we heard that.

HT: Are we talking about ISIS here?

A man from Damascus: Not necessarily ISIS, no, those are not ISIS. Those are an armed group that was sponsored by Turkey and is of Turkish origin and the names of their groups are after the

⁷⁰ It is interesting that there is no country called "Turkistan." One could assume that the author is simply articulating his fear of anyone Turkish or related to Turks.

Turkish sultans: sultan Murat, sultan Selim, sultan Muhammad. They did not have anything to do with ISIS.

HT: When you said they were yelling, threatening you, can you give me an example? Was it addressed to Armenians? How do you know it was addressed to Armenians and not to anyone other than them?

A man from Damascus: It was particularly against Armenians. When the big attack started in Aleppo, they were saying to Armenians: "Be ready, we have come to slaughter you." It happened.

For some respondents, the similarity was very strongly articulated even though the differences with the Genocide were also acknowledged.

A woman from Aleppo: Always! We called it the second forced displacement, the second forced migration, to be precise. Maybe those days they had to walk all the way and be killed on the way and we had transportation to leave Syria, but the feeling is still the same. It is the same: again, forced migration, again starting from the alphabet, again a longing for the country where you were born and raised, and being separated [from it].

HT: So, in a sense, Syria became a homeland, it became home?

A woman from Aleppo: A second homeland. We grew up in the Diaspora always with a longing for the homeland, the homeland is one, it is Armenia. Our second homeland was Syria. (A woman from Aleppo)

In other cases, the similarity was not necessarily with the war itself and being targeted, but the consequences of the war, as we see in another woman's answer below.

HT: Was there anything in this war that reminded you of the Genocide, that you saw some likeness [between the war and the Genocide]?

A woman from Aleppo: Honestly, until now I feel pain: why should the destiny of Armenians be like this? Always wanderers, from place to place, from place to place. Even my situation today, you should consider that I saw the same things as in the Genocide. Why? Because I am completely alone in Canada. I came with my husband, we had issues with my husband, we already had had them, but they became more serious, we were forced to separate. So now I am alone with my kids, I want to bring my parents here, but my income does not allow me to do the paperwork and bring them. And because it was my husband who worked with me [in our household], it is impossible. The resources of Hay Doun are also over [Hay Doun temporarily closed the refugee sponsorship program]. Now I am here in Canada, with my two kids, alone, I have no family.

When comparing the two experiences, the Genocide always was the strongest, the most painful one among the two.

Yes, there is [similarity]! I also lived the war in a way, because I was there until I was 16 and I was at home and a bomb fell close to our house and we had to run away in our home clothes. That moment, I don't know, I always remember that my ancestors also left their houses and ran away. The same way my parents and I left the house. Of course, it is not exactly the same, but I think the path of both is very similar. Of course, the pain of leaving a homeland and a second homeland is not the same, because what my ancestors left was their homeland and yes, I can't say it was not

my homeland there and it was not my land [Syria], but I can't also say that I would have a feeling similar to leaving Armenia. It was my homeland, not like Armenia, but still it was painful. (A young woman from Aleppo)

A woman from Aleppo in her 50s, when reflecting on the Genocide and its effect on her life, came to the conclusion that

every nation, or should I say every generation, has to see a war: They, at that time, saw the Turkish massacres, we saw the massacre of Syria, now the children of Lebanon see the massacres of Lebanon. So, every generation must see something. That's what I've learned. [...] Yes, they were forcefully driven out from their home, we were forcefully driven out from our homes. It is the same thing.

Not every respondent had a very clear-cut answer why, or even if, the similarity existed. Sometimes they themselves mentioned the differences, yet insisted that there were similarities, or even called what happened to them because of the Syrian war a "Genocide."

A woman from Aleppo: I feel very sorry that we saw the second massacres, the Genocide, but we did not suffer like our elders. Canada opened a good door for us, we were lucky and we came here of our own will.

HT: So, you see a similarity between you and your elders.

A woman from Aleppo: Yes, of course, for us this was the second Genocide, right?

HT: What exactly did you find similar? What reminded you of it?

A woman from Aleppo: Whatever our elders told us they had left: their homes, their goods, their everything, even their families, and they came, all of them were scattered around different countries, it happened also to us: we went to different countries, families [i.e., extended families] fell apart: the mother is in one country, the son/daughter is in another. I mean, it is the same story, but there were no massacres. We saw the war there, we saw the wounded, we saw everything, but it was a different kind of massacre for us. Yet it was almost the same story, after 100 years the same story repeated itself. (A woman from Aleppo in her 40s)

The passages above show that the trauma-memory of the Armenian Genocide was haunting descendants of Syrian Armenians in different forms and via different feelings, including the feeling of anger, fear, distrust, guilt, loss in different forms, a heightened self-preservation reflex, confused identities, etc. It informs their seeing of their everyday actualities in that light in such a way that a man in his 60s from Aleppo told me that this

war also had a goal to remove people from their roots. “Now I got to Canada, how am I going to go back and demand my lands, my grandfather’s lands in Erzurum [in modern Turkey/western Armenia]?”⁷¹ Who planned it, he couldn’t say, but he was sure everyone had their fingers in this war, the way they had had their fingers in the Genocide of 1915.

At the beginning of this chapter, I demonstrated how the trauma transmission had happened in the lives of the participants. Below, I want to elaborate on the omnipresence of that trauma, in the form of new details that are added to the main narrative with the passage of time.

With time the stories started acquiring more details. When I was a child, I did not know many details. For example, when I was little, I only knew that it was because of the Genocide that my last name was changed, but I did not have more details. Probably they thought about my psychology, so that I don’t get very upset. As I grew up, my grandmother started giving me more details. And I learned that the father of my great-grandfather was beheaded in front of his son [her great-grandfather]. Before, I only knew that he saw his death and came to Syria, but little by little I learned the details more and more during subsequent years. (A young woman from Aleppo)

A mother from Aleppo shares a similar experience.

Always, there were new questions, like how did it happen, when did it happen, where were you at that time? Other stories were also told. We became interested in details at other times. For example, my maternal great-grandfather was a college teacher in Western Armenia [the city’s name is deleted to protect the participant’s anonymity]. During April [around April 24th] he was arrested and for many months he could not come back. He eventually returned very sick and one night he lay down, and that night he asked my great-grandmother for an apple. Those days they could not find any apples, so he died without eating an apple. My mother told us that her grandmother until her death would not eat apples because that night she was unable to give an apple to her husband. We came to be interested in these kinds of details. Often the subject came up and later, when we got married and had families and children, we encouraged our mothers to tell those stories to our children. The same thing happened, they [the children] also became interested. They also asked questions. So those subjects were always present in our homes. (A woman from Aleppo)

⁷¹ I should mention here that this man’s belief about certain great powers’ motivation to draw him further is also shared by some Armenians in Lebanon. Ara Sanjian (2015) mentions that many Armenians in Lebanon believed that during the Lebanese civil war Turkey was unofficially “encouraging the emigration of Armenians from Lebanon to western countries by asking the latter to facilitate the granting of entry visas” (p.12), with the hope that drawing Armenians away from Turkish borders (and also historical-Armenian borders) would discourage Armenian demands for their historic lands (ibid).

As we see, for some participants the details were brought to their lives through their own initiative. They had started asking for more details growing up, digging deeper, doing their research, reading, asking questions. As a result, it seems that the Genocide story was evolving with them like a living organism, and “growing” as they grew older, and evolving. It is interesting to note also, that many of the respondents reported that the Syrian war made them understand or see the Genocide through a different light, to have more empathy toward the grandparents or great-grandparents.

Summary

The growing literature on intergenerational trauma and its social nature do not leave any doubt that there is a legacy to it and that it is “real” and omnipresent in peoples’ lived experiences even when removed from the event itself by generations. Janet Jacobs’s (2016) research took this scholarship to a different level by showing how this transmission of trauma actually happens, and what the main spaces for it are, such as storytelling, sites where a tragedy has taken place, rituals. I similarly tried to show the main spaces where the intergenerational trauma is transferred in the Syrian Armenian community, such as storytelling in the family, outside the family, at schools and in Armenian cultural centres, as well as the commemorative rituals on April 24th, around which the trauma was annually reactivated. I also introduced a new “space” in the form of a new traumatic experience, where the trauma is being reproduced and reactivated. Even though this trauma, stemming from the Syrian war, is distinct from the original one, and has little relation to it

in terms of its perpetrators, or the targeted population (although there was the Turkish element and the involvement of Turkey in the war, this was not a war against, or an organized annihilation of, Armenians), still it is often seen, as the abovementioned excerpts have shown, as either a continuation of the Genocide, or in relation to the Genocide.⁷²

The pogroms in Baku and Sumgait, the ensuing Karabakh war of 1991, and the recent Karabakh war (Sept. 27-Nov. 10, 2020) are particularly vivid examples of how unhealed traumas become reproduced every time new traumatic experiences happen. As such, the original trauma, still unhealed and unreconciled, is reborn and becomes more present in people's lives, this time richer and with the emotions of the traumatic experiences lived firsthand.

One of the interesting nuances that I noticed while talking to people is that all the children were very interested, almost driven to the story of the Genocide, the lost land, and the massacres. Why would children want to hear about this, to record and write down those stories? All the more so that, often, these tellings were followed by crying, emotional outbursts, upset moods, anger, or silence by their loved ones.

I would like to suggest that for these children, "having a story" had to do with identity construction and in-group membership. Perhaps they found that this story is something that "makes" them Armenian. Perhaps having those stories in their families made them as Armenian as other children at their schools or neighbourhoods. As I mentioned above, some of the respondents had heard about these stories and wanted to know if their families also had one, or they went to school and told their teachers about

⁷² As mentioned above, this was trending also in newspaper articles (e.g., Alia Malek 2012).

those stories. In a foreign country, which is how the respondents saw Syria, perhaps this powerful narrative was what connected them together and constructed a large part of their Armenianness, as well as giving them an escape from being refugees in a foreign land.

Unlike in the case of transmitting the memories of the Holocaust, where family photography has played a big role (Hirsch 2008:112, 115-116), the Armenian postmemory in Syria was shaped through other media — stories, rituals, both in public and private space, as well as visiting the actual and symbolic sites of atrocities. It is also shaped by, and itself shapes, new traumatic experiences, which become trauma sites for reproduction and transmission along with other such sites — dreams,⁷³ bodies, and physical spaces. Cho has (2008) argued that the person and body of Yanggongju — a sex worker during the Korean war — became the embodiment and the site of unspoken trauma stemming from US-Korean military history, the history of hegemonic power, colonization, loss, war and even nation building. The new traumatic experiences (such as war and refugeedom) become a site for Armenians for remembering and transmitting. How the intergenerational trauma shapes the perception of modern-day events and who does what (or who refuses to do what) for the intergenerational trauma to happen the way it does, is discussed in the next chapter.

⁷³ Cho (2008) notes that the trauma is often revealed in the dreamwork of diasporic Koreans (p. 151).

CHAPTER 5: HISTORICAL CONTEXT: SYRIA, WAR AND MIGRATION

“Can the memory of genocide be transformed into action and resistance?” (Hirsch 2008:104)

In the previous chapter I described the transgenerational trauma of the Armenian Genocide and how it was omnipresent in the lives of Syrian Armenians. I also showed how people reactivate the trauma in storytelling, rituals, and sites of atrocities, but also in new (and in this case unrelated) traumatic experiences. My main goal was to show how such transgenerational traumas materialize in people’s doings and become a form of coordination. In this chapter I shift my focus to investigate how what people do “now and here” can be informed by a large-scale coordination or “ruling relations” that originate in other places and at other times.

In this chapter I discuss how certain vulnerabilities that this group as a Christian minority in a Muslim majority country carried, along with the abovementioned trauma, became pivotal in constructing their collective identity and informing their doings, and delineated their engagement and integration, and their relationship with the state and other parts of the society. These multiple (real or perceived) vulnerabilities of the Armenians informed their everyday actualities and their views of certain notions such as rights, freedom, democracy, development, loyalty, and citizenship. As such, I argue that the social environment of the Syrian Armenians, where they had to do the everyday work of being diaspora members, loyal citizens to the state and to the regime, a minority group, and Christian Armenians, was not only constructed by the actual institutions and

organizations, but also by their past, which was omnipresent in their lives in the form of successive traumas and vulnerabilities.⁷⁴

The main broad point I make is that the Syrian Armenians had to live with, manage, and negotiate two levels of reality — a horizontal one and a vertical one. The horizontal (contemporaneous) one comprised their everyday realities, economic opportunities and limitations, the political situation, the geography, relations with other groups, and often also relations with other Armenian communities in Armenia and in the Diaspora. The vertical (diachronic) one included the memories and the traumas of the Genocide, displacement, discrimination as a minority group in a foreign land, and pogroms they had experienced several decades prior in Syria. These two levels of reality interacted with one another and influenced one another, informing the choices the Armenians in Syria made.

Below I briefly describe the history of the Armenians in Syria, since their arrival there after the Genocide in 1915. Afterwards, I discuss the lives of the Syrian Armenians as told by my participants. I organize my data around several analytical points to show how the present is inseparable from the past. I show this by focusing on several topics that my participants spoke about: Syria from the standpoint of a minority group (life and work experiences); minority rights; the Arab Spring and demonstrations; democracy, loyalty, and freedom; finally, why support Assad, and what this involved. In some instances, it was impossible to separate these topics from one another, without the risk

⁷⁴ I am not arguing that these vulnerabilities, whether we call them trauma, the past, or history, were the only aspect informing their choices and decisions, but rather that this was also a factor and should be considered in understanding the positionality of the Armenians in Syria when looking into their life stories.

of losing some meaning in the talk. In such cases, I provide the excerpt in whole and refer to it later.

For many Armenians, Syria was the country of their residence, a place where they were born and what many of them called a second homeland or a home. It was also a refuge, a country that took them⁷⁵ in and saved them from ultimate extermination during the Armenian Genocide. For some, it also was an ancestral home where their forebears had lived long before the Genocide, as part of the kingdom of Cilicia (see above). But for most, Syria was someone else's country, someone else's home where they, Armenians, were welcomed (mostly), given lives, rights, and homes, and most importantly, where they had had the opportunity to cultivate their trauma for many years. Nonetheless, they never stopped feeling their "otherness." I start my discussion with a brief historical excursus, which is particularly important as it shows the social environment where the lives and the work of the Syrian Armenians happened.

Armenians in Syria After 1915

Armenians have lived in the territory of Syria from pre-Christian times, and they lived there continuously since the Arab conquests in the 7th century (Hovanissian 1974). However, the majority of today's Armenian population in Syria was established as a result of the Armenian Genocide. The refugees who entered Syria were in the worst possible situation, starved, without any means to live and many of them carried typhus and other diseases.

⁷⁵ Factually, it is their grandparents and great-grandparents who were taken in and saved but the participants used the pronoun "we" to refer Armenians as a group, which included themselves.

Hovannisian (1974) writes that although “many of the deportees suffered a cruel fate at the hands of certain Bedouin tribes in the Syrian desert” (p. 19), the majority nevertheless were shown sympathy by the Arabs who themselves had been under Ottoman domination for four centuries. By 1925, Syria was home to around 100,000 Armenians (Hovannisian 1974).⁷⁶ The Armenian community began cultivating cultural and national markers, as if trying to prove that the Turkish attempt to erase the Armenians from the face of the earth had been unsuccessful. Among these markers were churches and schools, cultural centres and communal institutions, which persisted despite the difficult material conditions (Hovannisian 1974:20; Migliorino 2006). This path, however, was not without setbacks and difficulties (including the violence against the Armenian refugees on 26 February 1919, when Armenian homes were attacked by a mob and about 100 Armenians were killed, (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021)), which made the territory of Syria not only a place for immigration for Armenians but also a place of constant emigration (Della Gatta 2019).

The first Armenian caravans of survivors reached Syria during 1915-16, “destitute, physically sick, psychologically battered” (Lust-Okar 1996:55), followed by the Armenian survivors from Cilicia after the French withdrew from it, leaving it under the control of Turkish nationalists (*ibid*).⁷⁷ First, Armenians enjoyed some aid from the French, along with certain protections, which especially in the atmosphere of the hostilities that local

⁷⁶ Based on other scholars’ work and statistical data, Hovannisian (1974) writes that the number of Armenians in Syria was around 150,000 in the mid-1950s and 170,000 in the 1970s.

⁷⁷ Originally, the French promised to establish a state for Armenians on the territory of the historic Armenian kingdom of Cilicia (Lust-Okar 1996).

Arabs (also Kurds and the old Armenian community of Syria) showed toward them, was invaluable for their survival. Later, when the French lost interest in the Armenians and found collaboration with the Turks more beneficial, the Armenians found themselves in an extraordinarily vulnerable situation. Not only were they seen by the locals as representatives of Western colonialist forces, which had already made their situation difficult even when protected by the French. Now they lost that protection, too, losing access to the food and aid they had been receiving (Lust-Okar 1996). Eventually when the French withdrew from Cilicia after the 1921 agreement of Ankara, those Armenians who had survived the killings of Adana in 1909 hurried to leave their homes and join the earlier refugees in Syria (ibid). This event, as well as the actual risks of being associated with the French mandate, were among the reasons why the Armenians of Syria refused to be a playing-card in the hands of the French against the Syrian independence struggle, and did not side with them, thus demonstrating their loyalty to the Syrian state, and later they were praised by the first independent leadership of the Syrian republic for this (Hovannisian 1974; Hourani 1947:84).

Shortly after, however, with the start of the Arab nationalist movement, the Syrian Armenians and especially their leaders, the ARF party, were blamed for being foreign spies. Arrests and persecutions of their leaders, and then pogroms of the Armenian community followed. Being associated with the French became yet another vulnerability for this community with the rising tide of nationalism (Hovannisian 1974: 27).

The collective identities of the Armenian community in Syria were constructed with a strong centrality of those successive traumas (Payaslian 2007). During the 1950s-1960s, as a result of rise of Arab nationalism, Armenian schools, and their cultural and

religious life were brought under state control. The (initially Armenian) names of the Armenian organizations were changed into Arabic ones, the language of instruction at schools was from that point on mostly Arabic, all political newspapers were shut down, and Armenian intellectuals had to leave Syria because of the political climate. Armenians were completely excluded from public life and had no representatives in the parliament between 1963 and 1971 (Migliorino 2006). Strong state control was brought over the Armenian minority's political and cultural arena, including the press and the schools, which were now completely under state control, depriving Armenians of something very important to them: having spaces for cultivating their own identity as a means for self-preservation. Armenian was no longer the language of instruction except in religion classes. Courses in Armenian history, language and literature were eliminated altogether (Hovannisian 1974).

The Armenian church also suffered and the Catholicos (the leader of the Armenian church) was not allowed into Syria until much later, when Hafez al-Assad came to power and when some restrictions over the Armenian community were lifted and partial freedoms were given them, though mostly unofficially. This easing was in the sphere of culture, religion, and communal life, and did not include political activism. In fact, they were granted those freedoms in return for political disengagement (Della Gatta 2019). All this time, the Syrian Armenian leadership remained interested in the Armenian people both locally and internationally and disengaged from Syrian politics (Migliorino 2006).

Among the privileges that the Armenian community received after Hafez al-Assad came to power, was the visit of the Armenian Catholicos to Aleppo in 1972. He was received by the governmental officials (Hovannisian 1974), and was even allowed to visit

Deir Zor; later a museum commemorating the victims of the Genocide and an Armenian church were built here. Migliorino (2006) gives a good summary of how this “agreement” between the Armenian community and the government worked:

As for the Armenians, while it would be inappropriate to speak of a proper “pact” between the regime and the Armenian leadership, the terms of the new relation became gradually clear: the practice of state control over the communal activities of the Armenians would be relaxed in return for the Armenians’ support, or acquiescence. It also became clear that the control levers of the relation were to remain firmly in the hands of the regime: the informality of any concession being made meant that the state was at any time able to “take back” what had been given. The relaxation of state control, the development of a sense of “trust” of the regime towards the community and, on the side of the Armenians, the strict formal respect of the red lines imposed upon them have become – since the 1970s, and up to this day – the pillars of the relation between the Syrian state and the Armenian community. (p.28)

Since then, Armenians remained focused on their cultural and ethnic identities, and unlike other non-Arab minorities, never had any separatist claims in Syria, keeping their focus on the lost lands in Anatolia (Della Gatta 2019:347), an orientation shared by many of my participants. The Armenians’ disengagement from politics (other than having a certain number of representatives both in the parliament and in the leading party, encouraged by Assad after 1971) should not be seen, however, as marginalization. As argued by Della Getta (2019), along with their middle-class privileges and their economic wellbeing, they enjoyed a good reputation in the region and were established entrepreneurs (ibid).

During the last 90 years, the Armenian community in Syria, not without challenges and setbacks, was able to maintain a strong Armenian identity and certain spaces to cultivate it, including schools, churches, cultural centres, and charity organizations, along with traditional ties with the Republic and the other Armenian diaspora communities (Migliorino 2006). The Armenian community in Syria “represents an extreme case of cultural diversity within contemporary Syrian society, one that has seemingly found and cultivated a ‘diverse’ way of being Syrian,” under the slogan *kullna Suriyyin* (“we are all

Syrians”). Armenians were able to find a “modus vivendi” under the Assads (ibid): to Armenian schools were appointed principals who were less interested in interfering in school matters, and Armenian language and culture were allowed to be taught alongside other subjects. Some Armenian symbols were also tolerated along with the Syrian, Arab and Ba’ath party’s ones, and Armenian cultural activities were allowed (Della Gatta 2019; Migliorino 2006). Before the war, Armenians and other Christians were 10% of Syria’s population of 22 million (70% were Sunnis, including Kurds, 10 % Alawites, and the other 10% were Shiites [Siddiqui 2012]). Sanjian (2015) notes that the Armenians were about 0.3% of the population, or about 70,000, before the war, of which 5000 lived in Damascus and about 50,000 in Aleppo.

Syria From the Standpoint of a Minority Group: Life and Work Experiences

It is important to note that the above-mentioned situation was an important part of the social environment where the Syrian Armenians did their everyday work of being citizens, Armenians, a minority, diaspora members, etc. This social environment did not only consist of current-day organizations and institutions in the traditional sense, but also of their past. In the literature on transgenerational trauma, it is often asserted that the traumatized populations live their past in their present, and perhaps even project it into their future. This past was for the Armenians not merely a past, but also the core of their collective identity, and as such was omnipresent in their everyday lives. However, the Armenian Genocide, being central to the Armenians’ identity construction, is not the only event that shaped the identity of the Syrian Armenian community. The 90 years of their

struggles in Syria, the fact of being surrounded by “others,” feeling the threat of losing their Armenianness (both as a result of the Genocide and as a result of an uncertain diasporic existence, which included the turbulent politics of the 1950s-1960s) shaped their identities and as a result their actions and institutions (marriage preferences, communal and cultural organizations, families, and neighbourhoods). This is why, when we read the stories of the Syrian Armenians, we need to take into consideration not only their social environment of today, but also the past, which remains part of their social environment where their everyday decisions, actions, and talk take place.

When my respondents described how they remembered their lives in Syria before the war, most of this talk started with “It was a comfortable, safe life: we worked and we lived.” Most of them were middle-class families, small business owners, craftsmen, or shop owners; some were teachers, community workers, or company employees. Among my participants mostly the husbands worked while the wives were housewives, and this was explained as “one person’s job was enough to make a living.” There were few families where both spouses worked. The Syria they knew was one of great security and peace. Many of them lived in Armenian neighbourhoods, others, as they called it, in “mixed” neighbourhoods, where along with Armenians there were other Christians as well, and sometimes also Muslims, but not very often and not many. The most common school arrangement was going to Armenian schools until grade 6, and then to public Arabic schools.

An older man from Aleppo, a lab technician, tells how it had been for their ancestors to come to Syria as refugees, and build a life from zero. Now he, a grandchild of that generation, had a secure middle-class life. Before the war, he worked in a lab until

the lab was closed because it was not safe to work there anymore. The neighbourhood where he lived was a mixed one. He had friends among Muslims too.

A young Aleppo man, a university student from a well-off family, describes his life as “totally perfect” and “happy” before the war. For him, it mostly involved studying and socializing with friends. Comparing his life in Syria with his life in Toronto, he finds his life in the former easier than in the latter. In Syria he had everything he needed. He lived in a neighbourhood where the majority were Christians (not only Armenians). There was no connection with Muslim neighbours; the only connection with them was at the university. He did not work outside the university.

A life of comfort and security is also what a middle-aged father from Aleppo recalls.

Life was happy and good. I was a goldsmith, I had my store, my employees. My situation was good. I was not very rich, but I had a comfortable life. As to rights, the little ones went to Armenian schools, we went to our churches. No one ever interfered with us, we had our partial freedoms in Syria, we were comfortable, we went to our clubs, our environment, our surroundings. So, we had a comfortable life.

A young woman from Aleppo also describes life in Syria as a “peaceful, comfortable life, a great life.” The only “problem” she finds is that Syria was a Muslim country. When the war started, she was in her last year of school. With her brothers and parents, she lived in a neighbourhood partially populated by Armenians, but there were also Muslims. Before the war there were no Muslims in their building, but after the war started, Muslim neighbours appeared. Both in the neighbourhood and at schools and universities, they chose to be with Armenians. When I asked a man from Damascus if his life before the war had been peaceful, he told me, “Not just peaceful, it was a lavish life.” He worked in a shoe-making family business in Damascus with his father and brothers.

A young working mother from Damascus also describes life before the Syrian war as a comfortable life with “no issues at all”: a happy childhood, school education in an

Armenian elementary and later an Arabic secondary school. She got married in 2000 and lived in the centre of the capital until the demonstrations began. Her husband worked as a diamond setter. She herself started working in 2006 when her daughters were older. She worked in an Armenian elementary school as a teacher for years, until 2014.

Another woman from Aleppo, described her life in Syria before the war as “very, very good.”

I was living the life of a princess. For example, I was living with my brother and sister, there was everything for us, lavishly, happily, everything was great. The war started, the fear, we were in fear, we went through hardships. Before, we had a great life. (A woman from Aleppo)

Work in Syria

As one can see from the above excerpts, overall, all of the participants said they were happy with their lives in Syria. Considering the century-long struggle to achieve this kind of stability, this was something to be valued and not to be taken for granted. As mentioned before, those were mostly middle-class people, small business owners and public sector employees. One thing that stood out during the conversations, both with men and women, was that they talked about employment as a mere means for living. Thus, many women and men mentioned that in Syria, unlike here in Canada, there was no need for women to work as one person’s earnings were enough for a family to live on.

In my case only I worked, there was no need for my wife to work. In general, I should tell you that it was not like here [in Canada]. There, if one person from the household worked, the family lived comfortably. The percentage of the working women was small, very, very small. There was no need. Men already worked. Life was very simple, there were no complicated things, no such demands, nor high prices... so, one person worked and everyone lived. (A man from Aleppo)

A mother in her late 30s from Aleppo talks about women and work:

I can tell you the majority of them did not work and stayed home like queens. It's just the last generation that the girls, the young ones started studying and working, etc. In general, it is not a good thing that they get married early and create a family, but Syria it was something like that, they married early, they created a home with their husbands and children and so their lives continued. Here is my life: I got married young, when I was 16. I have two daughters, my elder one is 16 years old already this year, and the little one is 11. Both of them were born in Aleppo and both of them went to school in Aleppo until the year when that kind of chaos happened in Syria, a black cloud surrounded it and in a second everything changed. Even until today none of us believes that Syria became like that, that that happened. But it happened. Yeah. [...] No, I did not work, I was with the kids, I did not work, my husband worked, we had a good home in a good neighbourhood, my husband had a good job. In general, I am telling you, especially we Armenians, the majority of us brought up to be hard-working people, every person could earn their bread according to their family's needs with their sweat and their hard work. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another young woman from Aleppo had a similar view of work. Below I present an excerpt from the interview.

My life before the war [thinks for a second], I studied until I was 18, finished high school, after that I was engaged and got married when I was 19. I was 20 when I had my first child. [...] I did not work. Our situation in Aleppo was very good. My husband's work was going very well. He had his business. He was a great craftsman. He had his own factory; he is a blacksmith. He was making tools that are used to extract water from water sources [water mines].

HT: Did you not want to work or did they not let you work?

A woman from Aleppo: There was no need. I personally did not have any need to work. All the real estate we had was our own, we did not have any debts, no debts to the state, we did not have any payments. Life was comfortable. I owned my house. With everything my husband made, we lived comfortably in Aleppo. There was no need for me to work.

Another woman, who also had never worked, had two children and was a full-time stay-home mother, while her husband worked and supported the family. His work, she recalls, was enough to support the family and they also managed to pay off some debts. They had a safe and financially secure life and came to Canada only to seek safety.

As I mentioned above, there were also working women among the participants. One of them, a teacher from Aleppo, describes her life as "a simple, modest life." They were not financially privileged nor were they deprived of anything. Likewise, another woman and her sister, both unmarried, lived with their parents in Aleppo and both worked. She was a make-up artist and her sister worked at a hospital. She spoke of her life as an "ordinary" one. They did fine and were able to support their family with their work. Their

parents had minor illnesses and they were able to take care of those and still have an opportunity for having a life with their friends, “a very happy life,” she added. They traveled and were free. Another woman says her life was also “comfortable and peaceful.” She worked as a seamstress and had a comfortable life most of the time “depending on the job.” One other woman from Aleppo told me she worked as a teacher and a newspaper correspondent. Like others, she also found her life in Syria safe. According to her, they had some privileges and some limitations living in Syria. I will discuss these later in this chapter.

Living with Muslims

Most of the participants were from Aleppo, the largest Armenian centre, and some from Damascus, Qamishli (a region in the north), or surrounding areas. They lived mostly either in Armenian neighbourhoods or in Christian ones. Only some of them lived in mixed neighbourhoods, with both Muslims and Christians. The relationships with Muslims, as most of the participants mentioned, were “outside the home.” This included business relationships between their husbands and their clients, with neighbouring businesses, or with grocers in their neighbourhoods. Almost no home visits took place, with only a couple of participants reporting very occasional visits with work partners. In those cases, the participants hurried to add, they were among the “progressive Muslims.”

A father from Aleppo tells me that the neighbours near his workplace were Muslims. They had no problems with them. His clients (more than half of them) were

“others”⁷⁸ (i.e., Muslims). But there were no family contacts with them. One of his colleagues was “other” and once a year would invite them for dinner (but other than that, there were no family visits). According to this man, they never had any issues with the Muslims, a fact shared by many participants.

Very rarely was there a Muslim neighbour in the building, or a Muslim classmate at the university, for those who had gone to university. Women had occasional interactions with Muslim women. When mentioning these, they hurried to say that these were “not the ones that covered their faces and eyes” (A woman from Aleppo). Still, they say the feeling of difference, or even anxiety, was always there during those relationships, especially among women. Those feelings of fear and distrust were not always based on personal experience, but they still informed their everyday actualities. Here is what the abovementioned participant told me:

Personally, I was always surrounded by my family and I did not even leave my building alone, there was no trust. I personally did not have any issues, but I heard from many people I knew, that’s why I did not trust them and was always protected. (A woman from Aleppo)

For this woman, who was extra cautious even before the war, (and as a young woman, who was always protected by her family), the war erased the small safety gap between Armenians and Muslims and with that perhaps the feeling of “safety” that Armenians had created over many years by living mostly apart from Muslims. She continues:

They entered our lives when the war started. All those Muslims and Kurds, they came to our neighbourhood, because it was safer in our neighbourhoods. So, until now when I look at our restaurants, I see them [Muslims] there, things have changed a lot, it was not like that before and it is a real pain... The neighbourhood has changed. Before, the grocer had been an Armenian, now he was a Muslim. It does not mean we did not go [i.e., go out after this change], but it was important for us to be more careful. (A woman from Aleppo)

⁷⁸ It is interesting to note that the word *aylazg* (literally, someone from another ethnicity) was used to refer to Muslims.

Thus, the war had wiped away the borders between Armenians and Muslims and brought them together in the same neighbourhoods. Another woman told me that the relationship with Muslims had always been good; they had never seen any wrongs. Still, only very rarely did they have close ties, except with one or two who had been her husband's connections. With those, they had some home visits, but otherwise these encounters remained outside their homes. After the war, the situation changed for her (as it did for the previous participant).

The stores that were in our neighbourhood, the owners, the employers were Muslim, the employees were Muslim. They had no issues with us. If someone did not look at us with a kind eye, everyone asked, who was this, where did he come from? During the war, many people [i.e., non-Armenians] came from villages, when their neighbourhoods were destroyed, they came to ours, rented and settled and again, we never saw anything wrong, nothing wrong ever happened. (A woman from Aleppo)

Although “nothing wrong happened” was an experience shared by many participants, living with Muslims was seen as a “limitation” or the only obstacle to an otherwise perfect life in Syria. To the question if they had a peaceful life, a mother from Aleppo answered:

Yes, yes. You know, perhaps because we were surrounded by Muslims, we had some limitations in terms of clothing. It was not the same as when we went to Armenia or Lebanon. There were these limitations because Muslims did not have the same idea about clothing. In that case there was this limitation. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman's experience was more intense. She told me that from childhood she wanted to leave and live in a more developed country. She is happy to be in Canada; the only thing is that she would like to have her parents with her. “I wanted to live in a country that was more understanding,” she said. She explained that Armenian women were always at risk of being harassed, even if they wore something not as revealing as tank tops, but just short sleeves. Muslims harassed them: “This had to do with their religion, education and the way they grew up,” she inferred. She told me that Muslims said “dishonourable things” to them.

For a young woman, who was only 16 when she left Syria, the safe, “great” life in Aleppo mainly involved Armenians and Christians (some Christian-Arab friends), including ones from her Armenian school. She had no Muslims in her surroundings.

The neighbourhood where we lived was in an Armenian area, all our neighbours were Armenian except for one or two Christian Arabs. In Syria I never felt that I was in an Arab environment, because I did not get to go to university, we left the country. In general, for me Aleppo was little Armenia. (A woman from Aleppo)

Rights, Democracy, State, Loyalty

The issue of Armenians having rights frequently came up during interviews. When talking about their lives, the participants often made a point, and often not without pride, that they, Armenians, had many rights in Syria, perhaps more than other minorities. With slight variations, they generally agreed upon what it meant to have rights.

First of all, they were allowed to be themselves, i.e., Armenians. Third- or fourth-generation Genocide survivors knew how to appreciate this. Having their churches, their schools, their neighbourhoods, and their freedoms in a Muslim majority country was something most of my participants took pride in. All the more so that they reportedly had more freedom compared to some other minorities, something the participants clearly saw. The loyalties of the Armenians thus lay with the government, the state, “the peaceful ways” – this is how participants talked about their position.

How much liberty or agency Armenians as a minority had in choosing their loyalties, and what they got in return for this was discussed above. Importantly, most of the participants seemed happy with the amount of freedom they had in Syria. Perhaps as a result of their history in Syria, their expectations from the country were not very high.

Thus, their self-awareness as a minority, as being far away from their homeland (even an imagined one) and being eternal “others” in someone else’s land, made their expectations from the country where they lived rather modest. And perhaps in general, Syrian Armenians imagined their community as loyal, grateful, peaceful, respected and civil, and connected to Armenians across the borders of the country, rather than to people of other religions and ethnicities living next to them within Syria.

One of my participants from Aleppo, said that the government had always supported the minorities from the very first day, and not just after the 1973 revolution. The government always took care of the minorities. Things were even better before 1973. For example, before 1973, Armenian history, language, culture classes were offered more times per week than they were after. The teachers in “national” (i.e., Armenian) schools⁷⁹ (he had also gone to one) had to try and juggle across curricula to teach Armenian history and language alongside other subjects.⁸⁰

A mother of two from Damascus, and an active member of the Armenian community and Armenian organizations in Syria, told me that freedom was given to Armenian organizations, political parties, and “minorities in their full rights.” It was a life in harmony, with different religions and ethnicities living side by side.

Another young woman from Damascus also told me about the privileges the Armenian community had enjoyed in Syria.

⁷⁹ The rough Armenian equivalent for “national” is *azgayin*, which has a slightly different meaning. Unlike in English, where it means “state owned,” because of the association with the nation state, in Armenian it means belonging to the Armenian nation/ethnicity.

⁸⁰ This man’s account is not in line with the secondary literature, at least chronologically speaking.

Again, coming from my own society, my own surroundings, my bubble where I used to live... As you know, Armenians in Syria are very comfortable, because the government let us have our own schools, our own [girl- and boy-] Scouts, they allowed us to continue using our own language. We had all that compared for example with the Kurds, who are not allowed to have their own schools and all that. But [that's] because Armenians are not regarded as a threat to the government, right? We were always supporters. (A woman from Damascus)

This participant's account confirms the existence of a *modus vivendi* that Migliorino (2006) speaks about. At least the perception was that the privileges the Armenians had were given in return for their loyalty to the state. Plus, the fact that the Armenians were not a threat is also an interesting discourse and the same participant elaborates it further.

A woman from Damascus: It's just because we were not considered a threat. Armenians were not looking for power. Armenians were not looking for lands in Syria. And everyone, as I said, it was known that Armenians, when they had money, they never bought land. For example, Muslims, Syrian Muslims, when they had more money they would buy land, invest in land, because this is where they live. Armenians did not do that, because in our mentality, or in lots of people's mentality, they always want to go back to Armenia. Right? That's not my land, Syria is not my land, I want to go back to Armenia. With that mentality in mind, they did not buy land, Armenians did not buy lands. And all of these together were the reasons that we were not a threat to the government. We were considered supporters.

HT: And they did not even want to be in the government either, they did not want to have high positions, or anything?

A woman from Damascus: No, I don't think Armenians aspired to that.

HT: I see. And when you said they did not buy lands, in this context it [i.e., owning land] equals power in a way?

A woman from Damascus: No, no, no, the idea [thinks], well not power, I think land equals like, er, for example the Kurdish people, they are in Northern Syria, they are in Iraq, so they wanted to take those lands and actually to make a country of their own. Which Armenians never thought about.

HT: I see, I see what you mean. That's because?

A woman from Damascus: That's because they already have their own land, which is Armenia.

HT: Which is Armenia, not Western Armenia? [i.e., the formerly Armenian territories of Eastern Turkey]

A woman from Damascus: Yes.

This participant's account is interesting evidence of how groups "imagine" themselves to be part of one large community that spans different countries (cf. Anderson 2006). Many of the Syrian Armenians have never been to the Republic of Armenia, but

have lived in Syria for three-four generations, yet their country was Armenia and therefore according to her, they did not want lands in a “foreign” country, even though it was the only one they had had during the last century, and where they had been rightful citizens.

I will discuss the issue of home, homeland and ethnicity in later chapters; in what follows, I present other examples of Armenians discussing the issue of rights. Both a woman from Aleppo and a father from Qamishli said that Armenians received “special treatment” from the government. To my question if there were any challenges surrounding being an Armenian in Syria, the former very assertively answered that, “on the contrary, Armenians were so loved there, the churches, the centres, the schools, everywhere.” And the latter said they never had any issues with the state whatsoever. They were in agriculture, and they did not have any problems. “Armenians were cherished, spoiled by the government, always. We were considered smart and shrewd” (A man from Qamishli). This was a reality which according to him everyone knew. The Armenians were accepted and valued in every sphere and did not face any problems. “I personally never saw any wrong from the government.” But, he adds, there was also not much connection with it. They were working their land in Qamishli in peace. The excerpt below illustrates very vividly what those rights were perceived to be, and what freedom meant for Armenians.

First of all, we lived a safe life and we absolutely did not imagine that one day there might be a war in Syria. Because for a long time there was peace. We were born and grew up in peaceful circumstances and, I said, as a minority we enjoyed all the civil rights and other than that, we also had our own Armenian schools. Of course, Arabic was also taught in those schools, but we had Armenian schools, Armenian churches, centres. So we had freedoms, they were granted to us. [...] When I say freedom, I don't necessarily mean freedom of speech, I mean freedom that allows us to live as Armenians, because there are other minorities who did not have the right to have their churches and to teach their languages. We as Armenians had that right. We were not oppressed either. There was no pressure on us as an Armenian community. (A woman from Aleppo).

Another woman from Aleppo also thought that the life they had was “absolutely happy” and that the Armenians did not need to take part in the uprising because they

already were happy, so they did not need anything. For a mother from Aleppo also, having had rights was the reason for not wanting to have anything to do with the demonstrations. “We already had everything secured for ourselves, for our youth, why would we go against our president? We loved him very much and we still love him.”

Similar sentiments are expressed by two other women from Aleppo, as we see below:

Our president always protected Armenians and gave them freedom. We had our schools, our churches. He did not upset us even for a day. We even heard that he had close Armenian friends, his cook was an Armenian, his tailor is an Armenian. So we always heard it even during his father’s time, not just now. Armenians were loved and respected, it was Armenians who moved the country forward and they were skilled in everything. (A woman from Aleppo)

Well, I told you he gave us all kinds of rights, right? I told you, going to the Sunday schools, to clubs, to churches... and we were free, our heads uncovered, we wore our Armenian clothes, I mean we did not have problems, we did not need to cover up. They gave us lots of rights and when we needed to organize some event, the government would happily grant us permission to do any event. Whether it was the *Ognutyán khach* (Armenian Relief Cross) or *kiraknorya*, I mean we had all kinds of rights. (A woman from Aleppo).

The only kind of pressure, as a man from Damascus recalls, is when the state started having good relations with Turkey, but later it regretted this (see previous chapter). This man, however, is one of the few participants who spoke about the lack of rights for Syrian society in general, not just about the rights of the Armenian community, when asked about the reasons for demonstrations, even though his view of the Arab Spring in general was that “there is no such thing, it is just to destroy [meddle in] the affairs of countries.” (I will return to this later in this chapter.) Incidentally, he was also the only person who said that he had close relationships with Muslim Arabs.

Of course, inside the country there was a situation that was exploited. The monopoly of the Baath party in Syria, there was no freedom of speech, no freedom of media, one cannot criticize, only the state-governmental daily newspapers were around, nothing else was allowed. If you put those three together, everything they [the newspapers] wrote was the same. So, this has been accumulated from the past. For example, if someone wanted to hold a position but was not from a certain party, he couldn’t. They were also corrupt during the peaceful years. (A man from Damascus)

When one reads the excerpts above, it becomes obvious that the various ethno-religious groups in Syria were not integrated with one another, in the sense that they did not see themselves as one. They had different amounts of access to rights and varying amounts of resources. The division between them was so deep that the Armenians did not see other groups' struggles and causes as theirs. They secured some privileges for themselves and that was all they were aspiring to, while staying focused on the Armenian cause both locally and internationally. The prospect of a Muslim (especially an extremist) government was perceived as a real threat to Armenians, with many of my participants adding: "because we knew what it means." A gossip had spread among Armenians that "if they [the Muslims] won, we were going to be Islamized," and according to one woman, the Muslims had gone out to demonstrate because "they wanted Islam to be more dominant (*aveli islamutyun ylla*) in the country. That was the only question." Regardless of how rational these convictions or fears were, they were real enough to influence the decisions and choices of Syrian Armenians, whether in their everyday lives or in the political arena.

The issue of rights was often intertwined with the issue of demonstrations, the Arab uprisings (known as the "Arab Spring" ⁸¹), and supporting the government. I have previously made the point that the Armenians' position vis-à-vis the larger Syrian society and its politics was informed by the memory of a century-old trauma. It affected their

⁸¹ The nature of the Arab Spring has been discussed widely both in academic literature and in the media. The Western discourse in general is different from one propagated in other places, e.g., in Russia. Here I engage with it as much as necessary to give a brief historical background, and I base that discussion here on the Western academic literature.

political choices, their view of the anti-government units during the war, and their attitude toward the government. Namely, the fact that because Armenians carried with them the memory of the Genocide and the subsequent anti-Armenian pogroms perpetrated by Muslims, Armenians were wary of the Muslim anti-government units operating in Syria, as in their eyes, these were in a way a continuation of the Ottoman empire.

All of this is borne out by what some of my participants have said. But the Armenians' attitudes were more than just the reflection of cultural memory; they were informed by their real-life experiences during the Syrian war, as seen in my participants' stories (and as abundantly documented by Mollica and Hakobyan 2021:165-207). Following 2012, Armenians of Syria faced very real threats from Muslim anti-government units. On numerous occasions Armenian neighbourhoods, churches, and businesses were attacked, and Armenians were kidnapped and held for ransom. They were compelled to form self-defence units to protect their neighbourhoods and were for this reason accused by Muslim forces of being pro-government.

Turkey's involvement in the war made things worse for Armenians, thus reaffirming their conviction that Turkey continues the policy of its predecessor, the Ottoman empire, of eradicating Armenians. One of the tools Turkey used during the war was the Turkmen factor. The Turkmen are a minority ethnic group residing in Syria and other parts of the Middle East, speaking a language that is close to Turkish. During the war, Turkmen units were actively involved in the opposition with Turkey's guidance, and in Aleppo, one of the main Armenian centres, six Turkmen neighbourhoods were controlled by Turkmen units. Some of the names these Turkmen units chose for themselves evoked Turkish nationalist symbols, and at the same time evoked anti-Armenian massacres in the eyes of the

Armenians. For example, one of them was named after the Ottoman sultan Abdul Hamid II (1843-1918), who was responsible for the massacres of thousands of Armenians at the end of the 19th century. At the same time, Turkmen units were actively involved in anti-Armenian actions. For example, in 2013, the Sultan Murad Brigade attacked the Armenian Catholic Monastery of St. Vartan. And one of the leaders of the Turkmen paramilitaries in Northern Syria, Burak Misinchi, publicly stated: "I'm leaving for Syria to cut off the heads of Armenians and Alawis." When he was killed in 2015, his funeral in Istanbul was attended by Turkmen and Turkish politicians (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021: 177-78).

The Arab Spring, the Demonstrations, and "Supporting the Regime"

I already spoke about the practical considerations of why Armenians were apprehensive about a regime change in Syria. However, there are other considerations that one has to take into account as well. In particular, I once again note that the social environment of the Syrian Armenians includes also their past. Their decisions and perceptions of the government and of their president are to a great extent informed by Armenian history in general and by the history of the Syrian Armenian community in particular, and not just by questions and problems contemporary to them. It seems that the Syrian Armenian society is still in some kind of self-preservation and survivor mode, rather than an integrated citizenry of a country where it has been living for at least three generations.

For most Armenians, the demonstrations and the uprising in Syria, as well as the name "Arab Spring," "did not mean anything" or were pointless. According to them, all of

this was nothing but empty words and as proof, some pointed out the failure of the Arab Spring in neighbouring Arab countries.

Even in those cases when they theoretically could have meant something, it was clear to them that they did not prove to be what they were in the neighbouring Arab countries. And the actions of those who had risen against the government were described as “ingratitude” and “disloyalty,” as opposed to Armenians who were always “loyal” and “peace-loving.”

When we began talking about the events of 2011 in my interviews, I usually asked two questions: “What did the demonstrators want?” and “What was the Arab Spring?” Most of the participants answered that the goals (or in some cases the *true* goals) were unclear. There was a shared conviction that the demonstrators themselves did not know what they wanted. For most of the Armenians, this revolution and war were some kind of conspiracy, to which people fell victim, something imposed from outside. It had completely different reasons and goals than democracy and freedom, as the country was already great, secure, and the president was “already good.” Some saw it as a way to destroy a strong country, others as a way toward Islamism.

A man from Aleppo told me that this was a conspiracy that stupid men had fallen victim to: “Why do you [i.e., the majority Sunnis] allow a minority [i.e., the Alawis] to rule over you?” was sentiment used to successfully provoke the Sunnis. Like during the Genocide of 1915, there were many sides who had a stake in this war, not just one party. Among the goals of this movement (to destroy a self-sufficient country that’s independent from the great power), according to him, was also to remove Armenians further from their ancestral lands:

But what I see is they wanted to get rid of us, the Christian element and the Armenians, to push them further from those lands. [...] Now I got to Canada, how am I going to go and demand my lands, my grandfather's lands in Erzurum [in modern Turkey/Western Armenia]?

A woman's account of the Arab uprisings and demonstrations below articulates a similar view.

They wanted the country for themselves. When they started coming out, at that time they started telling Christians: "Your end has come. You need to leave our country and go." But they were not Syrians, they were not people of Syria. They were people who came from outside, those that took to the streets at night and screamed. Our people were really stressed, expecting an attack, when those started screaming. They brought those drums and started screaming *Allahu Akbar* [Ar. "God is Great"], at those moments we were very scared, really, really scared. This was not an empty thing [i.e., these were not empty threats]. But they only shouted that we need to leave the country, we must leave it of our own will, the country should become theirs. (A woman from Aleppo)

After further reflection, this participant added that those people also killed Muslims and destroyed Muslim neighbourhoods, and that it was not clear who they were or where the war came from but their goal was clear: "to destroy the country, and they did it." She thought that Turkey and Saudi Arabia had "a hand in it," an opinion shared by many other participants. To my question whether she supported the government, she answered without hesitation: "Of course! Because he [the president] has always been by our side." She then told me about the rights and privileges the Armenian community had enjoyed.

Another woman's perception of the demonstrators and the demonstrations is an interesting representation of the Arab Spring, of loyalty, and citizenship:

HT: Were they [the demonstrators] trying to convince Armenians to join them?

A woman from Aleppo: No, they did not succeed, they already knew very well that the Armenians are with the government. Armenians were not traitors as they were. They were also well off; they were well off. Yes, even among the Muslims, you know there are different groups. There were some that could not stand each other, I don't know what, yes there were such things, but they were provided for in every way, they were getting support even from the president's father's time, everyone had acquired money, I don't know, became homeowners. From where? If they were not given those privileges, yes, they are hard-working people, but if it was not for the privileges that the government gave them, they would in no way get there. But unfortunately, they became traitors and forgot all of that and went against [the government]. Many of them regretted it later, but it was too late. (A woman from Aleppo)

Earlier during the same interview, this participant told me that the demonstrators did not know what they actually wanted.

Now they wanted that the president steps down, now they wanted freedom, now they wanted..., they themselves did not know what was right. The locals, yes many of them were liars and turned to the other side, but we have many Muslim friends – *even* they, they ran away from their districts and came to the Armenians, as their neighbours or cousins were already on the other side, and if they did not turn to that side, they would kill them. (A woman from Aleppo)

A young participant shares a similar opinion:

If I remember correctly, they were demanding freedom. What kind of freedom and why they asked for freedom, I do not remember. They just wanted freedom and then after years they brought in the “free army,” an army that was a free army and they were demanding freedom. What they meant by that, on the basis of what, I don’t know. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman, a schoolteacher and an administrator from Aleppo, argues that this movement had an “ulterior motive” as Syria already provided what the demonstrators wanted.

A woman from Aleppo: Freedom, they wanted freedom and the president stepping down.

HT: On first sight, what they wanted made sense, freedom, democracy, not hereditary presidency. Did you not want to join the demonstrations?

A woman from Aleppo: It was already democratic. They were not right. Presidency was not hereditary [...] he was elected by the free will of the people.

HT: From what I heard, no one from among the Armenians supported the demonstrators, right? They were all for the regime?

A woman from Aleppo: Yes, in general Armenians are peace-loving and love development and they saw already that the president was good. You know, there is always a concern since we have seen the evil, we have lived and heard that, we are always afraid of what will come. It is possible that the one who will come after him will be worse than what he is [...] no he [Bashar] was good, very good. The father was also good, stricter, but good.

The Arab Spring does not mean anything to a young mother from Damascus either. She thinks there is no such thing, that it has no meaning and she suspects that the whole thing might have been a conspiracy. Then she added that she does not understand politics and she is more concerned with human and humanitarian issues. Life in Syria was a life in harmony, where different religions and ethnicities lived in harmony.

Some participants brought up the Homs and Hama massacres, which were organized by Hafez al-Assad. They thought that the demonstrations were a revenge. For most Armenians, it was a religious matter, not a matter of democracy. Sunnis used the opportunity to remove the Alawi Assad and put a Sunni leader in his place. This view is shared by the man from Aleppo below, who says that while ostensibly the reasons for the uprisings were freedom and democracy, the actual reasons were sectarian rivalry and hatred. As to the government's actions, according to him, they were self-defence.

The government had to defend itself, because they began armed attacks against governmental places. After all, if someone comes and starts throwing stones at your home, you will also go out to face them, right? So like that the issue became bigger [...] they started by shouting "freedom," then, well, the government was not ready for it, it partially bought [i.e., bribed] them, partially divided, so they [the rebels] started resisting with arms, or otherwise, by kidnappings. They kidnapped lots of Armenian young people in Aleppo.⁸² (A man from Aleppo)

According to this man, there was no ISIS at this point yet, this was the Free Syrian Army (FSA). As to Armenians, he said, they never went against the government, as they already had their rights and freedoms, "we had it in all the spheres," he said.

Look, Armenians had all the churches, the clubs, some newspapers, we had our meetings and no one ever interfered, especially the government. If you did not do anything wrong the government would never interfere. So, there were thousands who rose, not a single Armenian was among them, I am as sure about this as I am sure about my name. You know, we were organized, be it in churches, or in clubs, we know the rights and the wrongs, there would be no harm to us from the government, why would we go against it? (A man from Aleppo)

The Arab Spring did not mean much to a younger man from Aleppo. He had heard about the demonstrations on TV. The beginning was fine, he says; after a week or two he thought they were going back to a normal life. It all started outside Aleppo, and after a year it reached Aleppo as well. He did not want to participate in any of the demonstrations,

⁸² For a detailed account of the violence, killings and kidnappings directed at Christian minorities in Syria, see Reynolds (2013) and Shea (2014).

because Armenians never had any problems with the government. They were happy with it and they had everything they needed. In Syria you could buy whatever you needed, and life was easy.

HT: Assad and his father have been ruling for very long. Looking at other countries, did you not feel that something was wrong?

A man from Aleppo: No, we actually felt safer. Before that there were problems, but they solved the problems very quickly.

According to this man, if it were not for the social media, the government would solve this problem, too. But people rose up, looking at what happened in other countries, such as Egypt. He admits that there were people who did not have rights, and it is true for every country. Of course, there were problems in the country, and one could solve most problems, through bribes, directly or indirectly. I asked him what the FSA wanted from the Armenians, and he answered: "Well, they [the Armenians] were Christians after all [...], they [the FSA] did not want Christians there. So, they were Christians and the government supported them [the Armenians]."

The participant here constructs the government as protectors of the Armenians and Christians in general. A woman's account, meanwhile, constructs the Arab Spring as a ploy against the president, the Alawis and the Christians in general.

A woman from Aleppo: Well, they [the rebels] blew up mosques. There are two kinds of, what should I say, two kinds of Muslims [she tries to explain to me the difference between Alawis and Sunnis]. They wanted in Syria to do things against Bashar. They wanted to get rid of the Alawis. ISIS were Sunnis, they wanted to get rid of our president's religion and group.

HT: But they blew up Sunni mosques?

A woman from Aleppo: No no, on the contrary. Well, I don't know for sure and in detail, but I just know that those behind the explosion were Sunnis, those that cover up themselves completely [i.e., whose women wear the head and face covering]. They did not want that the country, Syria, be ruled by Alawis, they did not want people like us to be in Syria. Our president loved us a lot. He loved Armenians a lot. And he treated us very well.
[...]

HT: Those demonstrators were against Alawis and that is clear, but were they also against Christians?

A woman from Aleppo: Yes [sounding more like, “of course!”], oh, yes! They were also against Christians.

HT: What did they want from the Christians? What was their problem with the Christians?

A woman from Aleppo: They wanted us to leave the country. They acted against us so that we leave. They told us you don't have a place here. There were many cases when they kidnapped Armenians, many Christians. [...] I know many young people who were kidnapped, disappeared and until now we don't know what has happened to them, where they went.

A younger participant shares the sentiment of seeing the demonstrations as directed against the Armenians. Speaking of the Arab Spring, she says: “When everything Muslim started.” For her, it was the feeling that there are more Muslims than Armenians in their (traditionally Armenian) neighbourhoods, which had not been the case before the war. When it all started, she was in her last year of school and was preparing for the exams. For her, the way everything happened was that she realized very clearly where she lived — in a Muslim country. They were everywhere; “it was their country; it was obvious that we were refugees.” She thinks that unlike Armenians, who never wanted the country for themselves, the Muslims wanted that. The Muslims did not want anyone else in the country, neither the Armenians nor the other minorities, including the Alawis.

For this woman and for many other participants, this movement was also a reminder of who they, the Armenians, were, and that the country was a Muslim majority country, a fact that they perhaps had not felt on a daily basis, as many of them (especially in Aleppo) lived in “closed circles.” “We did not have any connections with them. As I told you already, we lived in a closed circle, we did not easily see such people in our neighbourhoods, we did not have any connections with them.”

The movement called “the Arab Spring” also erased the boundaries between Armenians and Muslims. Even if this movement was not against Armenians originally, it became so at some point, to “punish” Armenians for their neutrality.

A woman from Aleppo: There was a mosque next to us. I mean if you pass Nor Kiugh⁸³ a bit, there is a mosque. From the mosque people came out and the demonstrators started shouting that they want Bashar to step down and leave. They started shouting and even started breaking the windows of Armenians — you know there are Armenian stores there, so they started breaking the store fronts.

HT: What did they want from Armenians?

A woman from Aleppo: Honestly, they were upset by Armenians because in the beginning, Armenians were very neutral and had decided to keep a low profile as a community. That neutrality was taken to mean that we were pro-government and that’s why they turned against us.

HT: When they were upset with the Armenians, other than breaking windows and store fronts, was it expressed in any other ways?

A woman from Aleppo: Yes, with time, little by little, they occupied the region of Bostan Pasha, which was very close to Nor Kiugh. It was a neighbourhood of Armenian craftsmen, they had stores there, the demonstrators occupied them completely and from there they started throwing bombs into Armenian neighbourhoods. The Armenian neighbourhoods became a target for about two-three years. Nor Kiugh entirely became a target. Then they burnt an Armenian church. [...] There was another region that also had Armenian businesses, it was called Sheikh Najjar. It was said – it was the northern region of Aleppo, very close to Turkey’s border – that all the stores of Armenian craftsmen there were plundered by the Turks. The Sheikh Najjar region was completely plundered. (A woman from Aleppo)

Some participants insisted that many Muslims suffered from these demonstrations, too, and yet another woman said that FSA were not only Muslims (according to her, there were also Christian Arabs). Oftentimes, she made a distinction between the demonstrators and the “regular Muslims” from whom the Armenians had never seen any harm, as opposed to “those [who were] against Armenians, who occupied and looted the stores of the Armenian craftsmen.” (A woman from Aleppo)

It seems the participants were having a hard time reconciling two sets of images. One the one hand, there were the participants of the movement, or the rebels, who

⁸³ An Armenian neighbourhood, literally means “New Village.”

slaughtered Christians, attacked and burnt churches, imprisoned and maltreated priests and nuns, threw bombs at schools, kidnapped Armenians for ransom and destroyed Armenian neighbourhoods — an image which for them recalls the memory of the Genocide. On the other hand, there was the image of their neighbours, grocers, employers, etc., who were hospitable, generous, welcoming and never in any way harmful. The contrast between these two images of Muslims often occurred in one and the same story.

From the above stories, it is obvious that Armenians' support for the government was informed by considerations of their economic wellbeing, their rights as a minority, the very real or imagined threat posed by the rebels, the lack of trust in the motives behind the anti-government movement, and a deep conviction that the war was a religious matter (mostly between different types of Muslims, but some also mentioned that they did not want the Christians there too). Additionally, there was also the view of Bashar al-Assad as someone who brought development and progress, who took the country forward and “opened it up.” It is important to show that minorities, and this particular minority in particular, were not passive recipients and victims of state propaganda in supporting Assad.⁸⁴ Rather, they were active participants and made choices informed by their standpoint and their particular social environment. Below are some examples where people speak about Assad as a progressive leader.

The way I see it, in 2000, when Bashar al-Assad took the presidency, everything opened up in a way, like cellphone companies, private universities, everything started to open up like insurance companies. You should know that we did not have it before. I was lucky because I went to a private university: the Arab International University. The first three years they were amazing, because a new university, they actually adapted using English as part of the education, so everything was in English, there was nothing in Arabic. [...] I lived in Damascus, yes. I went to this university, everything was amazing, you see how everything opened. Instead of going to a public university,

⁸⁴ I am not claiming that the propaganda did not have its role.

now we went to private universities, everything was great. I graduated, started working at ... [a company owned by the president's family] [...]. As a company it was amazing, so from my point of view, during that time Syria was opening up, a lot, so we were developing. I know, like, I work in human resources. So, I know everything we were using, like technology, was exactly what people are using in Canada, so we were advanced. So, I would say Syria was advancing from my point of view. But again, that was my experience. A totally comfortable life [switches form English to Armenian] we were going to the [Armenian] club all the time, I was a [girl-]scout, then I was in committees, I was part of the Armenian clubs. [...] I went to a combined school, up to grade six it was Armenian and then Arabic. [...] After grade six everything was in Arabic. Our life was very good. We had a very good life. (A woman from Damascus)

It is not that this woman is unaware that there were some flaws in Assad's rule, but even then, she builds a case for being pro-government based on the social position she has.

A woman from Damascus: So, we know our government and we know how our country works. We have a lot of corruption and, to be honest, we were part of the corruption. Like in Syria, for example, if the policeman stops you because you took the wrong turn, or did not stop at the red light, it is easy to give him a bribe. Which is not something you would ever [stresses the word] think of doing in Canada. But in Syria it was the way, it was the way life was, so we were part of it. So, there was corruption, yes, there was more corruption during all this and we already knew how the Mukhabarat [the secret service] used to handle things. So, it was not that I believed that the government is not doing anything wrong, it is just that I believe that we did not have another option. The devil you know is better than the one you don't know basically. So, you know that the government is corrupt and there are lots of issues but we don't have anyone else because we don't have an opposition, a strong opposition. And at the beginning the status quo that we had was about this. We are safe, why change?

HT: I see.

A woman from Damascus: Right? I was living there and even the first several years when I came to Canada I was like, no I want things to stay the same because my family is there, they are safe like this, I don't want to worry when something bad happens or someone else takes charge and God knows what's gonna happen. And obviously they always, like, the thing is, when they insert religion to do it, so there is always the fear that the second person, the person or the party that is gonna take charge are the extremists. The extremist Muslims. Which scares us obviously as Armenians. Because we are Christians, right? So how are they going to treat us? Right? So how are they gonna deal with us? What's going to happen to us? There is always that kind of thinking, so I was not totally against it but I was not completely with it.

A woman from Aleppo, as well as many others, give credit for this to Bashar al-Assad.

The last ten years before the war started, Aleppo had changed a lot. First of all, I want to say that I am from Aleppo and Aleppo has changed a lot, thanks to our president's innovations. Families in general felt secure in terms of work and safety. Safety was something that everyone spoke about. Syria's safety. That you could come home at midnight from a party, from gatherings, from cafes and nothing would happen to anyone. Yes, Armenians lived in separate neighbourhoods, they were often not together in the same neighbourhoods with Muslims, but even with Muslims, Armenians

had a special place in Syria, any questions, be it governmental or anything else, when they saw an Armenian, the respect to Armenians and everything was special. (A woman from Aleppo).

A teacher from Aleppo shares the sentiment about Bashar al-Assad as a progressive ruler.

I think it [the Arab Spring and what the demonstrators wanted] was a religious thing, not political, not about the president, never. Because the president was already very good, always. He was someone who pursued development. And who doesn't love development? This was something else, another movement that was very deep. Perhaps there were other ulterior motifs that we do not know about. (A woman from Aleppo)

The above excerpts demonstrate several things. From the standpoint of the Armenian minority, who are relatively well-to-do, the social issues of the larger society (especially those of the majority Sunnis) were not visible. Before the Arab uprisings, they saw themselves as a minority among a majority. And even when the social issues of the larger society were visible, especially before the Arab uprisings, the Armenians did not engage with them, as the concerns of their group were limited to securing a diasporic existence and relatively safe conditions for themselves. After the uprisings, Armenians' attitudes stemmed from a much more pragmatic reason — self-preservation — because many Sunni Muslim groups posed direct threats to Armenians. One woman voiced this question eloquently: “What’s going to happen to us?” And this, perhaps, tipped the scale for them in the direction of supporting “the devil they knew.”

What did Supporting Assad Involve?

“The minorities supported Assad,” “Assad supported the minorities.” Both statements have been circulating in academic and non-academic literature, and both have been at the centre of heated discussions about how Assad, Putin, and other powers used the

situation of Syrian minorities for their purposes (see, e.g., ETANA n.d.). I am not going to discuss this here, but instead I want to show *what* supporting the government (which my participants insisted they did) involved for Syrian Armenians. There were three main ways the respondents spoke about doing this: not supporting anyone and being neutral; supporting the government by not being against it and staying neutral; actually doing something to support the government. In all scenarios, their position was in exchange for, or as a result of, the good and peaceful life Armenians had in Syria. Here are some examples. A man from Aleppo saw Armenians in Aleppo as neutral. Of course, there were Armenians in the Syrian army when all this started, but they were mandatory recruits, not volunteers. Others put it very plainly: we supported the government by not going against it, that was enough. A man from Aleppo thought that that was true also with other minority groups. A young woman from Aleppo saw supporting the president as staying neutral.

HT: Did your family support Bashar al-Assad?

A woman from Aleppo: Yes, because we did not have anything, I mean we have not seen any wrongs. Neither us nor any Armenians. In general, all the Armenians there supported Bashar al-Assad.

HT: When you say “support,” what did that supporting mean? For example, you went to these pro-governmental demonstrations? Or did you do something else?

A woman from Aleppo: Honestly, neither I, nor my family nor any of my kin ever participated in any of those. Because, you know, there all of that was scary. It might be that even if you were seen on TV, you could be harmed. So, in general we would not go, and neither would we go to anti-governmental demonstrations. We were happy with our lifestyle, and we stayed like that. We behaved like neutral, but we were on the side of Bashar al-Assad. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman, when asked if, as a supporter of the regime and the president, she ever went to pro-governmental demonstrations, answered: “No, never! I was never involved in such things, never was it my business. I never participated in any demonstrations and never needed to. I was far from such things.” Yet she saw herself as

supporting the government. This was a common answer: not doing anything but firmly being on the side of Bashar.

Here is an interesting account is the story of a teacher from Aleppo.

We went to a store to buy milk for my son. The salesperson was anti-government, anti-Bashar. My husband saw he was watching a channel and told him, “This channel tells lots of lies, why do you watch it?” He said, “You keep believing that Bashar, and see what would happen to you.” We felt that this person is not with us, or more precisely, he is against peace. We stopped buying milk form him. And this way, little by little we have learned that the salesman was anti-government. (A woman from Aleppo)

A young woman from Damascus was the only person who went to pro-government demonstrations. “I remember the first time that I went, I am not going to lie, it was really nice, the way I saw it was that the whole population is supporting our government, our country and all that.” The reason she went was because she was working in a company owned by the president’s family, so they all went.

A woman from Damascus: And the company, when everything started, they actually told us, they directly said, “Our company is pro-government, if you are not, you shouldn’t be here.” It is a wrong thing to say, but I mean, it is the president’s cousin’s company, so you would expect that.

HT: So, there was some kind of pressure on you to go to those marches?

A woman from Damascus: The first time—no, afterwards—yes. The first time I was excited to go. Afterwards it started becoming to be like a pattern that every time there is something, we had to go. (A woman from Damascus)

She also told me that she, of course, was aware of the mistakes of the government, but it was safer in general for Armenians like this (see the excerpts above). Below I bring two more participants’ answers.

HT: And when they said that the Armenians were pro-government, what did the Armenians do other than being neutral? Did they actually do something to be pro-government?

A woman from Aleppo: Several times we said that we are with the government. We tried to be very careful in our speech. The Patriarchate announced that we are with the government. We don’t want anarchy, we don’t want the country to be in anarchy, in a sense. But there were no expressions literally stating that we were with the government. We were very careful.

A woman from Aleppo: I mean helping the government, I mean when there were *intikhabat* [“elections” in Arabic], I mean, when the *ra’is* [“president” in Arabic] or someone else needed to be elected, we went and voted for him with the greatest pleasure and we were next to him. I mean we worked properly; I mean we did not do anything against the government. We did everything

according to the law (*orenqov kyneinq*), if there was need for paperwork or such, we did everything according to the law.

I conclude this chapter with excerpts from interviews with two men—one from Damascus and one from Aleppo. These were the two participants who did not say they supported the government but who, nevertheless, did not trust the anti-government movement. The man from Damascus constructed himself as someone who had close relationships with Muslims, as someone who liked going to Muslim celebrations and to the Umayyad Mosque (one of the central mosques in Damascus) “just to sit there in peace.” He tells:

When the first ones [demonstrations] happened, the majority of the participants were my friends, the activists, and they were blaming me that I am indifferent, why am I not participating, etc. I told them the issue is bigger, you do not do much, don't go too far! The plan is much bigger, it is not an issue of freedom, the issue is bigger. The same people who were participating and blaming me, those people are not there anymore. [...] I was not sure. I was telling them, “Let's wait, just sit back, become a power, wait until the next elections, put some effort into that, get someone into the parliament, have lots of people in the parliament. No problems will be solved in the streets because the military system is very strong.” But the people are not used to it. Imagine you bring a child and keep him inside and then one day you open the door and say, “Come out.” The child won't come out or will come out in fear, or will take a step and go back again. So, you need to teach him to take steps little by little. So, the people are like that kid. People at some point were indifferent to their own rights. That generation that grew up, they did not care. They just cared for economic well-being. The people were eating well, they had everything, everything was available. They did not think about the future. Whoever wants to rule let him rule, the most important is that we live well. (A man from Damascus)

The “falsity” or unsuccessfulness of the whole Arab uprisings as a struggle for freedom or democracy is represented in another participant's excerpt below.

There is no freedom in any Arab county anymore. There is no freedom in third world countries anymore. You know, the Arab spring started in 2008-10, in Tunisia, Egypt. They started doing like them, they thought “freedom, freedom.” But by the way, none of them got any freedom up to now [...] All the countries that rose and complained, and wanted freedom, and the Europeans encouraged them, but they [the Europeans] thought they would open the brains of these people and would pour freedom into them. But this is not how it happens. Democracy or freedom come from experience. (A man from Aleppo)

A man from Qamishli also agrees that something that was supposed to be good, actually ended up being worse. The discussion here shows that Armenians had very practical reasons not to rise against the government. First, there was the history they had

in that country, their memory of a past nationalist government, and their fear of a new nationalist or extremist one. Second, their position as a minority group was relatively satisfactory. Third, they saw themselves as part of a greater Armenian nation, rather than part of Syrian society.⁸⁵ Fourth, the Armenians actually saw Bashar al-Assad's government as a progressive government that brought change. Finally, Armenians did not believe the sincerity of the anti-government movement as a means for change, democracy or freedom, seeing it as either imported from outside to destroy the country, or as a religious movement against Christians, minorities, and sometimes even Armenians in particular. What one can infer from the above discussion is that Syrian society, diverse as it was both religiously and ethnically, did not share a unified vision of freedom and democracy, the country's future, or the Arab uprisings. Most of the participants never understood how the demonstrations turned into a war. There were many unknowns, and many people did not want to know anything. What they knew was that they had a life, and the war, which for most people meant explosions in civilian neighbourhoods, changed the course of their lives dramatically. I will discuss this in the next chapter.

Summary

I began this chapter by talking about the importance of understanding the social environment where the life-stories and the active participation of the Armenian community

⁸⁵ This point is subject to change, as happened with the Syrian Armenians who repatriated to Armenia during the war and began feeling an attachment to "motherland" Syria, cf. Della Gatta (2019).

in their everyday happened. I further argued that the collective memory of the Armenian Genocide and the following hardships that the Syrian Armenian community underwent became part of their social environment and are important for understanding their actions and choices. I described pre-war experiences of the Syrian Armenians and their everyday actualities during the demonstrations and anti-government movement. These experiences demonstrate how diasporic minorities negotiate their lives in the host countries. I illustrate that in their choices, both individual and collective, Syrian Armenians were not passive recipients of forced reality, but rather active participants in their day to day realities, who effectively negotiated their priorities. Finally, and most importantly, I show how the transgenerational trauma of the Armenian genocide as well as the past in general become a “ruling relation” or a relation of coordination, that informs people’s day to day choices but also exists and materializes in their everyday work of being minorities, loyal citizens, supporters, community members and a diasporic group. In the next chapter, I demonstrate that the shared past continues to be a resource to draw upon not only in the local but also in the transnational space.

CHAPTER 6: THE MAKING OF REFUGEES

In the last chapter I discussed the relationship between the Armenian community and the Assad government, as well as their life before the war. In this chapter I discuss the disruption the war brought into the life of the Armenian community, and how its members decided to leave Syria and assume the new status of refugees.

What is a refugee? How is a refugee officially defined, and how is a refugee perceived? The UNCHR defines refugees as “people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country” (UNHCR. n.d.c.), and the 1951 Refugee Convention defines a refugee as “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (UNHCR n.d.b.; UNHCR 2010:3).

The discussion of refugees in Canadian and global discourse happens on two levels, academic and public. In the public one, during the recent years the refugees have often been constructed as a threat to the welfare system, the country’s economic security – not only in Canada but in other Western countries as well (Hynie 2018). Winter and colleagues (2018) look into mainstream news media in Canada and Germany (*The Globe and Mail* and *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, respectively) to show how the construction of Syrian refugees in these journals is informed by the country’s position toward refugees in general. In both journals, Syrian refugees are represented either as a threat or as victims who need active saving, and this plays well into the discourse of “true Canadians” with their “virtuous helping behaviour” (Hynie 2018:5, 6).

The academic one includes a wide array of interests, from refugees' mental and physical welfare and housing (e.g., Bazaid 2017; Hansen et. al 2016) to exploring the general discourses on refugees, namely, how they are perceived by the hosts (e.g., Scott and Safdar 2017), the identity construction of the host society (Hynie 2018), as well as the resettlement and integration of refugees (as discussed in the research context). What remains interesting is how people become refugees. Of course, I doubt that there will be one single way even for those who are escaping the same Syrian war. There are different motivations for the refugees to move, and different resources they utilize in the process. It is clear that the reason for moving was the war, but the circumstances that became the reason for this move could be different from person to person, as well as from one group to another.

While Anthony Richmond's work on refugee movement (1993, discussed earlier) can explain a great deal about the motivations and reasons for refugee movements, in order to more accurately understand and describe the motivations and reasons behind someone becoming a refugee, one must study particular groups of refugees, rather than imposing a certain frame on an entire population, such as "Syrians." As mentioned, this is true even if all of these groups are fleeing the same war.

In this chapter, therefore, I hope to map out the main reasons that "made" the members of the Syrian Armenian community refugees. This chapter will shed light on the following questions, based on the participants' experiences: How does one become a refugee? What is that moment (if there is one), or what are the events that push the person to decide to leave behind everything they know: their homes, their jobs, the comfort of a native language spoken everywhere, their country, and step onto foreign

roads leading to uncertainty? Are these people the victims of circumstances, as is often portrayed in the literature, or persons of self-rescue (as in Kyriakides et al. 2018)? Without claiming that these are categories universally applicable for all the Syrian Armenians who became refugees, and even less so for other Syrians, I discuss below the main reasons that may be generalized for all my participants.

Will There Be War?

Before starting the discussion on how the war came into their lives, it is worthy of mention that one of the beliefs that the participants shared about the government was that it was strong enough not to allow what had happened in other Arab countries. No-one actually believed that, unlike in other countries, the demonstrations would turn into something big. The reasons they gave me were “because there is no game with this government” [i.e. you can’t mess with it], “the government will squeeze it with an iron fist,” “because it has been peaceful for a long time,” and the like. My participants believed that everything was going to be quiet soon. Doubting this fact was seen as being against the government and being in favour of “the ugly ones” (the anti-government extremists). So even though there were examples of unrest in the neighbouring countries, and it seemed that Syria was going to follow the same pattern, a lasting war was an unexpected outcome. For many, the unrest started on their TV screens, and through word of mouth, news that in such and such a city or region “things were happening” started to spread. As most of my participants were from Aleppo, and the war reached Aleppo relatively late (in 2012), their first experience of war was not firsthand. When eventually it did reach Aleppo, “it hit very

hard,” they told me. The main things they mentioned were the following: explosions, Muslims coming to their neighbourhoods, the shortage of life necessities and high prices (heating oil, bread, water, electricity outages, etc.), internal displacements and lack of safety in their neighbourhoods,⁸⁶ the central one being the Armenian neighbourhood, Nor Kiugh. Some of the participants also spoke about kidnappings of Armenians. The recent study by Mollica and Hakobyan (2021) offers a detailed account of how the Armenian churches and neighbourhoods as well as business were targeted by the rebels in Aleppo. They also offer stories of men either kidnapped or imprisoned by the rebels (ibid).

All of this led to the decision to exit Syria: for some – with the hope to return one day, for others – for good. And even though all of the abovementioned reasons had a part in their decisions, for each of them there was a singular event, or a single moment which

⁸⁶ An interesting observation is in order: Uğur Ümit Üngör, a scholar working on genocides and paramilitarism, notes that out of four main groups responsible for the violence in Syria (ISIS, the Kurds, the rebels, and the government), the violence that Assad’s regime committed statistically is much greater than the violence all the other three groups combined committed (even if one includes in this the Genocide against the Yazidis; Üngör 2019). Interestingly enough, the government’s misdeeds seem to have gone either unnoticed or are for some other reason not spoken about. Even when a participant mentioned some misdeeds, it was “a minor wrong”: corruption or not enough freedom of speech, but not atrocities and crimes committed by the government. One wonders if the reason for the Syrian war not becoming a cultural trauma for the Armenian community might perhaps be the fact that the space for trauma narration was already filled with the narrative of the Armenian Genocide, one as powerful and reproduced routinely, that there was no space for a new narrative. Secondly, perhaps Armenians could not identify themselves with the victims of Assad’s regime, as they saw them partially as perpetrators, especially since Armenian religious and cultural centres were actively targeted. In such a scenario, they rather identified themselves with their ancestors of whose ordeals they learned again through the powerful narrative of nationhood.

made them realize they could not stay anymore. I organize the pages that follow in the order of reasons mentioned above, and conclude with a discussion of how and why people came to the decision to leave.

Explosions

“What was that moment when you realized you were at war?” and “What was the moment when the peaceful demonstrations turned into a war?” were the questions that opened the door to the “war” chapter of our conversations. As mentioned earlier, war came relatively late to Aleppo, so for many, it was initially something that they saw on TV. Still, it was something unexpected. People in Aleppo continued their daily lives with the belief that “Aleppo was strong and nothing would happen to it.” A mother from Aleppo says that back then she thought that even if something happens, it will be quickly “cleaned up.” In thinking that Aleppo, or Syria, was strong and that the war would never reach her, she was not alone. The following excerpt by a different participant demonstrates similar feelings.

You know, Lebanon was always in these kinds of problems, so it was clear [expected] for them. But this never happened on our side [Syria]. We could not even imagine that would happen. The first two days when these demonstrations started and happened, we said that tomorrow the government would round up everyone, would make them sit down, it would be over. It won't stay like this. There is “no game” with this Government. That's how we thought. We did not know that it would get out of control like this, or would stay like this. (A woman from Aleppo)

But the hope that it will be over soon and that nothing could happen was violently dashed by the explosions which the Armenians witnessed. When the explosions were far from them, they did not pay attention. Not until they reached Aleppo. A mother from Aleppo tells me that it was hard to believe the war would reach Aleppo.

We started hearing about it little by little from people who traveled. For example, some people traveled to Damascus and they said that on the road this and that village is all in ruins and then there were foreign flags in those places, until it got to Aleppo. Even after the war had started in the other regions, we did not really want to believe that it would reach Aleppo. We said it will be over in a month, it will get resolved in two months. We believed so or we wanted to believe so. I don't know. (A woman from Aleppo)

Of course, this trust was soon replaced by disappointment due to the ongoing war: by explosions, death, and destruction. Such is the account of a man from Aleppo:

When it started in Aleppo, you know, you are convinced that you have a strong army, it will squeeze them with its iron fist, but we waited and waited for almost a year and nothing: houses were destroyed, innocent people died every day and there was nothing coming from the army. So those with foresight realized that the danger is approaching, the danger to life, and we did not work either. After all, we needed to work to be able to live. (A man from Aleppo)

The explosions and the falling bombs were a big challenge especially for the families with school age children. As a woman from Aleppo reports, the children “were very, very scared. But what can you do. It is not possible without school either.” Many schools were destroyed completely, so the parents had to find other (Armenian) schools in safer locations and send their children there. While the children were at school, the parents were constantly on high alert and in fear. They were ready to run to the school after every sound. Some of them said they stayed behind the school walls, so that if something happened they would be close by. The explosions were a nightmare for both parents and children.

A teacher and a mother of two shares how the explosions for her began.

So it started with a demonstration and already during the demonstrations, since the area where our house stands was very close to the Muslim areas, and I was a mother of two kids, my son was turning two, he was a baby. I had my bag ready, so that in case something happened I would go to houses farther away, my relatives' houses. So it was right after the demonstrations, it was quiet for a while and then on February 9, 2011, the two main explosions happened. My daughter was at school at that time. My home was behind the school. So, from my house to the street where the school was it took half an hour, all the people were waiting for their children on the school's sidewalks, so they could take them and go to safer places. The same was my case, my neighbour drove me to school so I could pick up my daughter. I can't forget that day. [...] After the explosions, the situation calmed down for a while, there were no explosions, no sounds, no explosions were repeated, but we always heard that the “freedom-seekers” have started occupying Aleppo, neighbourhood after neighbourhood. Bostan Pasha, for example, Shaar, from where they entered, all those, etc. This was FSA [the Free Syrian Army], ISIS came at the end, in 2014-2015. (A woman from Aleppo)

A passage from another woman's interview elaborates on the explosions more.

In March 2012, yes it was March, my oldest son, in church, at school, there was an event at school and then at the church, they were going to celebrate Good Friday, it was during the Easter Lent. They told the parents to come too, the children were going to have an event, then there would be a mass at the church, and then they would pray. We went to the church, we had nearly entered it, there was an event and during "Our Father" there was a huge explosion. It was the first big explosion. It was horrible and the same day we lost an Armenian guy – a soldier. That guy was in Aleppo, he was a soldier doing military service, he was not in the war or in the army, but he was a soldier serving in his army. (A woman from Aleppo)

HT: Did you know who was behind this explosion? Was it ISIS?

A woman from Aleppo: They always said it was ISIS behind it. That day I was shaken very badly. My elder son was in sixth grade, my youngest son was in second grade. I picked them up from school and went home. I went home and prayed. After that, for 3-4 weeks, every Friday there were explosions. We were afraid to leave the houses on Fridays.

A young participant from Aleppo, who was a student during the war in Aleppo, recalls her experience of the explosions.

A woman from Aleppo: The first time that I felt the war in Syria, or I should say in Aleppo, because before us, explosions in other places, and other things announcing the war had already happened. But in Aleppo, the first time that I felt I was in eighth grade and I was collecting my papers, and I heard a very loud sound. Until then it did not cross my mind that in Aleppo there could be an explosion. I thought, probably something fell down at school [...] I thought maybe it was a chair or a table that fell down when being moved. It did not even cross my mind that it could be war. In 5-10 minutes, sounds were heard at school, they said it is an explosion but it is far from us, it is not here. Yes, it was very far from us, but at that moment I was terrified when I heard that explosion, and I thought about my parents, I wondered if it was far from the school, and my home was not that far from the school, but an eighth grader could not understand all those things, such as how far that explosion could have been, the sound of which was so loud. After that, there were days that I would wake up in the morning from the sounds of shootings, and could not go to school. Because they were close by, the sounds of weapons. My parents were afraid and they called school and said that the sounds are close to us and my child won't be able to come to school and they [at school] would understand of course. [...] I was afraid, very afraid. I tried to occupy myself with my classes so I did not think about the war in general and about all that was happening. [...]

HT: When you mentioned that last explosion in your home, what was that?

A woman from Aleppo: It was a [propane] gas tank, which FSA threw at us and it fell in my neighbour's home. More precisely, those gas tanks, we used them for cooking, there was [propane] gas in those tanks, and that's how they would make fire. So those gas tanks, they put explosives on them and sent to regions that were Bashar al-Assad's army's, no matter who lived there. It did not matter how many people there were. What was important to them, probably, was to harm us. This was the reason why we all were afraid of FSA.

HT: So, they threw it and it fell in your neighbour's home.

A woman from Aleppo: Yes, and it gives you ten seconds only [i.e., you have ten minutes until it explodes], that explosive gas tank gives ten seconds. In these ten seconds the person decides how to continue their lives. I was standing in my room and heard the sound of it falling and in takes only

ten seconds for a huge explosion to happen. As soon as the sound of the falling [gas tank] was heard, my father said to me “run,” because it felt very close to us. I ran and it is good I did, it is good my father said “come” to me, because if I had not run that day, perhaps I would either be dead, either alive with horrible injuries and wounds, or maybe could not even be alive. Because where I lived, the next day when we went back, the building was half ruined and my place, the glass door of my room, its glass was scattered right where I had been standing.

Usually during my interviews, I asked the participants who, they thought, was behind those explosions, kidnappings, and other things that happened during the war. Most of the participants paused, then said it was not clear or that no-one knew. Some said, “it was of course the FSA, as there was no ISIS at that time in Aleppo, ISIS came later,” others said it was probably Nusra, some others indicated groups of Turkish origin. For many, however, the perpetrators of violence were simply “the ugly ones.” In some instances, I asked them how they knew it was not the government. A young man, who told me how he had escaped a rocket that hit the university (leaving 230 dead and 300 injured), said: “We were already living within the government, why would the government hit itself?” Thus, according to the participants, these explosions and targeting of the Armenians were done by FSA, Nusra, ISIS and some other groups, but never by the government. So “they” for the participants always denoted one of the abovementioned groups, or “the bad guys” in general.

This is how a woman from Aleppo remembers the explosions.

It started with the sounds. We heard the sounds and we heard that a bomb fell in this place or that place, so nothing happened to the neighbourhoods. [...] They did not enter ours, there were neighbourhoods where they entered. So, the Armenians that lived there left their houses and left, but it did not happen in our neighbourhood. They were about to enter our neighbourhood, but they [i.e., probably the government] felt this [i.e., had a premonition], so the army entered and nothing happened. (A woman from Aleppo)

They were living in Suleymaniyye near Nor Kiugh, an Armenian neighbourhood that was targeted. I asked if she had heard of bombs in Nor Kiugh. The woman from Aleppo told me that there were many in their neighbourhoods as well.

One fell in front of my husband's store. After work, they were sitting, four friends, and there is a distance of fifty meters between my house and my husband's store. There was a powerful sound. So what happened was, there was a car and the bomb fell onto the car's seat, then it broke the floor of the car and did not explode. That was one, then the second one my husband and I were going to meet someone for business, the bombs flew over us and exploded a bit further away from us. This is two. The third time I was hanging the laundry to dry and a helicopter was shot and big chunks of it fell into my balcony, this is three. One other time, I was going to bring the kids home from school through our neighbourhood, Suleymaniyye. I heard a whistle. "What happened?" I thought and threw myself onto the ground. At that moment a bullet cut through my car, where I had thrown myself onto the ground. So, one more step, and I was going to have it in my brain. And my husband was told that "your wife was in trouble, come see the car." The glass of the car was shattered. The front was cut, holes in it. When I was bringing the kids home from school, I passed under many bombs. Yes, the school was close to my home, but it was very dangerous. (A woman from Aleppo)

A man from Damascus summarizes the war briefly.

Everything died for me, the meaning of life was lost. We did not need anything. I had some money. So, I spent that money little by little. I was sitting around without a job. My plans were destroyed, my dreams were dashed. Nothing was left. Life had lost its meaning. The only thought we had when we left home in order to do something was to come back alive. So many people were slaughtered in front of my eyes. The bombs, the square... how many times it was hit, and I was there. I was lying on the ground for hours, the Bab Tuma bridge... in front of my eyes people died, people were injured. We saw death with our eyes several times, but God, it seems, wanted us alive. Our only worry was to come back alive, so we would pray once before we left the house and once when entering the house [because we came back alive]. (A man from Damascus)

Many participants described seeing the war unfolding from their balconies, especially those who lived near Bostan Pasha, a neighbourhood that was controlled by the rebels and was next to Nor Kiugh, the Armenian neighbourhood. They say they saw how buildings were being destroyed, how dust enfolded everything, how the injured and dead bodies were carried and laid there. But what struck them most were the deaths of Armenians. The lost lives of Armenians, friends and people they knew, hit the community particularly hard.

It is interesting to read the story of the explosions by an Aleppo mother, telling about the death of an Armenian young man. Even though there were others who fell victim to the explosions, it was the death of the Armenian that shattered her.

A woman from Aleppo: The first one, I can't forget that one, was in February. We were at school and we had a ceremony. In the morning, the first was during church time. We took our students to the church. There was a church right next to the school. So, we went to the church and our students

learned *sharakan* [church hymns sung during mass]. At that moment we heard a very powerful explosion and the windows of the church were shattered. It was really bad, the students were very scared. These were elementary school kids, 3rd-, 4th- and 5th-grade kids. We took them immediately back to school, which was closed already, but the parents came running immediately. Each of them wanted to get their child and go home. We tried to calm them down but even we were afraid: “what was that!” And that day an Armenian soldier fell. Even though it was pretty far away from our school and church, the Armenian soldier,⁸⁷ from the Yaqubiyye village, died. It was really shattering when the young man died, fell victim to that explosion.

HT: What happened, was he in the explosion?

A woman from Aleppo: They blew him up. I think a car stopped in front of the barracks and the car exploded. The Armenian guy was in those barracks too. It was really a shock, the next day was the funeral and the Armenian community of Aleppo, all of it rose, they were in complete shock, especially that his parents were well-known people. They were well-known people in the community, church, school, etc. [Some specifics are removed to preserve anonymity]. It was horrible.

HT: Was that guy the only victim of that explosion?

A woman from Aleppo: Of that day’s explosion – he was the only Armenian victim.

HT: But there were others? Non-Armenians?

A woman from Aleppo: Yes, yes. Almost all the soldiers that were in those barracks died that day.

HT: Who was behind it: was it ISIS? Or FSA?

A woman from Aleppo: During those days ISIS was not mentioned yet, those days they would say it was FSA. Even though FSA did not make any claims that it is them, did not take responsibility for the explosion. What happened we did not understand. But the death of the Armenian guy really affected us all. After that, we closed the school for several days, or, to be precise, the parents did not want their children to be at school. Then we went back to our regular school life, but families started leaving Syria.

The death of the Armenian soldier brought the war closer to the Armenian community. It showed them that they were wrong in thinking that remaining neutral, not taking part in this war and minding their own business could give them safety. Life as they knew it was shattered, and the imaginary barriers that existed between them and other communities of Syria, were erased. One of the manifestations of the latter was Muslims

⁸⁷ Mollica and Hakobyan (quoting Poladyan 2017) write that between 2011 and 2017 “in Aleppo, 35 Armenian soldiers of SAA died” (2021:120).

moving from other regions and neighbourhoods into the Armenian neighbourhoods, or settling close to their neighbourhoods. I discuss that below.

Muslims in the Armenian Neighbourhoods

Another noteworthy thing that the war brought to the lives of Armenians was that the borders separating them from Muslims that had existed for decades, were wiped out. Many participants told me that it was heart-breaking for them to see their ethnic enclave neighbourhoods, especially the Armenian ones, filled with others. Presumably, living surrounded by Armenians and other Christians gave them a feeling of home or homeland, which was taken away now by groups of Muslims coming into their neighbourhoods. Another thing that this war brought into their lives was that it contributed to the feeling of otherness very strongly. They felt that this is not their country, this was the country of others and they do not have a place there as such (many of them interpreted the war as an attempt to make the position of Islam stronger, and to get rid of Christians). Thus, for them, even if it was not a war against them directly, it was a war against their identities, against their feeling of belonging, and against their rights. Muslims, according to a mother from Aleppo, came to Armenian neighbourhoods to “protect their lives,”

[...] because if they had stayed there and had not turned to the opposite side they would've died. It was an escape in a way. Many of them ran away from the beginning, very fast, they migrated when they felt that this is becoming an issue, those who did not want to act against the government. Yeah, those who had a budget were able to run away, but those who did not, either stayed or died or turned to the other side. There was no other choice. (A woman from Aleppo)

A father from Aleppo also spoke about rural Arabs moving into their neighbourhoods in Aleppo, renting places and staying. According to them, residents of Aleppo themselves did not rise, they had no issues. It was the people from outside who

came, stayed, then went out into the streets and were shouting “death or freedom,” protesting against the government. After the month of Ramadan, they started also attacking Armenians, and lots of people died, says the participant.

In earlier chapters I briefly discussed how some participants spoke about the change their neighbourhoods in Aleppo were undergoing after Muslims moved in. The familiar places they used to go to and where they felt at home (since they were mostly inhabited by Armenians), were not the same anymore. Aleppo was not their city any longer, and according to some, the “others” did not want them in Syria altogether. Thus, the once familiar places which they used to call home (but not homeland) were not familiar anymore.

Did it make leaving their homes easier? While many of the participants expressed their satisfaction about moving to Canada (“we wish we had come here earlier”) they also said they missed Aleppo, they missed their lives there and the majority of them still have their homes in Syria. “I left it as it was” and “One day I will go visit,” they told me. Like many, the woman from Aleppo did not think what she was leaving at that moment. It was cold, dark, with no safety, she said. It is not clear if she ever will go back or not. The house is there as it always was, she said. It is now, years later, that she has started thinking about what she had left.

Shortages

The first major change that the war brought to many was job loss. Their shops and workplaces were in neighbourhoods that were occupied, attacked, and destroyed. So the men, who were the breadwinners, had to find other opportunities to provide for their families now.

In the last chapter I already mentioned a woman who spoke about how Bostan Pasha⁸⁸ (the neighbourhood where most of the Armenians had their stores and businesses) was targeted and destroyed. She also speaks about a different neighbourhood close to it, Sheikh Najjar, where Armenians also lost property.

[...] another region that also had Armenian businesses, it was called Sheikh Najjar, they said, it was the northern part of Aleppo, very close to Turkey's border. All the stores of Armenian craftsmen there were plundered by Turks. The Sheikh Najjar region was completely plundered. (A woman from Aleppo)

Being one of the few working women among my participants, she tells how they were unable to return to work.

School had begun, but we were unable to go back to school. We stayed like that until December, the Armenian schools were unable to open their doors. It was completely changed. We did not leave our neighbourhoods. We actually tried not to leave our houses either, only for very important matters, like shopping and stuff. We were afraid that if we went out, we would fall victim to a shell or an explosion. Because explosions like that happened a lot: near schools, churches and there were also Armenian neighbourhoods that were close to Bostan Pasha, that were emptied completely. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman from Aleppo says that the change that the war brought for them was that her husband could not go to work, because the neighbourhood where he worked was occupied and plundered. There were people who went there to see what happened to their workplaces and they were taken as hostages and the kidnappers called their families asking for ransom. "We did not risk going there." She was pregnant and had a baby. With her husband's job gone, she started making croissants, 250 pieces a day, to

⁸⁸ Bostan Pasha and Holluk were mostly populated by Turkomans (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021).

generate some income. Her husband took them to an Armenian store inside the Armenian neighbourhood. As her husband could not go back to his work (previously, he had a business, making suitcases), he was able to find casual work, such as selling phone parts.

The bread lines became a part of their lives. A woman from Aleppo said that sometimes they stood in line from 5AM to 11PM to be able to buy bread.

You could not get more than three, so two or three, they would not give more, but two was already enough, for those who ate a lot three was enough, others who ate less, it was enough for a week. [...] My husband served in the bakery [i.e., he volunteered]. We had a bakery in our neighbourhood, a private one, not governmental, and the owner was a Muslim, a very close friend of my husband's. For two years, when there was no bread in Aleppo, to the centres (i.e. clubs), orphanages, hospitals, senior homes, churches, teachers, all of those, my husband would provide with bread, he would take it to them, or they would come to take it from him. (A woman from Aleppo)

She confirmed that all the people they helped were Armenians.

Among other difficulties were the electricity outages and the lack of running water. At some point they started bringing water from water wells, carrying water manually or pumping it. Those who had access to electricity (as was the abovementioned participant's case) helped others: cooked neighbours' meals, did their laundry, gave oil to those who had children or had a sick person at home, and pumped water. Oil was very expensive and a scarce resource; buying heating oil in bottles was a commonly shared practice during the war. When it became unavailable, people started burning wood to heat their homes. They burned whatever they could get, including furniture pieces.

Inflation was another issue many of my participants talked about. Life became very expensive. Bread prices jumped several times. Combined with the joblessness, the situation became very difficult, and it was often hard to find life necessities. Another participant, who had two children aged five and six during 2014-2015, was struggling between joblessness and the need to support her family.

The main difficulty was that my children were young, we could not find milk easily. I bought several boxes of milk and kept it so I could feed my child. There was no electricity, the food got spoiled, as

there were no fridges. It was cold, we could not find oil to heat the house. That's the way it was. (A woman from Aleppo)

After jobs and businesses were lost, most of the Armenians survived on their savings for a while. Those who traveled to Lebanon or Armenia, meanwhile, tried to find jobs to support themselves. Most of the time, these were temporary jobs. Those who still had their jobs, or who were able to find other ones, still faced challenges. A mother from Aleppo tells:

We did not have gasoline, oil for heating, there was no internet, and so on and so forth. So it was very hard. There were jobs, the men worked, there was money, but there were no goods. You can't use the stove to warm the kids, there is no oil, you either need to bring unimaginable money so you can procure a small bottle of it [oil for heating]. That's how it was. (A woman from Aleppo)

One of the positive sides of those hard times, I was told, was that the community and the families maintained stronger connections and grew closer to each other.⁸⁹

Internal Displacement

Many families had to move out of their homes, neighbourhoods, cities, and eventually out of the country as things became more and more dangerous. The common destinations were the safer buildings within their neighbourhoods (e.g., top floors were considered

⁸⁹ Gasparyan and Saroyan (2019) write: "A common psychological reaction is often a compulsive need for group unity and a strong desire to help one another. Such an overwhelming need surfaced during the aftermath of the earthquake, as well as after the bombardments in Stepanakert, Karabakh, in 1992–1994. Similarly, it was also recognized that the people of New York were especially sensitive after 9/11, which was reflected in various ways. [...] The need for unity and to help one another reflects the capacity of each and every individual to universalize their pain and emotional upheaval and find empathy with fellow sufferers" (p.287).

more dangerous because of the explosions), safer neighbourhoods within Aleppo, safer cities within Syria (e.g., Latakia or the Qamishli region), and finally, Lebanon or Armenia. As places considered safe could rapidly become unsafe, many Armenians had to move more than once. For some it was not a choice. They went for a vacation for several weeks and were unable to come back to their homes as the situation had rapidly escalated. Many stayed in their places of refuge for weeks, others for years, some were back and forth between two locations. Considering the heavy shelling of some cities or the perils one might encounter on the roads, traveling between cities or countries could also be very dangerous. When I asked a mother from Aleppo how her life had changed after the war, she answered:

[It was] being a refugee inside the country. I have changed five houses. Wherever I went there was shelling. I started doing things I have never done before, for example, carrying water. Oh, that story of water carrying... [HT: as there was no running water in apartments anymore]. We did not have food supplies, not until we started getting humanitarian aid, then we brought wood, as there was no heating, we burned wood for heating. We even brought water from water wells. What I mean is not ready water that we got, we ourselves brought it from the water wells to the apartments. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman who had a child at that time and was pregnant with a second one, says that the first time there was an explosion in two buildings, which burned down, and the sound of firearms was heard. First, they did not know what was happening, then people started going out to the streets. They stayed in their houses to stay alive. She had to go to live in her mother's house, as the second floor where her mother lived was safer than the fourth floor where her apartment was, as it was more likely to be hit by a bomb. They changed the school of their child, finding one close to her mother's house. Apart from taking the child to school and back home, they mostly stayed home. Only men went out to make a living.

A woman in her late thirties tells me that when things started getting difficult, she left her home and moved to her friend's house (who herself had moved to stay in Latakia — a coastal and a relatively peaceful region). The friend's house was in a safer place within Aleppo, a place that was "protected by Armenians." "One year I stayed like that, one year I could not go home, I am in Aleppo, but I go to my home as a guest, limited times," she told me.

[...] seeing that my neighbourhood is becoming more dangerous, we did not have electricity, already the phones were down, the Internet was down, this was down, that was down, so if something happened to the little ones, we had to be able to reach them, we needed to be close to the bazaar, close to the hospital. So on that day we decided to talk to my friend. I talked to my friend and stayed for months in her house, then I decided to leave Aleppo altogether. (A woman from Aleppo)

As it appears from the excerpts above, the situation was particularly challenging for the parents of young, school age children, as they had to make arrangements with the schools. Some schools had closed and they had to find other Armenian schools in safer neighbourhoods and living arrangements accordingly, and sometimes also find fitting work arrangements. A young mother of two says that even though the situation was dangerous and they tried not to go out, they still sent their children to school because education was very important for her. But sending children to school or other educational centres was dangerous; "you don't know if they will come back," she says. She changed her job to stay at home in the morning with her kids, so that when the situation was dangerous, the kids could stay at home with her. Schools were mostly open, except for several days every once in a while. And one time they closed for six months in a row. Her house was in a dangerous place, so in 2014, she moved into her mother's house, a safer and a quieter place, for two months.

Nor Kiugh

Aleppo consisted of ethno-religious neighbourhoods (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021). One such neighbourhood that was also the main centre of the Aleppo Armenians (ibid) is called Nor Kiugh (or Nor Gyugh/Giugh), “New Village” in Armenian. During the war Aleppo was divided into two parts — one controlled by the government and the other by the opposition. The Armenian neighbourhoods fell in the middle (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021) and this situation remained such until 2016, when the entire city was retaken by the Syrian Arab Army⁹⁰ (ibid). Aleppo and its Armenian neighbourhoods were heavily attacked during the war and according to Mollica and Hakobyan (2021) the local Armenian population believed that Aleppo was the main target for Turkish and Turkish backed forces, and that behind any attack against Armenians or Armenian symbols were the Turks (ibid:169). This was not however the case with my participants. While the Turkish involvement came up more than once, for many of them it was not crystal clear who was bombing them — one thing they were certain of, it was not the government.

The story of Nor Kiugh frequently came up during interviews. Nor Kiugh suffered immensely during the Syrian war. It is next to Bostan Pasha, which was in the hands of FSA and from where, according my participants, Nor Kiugh was subject to sniper fire and shelling. Many of my participants talked about the grave condition people in Nor Kiugh endured, and about the loss of many Armenian lives. They told me that the neighbourhood was important to Armenians not just because of the people who lived there, but also for others things, i.e., the Armenian church and the cultural centre. That’s why the Armenian

⁹⁰ Part of the armed forces of Syria.

men had to come together, take weapons, put up barricades, organize patrols and take turns every night to see to their neighbourhood's safety. Many others were engaged in delivering food and water under the cover of the night to those who could not leave their homes, as snipers were targeting them. A young participant tells me that Armenian men volunteered one night at a time to protect the neighbourhood: "Every woman sent her husband or father to do their turn" (A woman from Aleppo). It is interesting that this woman emphasizes the women's agency in "sending" their men to defend the neighbourhood, thus bringing to light the perspective of women in her talk. Below is another participant's recollection of the events.

With time, little by little, they occupied the region of Bostan Pasha, which was very close to Nor Kyugh. It was a region of Armenian craftsmen, they had stores there, they occupied them completely and from there they started throwing bombs at the Armenian neighbourhoods. The Armenian neighbourhoods became a target for about two-three years. Nor Kyugh in its entirety became a target. Then they burnt an Armenian church.⁹¹ (A mother from Aleppo)

Where the Armenians got weapons was a question no-one was sure about. Mostly, people thought that it was the government that provided them with weapons, so that they could protect themselves. However, no-one knew how it happened, as it all happened "secretly" or unofficially.

We have lots of Armenian men that formed check points, they did not allow any men or cars into our districts, so we owe that to our Armenian men and the government of course. It was them [the government] that gave weapons to Armenians guys, they gave them everything so they could protect Armenians, the churches, the schools. (A mother in her late 30s from Aleppo)

Nor Kiugh was not the only place where Armenian lives were endangered. Many Armenians, according to my participants, were service members or had family members in the army. Some of them have died, the whereabouts of others are still unknown.

⁹¹ Most probably the participant is referring to the burning of the Saint Kevork church on October 20, 2012 (Mollica and Hakobyan 2021).

There were many close people who had [family in the army]. They lost their children [...] They were Armenians, some of them were kids from our club, who died. We got their bodies, we held the funerals. There were some whom they buried right at the place of battle, their bodies weren't found. To this day there are kidnapped Armenian soldiers who are not around [i.e., no one knows where they are]. (A man from Damascus)

Suleymaniyye, an Armenian neighbourhood next to Nor Kiugh, also suffered according to my participants. Explosions were frequent. A young woman from Aleppo says the memories of the explosions and war haunt her until now, after five years of being in Canada.

The first years after I settled here, even a small sound, even a book falling on the floor reminded me of those explosions, or that last explosion that forced me to leave my home, and I would start to cry. Of course, all that is over, thank God, but the memory is still there. (A woman from Aleppo)

Armenians in Nor Kiugh were involved in other ways as well. A young Aleppo man, a student and the son of a wealthy family, tells me that he volunteered to provide food and first aid (other participants spoke about this too). There was support coming from both Armenians and non-Armenian organizations, and he participated in distributing it to people. The situation was dangerous, and there were people who could not leave their homes for fear of being shot by snipers, he told me. The above-mentioned participant said he went under the cover of darkness to supply these people with necessities.

A father from Aleppo summarizes the work the Armenians had to do to protect their neighbourhoods, including Nor Kiugh, and it supports the other accounts mentioned above.

A man from Aleppo: The young men from the club put barriers in our neighbourhoods, because they were very close to us when they got to Aleppo. [...] When they reached Aleppo, they were already in nearby neighbourhoods and were about to attack our neighbourhoods, so that's why Armenian men put barriers and stood guard, the young men from the club. They did this voluntarily, not by the government [i.e., this was not organized by the government]. So, they [the Armenians] guarded us voluntarily, so that they [the opposition] did not attack us, our families, our children.

HT: Did the government not help Armenians when it started?

A man from Aleppo: No, at the beginning there was nothing. The government maybe helped with weapons, maybe those small weapons like Kalashnikov and such, those weapons maybe they gave, so they [the Armenians] could protect themselves. But at the beginning there was no

government, they [the rebels] reached our neighbourhoods and our young men drove them out. Only after that the government came.

Mollica and Hakobyan (2021) also give some examples to point out that the involvement of the Armenians was particularly for the purpose of protecting their neighbourhoods and their cultural symbols.

Kidnappings

One of the terrors Armenians faced during the war was the fear of being kidnapped. The fear of leaving their homes, especially in certain neighbourhoods, knowing that as Christians they were being targeted not only by ISIS but also by other groups, made everyone very conscious about their positionality. One man from Aleppo speculated that some people “worked” as traitors during the war, by giving information to ISIS about the whereabouts of the sons of well-off families, who could potentially pay a high ransom to free their children. Some other participants thought these were individuals (presumably non-Armenians) who were employed by Armenians; others did not know who those traitors were or how the information reached ISIS at all. The participants talked about kidnappings in different contexts. Here is one such account by an Aleppo woman: “Ok, my home was in a place, the ordinary places where you find Armenians, a bit further than that. When those things started, people were staying inside their homes, because they started to kidnap people, harm people.”

A man from Aleppo spoke about the kidnappings as something directed at Armenians as a revenge.

[...] since they saw that Armenians did not cooperate with them, they started to target Armenians: killing young men, kidnaping young men. What I mean by saying targeting, it is because Armenians did not participate, they [the rebels] wanted them to participate with them in their war. Since we were neutral, because of that there was tension against us.

When I asked a woman from Aleppo if she had heard about any kidnappings of Armenians, she answered:

A woman from Aleppo: Many, many people. There were people who were freed, they were asked to be ransomed, and they were freed, but many people never returned. For example, I know people who came from Lebanon and the bus was stopped and seven men were taken from it and these seven people are gone until now.⁹²

HT: Were they Armenians?

A woman from Aleppo: All of them, one had two children, another two, another had one, others, newly married brides, saw with their eyes how their husbands were taken away, and they never returned.

The account of another Aleppo woman joins others in confirming that Armenians suffered from kidnappings and that it was an aspect of war that particularly threatened them.

We were very scared; we were always in fear. There were many explosions, several times. I was afraid to send the children to school. That's how it was. We were always in fear. They took the Armenian men away and asked for money. (A second Aleppo woman)

While some spoke about the life difficulties and not having basic needs, the most common reason for Armenians leaving Syria was the issue of safety. As such, the decision came when the physical threat was perceived as too real. I will discuss this below.

⁹² Mollica and Hakobyan (2021) write that on October 29, 2012 (the same day that the Armenian church Saint Kevork in Nor Kiugh was burnt), the bus going from Beirut to Aleppo was stopped and ten passengers, including seven Armenians, were kidnapped.

The Decision to Leave Syria

People mostly describe the decision to leave Syria as a defining event, something tragic and something big. For others it was a series of events that led to this decision. Mostly, they say, it was the desire to find safety and the feeling that there was nothing left for them in Syria. But how does one decide to leave their country, the place they have called home, to leave their lives behind and to become refugees? At what moment was this decision taken? Because telling me about those moments was for my participants very emotionally difficult, I prefer to directly quote their words, rather than summarizing or paraphrasing them.

There was a very big explosion in Qamishli,⁹³ where I lost my friends and relatives in the same explosion. In that coffee shop there were about eleven people who died, eleven Christians, three Catholic Armenians. And the next day was the New Year [...] It was very, very, very bad. Our friends, relatives were playing cards inside this coffee shop and the coffee shop exploded. [...] They were playing cards, they did not have any fault [i.e., they had done nothing wrong], they had small children and they just died. [...] I decided to leave Syria after this explosion, honestly. Things were really, really bad. The loss of lives. You know, we tolerated everything, telling ourselves, “whatever it is, it’s our land, we do not want to migrate again, we have settled down already,” but this explosion was bad [...] you know, they were not soldiers, they were just regular guys who finished their work and came to play cards, they were not militants, or soldiers, they were just playing cards happily, because it was New Year, so they died. It was really, really bad. (A man from Qamishli)

A female participant is most probably referring to the same explosion. She tells me about explosions that took place in “a different region near Al-Hasakeh,”⁹⁴ when she was staying with her in-laws, after having left Aleppo.

There were several very bad explosions, about thirteen young men had died the day before the New Year. It affected us very hard. [...] They were sitting in a cafe and playing cards, they were Christians and among them there were Armenians and there the explosion happened, a very big one. Several young men died from it. It had a very bad effect on us. We decided to migrate after that. [...] We applied to come to Canada. We first tried Sweden, but we could not. Then we applied to Canada and went and stayed in Beirut for three years and got here. (A woman from Aleppo)

⁹³ BBC (2015) reported on a similar incident.

⁹⁴ Qamishli is part of the al-Hasakeh governorate in the Northeastern part of Syria.

For a woman from Aleppo, a mother of two, the decision to leave Syria also was the result of explosions, but especially one that involved her child. She said that there were explosions and people were dying and her situation was very difficult already, when that particular explosion happened. Below is an excerpt from the interview:

My situation was quite difficult, because before the war my husband had a special job offer from Saudi Arabia and went there, so in that period I was left alone with my children. Yes, my parents were there and my husband's parents were there, but it was a very difficult responsibility – to be with two children. Especially, since after every explosion there was no electricity and Internet, so I could not contact my husband for days and he was also suffering with no news. It sometimes took two-three days to tell him that we were fine. [...] Once it happened that my son went out to buy something from a store in a nearby neighbourhood. He was twelve, he went to buy something and there was an explosion very close by. I remember how I ran to the street, how I hugged him and returned home. That day I decided that I will leave Syria, I must leave Syria already, because I realized that I cannot bear this responsibility anymore [...] He was very shaken. He said that he felt he had jumped into the air and fallen back. He was very scared. How I took him and how I ran back home, it was horrible. That day I decided to leave the country. Before that our neighbourhoods had already started becoming empty. Especially those who had friends or relatives in Lebanon or who had financial security were able to live in Lebanon, they had left already, and then I also made that decision. (A woman from Aleppo)

For the woman from Aleppo below, the same decision came after a tragedy seen on TV.

There was one reason, our decision to leave Syria came one night. There is a city close to us and something happened there. We were watching TV and we saw that in a tree a mother, her husband was beheaded and the head was put there, and her two children, one was hanging from her one hand and the other was hanging from her one foot. We saw that picture and my husband said that it is time to leave. It was not in our city, it was in a different city, but that's why we left. (A woman from Aleppo)

A man from Damascus also told me that he decided to leave because “There was lots of death, among people close to us. A greater number of people started to die because of that war. I lost many close friends, I saw that it was very dark, so I decided that it was over.” A woman in her late thirties tells a heartbreaking story, too.

OK, first I want to tell you something else, something that happened to the kids, so before I left my home, my own, not my friend's, so it was close to the morning when, shall I say the Free Syrian Army – I don't even know what to call them – invaded our neighbourhood. It was never that close. Our whole neighbourhood, I can't tell you in what state we were that day. They yelled from downstairs “*Allahu Akbar*” [“God is Great” in Arabic], they made noise with their weapons, banged on building doors. So, they will enter, they will slaughter. A very bad day it was, I only know that my

house was big, the very last room, that was not attached to the balcony, we ran there and sat in the middle of the bed, I hugged my children, my elder daughter said, "Mama now if they come to slaughter us, what are we going to do?" I can't forget this. It was because of this that we decided to leave there and go to a more, what should I say, Armenian-populated place, close to the churches, so at least I wouldn't have this risk, it was that day that we decided to leave our home and go there. From there, for nine months, several times only a mortar shell fell in the neighbourhood where I was staying. It fell on the building where I was staying. I was on the first floor, so the debris fell all around my house. That day I won't forget my younger daughter's reaction, how she came running, hugged me, "Mama, are we going to die?" [...] That day was that we, together with my husband, we decided that we need to leave. The kids' mental health was deteriorating, and so on, and so forth. (A woman from Aleppo)

There were other reasons, not as tragic as the abovementioned, that made people leave Syria. A young man from Aleppo told me that there were many things that made him leave Syria. There was no drinking water, no electricity, no gas, no oil. They needed to heat their houses, but even though they were rich, they had only wood. There was theft, there was no guarantee that one would come back every time one left home. His father bought water. Earlier, nine loafs of bread cost 25 liras (at that time one dollar was worth 50 liras). He remembers there was no bread left and his father paid 800 liras for 9 loaves of bread. He says his father lost lots of money and his business. His brother was already in Lebanon, and he himself had an army problem. He had to serve in the army as soon as he finished the university and he was in his last year. Of course, he did not want to go to the army. If he did, he would still be there. So, he decided to go to Lebanon and later to Canada.

Avoiding military service was something many Armenians tried to do during those years. Many of my participants mentioned that they left the country for this reason. The families who had sons approaching military service age had to make a hasty decision to leave the country and go somewhere (e.g., Lebanon, Armenia), even if this was not their destination of choice.

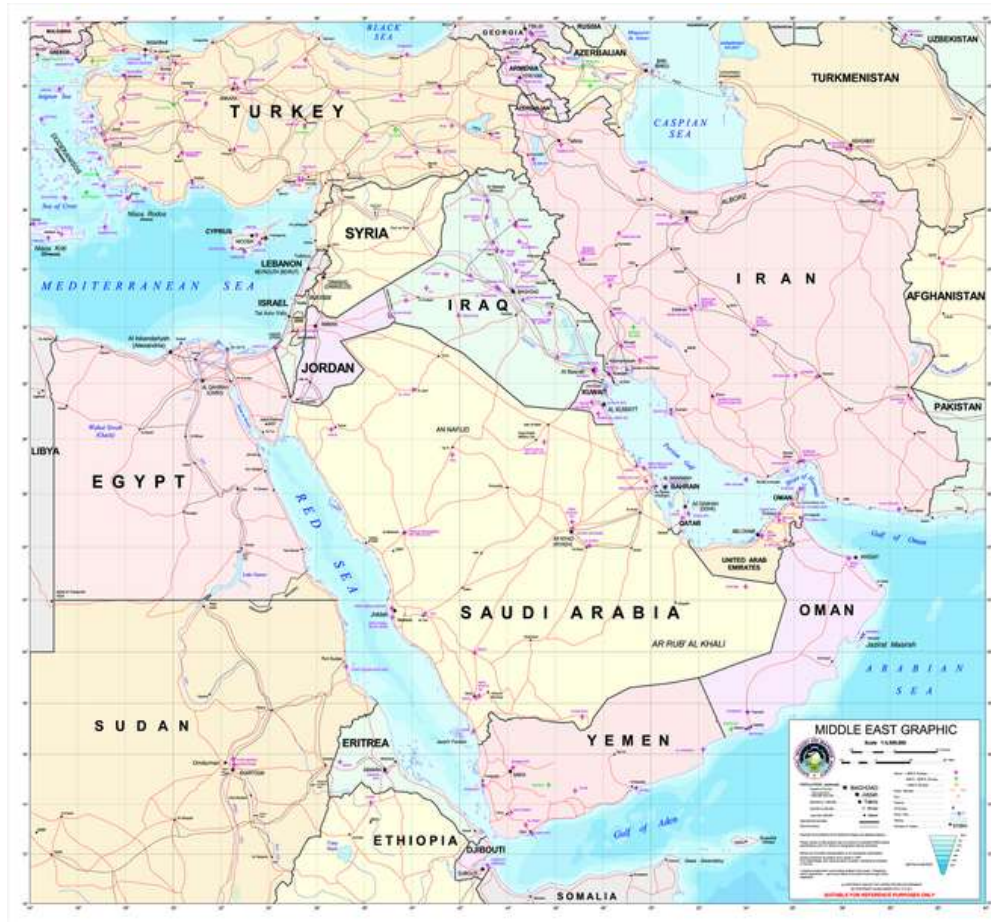
The situation for many changed very fast: from electricity outages to military airplanes flying over them, to shelled neighbourhoods and dead bodies. And yet people believed that things would be better soon. A middle-aged woman tells me she felt bullets flying through her hair before she decided to leave the country, and yet she was criticized for not trusting the government.

I felt that something like a bullet, like wind, went through my hair. I said, oh some wind went through my hair. They started blaming me that I am imagining things. I said I am not going to sit here anymore [they were then sitting outside together with their neighbour's family], I know that there was something, like wind through my hair. I said, "look there are pieces of bullets and you say that I imagine things." (A woman from Aleppo)

She decided to leave for Armenia while the roads were open and until "things get better," but she ended up going to Lebanon, where her brother had moved at that point already. As already mentioned before, the decision to leave Syria was mostly to seek safety, and was often thought of as a temporary measure. A man from Aleppo also thought that he was leaving the country for a short while, but it turned out to be for good.

I did not stay in Aleppo for a long time after that [after the war had reached Aleppo]. I saw that the belt was tightening, they were starting attacks and firing. There were explosions every day, in different regions, governmental buildings were exploding and so on. With every explosion we would run to school, you know, to see how the kids were doing. OK, our little ones were safe for a while, then they started shelling and bombing, every day someone died. Fear was in us all the time. It was the end of 2012, I said that we need to leave. It was still thought that the government will end this in several weeks, that it won't last. So, I said we will go to Armenia, stay there for several months and then come back. That's how it happened, we left Syria and never went back. (A man from Aleppo)

As it turned out, going to Armenia was not an easy experience either. For many, the homeland did not become home, and they had to put their hopes in foreign shores once again, and go back to a diasporic existence, reaching once more the heartbreaking conclusion that "we are a wanderer nation" and this is "the Armenian destiny." The question why and how this shapes their collective identities, will be discussed in further chapters.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Middle_east_graphic_2003.jpg

Figure 2: Map of the Middle East (Wikimedia Commons n.d.b).

CHAPTER 7: PERSONS OF SELF-RESCUE

The previous chapter discussed Syrian Armenians' experiences of war and their decision to leave Syria. As most of the participants mentioned, the main reason that pushed them onto the path of a refugee was the lack of safety: the falling bombs, the kidnappings and, for those families who had sons or husbands eligible for mandatory military service, the desire to avoid it. A male participant told me that, had he not left Syria, he would have had to go to the army and would have still been trapped in it.

But the decision to leave Syria was a step that set them on a path to continuous hardship, uncertainty and new dangers, among them the road out of Syria. Of course, it also depended on where that path led them. Between leaving Syria and reaching Canada, my participants stayed either in Armenia or in Lebanon, or had to move continuously between countries. Many families had to split up — often one family member (mostly husbands) making money in one country (Syria, Lebanon, the Gulf countries) while the wife and the children lived outside Syria (in Lebanon or Armenia).

As discussed in the literature review, in this chapter I draw on the concept of “persons of self-rescue,” which Kyriakides and colleagues have developed while studying Syrian refugees (2018; 2020). I have offered a thorough discussion of why this concept is useful for my work and why it is important to understand the work refugees do. Here I very briefly remind the reader of the concept and how IE helps us to extend the notion of “self-rescue.”

In the usage of Kyriakides and colleagues, this term offers a more flexible and meaningful alternative to “refugee,” as it highlights that the process of people’s moving

from zones of danger into safety is not a simple and one-sided rescue operation. Rather, they note that people actively involve their pre-refugee selves and their social roles (as “parent,” “provider,” etc.) in order to remove themselves from zones of danger and bring themselves into safety. I have tried to fruitfully expand the definition of Kyriakides and colleagues, using an IE orientation. I directed my inquiry into the everyday work Syrian Armenians have undertaken in order to become persons of self-rescue and be in Canada by actively operating within a context provided by a number of entities and systems: government laws and policies pertaining to entry, residency, and immigration; the UN and NGOs involved in refugee assistance; local labour and housing markets; and community and personal connections, especially those found among Armenians. The institutional ethnographic approach allows me to explore how people’s everyday work is coordinated by large-scale translocal relations of ruling.

To understand the extent of this work in a more comprehensive manner, it is important to engage with the following questions: Who were the main actors (state and non-state alike) in the process of their migration and integration (in those cases when they tried to settle either in Armenia or in Lebanon)? What appeal and what disadvantages did each country have for refugees? What were the main factors that made each country desirable or possible for settlement? It is also interesting to follow how the lives of those who did or did not officially register as refugees, and who did not follow certain procedures (in whole or partially), unfolded, and whether this benefited them, and how they actively used the web of both local and translocal relations of coordination, which they both as individuals and as groups were engaged with.

To understand this — which in itself is an important part of understanding immigration in general — in this chapter I briefly describe the two other main destinations that Syrian Armenians have taken, and the experiences of some of the participants in each of them. It is important to note that refugees, both as individuals and as groups, are engaged with these relations of coordination directly and indirectly. These relations — whether personal, ethnic, religious, or political — are and can include state and non-state actors and are both local and translocal, and do in certain ways coordinate the everyday actualities of refugees. For a Syrian Armenian person the web of such relations could include the following: the Armenian state in general; the Ministry of Diaspora and its repatriation program in particular; the Syrian Armenian community of earlier repatriates to Armenia (friends and family who had settled in Armenia earlier, whether because of the Syrian war or otherwise); discourses on refugees (in each country where these people have been); the memory of the Genocide; the Armenian diaspora (both in Lebanon and elsewhere); the Lebanese state and its immigration policies; the status of being a minority in Syria; the Canadian state and its immigration policies (particularly the private sponsorship program); diasporic organizations (such as Hay Doun and the other centres); and the transnational activities of institutions and individuals in Armenian diasporic communities.

Some of these ties and coordinating relations are discussed in the following chapters, and some need further exploration and study. Still, each of them contributes to our understanding of how refugee work happens and how refugees' lives and everyday work are organized by those relations. An example of the above-mentioned is how being a minority (especially Christian and a descendant of Genocide survivors) has organized

the refugees' position in the Syrian war, as well as informed their acceptance to Canada as refugees. A CBC article discusses that after the conference on Syrian refugees held in Geneva by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in 2014, it was believed that Canada would give priority to religious minorities — a decision that was not officially acknowledged but was criticized by Alex Neve, the secretary general of Amnesty International Canada (Lynch 2014).

In this chapter I focus on several stories demonstrating such work. I start with an overview of the participants' journey to Canada. Regardless of their paths, this particular group of people all ended up immigrating to Canada. The reason why there are not many among them who moved to Armenia is possibly that the route from Armenia to Canada was less easy, given that acquiring Armenian citizenship often became an obstacle to pursuing a refugee status with other countries, including Canada (as discussed later in the chapter).

Out of eighteen participants, one came to Canada directly as a student. While, like everyone else, she left Syria because of the war and lack of safety, her journey from Syria to Canada followed a different process. Doing her master's degree abroad was something she had always considered, but she had a firm plan to return to Syria after that. It was the war that made her leave Syria, since because of the war she and her fiancé (in Canada) were unable to visit each other for two years. It was then that she decided to apply as a student and come to Canada so she could "go forward with their relationship and be in the same country." While people like her are not included in official statistics on "refugees" — which are based on immigration categories — if we begin from people's experience and their project of escaping war, we can see that the work involved is also "self-rescue,"

which is possible by way of the international relations of higher education (if they have the qualifications, the means and the interest in doing intensive study). However, in this and the next chapter, my focus is on people coming through the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program and the work that they do in the context of its policies.

Apart from the above-mentioned student who came to Canada directly, all of the other participants spent some time in Lebanon and three of them also spent time in Armenia. People stayed in Lebanon for different periods of time, from several months to several years.⁹⁵ Among them, there were people who had their Canadian refugee sponsorship underway when they left Syria, while others only decided to immigrate to Canada after leaving Syria. For some people the process of immigration was very fast, and they ended up staying in Lebanon for shorter periods (two to three months). For example, a woman from Damascus recalls applying in December 2015 and getting on a flight to Canada at the beginning of February 2016. For a woman from Aleppo, however, the process proved to be very challenging. She was called to come to Beirut, where she found out that her application had been lost and she had to do it all over again. But she was unable to return to Syria any longer. She ended up staying in Lebanon for seven months. A young woman also recalls having to stay in Lebanon for several months, while originally she had been told she would leave for Canada in a matter of weeks. Others went to Lebanon with the shared belief that they could soon go back to Syria, but instead ended up immigrating to Canada. Usually these people – for example, a mother from Aleppo and her children – stayed in Lebanon for up to three years (others sometimes only

⁹⁵ An Aleppo woman, for example, stayed in Lebanon for three years.

in Lebanon, sometimes going back and forth between Syria and Lebanon, sometimes between Armenia and Lebanon, and for others, Armenia, Syria and Lebanon).

Only three people (a man from Aleppo and two women from Aleppo) spent time in Armenia in addition to Lebanon. Many other participants told me that they considered (or would consider) going to Armenia, but ended up not doing this. Among the reasons was having family in Lebanon or Canada or the poor Armenian economy or the job market.

The stories of these people are different yet similar. While there are of course individual differences in circumstance, all of these people were pursuing self-rescue within the same set of national and trans-national relations, and all ended up coming to Canada. Some stories include more challenges than others, but all of them contribute to our understanding of how the social organization of trauma, migration, integration, transnationalism, diaspora, repatriation happen in “the ongoing, coordinated, mutually adjusted activities of people” (McCoy 2021:38).

Lebanon

Perhaps the most popular first destination was Lebanon, for several reasons. It borders Syria and has had strong ties with it; many of the participants had relatives there, and it did not have a strong border control until 2015 (Dionigi 2017; UNHCR n.d.a.⁹⁶). For

⁹⁶ According to UNHCR, starting from January 2015, a Syrian national entering Lebanon had to inform the border authorities of the reason for their visit and provide appropriate documentation. The categories under which Syrians were allowed to enter Lebanon were tourism, business, managing property, tenant, student, traveling to another country, medical visit, appointment with a foreign embassy (with a 48-hour window),

decades, Syrians were granted six-month stays and some even entered the country without any proper paperwork (CBC News 2015). Further, the spoken variant of Arabic in Lebanon is the same as the one in Syria (called *Shami* or Levantine Arabic). There were regular flights from Lebanon's capital, Beirut, to Armenia. Finally, this was where the Canadian embassy was.⁹⁷ The challenge of course was acquiring a resident status for a prolonged stay and an invitation to enter Lebanon for a shorter stay,⁹⁸ namely, a letter that a Lebanese citizen or a permanent resident provides, directed either to the applicant or to the consular officer, to confirm that they will accommodate the visitor for the full length of their stay. The letter has to include some information about the host and has to mention, among other things, the reason for the invitation as well as the length of stay (with exact dates of entry and exit). The host must be a relative, a family member, a friend, a girlfriend, a boyfriend, and must have a place in Lebanon with enough space to accommodate the guest or guests (Visa Requirements n.d.). Those Syrian Armenians who had relatives in Lebanon were able to get the invitation fairly easily, show a reservation at a hotel, and present a justification, such as visiting relatives or going to a wedding. Others had a harder time getting the invitation, and in some cases, this involved paying someone to do the paperwork.

pledge of responsibility (sponsorship), displaced (had to be confirmed by the Ministry of Social Affairs). Each of these categories had certain requirements to be satisfied (UNHCR n.d.a.).

⁹⁷ The Canadian embassy in Syria was closed in March 2012 due to the continuing violence, according to Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird.

⁹⁸ Similar to an invitation letter to visit Canada, which is part of the visa application but is not a visa itself.

The road from Syria to Lebanon was full of military personnel from all groups – the government, ISIS, Nusra – and often it was not even clear who they were, according to the participants. Depending on the time, the roads were more or less dangerous. The choice of transportation also depended on the time: bus, microbus, or taxi. I was told that the drivers were experienced, as they were on the road all the time. Many of them knew whom and when to bribe to get safe passage, I was told. The buses, the cars, the taxis were stopped and searched, passengers' belongings were taken out and searched. For some it happened as often as every fifteen to thirty minutes. Once they reached Lebanon, different kinds of challenges arose. To understand some of the issues the participants faced, below I briefly discuss some aspects of the Lebanese state that relate to the issues encountered by the refugees, in order to better frame the stories my participants told.

Lebanon is a small country to the south and west of Syria, on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. According to a recent census, it is now home to about 5.3 million people (World Population Review), as compared to an estimated 4 million it had before the Syrian war. It received 35.6 % of the Syrian refugees⁹⁹ (Syrian Centre of Policy Research 2018). Since it borders Israel in the south, it is also home to Palestinian refugees from 1948, 1970 and 1980. Additionally, those Palestinians who had found refuge in Syria (about 70,000, see Blanchet, Fouad, Pherali 2016) now had to leave Syria to find refuge in Lebanon. According to WHO, already in 2013, 34% of all the Syrian refugees who had moved to neighbouring countries (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey) were in Lebanon (cf. El-Khatib, Scales, Vearey, and Forsberg 2013) and in the Spring of 2014

⁹⁹ Turkey received 37.5%, Jordan—14.1%; Egypt 4.8% and Iraq 4.6% (Syrian Centre of Policy Research 2018:11).

this number passed one million (cf. Fakhouri 2017). In 2015, 30% of the entire Lebanese population consisted of refugees (Blanchet et al. 2016). While there has been some international assistance to the refugees, including healthcare, which in Lebanon is privatized and user-fee based (ibid), it naturally left out those who were not registered with UNHCR as refugees, and did not always prove to be effective, as demonstrated below.

During the first two years of the Syrian war, however, while not an asylum country (it is not a member of the Geneva convention of 1951,¹⁰⁰ but is bound by the main refugee protection principles, including non-refoulement, Janmyr 2016), Lebanon had an open borders policy with Syria. It accepted the first waves of refugees and the dominant discourse was that these were people who needed hospitality (Fakhouri 2017). The terms used to denote them were *duyuf* (“guests” as fellow Arabs, see El Dardiry 2017) and *nazihoun* (displaced people, see Janmyr 2016), rather than refugees. The latter term was believed to entail some kind of rights and permanency as opposed to a temporary situation (Janmyr 2016). However, the uncontrolled and unregulated borders as well as the lack of certain policies in place led to a heavy pressure on the country’s already strained system and the poorest neighbourhoods now became home also to the refugees, as there were no refugee camps around this time in the country. Not having camps was rather a political decision, in order to avoid having concentrated enclaves of refugees,

¹⁰⁰ The legal document and its protocol (1967) defined the term “refugee,” refugees’ rights and member-states’ obligation to protect them. Central to those is the principle of non-refoulement, which means that states are obliged not to return the refugees to the country where they might be facing threats (UNHCR n.d.b.).

instead of integrating them into the country's population (Fakhouri 2017). The Lebanese state already had experience with having Palestinian refugees living in camps, and was wary of repeating such an experience.

In 2014 the first comprehensive legislative policy on the Syrian refugees was accepted in Lebanon. Now there were certain laws and regulations for Syrian nationals entering Lebanon (until that point Syrians had freely crossed the borders between the two countries and often without any proper documentation), and for those Syrians who already were inside Lebanon. For the first time since its establishment, the Lebanese state started to impose restrictions on the entry of Syrian nationals (Janmyr 2016).

The borders became more controlled, and many entering points were closed, and entering the country now required some paperwork, including for the Armenians. The General Security Office (with the Ministry of Interior) undertook the border-management and enforced a multi-visa system with the following categories: medical student, tourist, transit and business, short stay. It had a complicated system of renewing and registering, with no category for "flight from conflict" (Fakhouri 2017:687). For a long-term stay, Syrians needed a Lebanese guarantor (a Lebanese person "who would pledge to sponsor their stay" (ibid:687); this is different from the invitation letter, which is necessary for shorter stays as well, and is discussed above). Among my participants, some went in and out of Lebanon by renewing their permit to stay short-term¹⁰¹ every time (different reasons

¹⁰¹ For example, the family of a woman from Damascus could not stay in Lebanon as she says it was impossible to stay there without a job and paperwork (as a resident). She says that while they were there, the Lebanese government issued a decision that priority should be given to Lebanese citizens for finding jobs, as they did not want outsiders to get the jobs. They were back and forth several times between

for entering Lebanon were provided by them, from visiting a family member to going to a wedding). Some stayed illegally, while others successfully and unsuccessfully sought sponsors. This also opened the door to vulnerabilities for those seeking refuge. For example, a participant told me how she and her husband fell victim to a Lebanese woman who had promised them to give sponsorship for a certain amount of money, but instead stole the money from them without fulfilling her promise. My participant and her husband, however, paid her a second time in order to get the paperwork, even after being cheated by her once, as they “had no other choice” for fleeing the war.

It is also important to note that Lebanon was not only physically the closest country to flee to from the war, but it also was the country where Armenians had a strong diasporic presence. The Lebanese Armenian community mostly goes back to the period after the Genocide, when Genocide survivors settled in Syria and Lebanon, both of which were then under the French mandate. In 1920 the borders of Greater Lebanon were established, in 1926 Lebanon was established as a democratic republic (still under the French mandate) and in 1943 Lebanon gained independence. By 1932, Armenians were 4.5% of Lebanon’s population (Sanjian 2015), and in the 1970s there were under 200,000 Armenians (ibid). During those years the Armenians were able to establish a thriving community (even though the situation deteriorated after the Lebanese civil war of 1975-1990). They had their institutions: schools and universities,¹⁰² community centres,

Damascus and Beirut. Every time things became too dangerous in Damascus; they went to stay with her sister-in-law in Beirut. She recalls that during the war the road from Damascus to Beirut took about six hours (previously it had usually taken 1.5-2 hours).

¹⁰² Migliorino (2008) has a detailed discussion about this.

neighbourhoods, as well as political parties that actively participated in the country's politics. Sanjian (2015) writes that "Beirut had become the uncontested unofficial 'capital city' of the Armenian diaspora in terms of its political leadership and cultural production" (p. 7).

This is the context where the two stories below took place; they represent the lived experiences of two Aleppo women: A woman who lived with her sister and parents and a mother in her thirties with two children. Of course, these two stories are not representative of every single story I have heard. Some people faced more challenging situations than others, starting with finding a home to securing medical care for themselves and their loved ones. The two stories that I chose represent two ends of the spectrum, a relatively easy transition on the one hand and an extremely difficult one on the other. My hope is that they will give the reader an idea about everything else in between. Since the two stories are coherent long narratives, I will use pseudonyms instead of completely anonymizing them as with other participants.

Hourig (a mother of two from Aleppo)

Hourig's is a relatively successful story of moving to Lebanon, as she had family there and could stay with them, but it did not free her from other challenges. First, her family had to live separately: Hourig and the children were in Lebanon while her husband stayed behind and worked in Aleppo. She was able to stay put in Lebanon while waiting for a solution to their situation, unlike others, who had to leave and reenter Lebanon every

once in a while, to renew their status as visitors. Others were forced to stay illegally and as such were deprived of the scarce opportunities that the job market offered.

We went to Lebanon, but my husband stayed in Syria, because we needed to live in Lebanon, we needed money. If he came, no one would have been able to work, so he stayed in Aleppo. And his work was good: he worked and sent money to us from there, and we stayed [in Lebanon]. We stayed in Lebanon for two years. My mom is Lebanese, so I had aunts, and they could accept me with open arms in their homes. So, I stayed with them for two years, the kids went to school, and so on and so forth, but my husband stayed in Aleppo.

Before finding themselves in this relatively comfortable situation in Lebanon, Hourig and her family had to deal with the dangers of the road. Hourig tells me that until they reached the border, there were many checkpoints, and they were stopped every fifteen minutes.

We went to Beirut. Before the border there were many, I don't remember the exact number, but many checkpoints, I would not be lying if I said there was a checkpoint every fifteen minutes. There were drivers who found a way with them, but all the checkpoints were the government's, not the FSA's [Free Syrian Army's]. The FSA won't let you pass, there is no way: you either die or I don't know what they do. But there were drivers who had their way, you know, it was their daily route, they had money for that (if there was a checkpoint) imagine, every 15 minutes your stuff has to come out and go back, how would that be. One time only, I don't know if it was FSA or I don't know what, they opened fire on us, on the car, it was God's miracle that nothing happened to us, I don't know how, nothing happened. Nothing happened to us or to the car.

She tells me that the confused driver sped to reach the border, where they had to wait for four hours to get into the country.

Imagine, with the kids [...] they were hungry, they had to go to the bathroom, they wanted to lie down, complained, and so on, it was very hard. Those four hours were very hard, until we crossed the border and finished with it, with luck we got to Lebanon. It took my little daughter too long until her mental health was ok, even when I went to the bathroom, she would cry, she thought I had gone away or died. She would not move away from the door until I came out. It took her a long time to be fine again.

After two years in Lebanon, where she stayed with her aunts, Hourig realized that the situation was becoming worse: "We had many deaths: relatives, friends, people we knew, every day we heard that news and I did not want to open Facebook or see that news." She could not go back, so she called her husband and told him she was applying to Canada. Below, Hourig answers my question: "Why particularly Canada?"

The decision to go to Canada... first I want to say that many people came to Canada, I had many friends and relatives who came to Canada and my husband had a cousin who convinced me to come. "I will sponsor you, come" [...] he was a Lebanese Armenian who had been here [in Canada] for 35 years [...] I did not have any idea where to go, which city to go to, but based on his words, it was ok here, it was good, so we decided: ok. You know Hasmik, it came to the point when we were looking for a solution: Canada, Australia, Germany, we had not been to any of these places before, we did not know any of them. What we would find in any of them we did not know at all, but we hoped that it would be better than Aleppo.

Hourig thinks they got lucky that at that time Trudeau had decided to bring in Syrian refugees. In Hourig's case, Lebanon was meant to be a temporary home before returning to Syria, but with the ongoing war, and with no hope of reuniting her family, she used the opportunities that the Canadian state and immigration program, as well as the Armenian diasporic institutions (Hay Doun) and her personal connections in Canada, offered. Her husband's staying in Syria also made collecting the necessary documents easier as he was able to collect the documents needed for the application. Others who had left some papers behind, not knowing they would need them, might have had an added challenge in the process of application. She mentioned that they started looking for solutions: Canada, Germany, Australia. She did not mention Armenia among her choices.

Carmen (a single woman from Aleppo, with her sister and parents)

For Carmen also, homeland did not become a destination. Her story in Lebanon and her move to Canada proved much more complicated than Hourig's. Carmen's story is similar to Hourig's in the sense that hers too is a story of war and involuntary migration, and she also had ties in Lebanon. Yet she faced different hardships. Originally, she thought about moving to Armenia, but since her brother was in Lebanon already, she thought it would make sense to move to Lebanon. Of course, at that time the move was seen as a temporary measure. She moved to Lebanon with her elderly parents who needed care

and treatment, which was particularly difficult because they were away from home and their circle of friends and acquaintances, but also because they were deprived of the free healthcare that Syria offered its citizens. Although they had registered with the UN as refugees upon arriving in Lebanon, there still were many challenges before they could receive the help they needed.

In October 2012 Carmen, her sister, and her parents left for Lebanon. On the way they were stopped by different groups, both governmental and non-governmental, but were allowed to continue their trip when they said that they were going for treatment for their father. They reached Lebanon and “that’s where the war for us started, not in Aleppo,” noted Carmen. As did many Armenians, they also used their ties in Lebanon. They stayed with their relatives (a husband and wife) who had a small house in the middle of Bourj Hammoud, the Armenian neighbourhood in Beirut, and welcomed the four of them there. Carmen’s sister returned to Damascus, where it was still peaceful at that time. She found a job as a nurse to earn money and to send some of it to them. Carmen found a job in Beirut (she was a make-up artist) and rented a small store that was turned into an apartment. Carmen drew on her connections with other Armenians to find this place.

It was a store actually, not a house that they rented to us, because there were no houses, the borders were open and people were rushing in. The owner was Armenian. We were in a neighbourhood where there were both Armenians and Muslims, it was a camp-like place.

The situation changed for her drastically when a month later her mother fell and broke her hip. Healthcare was expensive and had to be paid for in US dollars. “She called me and said I have fallen and broken my hip, so I came home and did not know what to do, where to go. There was the Armenian Relief Cross (*Ognutyán Khach*) office and there were doctors there. We went there.” She learnt that her mother needed surgery, and her sister advised her to send her mom to Damascus in a taxi as surgery was extremely

expensive in Lebanon and they could not afford it. As noted, while before the war the trip lasted about two hours, now it took five to seven because of the lack of safety and the frequent checkpoints. Her father also needed full time care to be able to walk, to eat, etc., so she needed someone to look after him while she was working. She hired a taxi and sent both of them to Damascus to her sister, while staying herself in Lebanon as she had work. "In Syria the treatment was free, it was a state hospital and since we were Syrians it was free for us, that's why I sent them, as in Lebanon it was very expensive."

Soon after, Carmen's sister sent her father back to Lebanon, as she could not take care of him. Carmen had to find someone to take care of him. The neighbours helped, they came, gave him water, food, and other necessities, recalls Carmen. Several weeks passed like this, while her mother was waiting for surgery, and after the surgery, they told her she would have to stay in bed for a month. Carmen's sister accompanied her mother to Beirut after the surgery and returned to Damascus. Now Carmen, while working in Lebanon, had to take care of both her parents (the sister stayed in Damascus working); her brother, who also was in Lebanon, visited them, but could not do much as he had his own family. It was very difficult for her. She kept asking friends, relatives and neighbours to do things for her parents while she was at work. After about a month her sister came to visit them and said, "I don't like Mom's colour." Carmen asked a nurse from the Relief Cross to come and do blood work. She was told that her mother was heavily anemic and if she were not hospitalized, she would die. However, they could not afford the hospital.

We were registered with the UN as Syrians, we called them and told them that we have a sick person, which hospitals can we take her to? They gave us names of hospitals. I called an ambulance as my mom could not walk. My sister was with me at that time. We called the ambulance so they could get her to the hospital, otherwise they would not admit her. We went to the hospitals that were on the list that UN gave us.

They spent the whole day going from hospital to hospital (both those on the UN list and those for which, according to Carmen, the UN would cover 80% of the expenses). They were rejected from all. “We did not know if there was actually no space or if they kept it for their own people [i.e., those with connections],” said Carmen. The ambulance driver was an Armenian and did them a favour by driving them from place to place. After visiting all the hospitals on the list and realizing it was “useless,” they took their mother to a private one. She was admitted to an emergency department. Before admitting her, the hospital asked them to pay 500USD. Using the network of Armenian friends, Carmen was able to procure the money and to pay for her mother’s admission. But the next morning when she went to see her, there were new issues to be dealt with. The hospital had given her mother “two bags of blood” and now they needed to restock their supply. “‘We have blood,’ they told me, ‘we gave it to her, but now you need to bring someone in to give blood so we can replace what we gave her.’”

She found some Armenian men (friends of friends) who were ready to give blood, and she offered to give blood herself, too. Eventually the problem with blood was resolved. Later, the accountant called her and told her that up to that point she owed the hospital 2500USD and her mother would additionally need some other tests and an X-Ray. Carmen says she objected, asking what they had done to incur a debt of 2500 USD. She was told it was for the blood they gave her, for the room which costs 300 USD a day plus the cost of the checkups. “It was more expensive than a 5-star hotel.” On the list of the required exams and procedures they gave her there were some that she had never heard of before. Because she did not have the money for the treatment, she had to sign a form to take her mother out of the hospital at her own risk. She paid 2500USD for the

tests administered up to that point (otherwise they would not let her take her mother) and drove to Damascus directly from the hospital along with her brother and her sister, leaving their ill father behind at the mercy of the neighbours and friends. Carmen's brother drove right back to Beirut after leaving them in the hospital in Damascus.

After a while, her mother was doing better and started to walk. It turned out that other than a low blood count, she did not have any other serious conditions. She had to stay in Damascus for about eleven weeks after that. When she came back to Beirut, Carmen's sister accompanied her and stayed in Beirut, for as Carmen says, she told her she could not take care of two ill people. According to her, her mother was doing fine and even started doing some work around the house and feeding their father.

They were soon able to find a more comfortable apartment for the same price. Now there were two people from their family who earned wages. Carmen's sister, who had worked as a nurse in Damascus, started singing in Armenian restaurants of Beirut, as "she had a beautiful voice," and was now earning good money. Their financial situation was fine, but then her father's situation became worse. "He was losing blood," Carmen says. "We already knew what the hospital would do to us, so we found an Armenian doctor who came and helped him [...] we paid them less, about 500-600 USD, no more."

This time Carmen did not try to get help from the UN.

The UN did not help us. I did not even go to them, because I knew they were liars, they were going to send me from here to there asking to bring different documents for 500 dollars and then they would not help. So, I did not even go to them.

Up to this point, we see how Carmen and her sister very effectively used their connections within the Armenian community, whether to seek care (both healthcare and home care) for their elderly parents, to find jobs, or to secure housing in a busy Lebanese housing market. At the same time, they used their Syrian citizenship and proximity to

Damascus. Carmen was able to replace the institutional ineffectiveness of an international refugee organization such as UN through her own agency and the resources and tools she had at her disposal.

The rest of Carmen's story is a story of struggle with the deteriorating health of her parents. First, they lost their father ("in 2013, two days before Christmas") and organized his funeral in Beirut with the help of their friends and connections. "Our acquaintances had a cemetery, so they helped us to bury him there." About forty days later, Carmen's mother had a stroke. At this point Carmen's aunt's family had also moved to Beirut. Her cousin, her aunt's son, was a doctor, and Carmen's sister was a nurse, so they took care of her mother and did not take her to the hospital. "Five years! My mother's illness lasted five years. Throughout the five years we did not know if she recognized us or not." To procure medications, she used the paper the UN had given her to get prescriptions from the doctors of Red Cross and to get medicine from the Karagheusian foundation¹⁰³: "there was Karagheusian there, of the Relief Cross," she said. After five years of struggle and without recovering from the stroke, Carmen's mother passed away in 2019. Already in 2016, Carmen said, while her mother was still alive, their acquaintances in Lebanon were recommending that they move to Canada. She said they did not consider this because they had an ill person in the family.

Someone would come and say: "Canada is your place, go!" Yes, darling, it is our place, but we have an ill mother. "The [Canadian] Government will take care of it," they said. Ok, hold on for a

¹⁰³ Howard Karagheusian foundation, established in New York in 1921, was at first aiding orphaned Armenian children who had survived the Genocide. Later it branched out to provide help to Armenians in different countries, including in the Middle East. The support it provides includes but is not limited to healthcare, education, housing, etc. (Karagheusian Foundation n.d.).

second, fine, the government will take care, but is the government waiting for me or my mother in the airport, I said?

While in Beirut, Carmen says, they did not think about the future, nor did they have any plans for it. All they could think of was the day-to-day struggle, their sick mother, their living costs, the medication, and so on. Carmen worked during the day and her sister during the night. Eventually, her sister told her: “I will tell you something. We should go after all. Why don’t you go or why should I not go [to Canada]? That door is open, everyone has gone and we have not. At least you go.”

The sisters did not think they could both go to Canada at the same time because they would not be able to take their sick mother. Carmen was aware that she would need help in Canada, but that she might not actually get it. She also believed that the sponsor, a relative of theirs, was an old lady who would not be able to help her to take care of her mother. Even though her brother had come to Canada with his family before her (in 2016), he also did not have a place of his own yet. It is interesting to see that both in Beirut and in Canada, Carmen puts no responsibility on her brother and has no expectations of him. Carmen applied in December 2016 and in October 2017 she came to Toronto. Since Hay Kedron (an SAH institution) was full at that time, her sponsor applied through AGBU,¹⁰⁴ and that is how she came. Later, however, she moved to Montreal, where she believed

¹⁰⁴ Hay Kedron (Or Torontoyi Hay Kedron, literally, “Armenian Community Centre of Toronto,” along with Hay Doun, literally, “Armenian Home,” in Montreal) was the agency that sponsored (along with individual co-sponsors) and brought Syrian Armenian refugees to Canada. AGBU (The Armenian General Benevolent Union) was founded in 1906 (its chapter in Toronto was founded in 1923) and is a non-profit organization committed to humanitarian, educational and cultural programs for Armenians. It operates in nearly 30 countries worldwide (AGBU n.d.).

she would find more opportunities, and she says she did. She was joined by her husband from Beirut (Carmen had left her fiancé to come to Canada. Later she went back to Beirut and married him there).

Carmen's journey of self-rescue in Beirut and later in Canada demonstrates the work she did, drawing on resources from the Armenian community in Lebanon, her ties with the larger Armenian diaspora (e.g., her sponsor was a relative who lived in Canada) and the benefits of being a Syrian citizen. Carmen and her sister used not only personal and family ties but also communal, translocal and international webs to navigate their day-to-day realities that the war and being refugees had presented them with.

Armenia

Another popular destination for Syrian Armenians since the beginning of the conflict was Armenia. Even though sometimes it was challenging to reach an airport with flights to Armenia — at various times these were in Aleppo, Latakia, Beirut — or to take a long drive through Turkey, reaching Armenia from Georgia, still, it was relatively close to where they lived.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, it was also the imagined “homeland” of their narratives, both past and present. For many Syrians (but not for my participants) it became home, and for some of my participants it provided a safe place to stay before arriving in Canada. Here, I outline the main reasons why the “homeland” did not become “home” for my participants. According to many of my participants, they did not migrate to Armenia for economic reasons. Acquaintances and relatives who had gone to Armenia, they said, told them it

¹⁰⁵ See the map at the beginning of the chapter.

was difficult to live there, mainly because there were no jobs and the prices were high. The scarce research done on Syrian Armenians' migration and settlement in Armenia shows that even though the Republic of Armenia was greatly interested in integrating ethnic Armenians into the "homeland" – while also solving the issue of the decreasing population of Armenia (Karapetyan 2015) as a result of continuous emigration – it did not have the right programs, tools and resources in place to do so, and the Ministry of Diaspora of the Republic of Armenia did not prove to be very helpful and productive either.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ The Ministry of Diaspora was founded in 2008, with the minister Hranush Hakobyan in office. Its goal was to cooperate with the diaspora and to strengthen the relationships between the diaspora and the Republic of Armenia. It mostly focused on bringing groups of diaspora Armenians for short periods of time to visit, for conferences or workshops. "Come Home" is perhaps the best-known of their initiatives: each year, a group of young people were brought to Armenia and shown around, taught some Armenian, and invited to participate in cultural events. The Ministry of Diaspora was criticized on the grounds that it does not actually do anything other than organizing useless visits and is unable to organize the repatriation of the diaspora Armenians because of the lack of financial means. The Ministry had some ties with the Israeli Ministry of Diaspora and had some visits organized with them. I spoke with an official who worked in the Armenian Ministry, and he said that they should have done things like the Israeli Ministry does. In 2019, the Ministry of Diaspora was replaced by the "Office of the High Commissioner for Diaspora Affairs," whose mission is to strengthen the diaspora-homeland ties, encourage "Encouraging state-centered identity formation in the Diaspora," and promote repatriation (The Government of the Republic of Armenia). The realization of the above-mentioned – goals that are mostly shared with the previous office – remains unrealistic and unclear. Most of those goals are broad enough to mean everything and anything. Moreover, it is not clear how exactly, in the context of the lack of resources, those goals may be achieved.

What the Armenian government did provide were Armenian passports or prolonged residency,¹⁰⁷ in addition to not requiring visas for those of Armenian heritage with Syrian passports. The prolonged residency was more desirable for those who had military-service-age sons, as army service in Armenia — similar to Syria — is mandatory and citizenship would have implied mandatory army service. The granting of Armenian passports, however, was perceived ambivalently. Among my participants there were some who said they did not apply as they knew they were looking in other directions, and one of the participants told me: “those who got it, later regretted,” as it turned out to be a trap, depriving them of opportunities to get asylum in other, more developed and economically well-off countries. The above-mentioned issues resulted in Syrian Armenians looking in other directions for settlement and eventually, some of them left the country.¹⁰⁸ Based on an interview I had with a professional working in a major refugee assisting organization, as well as on some recent research, the reasons that push the Syrian Armenians out of Armenia, are the following.

1. *Tough economic conditions*: This includes a smaller economy and market compared to Syria; a difficult taxation system with high taxes despite the small market, resulting in a low income and sometimes no income; an ineffective taxation system and officials;

¹⁰⁷ This likely refers to the “Special Residency Status,” granted by the Republic of Armenia since 2006 to individuals of Armenian descent for a ten-year period, which allows them to live and work, while exempting them from military service, see Kasbarian (2009:366-67).

¹⁰⁸ According to the UNHCR website, the number of Syrian Armenians in 2020 was 14,000, out of the 22,000 Syrians who had fled to Armenia since 2011 (Hayrapetyan 2020). Other accounts (Karapetyan 2015; Barseghyan 2015) claim that two thirds of the Syrian Armenians tend to leave Armenia for other destinations — Canada, USA, Europe, as well as returning to Syria.

corruption; pressure on businesses; the lack of tax relief (Barseghyan 2015); expensive housing (both for renting and buying¹⁰⁹) especially in the centre of the capital, where finding jobs is difficult but still a possibility, as opposed to the provinces, where finding a job is virtually impossible.

2. *Education and language*: Even though there was some support for the Syrian Armenian children for a smooth transition in the schools (Zarikyan 2015:92; Barseghyan 2015), still, the difference in the curriculum posed a challenge. Additionally, the two varieties of Armenian spoken in the Republic and by Syrian Armenians – Eastern Armenian and Western Armenian, respectively – although mostly mutually comprehensible, have significant differences. This difference in language added another layer of difficulty for the integration of Syrian Armenians. For example, Syrian Armenians didn't know Russian (which most in the Republic of Armenian do as a second language) and this also at times limited their access to some kinds of employment.

3. *The issue of belonging*: This was a challenge for everyone but particularly for the youth. They were “othered” for their differences, for the dialect, for the different manner of dressing, and some other cultural differences. For example, in the gender regime prevailing in Armenia, Syrian Armenian boys were often perceived as unmasculine because they dressed differently (e.g., open sandals showing toes) or for not knowing the

¹⁰⁹ Most of the Syrian Armenians were renting. Other housing arrangements for Syrian Armenians were dormitories, which were in very bad conditions (Barseghyan 2015), despite the claim by the Ministry of Diaspora that the conditions were satisfactory. The Ministry of Diaspora noted that very few Syrian Armenians applied for housing in which the utilities, food and other necessities were taken care of by the state (Barseghyan 2015).

codes of the “street masculine culture,” and the girls were perceived as “loose” (e.g. smoking or having a more liberal relationship with boys).¹¹⁰ This created a certain gap for the Syrian Armenians between the homeland of their imagination and the reality of it. An older man from Aleppo and a young woman from Aleppo,¹¹¹ cited in my earlier chapters, talked about the disconnect between the homeland of their mind and the actual homeland they found in Armenia. This serves as a demonstration of the differences between an actual homeland and a conceptual one.

Here is a summary of the interview with the professional assisting refugees, which contributed to my understanding of why Syrian Armenians, both those who went to Armenia to stay and my participants who chose not to. Some of the points emerging from the conversation were the following: the Republic of Armenia did not have the resources to provide support (unlike other countries including Canada, Austria, Germany or even Turkey for that matter¹¹²) for the refugees to settle and live in Armenia; the Ministry of Diaspora did not work effectively and did not accommodate the refugees’ needs; Armenia was a poor country with laws and policies that underprivileged its own people (including citizens) and as such did not meet the expectations of the newcomers; Armenia was unable to provide the standards they were used too, let alone ones they hoped to find in

¹¹⁰ From the interview with the professional assisting refugees in Armenia.

¹¹¹ A man from Aleppo went to Armenia with a group of Syrian businessmen who were invited by the Ministry of Diaspora for a short meeting with the Minister, but did not stay there. A woman from Aleppo had spent some time as a tourist in Armenia before. The two people who actually sought refuge in Armenia from the war were a young woman from Aleppo and a man with his family from Aleppo, as mentioned above.

¹¹² Turkey has received about 6 billion dollars from EU and the World Bank under the “Facilities for Refugees in Turkey” program (The World Bank 2021).

the homeland; the Syrian Armenian children and the adults alike were different from the population of the Republic of Armenia in their language, their manners, their habits and their expectations from life; finally, she noted that the Syrian Armenians were not willing to settle in the homeland, they were not willing (or were difficult) to integrate, and they used the abovementioned reasons as excuses to leave the homeland for better countries and opportunities.

Throughout this conversation with the professional, the “blame” for unsuccessful integration was laid on the Armenian institutions, the lack of organized support, on the harsh conditions of Armenia itself, on the Armenian people and officials, on unfavourable laws and regulations, and on the Syrian Armenians themselves. The differences the Syrian Armenians had with the people of Armenia (*hayastantsi*¹¹³) were omnipresent in her speech throughout our conversation. Those differences were the reason, as she suggested both implicitly and explicitly, for a kind of unwillingness or inability on the part of the immigrants to integrate. Whether it was their “being different” or “having been raised and lived in Muslim countries” or their “not being willing to put enough effort in the homeland, but willing to do the same elsewhere,” one could help noticing that Syrian Armenians who chose to leave Armenia were at least partly to blame for a “failed” integration. Apparently, not only did the Syrian Armenians have expectations from the homeland, but those in the homeland had expectations of them. Below is the story of George, who made an attempt to settle in Armenia before coming to Canada. In line with

¹¹³ [...] “They are used to living in a different culture. They would refer to us as ‘those Armenians’, I mean the integration problem came not only from us but also from them.”

my discussion, it demonstrates the work that George did on the path to becoming a person of self-rescue, to bring himself and his family to safety.

George (a father of two from Aleppo)

In George's story, I sometimes include the questions I asked, as they clarify the answers he gives. I occasionally make some clarifying comments, but other than that, the account is as told by George. George decided to go to Armenia for several months until, as he put it, "the government would clean up Aleppo," and then return to Syria. George and his family left everything behind — homes, work, and were never able to go back. For the first time he did not go to Armenia to stay, but rather to wait for things to get better, but they never did. As already discussed in previous chapters, it was a shared belief among the Syrian Armenians (as told by the participants) that the war was not going to continue for long. The government was powerful enough to take care of it very fast, they believed. "At the beginning we went to Armenia, stayed there for several months, after that we went to Lebanon, then back to Armenia, back again to Lebanon and from Lebanon to Canada."

The road from Syria to Armenia was long and, in some places dangerous, and they needed stopovers. There were six of them in the car — George, his wife and two children, his pregnant sister-in-law and her husband.

The most dangerous part was Syria, until the Turkish border, so we drove non-stop for about seven-eight hours, because there were lots of checkpoints. [...] We had many challenges until we got to the Turkish border. Because we left Aleppo and we had to drive about 200 km to the Turkish border, because it was the only border that was controlled by the government, we wanted to leave through the government-controlled one, but when we left Aleppo, they started stopping us every ten minutes, there were checkpoints: FSA, Kurds, each of them put checkpoints, Jabhat al-Nusra, we crossed thirteen checkpoints. We were in five cars and in front of us was an Armenian [*hayastantsi*, i.e., a resident of Armenia] driver who drove people to and from Armenia. So, he would talk to those

[the checkpoints people], as he was at the head of the line, would tell them that we were with him, but every time they were scaring us: “Where are you going? Why are you going?” They were armed, so we were in fear, every minute we were in fear. [...] When we crossed the [Turkish] border we then went to Urfa, Diyarbakir, where we stayed at night at a hotel, then on the second day we woke up and I drove until Bingyol, to the Turkish border, again it was night already, we stayed overnight then woke up early in the morning, when the border opens at 6AM, the Turkish-Georgian border, and entered Georgia.

In Turkey they had no issues, George recalls, because they [those he encountered in Turkey] did not know George and his family as Armenians: “We entered there as Syrians.” In Georgia they had a cousin, with whom they stayed for five or six days to rest and then continued. Entering Georgia from Turkey did not cause any issues either, but when they arrived at the Armenian border from Georgia, questions arose.

Entering Armenia from Georgia was the problem. They told us that at that time Syrians were forbidden from entering Armenia, and they did not see us as Armenian. Eventually there was a soldier, who asked: “Are you Armenians?” It was already 1.5, two hours later [this is before the Georgian border guards realized these people were not just Syrians but Syrian Armenians], when they said, “You need to go back to Batumi, apply for Visas, then you could come.” I mean we had Syrian passports, but at that time no visas were needed [for Armenians]. Then he said you need to go back to Batumi, we said there is a pregnant woman with us, how would we go. So, we stayed at the border for two-three hours. Eventually a [Georgian] girl came, asked us “are you Armenians?” We said “yes.” She said, “maybe as Armenians I can let you enter [Armenia].” So, from the Georgian border she drove to the Armenian border, talked to a soldier, then she sent a person from the Armenian border to us. He came to us, talked to us in Armenian [...], asked us questions on Georgian land then said, “You are Armenians,” checked the names and said you are welcome, you can come in. But they really accepted us well there [on the Armenian side]. When we crossed the border they told us, “You should have come earlier, this is your country,” and so on.

During the first visit, which lasted for one month, George and his family stayed in the very centre of Yerevan (ten minutes from the Republic Square, he told me), where social life is active, full of cafés and restaurants, shops, theatres, the opera house, cinemas, universities, and the Republic Square with National Galleries, government buildings, etc. While in Armenia George did not work; as he said they just went for travel and stayed there for a month only. There, they did not get any substantial support, but the Minister of Diaspora was helpful.

At that time there was the Minister of Diaspora, Siranush or something like that [he refers to Hranush Hakobyan]. We met with her, those of us who came by car. She asked: “What kind of problems do you have?” Someone said: “My child was not accepted to school because, I don’t know, they said I am a Syrian Armenian.” She asked which school that was, then called and talked

to them, said “how did you not accept them, those are our Armenians,” and for the car she talked to the head of the police, well, we had gotten lots of tickets.¹¹⁴ Well, you know, we did not know the rules, it was a new country for us, the rules in Syria were different [...]. You know, in this way she was really helpful, not financially of course, but morally you know, as much as she could, she made it easier for us.

There were mixed accounts about the usefulness of the Ministry of Diaspora and the minister at the time, Hranush Hakobyan. I heard from both her team members and diplomats during unofficial conversations that she did what she could and she was the one person who really cared. Among the participants, those who had encounters with her and the Ministry shared accounts, both about her usefulness and about her corruptness, her using refugees to pocket the money that had been allocated by international organizations. I was unable to verify any of those accounts.

The money George and his family had was soon spent, as everything in Armenia was expensive. So, they had to decide what to do next.

We could not go back to Syria, because the borders were closed already completely, my car, I could not leave it, so I had to drive to Georgia, Turkey, but from Turkey this time to Lebanon by boat. So, we took a boat to Tripoli, Lebanon, and from there to Beirut.

They stayed in Beirut between October 2012 and the end of 2014. George opened a shop where they served coffee and hookah, and worked for around three years. At the end of 2014 they decided to try Armenia again.

I did not like Lebanon. I said to my wife, “Let’s go to Armenia,” because you know the first time, we did not look at it with a “stayer’s eye” [i.e., we did not consider staying]. We always wanted to go back, because you know it is really beautiful, clean. There was the job issue. So, we wanted to try. I sent my wife in 2014. The schools were over in Lebanon, I told her go rent a house and stay a bit, when the kids start school, I will come [to Armenia] too. I also went so I could look for jobs, so that we could stay, but unfortunately it did not work, again it did not work.

¹¹⁴ The fact that the Minister used her authority and personal connections rather than institutional processes is not an isolated case, but rather an accepted practice both in lower and upper circles of the Armenian government.

While the schools were good and the children were doing well, they could not settle as he did not find a job, and even if he did, he says, it did not pay enough.

George: I mean even if I found a job, I could not make more than \$200. \$200-250, you know only my rent was \$300 already [this is an apartment in the centre of the capital]. So, for financial reasons, financially I could not stay there.

HT: So, in Lebanon it was better than in Armenia financially?

George: Financially, yes, yes! I worked; I was very comfortable. I was paid very well, but in Lebanon there was a different issue — they did not love Syrians [...].¹¹⁵ They did not want us. Every six months we needed to redo, update the documents. Every six months we needed to pay fines to the government, we needed to find someone who can sponsor you in Lebanon. So, we got tired. When we went to Armenia, I did not close my work in Lebanon, thinking in case it does not work out, I had a chance to go back. That was the day that I decided that I am going to travel to Europe.

I have already discussed earlier that Armenian passports not only did not facilitate Syrian Armenians' entry into the European Union, as they had hoped, but became an obstacle for them as they could not claim refugee status with other countries, because they were rejected on the justification that they were not refugees anymore, but rather Armenian citizens. In a way, the refugees felt cheated by their homeland, as the Armenian passport and Armenian citizenship did not offer them much compared to developed countries, where refugees were receiving, if not financial support, at least some hope for a proper future. George, however, never applied for Armenian citizenship, as he says he

¹¹⁵ A woman from Aleppo also told me that if you were Syrian, you were paid less in Lebanon. For example, she says, if the Lebanese person is paid 500 for the same job, the Syrian will be paid only 200. She said, it did not matter if you were working for an Armenian or not, all that mattered was being Syrian. She worked for an Armenian organization there and had the same situation. Senthonar and colleagues, in their study on Syrian refugee women's experiences note: "The women described harsh living and working conditions (e.g., long working hours, low pay, physically demanding jobs) and discrimination by nationals during their migration between bordering countries. They spoke of nationals from Turkey and Lebanon, for instance, who believed Syrians were competing for already scarce jobs" (Senthonar et al. 2021:584).

was as yet undecided whether to stay in Armenia or not. He did not register as a refugee either, but his wife said they received some food in Armenia (in the form of flour) but not money or housing. They rented the place themselves and they did not receive any aid, although he says he knew someone who did get help with accommodation. The place that person was given was far away, he says, and it actually was a school converted into an apartment. Most of the Syrian Armenians had to rent the places where they stayed whether short- or long-term (Sargsyan and Petrosyan 2015). Overall, however, despite not being able to find a job in Armenia, George had good memories as he and his family were treated well.

You know, in Armenia it is fine. Even now that we are in Canada, every day we want to return to Armenia and stay. That's how good an impression it made on us. Because it was the first country we went after Syria to stay — clean, beautiful, peaceful, you know? So, our first impression is that it is a very good place, you know? For us it is a paradise.

The “paradise” where they chose not to stay because they were unable to make a living is still on their mind (it is not clear to what extent George’s “we” includes the opinions of his family members) even after they arrived in Canada, where they did choose to stay. Diaspora identities, Grossman (2019) argues (citing Safran 1991), among other things, can be based “on nostalgia to the homeland and a real or symbolic return discourse” (p. 1275). What we see in George’s talk here is, perhaps, such an identity construction.

George’s sentiments were not shared by everyone. Some were deeply disappointed — by the lack of opportunities, by the lack of support, but mostly by the fact that they were not accepted by the Republic’s Armenians as “our people” and were singled out as *spyurkahay* (a word designating diaspora Armenians). One of the participants even expressed her disappointment at having wasted most of her life in Syria learning the Armenian language, history, and culture. She questioned the benefit of all

this, considering that she was still going to be “the other” in the Armenian society. Others pointed out the impossibility to live and settle there, as the country was not in a good shape, as they had already been informed by their relatives and friends who had settled in Armenia earlier.

We were told that there was joblessness, life is difficult, so it is not easy for families to settle. That's what we heard. I have not been to Armenia, nor do I know what is there, but from what we heard, you cannot settle there permanently, because it is hard to find a job and fix the future. (A woman from Aleppo)

She adds that what made them choose Canada over Armenia was the quality of education and the job situation, even though she admits that they had considered staying in Armenia, and that many of their relatives actually settled there.

George's story above is an example of self-rescue from Syria to Canada, and seeking temporary refuge in the homeland. As he did not want to become established there and looked at it as a temporary measure, it satisfied his expectations of homeland, all the more so that he had income from elsewhere (Lebanon) and did not depend on the frail Armenian economy to support his family. It has not been so for everyone else. While many Syrian refugees remained to live in Armenia, others took the first chance they had to leave for countries with a better future for themselves and for their children. The love and longing for the homeland had to be packed in suitcases, moved and unpacked in far-away destinations.

I would like to end the chapter with a brief summary of the self-rescue journey of the participants. I presented three different accounts, in order to give the reader some idea of how people's self-rescue work happened. Some experiences were shared, others were different from one participant to another. Some of the journeys of self-rescue included parenting, family work across borders, working and staying (often illegally) in

various locations, going back and forth between countries, despite the risks involved, etc. All the participants of this study came to Canada and almost all (except one) were privately sponsored; some had a process underway while still in Syria, others — whose experiences are the focus of this chapter — took refuge in Lebanon or Armenia, expecting to return to Syria but sooner or later making the decision to seek a refugee status in Canada. In the next chapter, the focus is on the private sponsorship program, the work of the participants for getting into Canada and finally establishing a new life here.

CHAPTER 8: THE INSTITUTION OF CANADIAN REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP: WHERE THE WORK OF ORDINARY PEOPLE HAPPENS

This chapter explores the next stage of the Syrian Armenian experiences, this time in Canada. As in the previous chapters, the focus here is again on how those experiences are coordinated by local and translocal relations and how in turn people activate those relations in their doings. This chapter explores the Canadian Private Sponsorship program as a context that makes this coordination possible and visible. It brings into light the diasporic practices and the shared interpretive frame of the Genocide, the lost homeland, and of a common history and past in general. It also demonstrates how what people do in certain locations at certain times is coordinated with what people do in other locations and at other times.

The Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (PSRP) is unique in the sense that it is the only Canadian refugee program that allows ordinary Canadians to name and bring refugees. That is how the Armenian diasporic organizations and individuals have been able to become involved and to ensure the resettlement of the Syrian Armenians in Canada. Unlike other refugee programs, this program requires more involvement from the Syrian Armenian refugees themselves, and has coordinated their practice of diasporic connections and transnational ties, in order for them to ensure a co-sponsor (a requirement of the program). As such, the program also makes it possible to make visible the work done by the refugees themselves. The work they have had to undertake explains the reservations about, or the rejection of, the term “refugee” by many of the participants. I start this chapter with a brief overview of the Canadian refugee program, and a detailed discussion of PSRP. I then locate the experiences of the Syrian Armenians in this context

and show how they were coordinated with the doings of others. In particular, I bring into light the work they have done. I conclude with a discussion of their acceptance and/or rejection of the term “refugee.”

The Syrian Refugee Crisis in the Context of Canada’s History of Refugee Commitment

Before the recent conflict, Syria had a population of about 22 million (including 1.3 million Iraqi refugees and half a million Palestinians) (O’Neill 2022). The religious map of the country looked as follows: 87% Muslims, 3% Druze, and 10% Christians (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2015).¹¹⁶ Among the Muslims, the overwhelming majority were Sunni, and a small percentage were Alawi, Ismaili and Shia (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2015). The importance of religion in Syria lies in the fact that often communities are differentiated from one another along religious/sectarian lines. The same was true of political alliances. For example, Alawis supported Assad’s government, who was an Alawi himself. As is noted in the previous chapters, so did other minorities, including the Armenians.

Since its inception, the Syrian conflict has created nearly 13.2 million displaced persons (the largest group worldwide). Of those, 6.6 million are refugees, and among these, nearly 6 million are internally displaced (UNHCR 2019). Refugees are those who, according to the Canadian refugee and humanitarian resettlement program, fall under the Convention Refugees Abroad or Country of Asylum categories. For the person to qualify under either of the categories they have to be outside their country of citizenship and

¹¹⁶ Sanjian (2015) notes that the Armenians were about 0.3% of the total population in 2011.

outside Canada; they cannot return to their country or integrate into the country of their current residence; they must not have offers from another country (for settlement or citizenship). The points setting each of the two categories apart are the following two: in the first category, it is the “well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion”; in the second, it is that the person is to be “seriously and personally affected by civil war, armed conflict or massive violation of human rights” (Kennedy 2021 referring to IRCC).¹¹⁷

As of February 17, 2017, Canada had accepted 44,620 Syrian refugees (Hynie 2018:2)¹¹⁸ (as opposed to Turkey, which accepted more than three million, and Lebanon, which accepted more than one million), by August 2018, 58,600 Syrian refugees had been accepted to Canada (Senthanar et al. 2021:837) and according to UNHCR, between 2015 and 2019 about 63,938 Syrian refugees were admitted to Canada (Britten 2019 referring to IRCC). As of 2020, out of the 44,620¹¹⁹ admitted refugees, 21,745 were Government Assisted Refugees, 3,945 were Blended Visa Office-Referred Refugees and 18,930 were Privately Sponsored refugees (Government of Canada n.d.b)¹²⁰ Syrian

¹¹⁷ One ceases to be eligible to qualify as a refugee to come to Canada under any of the categories discussed above if the reasons for which they fled the country no longer exist, if the person has achieved citizenship and or protection from other countries, or if they have other options for life (e.g., in other countries).

¹¹⁸ Other sources give a much higher number. Kennedy (2021), referring to Government of Canada, reports this number to be 74,070.

¹¹⁹ The Government of Canada website, updated in 2020, still has this number (Government of Canada n.d.b).

¹²⁰ These categories are discussed below.

refugees in Canada mostly came from asylum countries such as Lebanon and Jordan (Citizenship and Immigration Canada). Syrian Armenians (those who participated in this study and most of the others as well) came to Canada as privately sponsored refugees.

Under the history of refugees in Canada, the Government of Canada website provides information about refugees Canada has welcomed, going back to the 18th century. It lists Quakers and Black Loyalists (in the 18th century), Polish and Jewish refugees (in the late 19th century), and Indochinese refugees among other groups (in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries). It concludes with information about refugees from Syria (Government of Canada n.d.g). Canada's commitment to refugees became official policy in the 1950s, when Canada signed treaties to deal with refugees and displaced persons after WWII. Canada was represented during the Refugee convention of 1951 (known as the Geneva Convention), which discussed the Status of Refugees and Stateless persons. Among other things, the participants defined the term "refugee," as well as the rights of refugees in asylum countries, and the responsibility of those (states, nations) who grant asylum. Part of the recommendations were for governments to accept refugees, to grant them asylum, and to provide opportunity for permanent resettlement (the non-refoulement principle was central to it, as discussed in the previous chapter). The convention also noted that since giving asylum may put burdens on a certain country of asylum, there should be international co-operation for finding a solution to the problem (UNHCR. n.d.b.).¹²¹ Canada has undertaken to assist refugees since June 1969, when it signed the

¹²¹ According to the Canadian Encyclopedia, "In 1986, in recognition of its exceptional contribution to refugee protection, Canada was awarded the Nansen Medal by the United Nations High Commissioner for

convention (and its 1967 Protocol) (Molnar 2017b), and in 1976 it signed its own Canadian Act of Immigration, a document that for the first time formulated Canadian policies regarding immigration and newcomers in general (Government of Canada n.d.g). Other than the Geneva convention, several other texts coordinate Canada's admission of refugees. Such texts are the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act of 2002 (IRPA), Bill C-31 (Protecting Canada's Immigration System act) and the Canada-United States Third Safe Country Agreement (signed in 2002 and in effect from 2004). Those texts regulate the refugee admission procedures either by restricting or changing the existing procedures. IRPA is an act that gives refugee protection to those who are persecuted, displaced, or in danger (Government of Canada n.d.i); Bill C-31 (or the Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act) restricted both the countries from which people could apply for refugee status (e.g., those considered safe countries) and the groups whose members could be accepted as refugees (e.g., political prisoners and activists were excluded) (The Canadian Encyclopedia 2020). The Canada-United States Safe Third Country Agreement requires refugee claimants to request protection in the first safe country they arrive in (unless they meet certain exceptions). This agreement prevents

Refugees" (The Canadian Encyclopedia 2016). It is however important to understand the difference between resettling refugees and receiving refugees. Canada might be the country that is in the front row if not the first one in resettling refugees (Abella and Molnar 2019), countries that receive refugees (i.e. asylum seekers) are incomparable in terms of the burden they have to bear. For example, Canada has resettled between 45-60 thousand refugees during the last several years. Jordan and Lebanon have received over one million refugees each. Molnar (2017) mentions that Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon have approximately 95% of all the Syrian refugees. According to UNHCR, in 2015 less than one percent of the refugees under their mandate were resettled globally (Molnar 2017b).

asylum seekers from entering Canada from the US to request refugee status, mandating that they should be returned to the US (Molnar 2017a; Government of Canada n.d.h).

Canada's commitment to refugee resettlement is operationalized through three different programs: Government Assisted Refugees (GAR), where the government takes responsibility for the refugees; Blended Visa Office-Referral (BVOR) (Molnar 2017b), a hybrid program introduced in 2013, where the costs are equally divided between volunteers and the government; and Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program (Hyndman, Reynolds, Yousuf, Purkey, Demoz, and Sherrell 2021), where community sponsors take responsibility for the refugees and the costs that occur during the first year (excepting healthcare and education).

The Government Assisted Refugees program brings to Canada refugees who are referred by the UNHCR or other referral organizations. People cannot apply directly to come to Canada under this program. Instead, they need to be registered as a refugee first. Government assisted refugees receive support from the Government of Canada or the Province of Quebec in all of their needs for the first year or until they can support themselves (Government of Canada n.d.e; Government of Canada n.d.f). This includes accommodation, help to find employment, clothes, and other resettlement assistance that might be needed (ibid).

BVOR requires volunteer sponsors to choose from the list of refugees the government has already approved. The costs of this commitment are lower for the government as the government and the sponsoring group share the expenses. The benefits of this program entail a smaller financial commitment, but at the same time it helps the most vulnerable (similar to Government assisted refugees, these refugees are

referred by UNHCR). It also requires less time, as the government has already approved the refugees and they are ready to travel (Government of Canada n.d.c; Government of Canada n.d.e).

PSRP does not receive any financial aid assigned by the government, and bringing a refugee or a family through it can take longer than the previous program. The upside is that people get to name the refugees they want to sponsor and bring particular persons to Canada. It comes with costs, however. Private sponsors normally provide (the word “normally” is taken from Government of Canada’s website) the expenses for rent, food, utilities, clothes, furniture, household goods, interpreters if needed, help with finding medical services, doing the necessary paperwork, enrolling children in schools, enrolling adults in language learning, making connections and finding jobs, and so on (Government of Canada n.d.d; Government of Canada n.d.k). It does not mean, however, as the participants’ stories demonstrate, that they actually receive all of the abovementioned, or any support at all. Hence, there is much that the privately sponsored refugees do themselves, and by studying their day-to-day work, I expand on the definition of self-rescue (Kyriakides 2018; 2020). Below I discuss how PSRP is organized, and the parties and processes involved in it.

*PSRP and Involved Parties*¹²²

¹²² Some of the discussed categories and groups overlap sometimes. My goal here is to briefly discuss and describe all the names of the parties one can meet at the government of Canada (and Quebec) website under different articles.

Private Sponsored Refugee (PSR), as a distinctively Canadian program¹²³ (Macklin et al. 2018), was formally legislated in 1976 (ibid) and operates along with the Government Assisted Refugee program and the BVOR program. PSRP is facilitated through different parties such as the Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH) and their Constituent Groups (CG), Groups of Five (G5), Community Sponsors (CS) and, for Quebec (under the Collective Sponsorship of a refugee who is abroad program), a legal person (a registered charity), or a Group of 2 to 5 natural persons (Gouvernement du Québec n.d.c).

Canada (except Quebec)	Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAH)	Constituent Groups (CG)	Groups of Five (G5)	Community Sponsors (CS)
Quebec	A legal person	Group of 2 to 5		

Figure 4: The parties involved in the Private Sponsored Refugee (PSR) program in Quebec and the rest of the provinces in Canada

¹²³ Canada is the first country to use PSRP where ordinary citizens and community are directly involved in sponsoring (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program n.d.).

Sponsorship agreement holders (SAH) are incorporated (legal) organizations (religious, ethnic, community or service providers) who have signed an agreement with Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and are responsible for carrying out the sponsorship of the refugees and providing settlement support (discussed below). SAH can sponsor refugees themselves or in cooperation with other groups, such as constituent groups (CG) and/or co-sponsors. Hay Kedron, an Armenian Centre in Toronto that sponsored Syrian Armenians, is a SAH.

Constituent groups (CG) (e.g., a local congregation, or the chapter of a national church [Government of Canada n.d.k]) are community members who operate under the agreement a SAH organization holds (ibid) and their authorization.

Groups of five (G5) are at least five Canadians or permanent residents with financial means, willing to sponsor the resettlement of a refugee living abroad into their community (UNHCR Canada, n.d.). G5 allows five individuals to name a refugee and sponsor them directly through the government or through an institutional middle rung such as SAH (Macklin et al. 2018).

Community Sponsors (CS) are corporations, organizations, associations that have financial means to resettle refugees into the same communities they are located in. Unlike SAH, they do not have to be incorporated under federal or provincial law.

Group of 2 to 5 natural persons (Quebec) is a group of two to five individuals who are willing to sponsor refugees. In this group each member must be eighteen or older, a Canadian citizen or a permanent resident and must reside in Quebec, in addition to meeting certain financial criteria, and each should be responsible for other members of the group.

*A legal person*¹²⁴ (*Quebec*) is a nonprofit organization willing to sponsor refugees. It must be in operation for at least 2 years, carry on its activities in Quebec, demonstrate financial capacity, must have honoured its financial obligations previously, and cannot be a political party (Gouvernement du Québec n.d.b). A legal person can be either a regular organization or an experienced organization (with more than 10 years resettled refugee sponsoring) (ibid).

Syrian Armenians, whether they came to Quebec or Ontario, were required to have an individual co-sponsor in addition to a sponsoring organization (Hay Doun and Hay Kedron respectively).

Co-sponsors are defined (Government of Canada n.d.k) as either “an individual or organization that partners with a SAH (or Community sponsors) to help with providing settlement support to the refugees.” In the case of the Syrian Armenians, these were individuals who were either kin or friends, and in some cases were other Armenians with whom the refugees had had no prior connections. The requirement for co-sponsors was, among other things, to either be a “Canadian citizen,” a “Permanent resident” of Canada, or a “Registered Indian,” to be 18 years old or older, to reside in the community of settlement, and to have been authorized by SAH (or another umbrella organization). This will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Application Process

¹²⁴ A legal person, i.e., a non-profit organization such as Hay Doun in Montreal.

Both in Quebec and in other provinces of Canada,¹²⁵ the sponsoring parties have to have interest in sponsoring, usually some previous experience in sponsoring, and must meet some other criteria (e.g., have enough material means), as well as signing paperwork registering their commitment, financially and otherwise (both for organizations and individuals). After this initial stage, the refugees join the application process as the application is filled out both by the sponsor and the refugee, and some additional documents are provided only by the refugee (the documents and steps are slightly different for Quebec but most importantly, they require commitment from the sponsor, and proof of the ability to honour that commitment).

¹²⁵ My discussion of PSRP is based on the government Canada website. The process in Quebec is not very different (except for minor differences in how things are formulated, or procedural differences. If there is a major difference, I talk about it separately).

The sponsoring parties' responsibilities include providing support and settlement assistance,¹²⁶ care and lodging for up to twelve months¹²⁷ or until refugees become "self-sufficient" (Government of Canada n.d.k; Gouvernement du Québec n.d.a), whichever of the two comes first. This commitment (including post-arrival support) must be extended to *all* the family members including those who arrive later, as the family members have a one-year window to follow the main applicant (Government of Canada n.d.k). The government also provides some estimates for private sponsors to have in mind when committing to sponsorship, by providing certain financial guidelines, both based on a national average and on local prices. Interestingly, there are also some obligations for refugees after they arrive. The first sentence of the following paragraph is an example of that.

¹²⁶ Under the sponsoring groups' responsibilities, the Government of Canada website notes:

"Private sponsors normally support the sponsored refugees by:

- providing the cost of food, rent and household utilities and other day-to-day living expenses
- providing clothing, furniture and other household goods
- locating interpreters
- selecting a family physician and dentist
- assisting with applying for provincial health-care coverage
- enrolling children in school and adults in language training
- introducing newcomers to people with similar personal interests
- providing orientation with regard to everyday activities such as banking services, transportation
- helping in the search for employment." (Government of Canada n.d.l)

¹²⁷ According to the Government of Canada website (Government of Canada n.d.l), in rare circumstances the migration officer may find it necessary that a longer period (up to 36 months) is more suitable and the sponsoring group must either agree to the new period or risk losing the sponsorship request altogether.

Refugees are expected to contribute to their own settlement costs from funds they bring to Canada or earn during their sponsorship period. When refugees have financial resources, they retain the right to manage their own finances. Sponsors cannot require the refugees to submit their funds for management by others (ibid).

It is important to pay attention also to the language of the last two sentences in the above paragraph. It is oriented to protecting the refugees and to limiting the control that sponsors can have over them. Helping refugees to find employment is encouraged as the final goal is the refugees' self-sufficiency, but the sponsors cannot force them to take up offered jobs.

When the application, with all the required paperwork, is completed by both parties (sponsor and refugees), it is submitted to the Resettlement Operations Centre in Ottawa (ROC-O). The permanent residency application is taken care of by overseas IRCC offices. People accepted under a refugee program enter Canada as permanent residents, with the right to apply for citizenship later (similar to independent immigrants, whose legal and potential citizenship status is the same).

After the three-stage process (intake, completeness check, and sponsorship application decision) the sponsorship application is approved and both the sponsor and the principal applicant are notified. The IRCC then issues a visa and the sponsor is notified around four to ten weeks before the travel date to Canada. Travel to Canada is organized by completing the following actions: IRCC notifies the sponsor four to ten weeks before the departure, then sends a request to the International Organization for Migration to book transportation and sends a Notification of Arrival Transmission to the sponsor approximately ten business days before the arrival¹²⁸ (Government of Canada n.d.). It is interesting to note here that the sponsor and the person traveling do not book

¹²⁸ It also provides information about Canada to the refugees.

their own flight (even though they mostly end up paying for the trip sooner or later), which would make the planning easier, considering that some had to drive all the way from Damascus to Beirut to catch their flights. While according to the law, the notification is sent to the sponsor around ten weeks prior, it still keeps the people in a great deal of uncertainty as to when exactly their trip will happen.

The refugees' responsibilities during the process are to complete the application, gather the supporting documents and to send the package to the sponsoring group or ROC-O,¹²⁹ to take part in the interview, then, if it is successful, to get a medical clearance from the Panel Physician, undergo criminality and security checks, as well as paying for their and their dependents' travel costs. In some cases, there is an "immigrant loan" available. Among other responsibilities, the website mentions "every effort to become self-sufficient as soon as possible after arriving to Canada" (Government of Canada n.d.l). This includes language training courses, higher education courses, employment programs, training and employment.¹³⁰ If the refugee chooses not to go to the community

¹²⁹ For Quebec, the ROC-O cooperates with MIDI (Ministère de l'immigration, de la diversité et de l'inclusion) during the sponsorship process to grant resettlement (e.g., Sponsors needs to receive approval from MIDI, and before any approval, ROC-O obtains from the MIDI a Quebec Selection Certificate (CSQ) and grants resettlement in accordance with MIDI's approval) (Government of Canada n.d.m; Government of Canada n.d.n).

¹³⁰ The Government of Canada website notes: "Support Services, including child care, transportation assistance, translation, interpretation, crisis counselling and provisions for disabilities, are offered across the Settlement Program to enable access to direct settlement services. Services are delivered by over 500 organizations in Canada and are available to all resettled refugees" (Government of Canada n.d.j).

of settlement¹³¹ by which they were sponsored, they are considered self-destined and if they choose to move after arrival, it is considered secondary migration. In these cases, they need to find a new sponsor (a G5; a CG or Co-sponsors) in the new community, meet the requirements for the new community, transfer the sponsorship, and appoint representatives in the new community (Government of Canada n.d.I).

Most of the time the refugees are eligible for healthcare from the first day of their arrival, but in some cases, they need to wait for up to ninety days as new permanent residents. While waiting, the Interim Federal Health Program (IFHP) provides healthcare benefits (limited and temporary). Refugees are also eligible for Canada Child Benefits. They also receive a permanent residency card that is valid for five years.¹³² There are also certain province-specific benefits that will be discussed as relevant to the data in this chapter.

This rather detailed account of the program should help the reader understand the framework in which my participants did the work of resettlement. Before the discussion of their experiences in Canada, however, it is also important to understand the Syrian

¹³¹ Living in the same community or having a representative there is one of the eligibility requirements for becoming a sponsor. Community of Settlement is “the village, town or city and surrounding areas in which the refugee is expected to settle. The term community is used, as there may be situations in which the sponsor does not live directly in the same village, town or city but could be considered to reside in the same general community. In determining the community of settlement, the paramount consideration should be the sponsor’s ability to provide adequate, in-person support to the refugee, taking into account the distance between the sponsor and the refugee” (Refugee Sponsorship Training Program n.d.).

¹³² The information above about the private sponsorship is taken from the Government of Canada website, the link is included in the list of References.

Armenians' ties with other diasporic communities and the homeland. Since I have already discussed this in Chapter 5, here I am only going to briefly remind the reader about the Armenian community in Syria and give a short description of the Armenian diasporic organizations in Canada.

Syrian Armenians and their Location in the Armenian Diaspora

The Syrian Armenian community of Syria has been discussed in Chapter 5. Here I offer a brief summary of that discussion, to locate the community in the wider Armenian diaspora community and to explain the ties between the Syrian and the Canadian Armenian diasporic communities. The Armenian community in Syria has a long history. While there are Armenians who have lived there from the time before the Genocide, for the most part the Armenian community is a result of the Armenian Genocide. Most people in the current community are third- and fourth-generation genocide survivors, whose ancestors found refuge in Syria which was at that time part of the Ottoman Empire. The life of the Armenian community has not been easy. From the starved, traumatized and barely surviving refugees, who faced different kinds of hardships, they grew into a strong, organized and connected diasporic community, which my participants often called the "mother colony" (*mayr gaghut*) among the larger (diasporic) Armenian community.

The Armenian community in Syria had different rights and freedoms at different times. Right before the establishment of Hafez al-Assad as Syria's president in 1971, the Armenian community lost many rights, including the right to schools where Armenian was the language of instruction. When Hafez al-Assad came to power, some restrictions were

lifted and partial freedoms were given to Armenians, mostly unofficially and mostly in the spheres of culture, religion, communal life. These did not include political activism: in fact, Armenians were granted those freedoms in return for political disengagement (Della Gatta 2019). Meanwhile, the Armenian leadership remained interested in the matter of the Armenian people both locally and internationally (Migliorino 2006), and despite their political passiveness locally, Armenians were highly engaged transnationally, not only on the level of leadership, but also individually; many maintained ties outside Syria and with the greater diasporic community. Such ties spanned over several countries including the homeland, Canada, USA, Lebanon, etc. Some of those ties were familial (some families had one Lebanese parent and often relatives on one side of the family were living in Lebanon or Armenia, or Canada) and some others were inactive (such as kindergarten friends, a relative's acquaintance or an acquaintance's sponsor) but were activated during the migration process. In fact, the continuum of sponsors ranged from siblings (e.g., a man from Damascus said that his brother became his sponsor) to strangers (a young man from Aleppo said he never met his and his family's sponsor before coming to Canada). Sometimes someone's sponsor also became a sponsor for others. For example, another Aleppo man's sponsor had previously sponsored his brother and then agreed also to sponsor him and his family. The abovementioned Damascene man's brother, other than sponsoring his own brothers and their mother, also sponsored many other people. The connection between the sponsoring organization and the individual co-sponsors is also interesting. In a few cases the co-sponsors heard about the sponsoring opportunities and reached out to the organization (and refugees), in other cases the organization reached out for potential sponsors (e.g., as in the case of the

abovementioned man), but mostly, the refugees heard about the opportunity and contacted potential sponsors asking them to contact the organization.

As PSRP required more involvement on the part of the refugees, including finding a co-sponsor, it actually makes it possible to investigate the work people do, namely how they activate their transnational ties and how their work is coordinated by translocal relations of diaspora. This work of activating ethno-familial or ethnoreligious ties (whether among the Syrian Armenians themselves or within the larger Armenian transnation¹³³) through the process of coming to Canada and finding jobs there and settling down (unlike the GAR, where the refugees are supported by the government for the first year of their lives in Canada) allows many of the participants to reject the term “refugee,” as will be discussed later in the chapter.

Choosing Canada

“Canada has opened a door”: this was how the path to immigration to Canada was described to me by many participants. There were different cases: some heard about Canada and decided to try, others ended up choosing Canada as other options were harder or impossible at all. It has been already briefly discussed in the previous chapter that Armenia did not become home for my participants, even though originally it was the main destination for most of the Syrian Armenians who had left Syria. The reason for not settling in Armenia permanently were the bad economy, joblessness, high prices and

¹³³ I borrowed the term from Khachig Tölölyan (e.g., 2000).

small salaries, and the lack of state or institutional support in general. In one woman's words:

It [Armenia] did not open a door for us. I wish it had opened a door, we would go there, and I love Armenia a lot. [...] Yes it [i.e., the economic conditions] was difficult, we went there twice and saw this, it was difficult to work there. The country is very beautiful, but there was no money to pay the employees, it was very hard, there was no money for that. We went and saw that. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman shared a similar sentiment. While Armenia was good for visiting, she said, it was difficult to live there. According to her, the government was not ready to help its people the way Canada does. And yet a third woman says that before trying to come to Canada they tried Armenia first. It did not work for them, she says, as her husband could not find a job. Many went to Armenia, they got passports, which the Armenian state happily gave them, but it worked better for those who had some savings, which they used in order to buy homes and settle there. A different Aleppo woman said:

But in our circumstances, we were working-eating (*askhatogh utogh*) [i.e., we spent whatever we earned]. My husband's father died very early and he [the husband] did not have any family money, the same with me, my father also did not have enough to leave us something. I mean we did not have the sourdough starter¹³⁴ to go and settle in Armenia. (A woman from Aleppo)

The lack of jobs, she says, was the only reason she did not settle in Armenia.

I love Armenia a lot, until now I still love it. It's my capital [sic]. When you walk in the streets you understand that you are an Armenian, it is your people, your blood, your flesh. I love Armenia a lot and I still say: "God give me strength and ability, I will save money, will go and buy a home in Armenia and I will live in Armenia.

A man from Aleppo, who did consider Armenia, told me that before he applied to come to Canada, he explored the possibilities of migrating to Europe.

First, I wanted to go to Europe, to Austria. I worked very hard, but it was dangerous. It was dangerous because you needed to go to Turkey, pass through Turkey, cross the sea, go to Greece. It was like that at that time. We tried and it did not work, even though I really wanted it. (A man from Aleppo)

¹³⁴ The usage is metaphorical, referring to resources needed to get things going.

What the last participant is referring to here is the dangerous, and at times fatal, journey many Syrians had to take. Achilli (2017) writes that between 2015 and 2016 (the situation changed in early 2016¹³⁵) Syrians had two options for reaching European countries: legally (through resettlement, family reunification, private sponsorship, university scholarships, etc.) and illegally. The illegal one involved crossing several countries (and the Mediterranean): Turkey, Greece, Croatia and Slovenia (Achilli 2017:8). Then they had to seek asylum in the first country after arrival.¹³⁶ One such attempt to cross the Mediterranean, which probably received the most media attention especially in Canada, was the tragic story of the three-year-old Alan Kurdi and his family, as mentioned earlier. There is no one account of what exactly happened to the overcrowded inflatable boat that was carrying them across the Mediterranean but Alan, his brother and mother died in this journey.¹³⁷ This story particularly resonated with the Canadian public as the family was trying to reach Canada. Alan's aunt was in Canada and tried to privately sponsor them but they were rejected. According to Hynie (2018), this event moved the Canadian public, and demands were made to the government to accept more Syrian refugees. A mother of two from Aleppo also had to choose between Canada and Europe.

¹³⁵ The Turkey-EU agreement was signed, and Macedonia sealed its borders with Greece at this point (Achilli 2017). The agreement aimed at preventing refugees crossing to Greek islands irregularly: those who manage to are to be returned, and for every returned Syrian refugee an EU member country will accept a refugee who has waited in Turkey.

¹³⁶ This does not mean that people sometimes do not try to get through the countries where they don't want to stay in order to claim refugee status in more desirable countries.

¹³⁷ According to UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), about 5000 people have died at sea worldwide (Molnar 2017b).

We had connections abroad. My sister was staying in Armenia, but eventually she migrated to Sweden. She used to always tell me that there is no hope. We waited for a door to open, honestly. I had heard about Canada, I had friends here, they kept praising it. There were opportunities to go to Europe but the conditions were really hard: you either needed to go as a refugee or by boat or I don't know what. Now my older sister reached Germany by boat, but not one of the sinking boats; she just paid a huge sum of money and did it like that. Now, what if you do not have that huge amount of money? I, for example, had to pay for at least four people. You need to consider everything. When you do not have that ability to take such big steps you always sit back and think. (A woman from Aleppo)

When the above woman from Aleppo heard about Canada and learned that Canada was offering good conditions, she decided to try. It is noteworthy that from the perspective of the Syrian Armenians, Canada had better conditions and easier policies of accepting refugees than some European states or Australia. Another woman told me that she applied to come to Canada, while her sister chose to go to Australia first: "We had relatives in Australia and they applied there. I don't know for what reason they were denied. Two-three times they applied and were denied."

The door that opened for all of my participants (whether the only one they had known, or one of many), was Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees program. The Canadian Private Sponsorship framework originated after WWII as a response to the large-scale displacements that were taking place in this period. Refugee resettlement programs that later led to PSRP began in 1947, when the Cabinet voted to accept labourers from European camps, and followed up in 1976 by the Migration Act, and then by the Master Agreement in 1979 (Cameron 2020). Decades of advocacy by religious groups¹³⁸ and the government's collaboration with the latter resulted in the development and improvement of PSRP, which over the last forty years has allowed about 325,000 refugees to come to Canada (Cameron 2020; Hyndman et al. 2021). In 2020, privately

¹³⁸ According to Cameron (2020), even today religious groups play an important role in PSRP. About 90 out of 120 SAH have a religious community affiliation (p. 35).

sponsored refugees were twice as numerous as government sponsored ones (Hyndman et al. 2021). Hyndman and colleagues argue that we should study private sponsorship as it is an important part of refugee resettlement and because it connects the actions of local communities to the “global politics of injustice and displacement” (ibid). Furthermore, the refugees who come through this program often themselves become private sponsors of still more refugees, thanks to personal and family connections.¹³⁹

All of the abovementioned is embedded in the doings of ordinary people and is coordinated by local and translocal practices, both personal and institutional. This community building can often have at its base not only familial ties but also a shared group belonging. In some cases, it is rationalized by the idea that “we are Canadians,” and helping others is part of that; in other instances, it is a religiously motivated commitment to help others; more globally, it is based on the broad humanitarian urge to help one’s fellow human beings. In particular instances help is offered because of a shared identity and commitment to members of a certain group. This commitment can come from individual people, groups of people, or from organizations. In either case, people actively participate in the process. It involves people who do not work for the government’s immigration ministry, and are involved as private citizens or members of the civil society (e.g., people who work for nongovernmental organizations).

While the growing literature on sponsorship, sponsors and the work they do is important, it is also important to understand that refugees are not passive recipients, but

¹³⁹ One woman, for example, told me that she is planning to bring her two sisters and their children. Another, who came to Canada sponsored by her husband’s relative, later also tried (unsuccessfully) to bring her sister.

rather active collaborators in the program, whose work and contribution make the program successful. In keeping with the overall focus of this thesis, this chapter aims to make this work visible in the context of the Canadian PSRP, diasporic institutions and personal, familial and communal links nationally and transnationally. It also empirically investigates a specific type of motivation behind private sponsorship based on kinship and ethnic ties. Finally, it examines the amount of support refugees actually have received, and explores how effective it was for them. It also suggests that while integration is a gradual long-term process and some refugee groups might need more assistance than the established twelve-month period (Lenard 2019), others become self-sufficient much earlier. Understanding this may help policy and decision makers rethink the numbers of refugees allowed through this program and to increase it amid the fast-growing refugee crisis around the world.

Despite the fact that, as noted above, private sponsorship is important, and can become the main way of resettlement in the future not only in Canada but also elsewhere, the scholarship produced on it is still very scarce. As such, my work empirically investigates private sponsorship from the standpoint of the refugees. Hyndman and colleagues (2021) are right to point out that understanding why people sponsor is an important part of PSRP in general. I should add that part of understanding why they sponsor is to know whom they sponsor. Most of the Syrian Armenians, including those whom I interviewed, came to Canada through the private sponsorship program. Their stories illustrate the complexities of everyday life through transnational practices in the context of the Canadian PSR program.

Armenian Diaspora Institutions of Canada

The majority of the participants, as mentioned, came to Canada through Hay Doun in Montreal, and less frequently through Hay Kedron in Toronto. One or two came through AGBU, and one or two people through other ways, which they did not elaborate on.

Hay Kedron (lit. “Armenian Centre,” the Armenian Community Centre of Toronto) is a non-profit organization that serves the Armenians of Greater Toronto. Its activities include different programs, ranging from athletics to education to culture. Their website represents it as a “home away from home, acting as a continuum of the Armenian home and family life” (Armenian Community Centre). It is a Sponsorship Agreement Holder, and together with individual co-sponsors it has brought Syrian Armenians to Canada.

Hay Doun (lit. “Armenian Home”) is a non-profit organization in Montreal, established in 2005 by the Primate of the Armenian church of Canada and other members of the Armenian community to help those who could not access social services (mostly because of language barriers and their unfamiliarity with offered social services), as well as to help them navigate through cultural differences (Hay Doun n.d.). Its mission is stated as follows: “Hay Doun is committed to serve the community by providing an effective tool for integration, social education, and support at multiple levels” (ibid). Among the programs that it offers are Caregivers of Elderly-PIF, Habitations Ararat (a senior residence), and Collective Sponsorship (which is temporarily suspended now). Collective Sponsorship of Quebec (*Parrainage collectif*) is a program that allows organizations (as well as groups of two to five) that meet certain requirements¹⁴⁰ to sponsor refugees who

¹⁴⁰ For further details see Gouvernement du Québec n.d.b.

want to establish themselves in Quebec.¹⁴¹ The organization is expected to have prior experience of sponsorship, to demonstrate financial capacity, to have honoured its financial obligations, and not be a political party, among other things. It needs to take responsibility for the refugees' needs. Hay Doun, with the collaboration of Quebec's Immigration, Diversity and Inclusion Ministry, signed a partnership agreement and sponsored refugees who were willing to settle in Quebec (ibid). They first sponsored forty-five Iraqi families, and since 2014, have sponsored 2500 Syrian refugees.¹⁴² According to their website, Hay Doun was the first and only organization in Quebec (and in Canada generally) that sponsored so many refugees in such a short timeframe and for that they received the recognition of the Immigration Minister Kathleen Weil. The website also states that Hay Doun is responsible for all the integration issues, including tutoring, employment, housing, schooling and community integration.

For most of the participants, the path to Canada started when they heard from friends and relatives in Canada or community members in Syria or Lebanon, that Canada offers an opportunity to immigrate. A participant from Damascus knew about this even before the program had started.

My brother works close to Hay Doun, he communicates with them. One day one of their officials came and told my brother: "tell your family to be ready, we got the agreement from the Canadian

¹⁴¹ The organizations were barred from this program in November 2020. In October 2021 Quebec Immigration announced it will accept sponsorship (in a limited number) from organizations (Singer 2021).

¹⁴² The ethnicity of the refugees is not specified on the website, but it is common knowledge that most of these (if not all) are Armenians; see the citation that follows.

government. Just as we have brought the Iraqi Armenians,¹⁴³ now we are going to bring Syrian Armenians." My mom heard this conversation and came to us. After two months Hay Doun started accepting applications. We were one of the first ones. (A man from Damascus)

Many of my participants told me that when they heard about Canada they did not believe it as it was too good to be true. They decided to try, however, thinking that they were not losing anything. All the more so that those conversations had happened before. A woman from Aleppo told me that they had tried to come to Canada once before, for reasons unrelated to the war, sometime between 2002 and 2007.

I had been hearing about Canada for a while, I had relatives here and friends; they had always told me [to apply], but we always said "it is a cold country." It was in 2002 or 2007, my husband said "let's try to go to Canada, let's try something." We heard that there was someone in Damascus who did that. He went to Damascus and talked to him. (A woman from Aleppo)

In Damascus, however, the abovementioned woman and her family were asked to pay thousands of dollars to the person, who supposedly was organizing a passage to Canada, with little promise that once they were in Canada they would be allowed to stay. They never knew if that was a scam, because they refused his offer. Later, because of the war, they came to Canada through Hay Kedron of Toronto but moved to Montreal shortly after arriving.

After learning about the opportunity, the next step was to find a sponsor (an individual co-sponsor or a guarantor). As discussed above, even though Hay Doun or Hay Kedron were the sponsoring institutions, an individual sponsor or guarantor was also a part of the sponsorship processes (also found under Hay Doun's "special conditions" for eligibility). Those who had a family member or a close friend in Canada, did not have

¹⁴³ The president of Hay Doun, Nayiri Tavlian, told CTV Montreal (2015) how the Armenian bishop asked them if they could help Iraqi refugees to resettle in Montreal, and how Hay Doun signed a collective sponsorship contract with the government of Quebec and started sponsoring.

to work hard. Sometimes, as in case of a woman in her 30s from Aleppo, the Canadian person contacted the Syrian Armenians themselves and offered sponsorship. Sometimes it went smoothly, in other cases the inexperience and lack of knowledge of the sponsor led to rejection. One of the requirements for the sponsor was to live in the same city where the refugees were immigrating. A mother of two from Aleppo says she did not know about this when applying and that is why they had to apply twice before being approved.

First the paperwork was done wrong, our sponsor was from Montreal, while we applied to come to Toronto. So the Canadian government had been instructed that each sponsor had to bring the sponsored persons to their own city, not to another one. The sponsor was a friend and his wife was my friend. It was through our personal connections. When we did the papers, we were told the answer comes very fast, after 8 months we already had our answer. Our sponsor applied through Hay Doun this time; we came through Hay Doun. Already in January we heard from them, it all worked out, the papers were approved. We were about ten families and we were part of the 25,000 individuals that they brought in. (A woman from Aleppo)

In the case of a woman from Damascus, it was her husband's nephew who had come to Canada earlier as a student and had already sponsored his own family¹⁴⁴; he then was able to sponsor this woman from Damascus and her family. This is an instance of a transnational practice of familial ties. A man in his 60s from Aleppo told me he found his kindergarten friend and asked him if he could sponsor his family (himself, his wife, his unmarried daughter and his married daughter with her husband and two children). Others, meanwhile, told me that they came prepared to live here and take care of themselves (including funds for lodging), and either did not stay with their sponsor at all, or did so only for a very short period (days or weeks). In the abovementioned man's case, the sponsor actually needed to provide for them until they were able to "stand on their feet," as this man from Aleppo puts it. For them it meant also living in their sponsor's house for a whole

¹⁴⁴ See above about sponsors' requirements (e.g., being a permanent resident and over the age of eighteen). Another participant came to Canada as a refugee and later sponsored her husband to come.

six months. While their life in Canada is something I will discuss later, the piece above is important to show the commitment the potential sponsor needed to offer (and to prove their ability to do so) when a Syrian Armenian person called them and asked for sponsorship. However, the other stories demonstrate that not everyone actually provided that kind of assistance, or any assistance at all, after Syrian Armenians reached Canada.

After finding a sponsor, the next step for the Syrian Armenians and their sponsors was the paperwork. A mother from Aleppo in her thirties told me that her sponsor called her and they did the paperwork together. She recalls that he phoned her every day for a 45-minute to one-hour conversation and asked questions.

He asked questions and wrote down [the answers], the next day he called and said: ok, tell me this, tell me that and that. He asked for some documents that we needed to do, I told my husband [he was in Aleppo working, while she was in Lebanon with the children], he sent all those, we translated them, I took pictures of all those and sent them to him. We got lucky again since at that time Trudeau had said that he would bring this many Syrians and at that time we were part of that group. So, our papers came through Hay Doun. (A woman from Aleppo)

Those who knew English did their paperwork themselves. For example, a woman from Damascus said she filled it all out by herself and her husband's nephew, the sponsor, went over it later. She was a teacher of English, so she did not have difficulties that others had filling the paperwork out. Those who did not do it themselves, paid someone to do it for them. There were offices or Armenian individuals in Lebanon who used to do it for a small amount ("a humane fee," as they put it): "All the Armenians were going to him. He did everyone's paperwork, everyone who filed a refugee case from Beirut to Canada or Australia. [...] It cost about CAD100. [...] So that's how I came to Canada," a woman from Aleppo told me.

Medicals and interviews followed the paperwork. "Those whose medicals came back normal they accepted, others were either rejected or accepted," said a man from

Aleppo. The wait was a big challenge, too. Some people had to go back and forth between Lebanon and Syria, and others had to find a way to stay, often illegally, to rent houses and find jobs, which was almost impossible without the proper paperwork. Entering Lebanon after the regulations were introduced (as discussed in the previous chapter) was a challenge itself. Lebanon had a special entry category for visiting a foreign embassy for 48 hours and it also could have been extended if necessary for a short period of time, as long as they provided proof from the embassy itself (General Directorate of General Security n.d.). Perhaps because those regulations were new for Syrians, who, as mentioned above, had previously entered Lebanon freely, some participants did not know about them and sought other ways to enter the country.

It was very hard to go to Lebanon. We had to have a reason, so one of my girls who used to work in the immigration office before, had to do paperwork every time to convince them that we were going to a wedding or an engagement party and that we were staying in this hotel or that. From there we needed confirmation so we could cross the border to Lebanon. We needed to show them the hotel reservations when entering Lebanon, so they knew we had somewhere to stay and were not going to be a burden on anyone and that we were going to go back. (A man from Aleppo)

Eventually there was the interview with the embassy, following which there was more waiting. The waiting times varied. For most of the participants it took several months, in a few cases it took around one or two years. The final call from the embassy told the successful applicants about their flight. A father from Aleppo recalls being taken aback by the speedy pace of their application process.

After a week we got our file number, after two-three weeks they called us for a medical, after three weeks they called us for the interview, then it was Christmas and I moved homes in Lebanon, because the process usually takes two years, coming to Canada takes one to two years, I thought, let's live comfortably until our paperwork arrives. Christmas was over, it was January 4th when they called us and said that our flight is on the 7th [of January]. I had not prepared anything, my stuff, I had not taken care of the shop [he had a coffee shop in Beirut], you know. I did all that in three days, we collected all the stuff we had, the rest of our stuff we left there as my brother-in-law was coming after us [they had applied too], and so we came to Canada. (A man from Aleppo)

A teacher from Aleppo said her and her family's paperwork was approved in eight months (it was January). However, in February they were told by the Canadian embassy

in Beirut that they would not be called to board their flight until next October. They decided to return to Syria, especially since they were not allowed to stay in Lebanon any longer. “When you stay in Lebanon illegally you get a red stamp in your passport which means that you cannot enter Lebanon for a year. We were punished in that way, too,” she told me.

Back in Syria the above-mentioned woman from Aleppo went back to her job and lived in her home. Five families, she said, shared one house. Meanwhile, back in Syria she got a letter from the embassy telling her to come to Lebanon for her flight. She explained to them that she could not enter Lebanon, as she had a restricting order for a year. She asked the embassy if they could help her enter Lebanon, but the embassy could not as it was the Lebanese government’s decision. She was told to contact them as soon as the punishment was over. Every month they called her and asked if she had entered Lebanon. Her penalty was over on March 18, so they finally entered Lebanon. Her flight was on April 28th, a year and four months after she had gotten her initial approval.

A participant from Aleppo and his family had five days between the call and the flight. “I had to collect my forty-year-old life in five days,” he told me. Five days and up to twenty-three kilograms per person, that’s how much they were allowed. Most of them were able to bring with them only documents, some clothes and some small family relics or photos, but not everything. “Maybe when things are back to normal, we will go, if we still have homes left there,” was a sentiment shared by many participants. I often asked them what happened to their belongings which they were unable to bring along. Those who still have homes there said they left everything as it was, with the hope one day to

go back and perhaps to be able to bring their belongings; others aired concerns that it is unclear if they still have their homes or if anything is left of them, as they heard ISIS had entered the region and the neighbourhood where their homes were. Others had managed to sell their homes and to get rid of their belongings.

Often, the lack of clear timelines for the immigration process added to the uncertainty and the hardships they experienced. Sometimes it went too fast, sometimes unexpected and unexplained delays happened. A young woman from Aleppo, who was school age at that time, remembers going to Beirut and, after having her and her family's interview, being told their flight was in three weeks. She said they did not even go to school there as this did not make sense for such a short period of time. However, they were not called for their flight after three weeks and ended up staying in Beirut for much longer. She cannot remember exactly how long, but she recalls staying there for several months.

An interesting detail regarding people's travel to Canada is that some families were brought free of charge. "The Government paid for the tickets, it was free," recalled a man from Aleppo. Others were made to pay for their ticket or even to sign a document that they would pay the money back within a year after arriving in Canada. Other than a mother in her thirties from Aleppo, who recalls coming to Canada in military airplanes free of charge,¹⁴⁵ everyone else took regular flights from Beirut to Jordan or Turkey, and then to Canada. The timelines for the application process varied for different applicants. For the above-mentioned participant it took only two months (she came to Canada in 2015), while

¹⁴⁵ The first wave of Syrian refugees was brought on military airplanes, Justin Trudeau announced in the House of Commons (Harris 2015).

in the case of others it took much longer. It appears that those who came around 2015 — when the newly-elected Trudeau government had pledged to bring 25,000 Syrian refugees — were on a faster track, while those who applied later (2017-2018) had to wait longer. Other than the fact that starting from January 2017, “the Liberal Government limited the resettlement of refugees from Syria and Iraq to 1,000 new cases” (Molnar 2017b), it could also be that Hay Doun had reached its allowed number of sponsorships. A man from Qamishli, for example, told me that he filed his application through Hay Doun, and waited for about nine months. When he did not hear anything, his relatives in Canada decided not to wait and, instead of trying through Hay Doun or Hay Kedron, to do it themselves (most probably using Quebec’s Sponsorship of 2-5 persons). The man from Qamishli never knew what happened to his application and why it never worked through Hay Doun. Similarly, a woman, who arrived in Canada in 2019, said she and her family did not make it through Hay Doun. She says when the Government opened the programs, many people made it to Canada very fast whether through Hay Doun or otherwise. Later, everything became slower and there were people who waited for their resettlement for two to three years (including those who applied through Hay Doun, which, a woman from Aleppo explains, was “because Hay Doun’s numbers were completed”). This participant (she had to wait for 2.5 years) said they came through a private sponsor; their relative, she says, applied directly to the Government.

It is impossible to present all the hard work, including the emotional work, the participants did to be able to reach Canada. As mentioned previously, many had to stay in Lebanon illegally, and in some cases, they also had to pay for the consequences, struggling for jobs and making ends meet in a difficult economy, where Syrians were not

liked (according to their accounts¹⁴⁶), and where everything was much more expensive and complicated than in Syria. Their arrival in Canada ended those challenges but started new ones instead.

New Experiences in a New Place

We came here to an unknown city. We did not know the language or anything, nor did we have money in our pockets. We threw away everything and came here and it is good we are here. (A woman from Aleppo)

In Canada they were greeted by welcoming parties, the government and the sponsors. For some, the first encounter with the sponsors (both the co-sponsors and the SAH holders) happened in Canada, as opposed to those whose co-sponsors were close family members or friends. The participants, according to their own accounts, were greeted at the airport.

[...] as soon as we landed in Canada, they put us in buses and drove us for about half an hour to a place, with a prepared huge space where they gave away coats, boots, did the paperwork, etc. We went there and then our sponsor came and got us from there and Canadian life began. We came in sneakers not knowing about Canada's cold [laughs]. Yeah [laughs]. We started life in Canada in sneakers. (A woman from Aleppo)

In other cases, government representatives took them to a hotel on the first night and the next day they went to the SAH holding organization where they met their sponsors.

Then the official at Hay Kedron picked us up and brought to Hay Kedron. There our co-sponsor came to see us and my brother [who had come to Canada as a refugee himself before them] came to see us. (A man from Aleppo)

¹⁴⁶ For example, a woman from Aleppo told me that "Syrians were not being hired" in Lebanon and she found a job only thanks to the network of Armenians there.

The question how much support the newcomers received from the co-sponsors (or the organization) is an interesting one. Different sponsors, it seems, were involved with those whom they sponsored to different degrees. Some had a very hands-on approach, from meeting them at the airport to driving them shopping, assisting in finding jobs, and even staying in touch and offering help after the commitment year was over. Others had a more symbolic presence in the lives of the refugees. While most of the sponsors were personal connections who had reached out to save their acquaintances or kin in a difficult situation, my participants did not want to burden them by asking for (what they saw as) extra favours. They were committed to “standing on their own feet” as soon as possible and had no expectation of extra help from their sponsors. A man from Aleppo, for example, when asked if his sponsor helped him once he was in Canada, answered that the sponsor had already done for him and his family all he could (by sponsoring to come to Canada) and, pointing out the sponsor’s old age, told me: “What else would he do?” Similarly, a woman from Aleppo, who was sponsored by her mother’s relative, told me that the sponsor was an eighty-year-old lady, who opened her home for the participant, but was unable help more than that.

Two women from Aleppo (below) told me they did not “burden” their sponsors, when I asked if they were helped (in the case of the first one I asked if they had help in renting).

No, no! We did not want to burden them. Those people had already helped us, they did everything. They gladly did our paperwork, we reached here safely and soundly, we stayed in their home [for about two weeks] until we could rent, we did not expect anything more than that from our sponsor. (A woman from Aleppo)

No, never, never. Of course, they were ready to help us, but every person, not just us, but all the newcomers come knowing that they need to have something [a small budget] at least for the first six months. There were only very few that really needed help, or the sponsor was very rich, so they came without worries, but the majority, they brought their budget and did not bother the sponsors, they were able to take care of themselves. (A woman from Aleppo)

Unlike government assisted refugees, she told me, the privately sponsored ones did not receive much. Other participants were in close communication with the sponsor. For example, a mother from Damascus reported that her sponsor, who was her husband's nephew, is their "saviour." They go to him with every question they have. Often the sponsor-refugee relationship was also dependent on who the sponsor was in relation to them, but also on the resources the refugees had. The relative of a man from Qamishli offered him and his family to stay with them, but they did not, as the relative had a family of their own, and he did not wish to burden them. In another man's case, he and his family stayed at the sponsor's house for six months, as they did not have any other choice.

My friend and his brother-in-law supported us from day one. After we came and rested for two days, they took us to do all the paperwork, medical cards, etc. Then they found a convenient bank next to their place and opened an account, because you need an account to get things going. So they supported us in this way so that we don't feel a thing. We stayed for six months in my friend's house until, eventually, my younger daughter and her husband looked for jobs until they found one. When they found jobs, we rented a house and left. (A man from Aleppo)

Other participants were able to begin living independently much earlier. Some of the women (see above and below) well demonstrate this in their excerpts.

We lived with him [the sponsor] for fifteen days, then we rented something and left. My husband found a job and started working from the very first week. One of the good things about Montreal is that there are many Arabs, and our people, who had a language barrier, adapted very fast, or it would be more correct to say, they were able to find jobs fast because the language was not an issue [i.e., their Arabic was enough for that, they did not need French or English]. (A woman from Aleppo)

A different young woman from Aleppo also remembers staying at a relative's house for only twenty days. Then, she says, they rented a place and moved.

Recent research (Lenard 2019) shows that the sponsors' goal is that the refugees become ready to be on their own by the thirteenth month, and that by that time they have jobs and are living independently. In this regard my interviewees were doing very well. The average reported time when they were able to find jobs, as seen in the excerpt above,

was within weeks. Although most of those jobs were treated as temporary (construction or service, e.g., Adonis, KFC, Canada Goose, driving Uber) and later were replaced by more permanent and better jobs, especially after becoming more comfortable in French, these jobs still allowed the newcomers to support themselves and their families. A middle-aged mother, for example, told me they lived with their sponsor for about a month and moved out after she found a job and could rent a place: “We came and stayed in her place for a month, until I found a job, rented a place and we left. [...] I found a job within a day.”

Very rarely, participants reported that they received no support from their sponsors (as opposed to not wanting any support).¹⁴⁷ A young man from Aleppo, for example, told me that unlike other refugees, he and his family got nothing from their sponsor. They saw her when they landed; the government took them to a hotel for the first night. In the morning they went to the SAH holding organization; they approached the sponsor, who was there, to say hello. She told them, “I sponsor many others and I have no time for you.” They stayed in the hotel for twelve days, paying CAD1200. No one helped them except their relatives, who were already in Canada.

While there is a requirement for the sponsoring parties to support the refugees, the support received was vastly different across cases. Apparently, there was no governmental supervisor over this aspect of refugee settlement and the support was left to the discretion of each sponsor, whether organizations or individuals, even though the

¹⁴⁷ It is not clear what the participants knew about the guidelines and requirements of the sponsorship agreement. As most people were happy with formal sponsorship (i.e., signing the co-sponsorship documents and giving them an opportunity to come to Canada without any further expectations) I did not explore this question with the participants.

Government of Quebec website (Gouvernement du Québec n.d.a) has a requirement for the sponsors to file two Settlement reports during their sponsorship period with an update on their commitments.

The abovementioned woman who lived her sponsor for a month, unlike the abovementioned young Aleppo man, says that her sponsor even helped her find a job.

My sponsor had previously worked in a store and she was familiar with the management. Well, first, when I came, I was told that I need to find a job immediately, even before learning the language, to be able to show income, so I can bring my husband [as mentioned earlier, her husband had been unable to apply with her because he had a residency in Saudi Arabia]. That's why the very next day I went there. The very next day she [the sponsor] said, "I can take you there," because it is an Arabic-speaking environment and because we still don't know French; she said you might be able to find a job there. I went, applied and probably out of luck one of the ladies who worked there went on holiday, and they immediately accepted me. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman, who first came to Hamilton where her sponsors were, and who later moved to Laval, said that her sponsors used to call her to inquire about her and offered help even after the move.

It was interesting how the participants spoke about the support from SAH holding organizations. There were three general answers. First, there was no help from them; second, the organizations helped if they asked, but they did not want to burden them; finally, they did help a lot, not materially but with everything else. She told me that a year or two after her arrival, Hay Kedron of Toronto called her to inquire how she was doing, but not to offer any help. Still, she was very happy with the support she received. A man who lives in Toronto now said the following.

Hay Kedron did a lot for us. They welcomed us at the airport, they provided us with a home, not financially I mean, but they had agents, they helped us to rent homes. We all came with money; they provided furniture, they provided jobs, organized meetings for finding jobs, collected the Armenian employers in Hay Kedron, they did the applications, so they helped a lot, they organized stuff as much as they could. (A man from Aleppo)

One form of support the Armenians received is exemplified in an ad posted on the Facebook page of the Tekeyan Cultural Association of Montreal. It reads: "Call for

Montreal employers. 100 years ago the Syrian Armenians helped our deported ancestors... now it is time for us to return the dues...Let's extend a helping hand: SOURYAHAY ["Syrian Armenian"] compatriots are looking for jobs. Numerous tradespeople, craftsmen, professionals, general workers are registered with us. We will gladly match them with job offers."¹⁴⁸ Here the Armenian Genocide and stories of deported ancestors of Canadian Armenians become the link to create a motivation to help one's ethnic kin.

A man from Damascus thought that the Canadian Armenian community, the institutions, in this particular case Hay Doun, would have helped them if they had asked.

You know, it is not that we did not get anything from them — we did not want anything. We bought everything, a home, furniture – with our own money. We said that there are people that came to Canada with empty pockets, let them get that. We have it, we can do it with our money, so that's why we should not ask for anything of Hay Doun. They would help if we went to them and asked, it's not like that they would not. (A man from Damascus)

The next woman's story is very different from those of two men, excerpts of which we saw above. She says that after coming to Canada, they did not stay with their sponsors. The sponsor only met them at the airport. Instead, they stayed three weeks with the participant's sister. After that they moved, as her husband's work was starting. They moved into an empty house. "We did not see *a thing* [puts emphasis] from our sponsor. One night we even went to bed hungry. [...] We lived in the empty house, we sat on the floor, and for two months we slept on the floor," she tells me.

She says the sponsor came bringing some coffee and asked what they ate and what they did. She told her that they did not even have a fridge and the food her sister

¹⁴⁸ The Tekeyan Cultural Association's Facebook page, accessed August 10, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/303091173093256/photos/pb.100064548858509.-2207520000./963220937080273/?type=3>.

had given them was eaten by the squirrels as it was on the balcony. According to the participant, the sponsor did not even tell them that there was a supermarket next to their house where they could buy some food. There was one sandwich left in the house, so they shared that sandwich between the four of them and went to bed hungry. Only next morning did they learn that there was a supermarket nearby.

This woman recalls that unlike others, they did not receive anything from Hay Doun either. “We went there and registered, but we did not get anything,” even after asking. Instead, she says, she found an “exceptional, exceptional lady” through the book that Hay Doun gave them (with all kinds of phone numbers, she recalled). That lady (a Lebanese Armenian) was devoted to helping Armenians and “had their back,” and “helps to this day,” says the participant. Like this woman, other participants also reported finding the Armenian community and connections helpful. A mother from Aleppo recalls the support she received.

The community, Ognutyán Khach [Armenian Relief Society], the churches, all the churches. I mean they provided me with home stuff; it was used, but they gave it to us those days. They gave us help, and gave some stationery to our children, so yes, the Armenian community helped as much as they could. (A woman from Aleppo)

Others reported having no connection with the Armenian community, partially because Covid 19 had started and those centres were closed. Since he could not afford the Armenian school as it was expensive, the next participant from Qamishli wished that there had been some activities organized, so that the children did not forget their Armenian. It is interesting that the man from Qamishli himself did not speak Armenian, as is the case with many Catholic Armenians in Syria, yet for him it was very important that his children did not forget Armenian. He told me his wife and children did speak it.

Finding Jobs

The question of finding jobs, as mentioned above, arose relatively early on in the lives of the Syrian Armenians in Canada. Many mentioned that their first job was not work they had been used to, or that it was outside their qualifications, but they had had to take it anyway. A few said they had started learning French before looking for jobs. Since the newcomers received a stipend for studying French in colleges, I was told, this provided some income. The job hunt was always intertwined with the Armenian community, whether on the individual or the institutional level. Some accounts below demonstrate that. There was either a connection through the sponsor or through the institution, or there were some personal connections; in any case, the ethnic community was part of this process even in the cases when the newcomer claimed that there was no help from the Armenian community. Some people said they found a job the very next day or within a week.¹⁴⁹

A young man from Aleppo, for example, who said he had not received any help from the Armenian community, was offered his first job by an Armenian employer who

¹⁴⁹ Senthanaar and colleagues (2021) report that all the PSR women in their study have found jobs within a year as they, compared to GAR, had better resources — education, language proficiency as well as connections. The authors (citing Hyndman 2011 and Agrawal 2018) mention that in Canada the PSR are better off in terms of long-term integration and adaptation than the GAR. They write: “In a study of church groups as private sponsors, Chapman (2014) found that the majority of Privately Sponsored refugees were either known to the sponsors (friend, acquaintance) or were family-linked cases. More recently, 62% of Privately Sponsored Syrians indicated that a family member sponsored them (Citizenship and Immigration Canada 2016)” (Senthanaar 2021: 589).

accepted him to work without asking for Canadian job experience and the participant said he appreciated that. He worked there for four years. After two years, he was offered an additional position with a raise of only one dollar, and he did this for two more years. He asked for a raise but was turned down. The participant realized he was being taken advantage of. Recently he was laid off.

It is interesting to listen to some of the participants' observations about life in Montreal or Laval. Montreal was reported to be a good city for immigrants (better than Toronto).¹⁵⁰ One of the reasons reported was that there were lots of Arabic speakers and so language was not an issue. A woman in her thirties from Aleppo told me that the men in Montreal did not have a language issue, as their Arabic was enough for them. And the fact that there were many Arabic speakers played a major role in the job market.

I have many relatives in Toronto who are not happy. There they have a stronger sense of being migrants, they feel foreignness, but in Montreal, as I said, there is that good side, Armenians are close to each other and there are lots of Arabs. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman, who originally came to Toronto, later chose to move to Montreal. She says she was advised against it but she chose to move nonetheless: "It turned out quite different from the way they described it to me. They said there are no jobs in Montreal, the salary is not good." Both she and her husband easily found jobs in Montreal, according to her. The next woman from Aleppo says she stayed in touch with the Armenian SAH holder organization; she says she kept calling them and they already knew her by her name. They eventually also helped her to get her first job.

¹⁵⁰ It was interesting for me to discover this, as according to Catherine Solyom of Montreal Gazette (2016, updated in 2020), Quebec historically has been the worst place for newcomers in terms of finding jobs, and the unemployment rate for immigrants had been more than 60% higher than in Ontario.

So one day I called Hay Doun [...] I told them “I am looking for a job.” They asked me “Do you know English and French?” I said, “Yes, I know.” We already knew English, not very well, but I can understand and make myself understood all right. And the French, I reached the second level, not good enough for working yet, but I got some courage. The employer in Hay Doun said, “OK, what have you studied [what education do you have]?” I said, “I am a receptionist, I have a diploma from Syria, I have studied after finishing my high school for two years, I love the work of a receptionist, I have worked as a secretary at a school in Lebanon.” I said, “These kinds of jobs I like.” She [the employee at Hay Doun] said, “Actually there is an Armenian lawyer who wants a secretary.” She said, “The Armenian lawyer has left a note with us that he is looking for a secretary. Would you like that? Send us your CV and we will send it to him.” I said “Ok.” I sent my CV to them and they sent it to the Armenian lawyer. I went for the interview, the Armenian lawyer encouraged me, he was happy with me, he accepted me and I worked for him. (A woman from Aleppo)

The above-mentioned woman from Aleppo told me that in order to encourage employers to hire newcomers, the government paid half of their salary for their first job for six months.¹⁵¹ Interestingly, she was asked not to come to work after six months. She says the reason was some misunderstanding between her and a long-time Quebecois colleague. She says her husband also found a job early on. On the third day after their arrival he started working on construction even though it was not his expertise. Later he found a more suitable job. A father of two adult children tells me his first job also was not in his field but he started working from the second week.

It was not my job but, you know, it was still a job, something you have to do, you can't do without it. I started working in a wood-working plant. My sponsor [the co-sponsor] referred me to be hired there, as the owner was his friend [not an Armenian]. [...] He accepted me and I started to work there. For my wife it was hard at the beginning. The women wanted to work in the supermarket, but since we all [Syrian Armenians] came all together, those spots were filled fast as there were only limited spots. Later, my wife found a job and worked in an office [in a supermarket]. (A man from Aleppo)

As he notes, many of the women had to start working in Canada for the first time in their lives. Back in Syria, I was told, one salary had been enough to live on, especially

¹⁵¹ One such program was “PRIME – the French acronym for the Quebec government’s Employment Integration Program for Immigrants and Visible Minorities– [which] offers companies subsidies to cover up to 50 per cent of an employee’s salary (or the equivalent of minimum wage, \$10.35 per hour) and also offers up to \$3,600 for training” (Solyom 2020).

since people as a rule owned their homes. In Canada, with its high prices and rents, a second salary was necessary.

Discrimination against Newcomers

None of the Syrian Armenians I interviewed said they faced any discrimination, even though some admitted they had heard of such things happening to others. The next woman from Aleppo was the only person who said she thinks there may have been some discriminatory attitude toward newcomers among people (but not the government, she emphasized): “We came and poured into their country and started living very comfortably [...] Of course they [i.e., Canadians] would feel some discomfort, I am sure of that.”

She thinks it is because the majority of Syrian refugees did not work and did not pay taxes, they were receiving support from the government, and that is something that the Canadians don't accept. That's why, she thinks, they would have had an attitude. “But I never felt anything, as I started working the day I came and I pay my taxes.”

Even though she herself never faced any discrimination, here this woman from Aleppo is voicing one of the several discourses in Canada (and in the world) with regard to refugees: seeing them as a threat to the welfare system. Another woman from Aleppo said that Canadians accepted them with love. Wherever she went and asked for help, everyone helped her (e.g., with paperwork or finding places to live). She says she thinks the reason for this is the experience Canadians have had with refugees: “All the officials here are honest, they are ready to help us, they have experience; it has been several years that they've been accepting refugees.” A young woman from Aleppo, who came to

Canada when she was still school age, and first went to an Armenian and then to a Canadian school, says she never experienced any discrimination in Canada, and was only treated with respect. A man from Aleppo also said that no one ever looked at them with a “discriminatory eye.” “On the contrary, they welcomed us at the airport, gave us our PRs [Permanent Resident cards] and our SIN numbers; they organized everything for us, whether the government or the people with whom we interacted.” Interestingly, in order to explain this, the participant pointed out the fact that everyone in Canada came from somewhere else. Another woman’s experience is shared by many others: “No one ever even asked us: are you Armenian, are you Arab? Are you Muslim, are you Christian? People are simply people.” A woman in her twenties from Aleppo said in Canada people are valued for being human beings; no-one discriminates against them. Many participants said that from the moment they entered Canada, they had the same rights as the locals. A man in his sixties told me that when his and his family’s application was approved, they were told in the embassy: “From now on you are Canadian citizens.”

We can unpack the above in two ways. Of course, it would be naive to think that there was no discriminatory attitude toward newcomers. One of the reasons for the lack of reports of discrimination could be that perhaps oftentimes discrimination was toward the visible identifiers of Islam, and Armenians, being Christians, were not identified as Muslims. It could also be that Armenians, who were not particularly in the public discourse in Canada, were not associated by the general public with the Syrian refugees. The second reason could be that the majority of the Armenians had lived in Syria in a closely-knit community, already felt like foreigners there, and now they were only moving from one foreign country to another, and to a more desirable one at that.

The Term “Refugee” and the Feelings it Evokes

The term “refugee” was a controversial one for participants of the study.¹⁵² Having equal rights and not being discriminated against, yet at the same time being labeled as “refugees” was a question that came up in some conversations without me even having to ask. One of the arguments against being called by this term was that unlike government assisted refugees, they never received anything from the government. As mentioned above, Privately Sponsored refugees did not receive any financial aid or housing from the government; they just received access to the provincial healthcare system and education for children as all other Canadians and permanent residents do. Adults were able to attend French language classes for free and get a stipend for attending.¹⁵³ However, the comparison here between those who were helped by the government and between the privately sponsored ones perhaps stemmed from the fact that most of the participants had started working early on and had been paying their taxes as any other resident of Canada. They also paid for their housing and other necessities, and those who could afford to, sent their children to the Armenian school, which is private. So as such, they were very active in the process of their own resettlement and contributed in full capacity. The word “refugee,” as they understood it, did not fit what they were doing.

¹⁵² Basileus Zeno (2017) describes how Syrian refugees in his study found the term humiliating.

¹⁵³ To my knowledge, this is available to all the immigrants (who come as Permanent Residents) to Canada, so as such, privately sponsored refugees indeed did not receive any extra benefits as opposed to government sponsored ones.

During the interview, a woman in her thirties from Aleppo, brought up this subject when I asked about the difficulties she faced in Canada.

When we say difficulties, there is only one thing that until today upsets me, namely that we are put in the category of refugees, but we are not refugees. We came here by leaving our lives, our past. We had everything there, but we were forced to come here. Well, I am not saying we did not want to come, we did want to come, I even say I wish we had come earlier, if we were to come, I wish we had come earlier. But we are not part of those refugees. I never say that we are different and they are different, no, we are all humans, but we can't be in one category. "Everyone is a refugee": no! (A woman from Aleppo)

A man from Damascus also did not think of himself as a refugee. He (perhaps in part as a way of distinguishing Armenians from Arabs) stressed that "us being refugees is different compared to those who were brought from the refugee camps, non-Armenians, those, the government gave them homes and stuff, so everything was given to them by the government."

Unlike them, the Syrian Armenians did not receive anything. Perhaps "the agreement between the government and Hay Doun had been that way. [Namely,] that we would accept them but you take care of their expenses or let them take care of their own expenses," the man from Damascus above elaborated. He also mentioned that they signed a paper with the Government of Canada before their arrival to the effect that for a year they would not ask for any help. And that, he said, makes them "very weird refugees."

I do not consider myself a refugee. First of all, the visa in my passport says "immigrant." We came to Canada with immigrant visas not with refugee ones.¹⁵⁴ You know a refugee is... no, there is no shame in being a refugee, people were forced, well we are not comparing ourselves to refugees, we were not refugees. But there is no shame in being refugees either. (A man from Damascus)

¹⁵⁴ Most probably they refer to the case when people reach Canada on their own, seeking asylum and need to be recognized as refugees by the Immigration and Refugee Board as such before being granted a status. They are referred as "asylum seekers" or "refugee claimants." (Abella and Molnar 2019). This is in contrast with either the UNHCR referred and government sponsored or privately sponsored refugees who, like other immigrants, are granted permanent residency upon their arrival (ibid).

A single woman from Aleppo did not mind being called a refugee, even though she did not think she was one.

When we came to Canada, we were given equal rights, so we could have health insurance and residency. When you come as a refugee, you can't have anything. Those are the refugees. I mean, you stay in the country but you don't know at which moment they will tell you "Go back to your country." But we, from the airport, we entered as Canadians not as refugees. But we stay under that name [i.e., refugee]. (A woman from Aleppo)

One wonders whether their mental image of refugees as people deprived of rights comes from their knowledge of life in contemporary refugee-camps or from their memory of their ancestors' stories of being refugees, and their arduous journey to Syria. Regardless, it seems that people considered that being named a "refugee" was part of the deal of coming to Canada. "I mean, like when someone adopts a child... it is like Canada adopted us. We are those adopted children." (A woman from Aleppo)

A mother of three from Aleppo made a similar point: "Since I found a better life here, for me that word is positive and not negative." Nonetheless she, with hesitation, simply has to consider herself a refugee "since this is not my country."

Not everyone had strong feelings about the term. Some in fact felt that it did not matter and, refugees or not, they were here now and they were grateful for that. A young single man from Aleppo, however, thought that if they were to be called refugees, then at least they should have received some support. He hastily added that he is grateful to the government for having brought him here. For a woman in her twenties from Aleppo, who had previously tried to come to Canada with her family through the UN and had been rejected,¹⁵⁵ the difference between the refugees and her and her family is clear now. They, she says, are actually immigrants and not refugees, and those who come through

¹⁵⁵ She says that is because her mother is Lebanese Armenian.

the UN are refugees: “I just don’t get why the government puts us under the refugee category.” She points out that they have different rights and privileges here which in her understanding is not the case with the refugees, who in some cases are not even allowed to leave the country.

Be it as it may,¹⁵⁶ and despite all the minor and major hardships, the Syrian Armenians seem to have settled in Canada now. While for some, language is still an issue, overall, they feel welcomed and happy about their new home and do not consider returning to Syria, except for visiting relatives or their homes for those who have still kept them. Some, however, said that one day they would like to visit or even settle in Armenia, even though they did not choose it over Canada as their home for good reasons. This brings us to the following chapter of this thesis: what is home and homeland, and where is it?

Summary

The chapter discusses the experiences of the Syrian Armenians in Canada and their work of self-rescue as coordinated by people, institutional practices, and a shared interpretive framework locally and translocally. The Canadian PSRP is an important context where this coordination becomes visible and where people activate, in their doings, otherwise

¹⁵⁶ One can note a sense of pride and self-sufficiency in the accounts. The term “refugee” seems not only to cancel all the work Syrian Armenians know they have done to get to Canada and to become settled, but to cast them in a different identity, one which, despite their saying it brings no shame, they seem to find belittling.

abstract notions (i.e., diaspora, transnationalism, ethnicity, etc.). Unlike other refugee programs, PSRP requires more involvement from the refugees and hence gives the researcher the opportunity to make visible the often invisible work of refugees.

Finding jobs was the way to independence and renting a place of their own. The average job finding period was again within a month, excluding cases when the participants decided to study first and get a qualification before looking for jobs. Another such point is the role different locations and communities of resettlement play. Participants found Montreal to be easier to find jobs in, compared to Toronto. Their knowledge of Arabic proved to be a useful resource in the early stages of the job hunt, thanks to the Arabic-speaking community of Montreal. This should not be confused with unwillingness to gain language competence. Even the oldest participant of the study, a man in his sixties, started going to college with his daughter to learn French once in Quebec.

The third point is how sponsorship ties informed the support during the resettlement period. Most of the participants reported not needing or choosing not to ask for any support from either co-sponsors or SAH. However, a few said that they did not receive any support and one participant said she asked but was not given any help. As already mentioned above, the program does not mandate or has no way of supervising whether due support is provided by the co-sponsors/sponsors to the refugees. There may have been two reasons for the relatively uncomplicated relationship between the sponsors and the refugees. First, often the sponsor often knew who the newcomers were and where they were coming, being a friend or a family member. Second, even in cases when they did not know them personally, they could personally relate to their story — one

of a lost home and migration. Furthermore, there were no cultural misunderstandings that usually arise from a lack of cultural competency on the part of the sponsors, as is sometimes reported in the literature about the sponsor-refugee relationship. Whether, in a growing refugee crisis (with about 80 million refugees worldwide and with a growing global need for refugee assistance), the Canadian PSR is the best avenue, is outside the scope of this thesis. However, in those calculations, the refugees and their active work should be factored in.

Summing up, it is important to highlight that participants spoke about a relatively easy transition, finding a safe home in Canada, not facing any discrimination,¹⁵⁷ about their satisfaction with moving to Canada and the lives they built here for themselves, and their lack of a desire to return to Syria¹⁵⁸ (even if things get better there). All of this raises questions about belonging, home, and homeland. Where is homeland, and where is home? How are they defined and how does this shape people's lived experiences? Can home be the diaspora itself and move with you anywhere you go? These questions also challenge the more classical definitions of diaspora, where ancestral home and homeland are central to the definition (Safran 1991; Cohen 2008). They also turn my attention toward studying the diasporic in people's doings, rather than focusing on changing

¹⁵⁷ Interestingly, Dagirmanjian notes that when the Genocide survivor Armenians came to the USA, they were faced with "intense intolerance for differences prevailing at the time" (p.443) along with their unpreparedness for the industrial society of US, as they were coming from a mostly agrarian one. Yet, he says, Armenians were always immensely grateful and paid back by their hard work and being good citizens (Dagirmanjian 2005).

¹⁵⁸ Although the discourse around Armenia even for those who had already unsuccessfully tried to settle there is different.

definitions. While some of those questions will need further investigation, others are discussed in the concluding chapter.

CHAPTER 9: HOME AND HOMELAND

My work began with the journey of my participants — both physical and in memory — and my own journey of learning about the Genocide and it becoming part of my life. Their experiences sometimes became intertwined with my own, very similar, experiences, or rather memories and feelings, but sometimes they moved away in completely different directions. My own history, with my share of collective trauma and collective identity, allowed me see what was visible from where I stood. For this work to be possible I had to stand where they stood, in order to look at and study what was visible to them. Since trauma and memory were the common ground between them and myself, I dedicated my first chapter to exploring the knowledge of this shared trauma, the social organization of its transmission to further generations among Syrian Armenians, and people's participation in it. Each of my chapters was committed to exploring one part of the journey of Syrian Armenians and illustrating how this network of what I call “doing being Armenian” — based on a shared past, narrative, trauma, homeland — coordinates their doings within and across borders, states and institutions. I aimed to illustrate how this global doing being Armenian becomes a lens to make sense of their experiences but also a resource to draw upon. I also reflected on my own Armenianness and what it involved for me and for this research. I was present as an Armenian researcher, an immigrant, someone who shared the memory of the Genocide and the lost lands. While I left Armenia of my own free will, my ancestors were forced to leave their historical homeland (Alashkert, in Western Armenia) before the Genocide. I, along with other Armenians, feel I lost my “homeland,” *Western Armenia as a whole*, after the Genocide. While I am not a diaspora

Armenian by any of the definitions provided in the scholarship I reviewed, I am also an Armenian who lives outside her homeland and who knows about her roots in a lost homeland only from stories. Considering that diasporic identity is attached to myths and memories of homeland, dispersal from ancestral lands, victimhood, collective memory or trauma, and an orientation toward “homeland” (Safran 1991; Clifford 1994; Cohen 2008), I often wondered if it is possible to be part diasporan within the borders of a nation state, as I reflected upon my participants and my stories. What made me think this was that even in the Republic of Armenia many people can share the features of a diasporic identity described above either or both because their ancestors are dispersed from a historical homeland to the current day Republic; and because the shared cultural, political and social memory of it (even if their ancestors did not personally go through it) is actively reproduced and passed down from one generation to another. What did it involve to be an Armenian (for me and for them) and a diaspora Armenian (for them)?

Even before starting the research and designing my questions, I knew there was something that made the story of Syrian Armenians escaping the Syrian war relatable on a familiar level. Apart from all the hardships which they had gone through and I had not, the feeling of pain and loss were familiar to me (of course, not to the same extent). Obviously, this familiarity was not due to my having lived through the war in Syria, the pain of losing a home and an established life due to forced migration and becoming a refugee. I had not experienced any of these but there was a deeper level of being able to relate to their stories not just on the level of research but as a person and as an Armenian. This shared pain, this trauma across generations that both my participants and I shared, the narrative of the Genocide, of lost lands, of a homeland — both the lost and the current

one — brought us into a space where this research happened. My questions, my research interests, my presence in the stories were all happening in this space of loss, trauma, memory, past and shared identity of being Armenian. I was not a Syrian Armenian, but to use my participant's words, "I am Armenian first of all." This global Armenianness involved different things: some of us *were* Armenians and practiced traditional markers of ethnicity, others *felt* Armenian instead (Bakalian 1993). We also had the shared homeland and a "back home," albeit not always in the form of an actual geographical place and not necessarily a place at all. Home, homeland, and Armenianness were hovering over us during the interviews with or without any questions being asked. Therefore, my questions were directed at exploring how "home" and "homeland" were conceptualized by my participants.

To locate my work in the academic literature, let me return to some of the literature on diaspora discussed in the literature review, and briefly present how it tackles these two concepts. Diasporas are described as having a homeland orientation along with the feeling of longing and return attached to diasporic identities (Grossman 2019). The role of "home" and "homeland" is central in both the classic and more recent conceptualizations of diaspora. Safran's (1991) conceptualization of diaspora around home and homeland emphasizes the existence of some "collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" among the community members (p. 83), who regard their ancestral homeland as the true, ideal home for their descendants to return to and live in, and are committed to the wellbeing and maintenance of this original homeland. This notion of homeland, memories of it, the desire to return to it and the collective support of the homeland are also central to Clifford's (1994) discussion. Memories of something

that has not been seen or experienced first-hand requires imaginative work, representation and construction, and it is only logical that Cohen uses the term “imagined homeland” when talking about diaspora (Cohen 2008:6). Cohen discusses how the homeland-diaspora dichotomy became loose and the concept of home became fluid and vague and “generously interpreted” (p. 10) to be a place of origin, settlement, a transnational, local and national place, a set of imagined virtual communities, a matrix of unknown experiences, intimate social relations, etc. (p.10). Increasingly, homeland has been conceptualized as detached from a certain geography (Cohen 2008; Connor 1986), as frequently with the passing of generations, the ancestral home and homeland become concepts that do not overlap, something that we will see below among my participants. But it is not only “home” that becomes detached from homeland geographically, it is often the homeland itself that becomes detached from a certain geography. Whether geographically attached or detached, imagined or “real,” actual or “spiritual” (Bakalian 1993:347), the homeland or rather its absence was paramount in the talk of my participants. Robin Cohen proposes three broad types of homeland: fixed (i.e., one located in a particular geographic location); liquid (one that’s a diasporic space that is purely in people’s minds); and soft (which includes elements of both) (Cohen 2022).

As I have done in my previous chapters, now I would like to shift from the theoretical to the empirical and to see what all of this meant and involved for my participants, who have lost their homes and perhaps also homelands both symbolically and physically and who, from being Syrian Armenian, have now become Canadian Armenian (or perhaps Syrian *and* Canadian Armenian at the same time). Rather than talking about what diaspora is and is not, or how its borders and features are defined, I

rather discuss what were some of the diasporic practices of my participants, how they were attached to a locality, and how they have changed from the Syrian context to the Canadian one. I will demonstrate below that for many of my participants home was more of a physical space (with variations in definition during the conversation), a place where they felt safe and well with their family, a sanctuary in a sense; most of the participants did not hesitate to locate their home in Canada where they found safety and a future, while homeland in general was both abstract and real, territorialized and deterritorialized.

For many of the Syrian Armenians I spoke with, homeland was a conceptual reality, rather than an actual one. Homeland was an emotionally charged notion, while home was not. On this topic a man from Aleppo told me: “The real home for a human being is where he finds a peaceful life with his family members, seeing their joy and their future [...] Of course, we were uprooted when we came here but I see that both my daughters are fine, they go to schools, their future is safe, they work.” Now Canada is his home, he said, and home for his grandchild, who was three when they arrived and still remembered the soldiers, the bombing and the sounds of war. When asked, “Would you go back to Aleppo?” the grandchild answered: “No, I don’t want to go back, I love Canada.” For a woman in her 20s from Aleppo, “Home is the family, so wherever is the family there is home.” For a man from Qamishli, home is also attached to safety. “Home is four walls, with electricity in it and there is no sound of war and bombs, that’s home,” he said. Homeland, however, was different from what he had imagined for himself and what he wanted for his children. In his childhood he had thought of Armenia as homeland. Then he thought that perhaps it was Syria, but now it is wherever his children are able to laugh and live, where they are happy. As mentioned above, homeland was both abstract

and real, territorialized and deterritorialized, a conceptual reality, much more complex than home.

While home for the young woman from Aleppo mentioned above was straightforward, homeland was not as simple. She said she would want to live in the homeland had she felt that it was her home. She had grown up learning about Armenia, about its culture. However, it did not turn out as she had hoped, as she was not accepted in Armenia as one of “their own,” but rather was branded a “diaspora Armenian,” which often comes with a derogatory attitude. “Why did I sit and learn all this [she mentioned Armenian history and the Armenian language] if it was not going to be part of my life?” she said. She says she went to an Armenian school, not an Arabic one, so she would grow up as an Armenian girl. She learned Arabic only because she was living in an Arab country. “I was Armenian, but those stones [historical monuments, buildings] belonged to Muslims, it was their history. I was Armenian and I was learning Armenian history, but again it was not mine because I was a ‘diaspora Armenian’ and I was foreign even in Aleppo.” She was not home in Aleppo because she was not a Muslim and she was not home in Armenia because she was a diaspora Armenian. So, she did not belong anywhere.

“We lived our whole life like that, in that duality,” a woman from Aleppo said in this regard. She also thought that as a diaspora Armenian, she never felt she was at home: “Because as a diaspora Armenian I feel that it is nowhere. I mean when I lived in Syria, yes, I loved Syria and its people, I feel they were close [*harazaf*], because all my life, all my memories are there, but after all it was not my home.”

It is interesting to note that for the mother from Aleppo below, too, home was not locatable, it was something never to be found. Homeland did not fill that void of “home” for her either.

I don't know how to explain this but even when I went to Armenia (I have been to Armenia), yes, it is homeland and all my life I lived with a longing for my homeland, I love it, but again I did not feel that I am home. I don't know why I have that feeling but I have it. As a diaspora Armenian I feel that. Now that I am in Canada, and I am grateful to the Canadian government for granting us all this ease in our lives, but again, we are foreign, we are not home. I feel that the Diaspora Armenians, wherever they go, they are foreign [...] I went [to Armenia] with the dream to be an Armenian. But there, I felt that I am a diaspora Armenian. They made me feel that. Not everyone, they were hospitable, but they made us feel that we are diaspora Armenians. (A woman from Aleppo)

As we see from the above two accounts, like homeland, home can also be deterritorialized, and sometimes it may refer to a feeling of belonging rather than an actual, physical space. Tölölyan's words bear repeating: “We must be careful not to locate the diasporan's home in the ancestral homeland too easily” (2018:27). Although, whether the Republic of Armenia is ancestral homeland for the diaspora Armenians is also debatable,¹⁵⁹ as their ancestors never lived on its territory but rather in Western Armenia. The take of the above-mentioned woman from Aleppo on this, as discussed below, is important for understanding the fluid, unfixed and extendable borders of homeland (Connor 1986). Hall conceptualizes diaspora as experience (as cited in Grossman 2019). Based on my data, I would like to suggest that homeland too is often an experience, or to be more precise, the experience of a void — rather than a physical space. This feature of homeland could fruitfully complement more traditional characterizations of homeland, as discussed in my literature review.

¹⁵⁹ Kasbarian (2009:359) suggests the term “step-homeland,” and argues that diasporan Armenians, who have no direct links to the Republic of Armenia, have to negotiate between the mythical homeland and the currently available “step-homeland” that is the Republic.

A young woman from Aleppo, who earlier spoke of home as movable, as a place where one's family was, later spoke about not having home either in Aleppo or in Armenia. Her mention of duality and her conceptualization of home ("as diaspora Armenians we felt it is nowhere") also indicate some kind of missing belonging, rather than a location. At times, the line between home and homeland was also blurred, and participants spoke about belonging and missing while conceptualizing both. Homeland, and especially being away from it, was a lifetime struggle for the abovementioned participant.

Homeland was Armenia, as for most of the participants, but Syria, she said, became a second homeland: "We grew up in the diaspora always with a longing for the homeland, the homeland is one, it is Armenia. Our second homeland was Syria."

It is interesting to note that throughout the interviews, even though homeland was Armenia for everyone, the geography of Armenia and its borders were different for each individual. When I asked the above participant if homeland was the Republic of Armenia, Western Armenia or the region where her parents came from (Kessab, in Syria), she answered: "The whole of Armenia, there is no Western and Eastern. Western Armenia is occupied today, but our homeland is the whole of Armenia, the capital is Yerevan."

As we see, not only can the idea of homeland be detached from geography, but the borders of homeland can also be different from person to person. It can be the historical and reimagined product of the past rather than a geographic one, a nation-state with concrete borders. What we also see in her case, as opposed to the majority's responses, is that home can also be abstract and not geographically locatable. It is

nowhere and is shifting. It was not Syria, but when she went to Armenia it was not found there either, and it is definitely not Canada despite all the kindness it has shown them.

In this type of belonging and feeling that home is everywhere, a sort of “cosmopolitan floating” and an embracing of “globalized identities,” home is nowhere and as such it can be anywhere (Karageozian 2015). This fluidity and plurality are seen in the account of a man from Damascus. For him, home was both concrete and abstract and particularly difficult to locate.

Home is safety: when one feels safe at one’s home, maybe not physically but spiritually. When I am in my house, I can sleep the way I want in the bed I want, I will make the food I like, I will listen to the music I like, it is a place of freedom for a person. (A man from Damascus)

As to deciding where exactly home is — Canada, Syria or Armenia — this was a difficult choice.

Believe me, before my feelings were split between Syria and Armenia. When I missed Armenia, I spent there four-five months, when I missed Damascus, I got on a plane and went there. It was only an hour and a half and 300 dollars. Now Canada became number three. I need to confess; my feelings are scattered. Canada... one must love Canada, it is beautiful, especially Quebec and Montreal, it is beautiful, romantic, peaceful, so you can, you should love it. One should not be ungrateful, but my heart, my soul, my mind is in Damascus and Yerevan. Maybe if I get married and have a family, my home will be where my family is: where one’s wife, husband, children are. Am I right?¹⁶⁰ (A man from Damascus)

This participant also spoke about a third component of homeland, and that was the birthplace (i.e., Syria): it is impossible to forget it, he says. This man from Damascus is the only participant who had an Arab Syrian (i.e., a non-Armenian grandparent) and also one of very few who had more connections with non-Armenians in Syria than most. This

¹⁶⁰ This passage echoes well Vertovec’s notion of “diasporic consciousness,” as involving double or multiple identities, the feeling of belonging in more than one place and being both in the country where a person resides and in their country of origin (Vertovec 1999).

was also the only person (other than one woman from Aleppo) who, when speaking about homeland, considered Syria as having an equal status to Armenia.

A mother of two from Aleppo, who had never been to Armenia, and who had the Armenian flag with a forget-me-not on it (the symbol of the centennial of the Genocide, as noted earlier), became emotional when speaking about the homeland. Like the other woman from Aleppo, she considered Armenia her land, even though she agreed that Syria was hers too, but for her it came after Armenia. What exactly she considered Armenia to be she explained to me in the following way: “Now there are many different opinions. I say since we came from the region of Cilicia, that is our land, yes, it was in historic Armenia, so that is Armenia.”

The Republic of Armenia, on the other hand, was a dream for her. It was the homeland, she said and burst into tears. It is interesting to note here that the gap between the “step-homeland” (i.e., the Republic of Armenia) and the mythical homeland (as discussed in Kessabian 2009), shrinks on the discursive level in the participant’s account, as the Republic of Armenia, and not just the “supposed ancestral home,” is idealized (Cohen 2008:165) and considered homeland. The following woman from Aleppo had a more practical view of Armenia. It was homeland of course, but it did not support them, “it did not open a door for us.” If it were not for economic reasons, they would have gone to Armenia. She loved it and it had been the place where her father had always wanted to move if he were ever to move somewhere, but there were no jobs, no money and no support even though they, Syrian Armenians, were treated well, she says. They, as Armenians, were also treated well in Syria, according to her, so they lived in Syria. Armenians were very well off there, she said. They lived there with Armenia as homeland

— all the history they had learned had been about Armenia, they lived with the neighbourhoods of Armenia in their minds, she said, they knew everything about Armenia. “We lived there [in Syria] with Armenia as homeland.” As to home, as for many participants, it was a concrete place, which for her was her own house: “A child wants the house she was born in, and the bride the house she is taken to [as a wife],” she said. She and her family still see their home in their dreams, she said.

For a young participant from Aleppo home was also safety, where she had peace of mind.

It is also possible to say that Armenia is home and now perhaps I live in a foreign country where I built a temporary nest. I do think about moving to Armenia at some point, but I still do not know, maybe after I finish my education here. It's my dream. (A woman from Aleppo)

The rest of the interviews draw a similar picture: homeland is Armenia, with varying borders (e.g., only the Republic, or the Republic together with historic Armenia, and in some cases including also Cilicia). Syria was mostly a foreign land, or as some admitted, a second homeland. A mother of three from Aleppo was the only participant to say: “My homeland is Syria. Armenia for me is something I don't know, it is unknown.” Here we see a shift from more traditional features of diaspora (Safran 1991), where ancestral home is seen as true home, tied to the myth of return.

A young man from Aleppo offers an interesting account, which illustrates the limits of homeland as an actual place to live in, rather than a memory or a symbol to love. First, it is important to note that, as did others, he considered as his homeland Armenia and not Syria. As he said, he felt he had wasted his life there, in Syria. Being from a well-off family and having a very privileged life, he thought that life in Syria was a mistake for the Armenians. Saying this, it is interesting that he was the one to convince his father not to move to Armenia but rather to Canada. Here is his elaboration on that account.

After 1915, when the Genocide happened and they came to a foreign country, staying there for a long time was a mistake. Their investments should have been in a place like Armenia where they had a homeland. Yes, in Armenia the government was not strong but you would be living on your own lands. Now you can ask why did you not go to Armenia? Because if I went to Armenia now, my financial situation is already not good, it is already low now, if I go to Armenia now it will go even further down, to be honest, it is hard. But my point is that in 2004-2005 in Syria, Armenians were making money and Syria benefited from it. There were businesses. There are people, I had connections with them, I can give their names, I talked to them, they succeeded greatly, be it in my father's business or in the club, they achieved a lot, and I don't know why they did not think of investing in their homeland rather than in a foreign country. (A man from Aleppo)

That Armenians did not consider Syria as their homeland apparently was a fact known not only among them. In the account of a young mother from Damascus, it was something well-known. In an excerpt that has appeared in chapter five, this woman expressed that Armenians were not considered a threat to the regime, as they had no aspirations for power (and claimed to be supporters of the regime). Unlike, for example, the Kurds, Armenians did not have separatist inclinations and did not buy lands to create a homeland on Syrian territory because, as she said, "in our mentality, or in lots of people's mentalities they [the Armenians] always want to go back to Armenia. Right? That's not my land, Syria is not my land, I want to go back to Hayastan [the Republic of Armenia]." Later she clarified that by homeland she means the Republic and not Western Armenia.

In this woman's account we see three things: firstly, that Syria was not considered a homeland for many or most Armenians; secondly, it shows that while the longing and the idea of return is part of diasporic existence, it is not necessarily something people actually act upon; finally, we see the changing borders of "homeland." From an IE perspective this is particularly interesting as it demonstrates how a constructed past and the idea of return (a discourse) coordinate people's daily choices. In this particular case, it was not buying lands or not aspiring to have power in the country they lived in, being supporters of a regime, making a point of not being a threat, etc.

So far in this chapter we saw participants speak of homeland as some or all of the historical Armenian lands combined (i.e., Western Armenia, the kingdom of Cilicia, and in the last case, the Republic). A woman's answer added another "space" to the abovementioned geographies: "The homeland [Armenia] is in our hearts." Syria was not her homeland: "I am not looking in that direction anymore, I won't go back." If she goes somewhere, that will only be Armenia. Her answer suggests that the idea of return for her is tied to homeland; Syria is not her homeland so she is not considering ever returning there.

Home and homeland were different for a single woman from Aleppo. Home is Syria, "the country where I was born and raised," she says, while homeland is Armenia. As mentioned before, home is a more concrete, geographically located concept, while homeland often is symbolic and conceptual one.

I love my homeland, I do say that Armenia, if I had money, I would immediately buy a home there and I would go and live there. Now, if I say my home is Canada, I am in between the two, between Syria and Armenia, and Canada [...], it became three now, I am a very rich person [laughs], don't you see what is one of the privileges of being Armenian? We are always rich; we are rich in our hearts. (A woman from Aleppo)

Another woman says that everything is home (cf. Karageozian 2015, on "cosmopolitan floating".), but then more specifically, Kessab, the place tied to her childhood memories, and a remnant of the medieval Armenian kingdom of Cilicia. Perhaps the way I asked the question also informed the first part of her answer. Instead of simply asking what is home, my question came as "What is home for you? Is it Syria, Armenia, Canada or maybe all of them are home for you?" to which her answer was as follows.

This is a good question, you know, all of them are home [Armenia, Syria, Canada], but you know, those childhood memories... We had a home in Kessab and we stayed there for three months in the summer. My father had his job so he visited only on weekends. All [my] childhood memories are from Kessab where everyone was Armenian. [...] If one day I go to Kessab, I will cry. [...] My

memories are there; I called my neighbours *neneh* (“grandma” in Armenian). (A woman from Aleppo)

For a young woman, whose conceptualization of home we saw above, homeland is Armenia, with no distinction between Eastern and Western (i.e., the present Republic vs. historical Armenia). But when she says “Armenia” now, she refers to the Republic. Even though she lived in Syria, it is not homeland; perhaps it is a second homeland, she said. She does miss Syria, Aleppo, especially the church which she used to attend and which was burnt down by the “ugly ones.” When comparing her leaving Syria as opposed to her grandparents’ leaving Western Armenia during the Genocide, she constructed a hierarchy of feelings: she does not say that the grandparents’ pain was stronger because of the manner in which they had left their homes, during the Genocide, but rather because they were losing their homeland while this woman from Aleppo is only losing a second homeland. It is interesting to see here how an imagined homeland is claimed to hold value that is stronger than the actual country of residence.¹⁶¹ Again, from an IE perspective this is interesting as we see how the shared trauma and the memory of something that originates translocally coordinates their feelings mediated by their practices, in which they had participated since their childhood.

A mother of two from Aleppo says it is still hard for her to see Canada as her home. Syria was her home, she says, as she was born there and it was there that she felt Armenianness, but she eventually wants to go to her homeland to live in. She wants to become established here (in Canada) first. As in the case of the young man from Aleppo (above), this woman’s answer also points out the limits of homeland and its actual appeal for return: “I have to think logically and not emotionally. It is good to live here peacefully,

¹⁶¹ The relevant excerpt is cited in chapter 4.

for me and my children. I would like to improve our condition, but in the future, I would prefer to take my children and go to Armenia and settle there.”

She won't go back to Syria, she says; it was never homeland for them. She says her younger son went to Armenia the year before and did not want to come back: “‘Mom, what are we doing in Canada,’ he told me,” she said laughing. Her son, who likely is already a member of the shared narrative of Armenianness, does the “not belonging” here and “belonging there,” as he also participates in the translocal coordination. It is interesting to see here a parallel with the situation in the Croatian diaspora in Toronto:

Although heavily laden with symbolic meaning and emotion, the idea of actually “returning home” does not reflect the reality for the vast majority of Toronto Croats. For them, “home” and “homeland” are conceptual or discursive spaces of identification, nostalgia, and imagination, with no concomitant requirement to actually move to the homeland to live. (Winland 2007:9)

Thus the return to homeland, even if only discursively, is closely linked to diaspora and diasporic identities.

I would like to remind the reader that the main debate in the field of diaspora studies is between the objectivist and constructivist views (as discussed in my Literature Review). I suggest looking at diaspora as a social organization of knowledge and coordination of practice. As I mentioned earlier, in my work I would like to shift the attention onto people's doings, and to trace how the diasporic, the commemorative, the ethnic, and the transnational are embedded in people's everyday actualities, and how these are connected to the doings of other people — ruled by relations that are local, translocal, and are mediated by institutional practices.

It is true that one can see in the above-mentioned excerpts the expression of the first two approaches: homeland, situated in the current nation state, in the historical homeland or particular parts of it, in Cilicia, and in one or two cases even in Syria. We

also see very vividly that homeland, like diaspora, has moved from being a “discreet entity” that is out there (Grossman 2019:1264) and has borders, into being a context, experience, consciousness and an interpretive frame (“homeland is in our hearts,” a longing, a lack of belonging, a void). We saw how “home” and “homeland” are conceptualized differently and often inconsistently by the participants, the borders of both changing from concrete to abstract and from geographical to symbolic, often echoing Cohen’s proposed continuum between “solid,” “soft,” and “liquid” homelands (Cohen 2022), thus moving away from a strict “concrete vs. abstract” binary. All of this is undeniably important and useful for the academic debates and for establishing a field with a shared language to talk about it. But what is also important is how all of these materialize. Who does what for this to happen and to extend this observable knowledge into larger, often translocal, space from where this doing is coordinated and mediated by institutionalized practices, texts and by the doings of other people? In the fourth chapter, I provided a detailed discussion of how the social organization of shared trauma (Genocide, lost lands, and homeland) happened in people’s everyday doings (and I consider this fundamental for my work); how people produced and were being produced by this trauma as a group; and how its transmission and manifestation happened. We also see how this trauma becomes an interpretive lens for seeing their experiences. In this chapter we see how people’s doing and feeling as diasporic are informed by this trauma. We also see how the diasporic, home and homeland happen in the doings (sayings and feelings) of people: in their planning to go to Armenia or saying that they will; liking Armenia more than other places; feeling belonging to somewhere they have never been to or not belonging in other places and eventually not feeling belonging

anywhere at all; studying the Armenian language and growing up Armenian; not considering Syria as homeland, and so on. What people do here is mediated by discourses, books, ritualized practices, visits to community centres and churches, being attached to other Armenians, following news from the homeland, donating, demonstrating for issues in the homeland in their countries of residence,¹⁶² etc. Of course, we do not necessarily see all of this in the excerpts above, or in my participants' case, but there is enough evidence in scholarly literature to suggest that diasporas have a homeland orientation. One example that demonstrates my point is a rather large excerpt from the conversation with a man from Damascus where he is telling about his life.

A man from Damascus: I started to work as a correspondent with media, writing articles. I thought that the Armenian outlets had lots of writers, I better write for the Arabic ones to introduce them to our culture, our history, our problems, our rights. So I started writing at the same time. After a while I left the job and went to Beirut with my dad. I worked there for many years with Armenian media and created an Arabic-language Armenian publication, so I was editing it. I was typing, editing, doing all the work of a publishing house. I stayed there for six years and in between I also served in the Syrian army. I stayed in Beirut until the Karabakh movement [1988]. Our work became harder then. We were publishing materials in five languages.

HT: About the Karabakh war? [The First Nagorno Karabakh war lasted until 1994 although occasional shootings and casualties happened from time to time after that too.]

A man from Damascus: Yes, yes. We were distributing to Beirut's media; we were going to the universities there and giving those materials to students. So, we were trying to spread this information, so that people would know what is going on. At that point Armenia was not independent yet. Many times, we were called to the Soviet embassy and told that they are not happy with the work we do. Of course, we ignored them and just stopped having any relationship with them. Before we had been visiting them, but now when we were publishing something, we would just throw it over the fence into the embassy yard without going in.

HT: Why was it so important for you to help Armenia, and all the work that you did? What was that bond for you?

A man from Damascus: In essence, being Armenian. We continued until the victories started. It was not just in Arabic, English, French, in Athens it was in Greek, we even did in Turkish several times and sent it several times to their media outlets, until the victories started, the Lachin victory. I remember we had a big campaign and celebrated it.

¹⁶² We see this happening on April 24 in different countries where Armenians live; we also witnessed this during the last Nagorno Karabakh war in 2020.

This man is an Armenian and he is a diaspora Armenian. But is he a diaspora Armenian at any given moment? Or, does he become part of the Diaspora the moment he does the above-mentioned activities? The Diaspora comes to happen in this man's doings, it is "downloaded" from the "cloud" into reality, when people "do" diaspora in their everyday work of acting, saying, feeling. What IE helps us to achieve here is to investigate concepts such as "home," "homeland," "homeland orientation," "belonging to the homeland" or "not belonging to the hostland," the "being/feeling Armenian" not as entities or abstract thoughts but rather as work processes that would not have been observable or happening at all without people's doings. On the conceptual level, the topics that emerged throughout the data are the following:

1) Home as an emotional space (feeling safe); 2) a lack of belonging or feeling "always foreign"; 3) Armenia (with changing borders) as homeland (Syria either as a second homeland or not being considered a homeland at all); 4) deterritorialization of home (cosmopolitan floating (Karageozian 2015), globalized identities). To conclude, I would like to add that the concepts of home and homeland are not the only "unfixed," complex and floating ones (they are used differently, depending in part on the conversational context). Identities themselves are also complex, fluid and intersecting. What this intersection involves for people I discuss below.

At the Intersection of Being Armenian, a Diaspora Armenian, a Syrian Armenian, and a Canadian-Armenian

What does diasporic or diaspora involve or mean for my participants? How do they construct themselves as diaspora Armenians and what does it actually involve for them to be or to practice being diaspora Armenian, Syrian Armenian or Armenian in general? Diasporic identity is described in the scholarly literature as unfixed and fluid and as one of existing multiple (competing) identities (Tölölyan 2005). It is hybrid (Vertovec 1999; Brubaker 2005, citing Stuart Hall 1990), diverse (Pattie 1999), heterogeneous from one diasporic group to another (Cohen 2008; Tölölyan 2007), and it has been moving away from “exilic nationalism” into “diasporic transnationalism” (Tölölyan 2000:107; 2005:44). As the Armenian diaspora has emerged as a result of different historical events at different times (Tölölyan [2007] estimates that over half of diaspora Armenians are descendants of the survivors of the Genocide), it possesses different amounts of traditional markers of Armenianness (including knowing the language, being connected to the institutions and/or community, having a homeland orientation, commitment to the homeland or even considering oneself to be Armenian) (Tölölyan 2007:109). For the diaspora members these days, “Armenian identity is one of several identities that compete for their time and attention; and Armenia is a place for which they have sympathy and in which they take an interest” (Tölölyan 2007:109). According to him, a minority of those people are completely “diasporic” (quotations in the original, *ibid*:110) in their commitment to and concern for the homeland and Armenian communities everywhere, and their identities and loyalties are not uni-local. Across the heterogeneity and differences both within communities and across them, there is, however, what unites them and allows us to talk about an Armenian diaspora (*ibid*). According to Tölölyan this includes, firstly, those elements of culture that are shared across various Armenian communities, such as

religion, music, the memory of the Genocide. The Genocide and attachment to the community are made apparent also in Bakalian's (1993) work. While the traditional ways of being diasporic are replaced by flexibility and hybridity, nonetheless, the sense of a strong belonging to the Armenian community is intact (87%), as is the commitment to the question of the Genocide, with most attention paid to Turkey's denial and the need for its recognition of the Genocide (85%) (Bakalian 1993). For Tölölyan, what unifies the different Armenian diasporic communities are the transnational discourses circulating between elites and institutions (Tölölyan 2007:110) and the institutions' ability to create opportunities for mobilizing the diaspora's members, when necessary, to create a sense of unity and provide attachment to the community. As we saw in previous chapters, those institutions and organizations also became sponsors for Syrian (and previously for Iraqi) Armenians to come to Canada, and offered help (this differed from participant to another) during their settlement and integration. Among my participants, the attachment to the Armenian community was on a spectrum between "no connection at all" to a "very strong connection." We see the latter in the following account:

My connection personally is very strong, as I worked in [...] an Armenian establishment [the details are removed for anonymity]. I also had connections with the Syrian Armenian kids whom I taught back in Syria, so now [seeing their teacher here in Canada] they felt emotional and it was really moving. After that I started working in an Armenian establishment again, even my children go to the Armenian centre, to the church, so it is a very strong connection. I feel myself a community member. (A woman from Aleppo)

As seen in this account, the connection is created and maintained by working in a community institution, sending the children to an Armenian school, going to church and to community centres. This is a good example of understanding the community connection and belonging as processes and work people participate in, rather than "things" or just "ideas" or as a "consciousness." It is also interesting to note that this

network of connections is not bound to one place but travels transnationally from Syria to Canada and at times to Lebanon, where the woman from Aleppo had lived and worked for three years in Armenian establishments.

A man from Damascus also mentioned having connections with the Syrian Armenian community in Canada. His job is connected with the Armenian community and he works in an Armenian community organization. He described the relationship between the newcomers and the Armenian community in Canada in the following way.

Those who have come recently from Syria gave life to the Armenian groups here. You know, the Syrian Armenians, the Aleppo Armenians are very organized, prepared — be it in the cultural sphere, or as boy scouts, or socially in general. They gave lots of strength, a new spirit. The clubs became revived. There were clubs that were about to be closed, e.g., the Tekeyan centre,¹⁶³ no one was going there, it was completely empty. The Syrian Armenians came and it came to life, it is full. So did the others. (A man from Damascus)

We can see two things here. First, as Clifford (1994) argues, diaspora is not so much about returning to one's roots that are located in a particular place as "an ability to recreate a culture in diverse locations" (Clifford 1994 pp. 305-306, cited in Brubaker 2005 p. 6) and we see here that ability to recreate both in Syria and in Canada. Secondly, what the man implies about Canadian Armenians not being as engaged in the community centres and not being as organized as Syrian Armenians were, could also be the impact of different socio-political milieux: while for Canadian Armenians engaging in political and civic activities was possible if they wanted to, in Syria, as mentioned in earlier chapters, Armenians (or anyone else other than the ruling regime) were allowed to engage only in cultural activities. The Syrian Armenian community, therefore, became deeply engaged in being diaspora, a minority and in reproducing Armenian culture and what was important for being Armenian.

¹⁶³ The Armenian cultural centre in Montreal.

While this man maintained the connection with the Canadian-Armenian community, some differences disagreements between the two Armenian diasporic communities (Syrian Armenian and Canadian Armenian) came up. Without mentioning what exactly those differences were, he explained some of them as follows: “You know, those questions of struggle are everywhere. It is in the nature of the Armenians to struggle against each other, to be against each other, so of course it is there. It comes from the Armenian way of thinking.”

A divorced mother with two children from Aleppo also reported strong connections to the Armenian community: “Of course! My children go to the club, they are boy scouts, they are in the choir [...] They also go to Sunday school, they are in the Armenian school, so they live in the Armenian diaspora, I mean in an Armenian environment.”

It is interesting to see the above-mentioned woman from Aleppo describing her children living “in the Armenian diaspora” (as opposed to living in Canada). In this regard, it seems not much has changed since their move to Canada. Both there and here one lives in the diaspora in a foreign country, while homeland is elsewhere. Diaspora is then an environment, a community, or as Brubaker (2005) argues “a distinctive ‘community,’ held together by a distinctive, active solidarity, as well as by relatively dense social relationships, that cut across state boundaries and link members of the diaspora in different states into a single ‘transnational¹⁶⁴ community’” (p.6). However, as the excerpt

¹⁶⁴ Even though there is some overlap between transnationalism and diaspora, the two are different concepts. Transnationalism is a broader notion, and it can encompass diaspora, but not vice versa (Wong and Satzewich 2006).

above manifests and in opposition to what constructivist scholars argue, it *is* also a place such as schools, clubs, choirs, etc.

A man from Qamishli, as mentioned in the previous chapter, said he hoped the community would do something, would organize something for the children so they would not forget the Armenian language. It is only fair, according to him, that the Armenian community should undertake the job of “preserving Armenianness,” as traditionally that was one of the jobs of diasporic institutions. Like him, others who had to enroll their children in public schools said that if they had the means, they would send their children to the Armenian school. A mother of three from Aleppo, for example, while speaking Armenian to her children at home, worried that they would forget it eventually as they used more and more English. She was one of those parents who could not afford the Armenian school, and sent her children to a public one. Apparently, one aspect of life in Canada that was harder to manage compared to Syria, was being and staying Armenian. Other participants sent their children to the Armenian school and as such it was a very smooth transition for them from Syria to Canada. In the above-mentioned cases, where language was perceived as central to Armenian identity, we see, unlike in the case of the Armenian Americans in Bakalian’s work (1993), that Syrian Armenians still emphasize the traditional ethnic markers (e.g., language) of being Armenian and the loss of the Armenian culture as a threat to Armenian identity (Pattie 1999).

A man from Aleppo, however, said that he and his family did not have any connection with the Armenian community. His wife sometimes went to Red Cross events to socialize, as there were some people from Aleppo there. When I asked if the Armenian community helped them, he answered:

We did not ask anyone for help, we just went through our hardship ourselves. Everything was so expensive, but how could they help us? My daughters' jobs worked out through an old neighbour we had, who came here 25 years ago. As they had connections and knew how things worked here, they were able to help my daughters. (A man from Aleppo)

This man did not describe this transnational web of Armenians and its resources as personal connections. The Armenian community, he said, did nothing. He elaborated on this further, telling about his experience with the Canadian Armenian community. He said he went to the church to say that he wanted “to cooperate” (he did not elaborate what he meant by “cooperate”). Canadian Armenians invited the Syrian Armenians to two meetings. But the attitude of the Canadian Armenians was “we know it all.” “The Syrian Armenians are not shepherds [i.e., illiterate and simple peasants], we also have our experiences, we are professionals and have our own ideas.” He thought they would cooperate. However, if Canadian Armenians tell them, “We know and you don’t,” it won’t work, he said. After that meeting no one invited the Syrian Armenians and the subject of cooperation was closed. So the attitude is:

“We don’t want anything from you [newcomers]. If you want to give money it’s ok, otherwise don’t interfere,” exactly like the Armenian government. But if I see that they [the Armenian Government or the Canadian Armenians] are wrong in something, why should I not be able to say it and if so, why should I give them money? (A man from Aleppo)

This discourse is very familiar to any Armenian who ever engaged in Homeland-diaspora dialogues. It was often argued that the Armenians in the Republic (particularly the government) are eager to take the money of diaspora Armenians but not to consider their expertise and their advice. The differences between diasporic institutions (mainly depending on which political party they were attached to) even within one country are also a well-known fact. In the abovementioned man’s account, as well as in the talk of other participants, community was mostly perceived as institutions or as community

leaders. This woman's account below also revealed some of those differences, but when asked for more details, she did not want to elaborate much.

A woman from Aleppo: Now, I was more active there [in Syria] in these questions [Armenian community]. Here I can't, unfortunately, I can't. First of all, I do not have time for that, secondly, it is not the same, the way of thinking is completely different. I am saying this with pain in my heart, I am not happy with this situation, but unfortunately, they do not look with the same eye [i.e., they have a different attitude].

HT: They don't look similarly at what? At you, at how to be Armenian?

A woman from Aleppo: No, no, not how to be Armenian. You know they don't want to use your experience; you know. If you follow their line, all is well, but something in between could be found, but I want to tell you I am not one of them, I don't know how it should be. But when it is about help, they all do everything, they extend a hand to newcomers. [she preferred not to say more than this].

She said that in Canada, connections are mostly maintained between the Aleppo Armenians.

We see here an example of the heterogeneity of the Armenian diasporic communities, including how things are done within them. Each of the communities has become formed around specific institutions and organizations, each with members and identities that differ from one country to another (Cohen 2008), and the differences among them often stem from their socio-cultural and historical environments (Tölölyan 2007). The diasporic identities are constructed and imagined in the context of certain realities seeking acceptance in a particular society while preserving a distinct Armenian identity (Payaslian 2010). So certain characteristics of the Armenian people, past and present, were imagined and constructed in a context-sensitive way (ibid).

The position of the following woman from Aleppo was something in between: "We go to churches, and if there is anything at the club, we go, but it is not a deep connection." There is no difference, she said, between Syrian Armenians and Canadian Armenians, but there was some tension with the Lebanese Armenians: "They don't like us at all," she said. The reason, she said, was because the prime minister here brought the Syrian

Armenians free of charge, while the Lebanese Armenians had to pay for this.¹⁶⁵ There is no difficulty at all in being an Armenian in Canada, she concluded.

A young man from Aleppo said he stopped going to the Armenian community centres after visiting for a year. He did not like the community centre(s) because there was no Armenianness in it, he told me. Particularly, he is unhappy that everything was in English instead of being in Armenian. Here again, we see a traditional marker (language) being central to Armenianness in Syria (of course, there are also Arabic-speaking Catholic Armenians in Syria, such as the participant from Qamishli). Language was tied to the idea of belonging and ethnic identity, and was important both for “being” Armenian and for feeling foreign and not belonging in Canada. He told me that here in Canada, the situation is different. In Syria, they were surrounded by Armenians and the Armenian language, 24/7.

A woman from Aleppo recalls how, when she first arrived, her relative (who was her sponsor) took her to the Armenian club in Toronto.

“Do you know English?” they asked me. “No,” I said, “I have just arrived. I understand English, but I don’t have practice speaking.” “Go to school,” they told me. I needed money, how can I go to school, I need money, if I go to school, is school going to pay me? “Well, you won’t find a job, you don’t know English,” they told me. (A woman from Aleppo)

She learned about OSAP (the Ontario Student Assistant Program)¹⁶⁶ in a community centre (it is not Armenian). They told her that there is such a program where

¹⁶⁵ The Lebanese Armenians came to Canada prior to the Syrian war (either because of the civil war in Lebanon or for other reasons). A quick reminder that not all the Syrian Armenians came to Canada free of charge: many in fact had to pay for their tickets immediately or to return the money later (as in case of a man from Aleppo).

¹⁶⁶ A program financing post-secondary education.

they give you money. She went and took the money to study to become a hairdresser, but before the school was over, she left (and let the school know) that she had to visit her mother in Lebanon, to get married and to start the paperwork for her husband (who was in Lebanon). She got married, came back, but at that point she was denied her grant. Now she has to return all the money. She never learned why the grant was taken away from her. She has not made any payments yet, and she is ready to pay 10,000 out of the twenty she owes, but she wants to understand what the matter is, first. She asked for help of the Armenian community centres but neither Hay Doun nor Hay Kedron could help her. She says they called from the Armenian centres and asked, "Do you work?" She asked if there was a job for her and they said there was none, they just had her number and were enquiring about her job situation.¹⁶⁷ She says she did not receive any help either from Hay Kedron (in Toronto where she originally came from) or from Hay Doun (in Montreal where she moved to). She said that in the beginning she used to call Hay Kedron, but no support came from there.

The experience of a young participant, who came from Aleppo, was different. She works for an Armenian organization. She says all the Armenian organizations, churches, centres, as well as individual Armenians, individually always were there to be of help. She says, they never had to wonder where to go for help. "Armenians had each other's back," says she.

A woman, who has lived both in Hamilton and Laval, says she does not have connections to the Armenian community but then she goes to church in Laval and is a member of another Armenian organization. When I asked if there are Canadian

¹⁶⁷ Which can be done as part of the reporting requirements as a sponsoring organization.

Armenians in the church, she said “of course, they are the founders.” She says she does not have much of a relationship with them (i.e., the Canadian Armenians, who came to Canada long ago), but they are very good people. She went to the organization several times to volunteer and they invited her to work there. She says there is not much difference between the branches of the same organizations in Syria and in Canada, and the churches in Canada and in Syria are similar too. A young woman from Aleppo also said that she had connections with the Canadian Armenian community. She goes to church, works in an Armenian institution, and she also has friends who are Canadian Armenians (i.e., were born in Canada).

It was interesting to hear the participants talking about being Armenian, how they conceptualize the Armenianness that they were brought up with. Being Armenian was also reported to mean being kind, generous and feeling proud. On the practical level it involved growing up Armenian (being in an Armenian environment, knowing and using the language, going to an Armenian school, knowing the history, etc.). It was also interesting to see how often participants talked about themselves as Armenian, a diaspora Armenian, a Syrian Armenian or a Canadian Armenian. Victimhood and trauma are also a feature of diaspora (see Anthias 1998) and it is true particularly of the Armenian diaspora (Cohen 2008). As the closest one to the “ideal type” diaspora (Safran 1991), Armenians have a strong commitment to their community, language, history, origin, the collective memory of homeland, the notion of betrayal, and the memory of the genocide (Safran 1991). However, as discussed above, none of this is fixed and continually evolves.

I asked a mother from Aleppo about being a Syrian Armenian, a Canadian Armenian or being a diaspora Armenian in general.

A woman from Aleppo: As much as we say Syrian Armenian, Canadian-Armenian, Lebanese Armenian, before everything I feel myself Armenian. When I introduce myself somewhere I say that I am Armenian. I don't explain that I am Syrian Armenian, Canadian-Armenian, I am Armenian first of all. Despite all kinds of accounts, all kinds of difficulties, dualities, dual identities that I have had, after all I am Armenian and I am proud to be.

HT: Are you also now a little bit Canadian?

A woman from Aleppo: I still do not feel it but perhaps I will feel it in the years to come, but not yet. I feel that I enjoy my rights, but until the moment when I master the language, and I can make connections with the locals, fluently speak, understand and have them understand me, I will still feel that I am still a migrant (*ghaghtakan*).

As mentioned above, it was not only Canada that did not feel like home, it was also the Republic of Armenia, the homeland of their dreams, that did not prove to be what they had expected. As she put it: "I went with a dream to be an Armenian. But there I felt that I am a diaspora Armenian."

What is interesting here (and also in the excerpt by a young woman from Aleppo, presented earlier) is that it seems that there is a hierarchy of forms of being Armenian. If the "real" Armenian culture is imagined as pre-dispersal and pre-modern, and if what is found in the diasporas is seen as its "watered down" version (Pattie 1999:85), is the real or "pure" version of being Armenian a non-diasporic one?

For the last woman from Aleppo, it seemed the language was what filled the gap. She mentioned it when talking about Canada and about belonging. She also mentioned that in certain regions of Armenia, where both the people and their dialect were close to those of Western Armenia (the variety of Armenian that Syrian Armenians speak), she,

as a diasporan, felt better and had a greater sense of belonging. It is interesting to note that Western Armenia was the “home” against which everything was measured.¹⁶⁸

For the young woman from Aleppo, being Armenian was also attached to preserving the language, among other things. She mentioned that being Armenian in Syria was very different from being one in Canada.

It is not a big struggle to be an Armenian in Syria, because being Armenian in Syria is your everyday life. We know we are Armenians, we speak Armenian, we were in Armenian circles, surrounded by Armenians, only at the university are you among Arabs. You can even work in Armenian circles and stay only among Armenians. But here, to stay Armenian and to speak Armenian is a bigger challenge. Even raising your children speaking Armenian is difficult. What I mean by challenging is that there are already two languages that the student has to learn — which is English and French. On top of that there are their classes, and the Armenian schools here are more expensive, on top of that if the child is not going to an Armenian school and is going to a foreign school, then it is hard to keep Armenian strong for years, unfortunately, and I am saying this with pain in my heart, Armenian will definitely be lost. Of course, the Armenian spirit will stay in the person but it is also possible that little by little Armenian will get weaker, even though the person will still feel oneself Armenian, but it is a bigger challenge to live as an Armenian in Canada than it is in Syria. (A woman from Aleppo)

She said she is now a Canadian Armenian, or perhaps a Canadian Armenian with Syrian roots, or even a Canadian Armenian/Syrian Armenian. In either case, “Armenian is always there,” she stressed. Personally, for her, being Armenian in Canada involves going to church, working in an Armenian institution for a while, and keeping her Armenian the way it is and even improving, no matter how many other languages she learned.

¹⁶⁸ A similar point of comparison is also the “Armenian Cause” (the struggle for the acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide) for a mother from Damascus. She told me that during the war in Syria, when they heard nationalist speeches (on TV, governmental and supporters, etc.) she told her husband that she started to have feelings for the Syrian crisis similar to what she had for the Armenian cause. “I said that I am as much Syrian as I am Armenian.”

A mother from Aleppo in her thirties carried her Armenianness with pride: “I am proud to be Armenian, I can say.” “There is no language sweeter than our language, I think,” she said, and the next woman from Aleppo shared a similar view.

Being Armenian is huge for me. It is good that I am Armenian. It is good I am born Armenian; it is good that I have the blood of an Armenian, it is good that I have that tender heart of an Armenian [laughs]. You know, we Armenians are like that. We love to be good to people. We go to a country and build it, make it prosper and at the end we pack our bags and leave the country [laughs]. This is our Armenian destiny. (A woman from Aleppo)

While not as explicit as in the example above by the young man from Aleppo, we see the victimhood and notion of dispersal and scattering coming up in the woman’s description of being Armenian, as it is often the case with diasporic identities (discussed in Anthias 1998). We also see the emphasis on Armenians’ contributions to the host nation and their civic goodness.

Another woman shared similar feelings about her Armenianness:

Wherever I go I am Armenian and I am proud to be Armenian [...] There is no Armenian neighbourhood here [Canada] but this is a free country so everyone can be whatever they want — the Hindu is Hindu and the Muslim is Muslim and the Armenian is Armenian. There is no difference. Every person is free here, every person is human here, every person is about his religion. (A woman from Aleppo)

It is interesting that the woman from Aleppo brings up this point. In Syria, as often mentioned by the participants, Armenians were free to follow their religion, to go to their churches, to have their gatherings, to celebrate their holidays and to commemorate their events. Yet, the fact that she mentions this with regard to Canada perhaps points out that there was a different feeling among Armenians about being a minority, living in a Muslim majority country and about their rights and freedoms. Perhaps those feelings were attached to the earlier history of their ancestors in Ottoman Turkey. It is also interesting to note that being Armenian here is not attached to certain locations (e.g.,

neighbourhoods) but rather is free floating (cf. Karageozian 2015) and is attached to the freedom of being whatever one wants.

While staying faithful to the participants' meanings, I would like to summarize the chapter by offering several emerging themes of what the intersection of the above-mentioned different identities (or practices), or just one of them, involved for the participants.

The two notions of being "Armenian" and being "Diaspora-Armenian" are often inseparable. Often, however, there is an implicit hierarchy attached to them, where the former is considered better than the latter, as well as the feeling of impossibility to bridge the two. I will, therefore, categorize the two separately.

1) In Canada, the work of being Armenian or Diaspora Armenian that Syrian Armenians were expecting of the Canadian Armenian community they were joining (either from institutions or individuals, but mostly from institutions), involved helping each other, "having each other's back," actively helping especially in job search (as opposed to just providing information in a disengaged manner),¹⁶⁹ keeping the Armenian language alive and providing opportunities for the youth to practice it.

2) In Canada the work of being Armenian that Syrian Armenians expected of themselves involves sending their children to Armenian schools (even though it is expensive), going to church, to Armenian community centres, speaking Armenian at home, "preserving the culture."

¹⁶⁹ Recall the man from Aleppo saying that the Armenian centres organized meetings between Armenian employers and themselves, while a woman from Aleppo mentioned that they just told her she needs to know English and did not provide any practical help.

3) In Syria the work of being Armenian was likewise staying in Armenian circles, not mixing with “others” (especially with Muslims), sending one’s children to Armenian schools, speaking Armenian, intermarrying, loving the homeland, cultivating the myth of return (this also in Canada, see Payaslian 2010), not seeking belonging or growing roots because of the feeling of foreignness (both in Syria and Canada). Drawing on the data of the previous chapters we can add to this protecting the Armenian neighbourhoods during war, the support for the ruling regime (whatever “support” meant), reimagining and “transmitting” the traumatic memory of the Armenian Genocide, the lost lands and being “demanders” (i.e., being committed to the acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide).

Of course, it is important to note that these are loose categories and do not apply in their entirety to all of the participants and not in the exact terms and in the same amount. It appears that, like homeland, the diasporas, the identities, the memory, the past, and the work of being Armenian are diverse, ever-changing, evolving and stemming from context and social location — both individual and collective. This work of “being Armenian” among the Syrian Armenians¹⁷⁰ by practicing traditional markers of Armenian identity, becomes more difficult after crossing the Canadian border (e.g., speaking the language, going to Armenian schools, participating in Armenian community events, visiting Armenian places — churches, clubs, restaurants) for a number of reasons. First, the Armenian school was not available to everyone, either because it already was full when some refugees arrived or because it was expensive. Second, and connected to the first reason, preserving the language became a challenge once children stopped going to

¹⁷⁰ As opposed to “feeling Armenian” among American Armenians cf. Bakalian 1993.

an Armenian school. Language was also tightly connected to the issue of belonging¹⁷¹ and ethnic and/or national identity. So, whether losing the language for the newer generation of Canadians would also threaten their feeling of belonging to the Armenian transnation (Tölölyan 2000) and their ethnic identity, is a question to be answered in future research.

Another part of “practicing” ethnic but also diasporic identity, one which was becoming fainter in Canada, was being connected to the Armenian community and staying in an Armenian environment. While it was very easy in Aleppo to go to Armenian restaurants, live in Armenian neighbourhoods, and visit Armenian-owned stores, this was becoming hard if not impossible in Canada (a couple of participants raised the question of not having a proper place for their gatherings — Tim Horton was mentioned as an inadequate place for them, and Armenian cultural centres are not Armenian enough, the latter because English was used instead of Armenian). Finally, connections with the Armenian centres were affected by the pandemic and by the fact that being Armenian was practiced differently in Canada than it was in Syria.

A further practical reason for disengagement from the Armenian environment and institutions might be the fact that now both wives and husbands worked, whereas back in Syria, women mostly did not hold employment, and possibly had more time to do the kind of work that connected themselves and their family to the Armenian community. Additionally, people in Canada were busy trying to build a new life (including learning new languages), as opposed to having established careers, lives and homes, which left little

¹⁷¹ See the example above by a woman from Aleppo, both about Armenian and Arabic, and now in Canada about English and French.

time for cultural engagement. Circling back to the dialogue between Khachig Tölölyan and Lily Cho, and Tölölyan's argument that diasporas are "neighbourhoods and networks, chains of connection and exchange" (in Tölölyan 2018:25), one could argue that the Syrian Armenian community has lost the "local," "the objective," and the "actual" in their diasporic everyday: the familiar streets and neighbourhoods, the three-generation grandparents' houses and summerhouses, the schools, the churches, the clubs, the restaurants, the generational material memories, the memorials they built and visited, the cities and the country itself, and the proximity to the homeland and the ancestral lands.¹⁷² Yet the abstract diasporic, the transnational, the network, the interpretive frame, the stance, the claim and especially the diasporic identities will be "transferred" or rather "invented" in a new historical context (Hall 1990) in Canada, a place that will or will not become home.

¹⁷² Cf. the man's concern about being unable to struggle for his ancestral lands in Erzurum (Modern day Turkey), because now he is so far removed from them.

CONCLUSION

As I conclude my work, new waves of refugees are leaving their homeland and stepping onto indefinite paths. Not every group receives equal attention and not everyone's tragedy becomes shared by millions. And not everyone's trauma becomes the trauma of a collectivity. The world is still unaware of or indifferent toward many groups, and state borders are not equally crossable for all people. What do I want for my work to achieve in such times? Bringing awareness about wars, genocides, refugeedom and a long-lasting effect that spans more than one lifetime is undoubtedly one of them. The hope here is perhaps that with more knowledge comes proactive rather than reactive action from states and policy makers regarding those issues and that this might prevent such tragic events in the future. Drawing attention to people's sufferings, both past and present, or showing they are not forgotten, is a debt for those who have an audience. Milan Kundera's famous quote comes to mind: "the struggle of men against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting" (2019:4).

So one goal is not to allow the suffering of the people to pass into oblivion and the perpetrators to go unpunished. Another goal is more practical but no less people oriented. Despite all the sophisticated and deep debates about refugeedom, immigration, nation-building, people and their work go unnoticed. "Who does what for something to happen, and who does what for something to happen exactly the way it does, and why" is yet to be discovered. Is there anything beyond what people do and how does it inform what they do? Those questions are of course sociological, theoretical and methodological, but they are also very practical. If we understand, for instance, the work a privately sponsored

refugee does to be able to get to the safety of Canada (as opposed to being *brought* to Canada), even in the context of the much-praised PSRP program, we will also understand how non-inclusive and imperfect the program is.

What are the spheres to direct our gaze to for improvement (other than the successful settlement and integration already in Canada)? Who are the people who mostly benefit from the program? And who is left out because of bureaucracy, state and non-state actors and regulations? Also very important, but not much studied, is how PSRP, a Canadian program that gained attention internationally and recently became a model for the USA (Padraig 2023), operates outside the Canadian borders, what are its shortcomings (as participants' stories demonstrate), and how it can be improved. These are questions that my thesis aims to bring attention to.

Would any of the participants, who had the option of using the network of Armenian organizations, friends, relatives, an Armenian community in Lebanon and their ethnic homeland-state (i.e., the Republic), be able to benefit from the Canadian program without the above-mentioned resources? Many of my participants who eventually used the program to come to Canada, had to spend some time either in Lebanon — using their own connections and resources, or in Armenia, or to go back and forth between Syria and Lebanon. What about those who did not have such opportunities? Should a refugee program that is designed “to save” people, demand all the work that has been done by those whom it is designed to save? Or should it at least acknowledge their resourcefulness and the work people end up doing themselves, and factor it into the feasibility of the program? Should there be special allocations and in-between positions offered to those who are unable to make their own arrangements? Refusing to talk about

the work done by the refugees themselves makes it invisible to the policy makers as well as the wider public, who see the newcomers as either vulnerable and passive or dangerous and predatory, which leads to stereotyping and inaccurate generalizations. My dissertation sheds light on the above questions and opens a path for further discussion and research.

My thesis studies the experiences of the Syrian Armenian refugees across borders and in multiple locations, their journey ending in Canada. Unlike other refugee studies that focus primarily on the experiences of refugees when they are already at the destination, I propose to look at those experiences within their context, by taking into account all the complexity where these experiences happen. Instead of studying the refugees, I turn the spotlight onto the world they know, to study what is visible from where they stand and in certain cases extend that knowledge to what is not knowable or visible from their location. I further suggest that the past in the form of transgenerational trauma becomes a lens and a resource to make sense of their current-day traumatic experiences and as such should be factored in when studying this group's experiences and doings.

The overarching methodological goal of my dissertation is to provide an empirical study toward understanding how the social world around us comes to happen the way it does. From one location to another across borders, and even across time, "following" my participants and what they know from where they stand, I have investigated and illustrated how abstract notions such as trauma, diaspora, and migration, come to life in what people do and how these become relations of coordination across time and space. As I mentioned at the beginning of my work, I am particularly concerned with how unhealed

and unresolved trauma travels across generations by being reproduced in what people do, as coordinated by other people's doings "elsewhere and elsewhere" (Smith 2005:225). As such, I claim that this shared transgenerational trauma becomes a relation of coordination for people's experiences to happen as they do, at the same time being reproduced and reactivated in people's everyday work. I show how this coordination spans borders and countries and even state laws and changing regulations. As such, other than providing rich data on how transgenerational trauma happens, the spaces for their transmission and reproduction, as well as being a methodological contribution to how one can study such traumas, I also provide a theoretical contribution by looking at transgenerational trauma as a large-scale coordination.

In each of my chapters, I take my reader on a journey through my participants' stories, and direct the spotlight from where the participants stand to what is visible from their standpoint. I invite my readers to engage with the contexts and larger relations that inform the participants' doings in each geographical location. This allows us to map and investigate topics as broad as trauma, war, political engagement or disengagement, refugeedom, the Canadian PSRP, integration and settlement, belonging, diaspora, home, and homeland. By providing ample ethnographic material, I show how all of these otherwise abstract notions materialize in people's actions. The wide thematic sweep and intersectionality of the work also contributes to a holistic understanding of some of the topics mentioned above. One such topic is understanding the much-discussed Syrian war from the point of view of minorities and so called "supporters" of the regime. While this is a label my participants eagerly and willingly accept, a small yet important discovery — that supporting the regime involved for most of them nothing more than disengagement

— invites us to think that perhaps we need some reconceptualization of and a dialogue about who controls the language deployed to describe the war and how this language is limiting and non-inclusive of people's experiences.

In my fourth chapter, I investigate the social organization of trauma and the main spaces where the transmission happens. Among the findings of this chapter is that the transmission takes place through familial, communal and institutional channels and the main spaces where this happens are storytelling (I include here also singing songs, watching films and reading books) and ritualized commemorative practices (e.g., visits to an atrocity site as well to symbolic spaces for commemoration). I also suggest a new space for trauma transmission in the form of a new traumatic experience. While this was brought up only by several participants and as such did not become part of this project, it would be interesting to study how bodies have become sites of trauma-memory transmission: several of my participants learned about the trauma by seeing bodily signs of the tragedy on their older relatives (e.g., undeveloped feet, a bullet stuck inside the body, knife scars, etc.). My findings also indicate that while different people have entered this "trauma world" differently, it materializes itself throughout their lives in the form of emotions: feeling a stronger bond with their Armenian identity, having a feeling of identity-loss, the feeling of a lost homeland, distrust toward Turks or Muslims. These categories are very fluid and not always separate from each other.

I also demonstrate how the Genocide story was part of the identity narrative of the Syrian Armenians, including among children, who perhaps perceived "having a story" in the family as an important part of membership in Armenianness.

My fifth chapter starts by showing how the Armenian minority in Syria lived before the war, and how they perceived the Arab uprisings, Assad's regime, and the Syrian war. Studying the war from the point of view of a minority, one whose members are considered "supporters of the regime," allows us to understand the Syrian war in its complexity and to draw a picture that is more holistic than the simplistic "struggle for democracy" image often promoted in Western media. It also draws our attention to more numerous actors than just "the terrorists," "Assad," and "the rebels." In this chapter, my findings suggest that the social environment of the Syrian Armenians, where they did the work of being diaspora members, loyal citizens to the state, a minority, and Armenians, was informed not just by their present lives, but by their past, a past which was ever present in their lives in the form of successive traumas and vulnerabilities.¹⁷³

I show that Syrian Armenians had to manage two levels of reality: a contemporary one that included their everyday realities; and the diachronic one that included the trauma of the Genocide, displacement, discrimination, and pogroms. These two levels informed the choices Armenians made. Here too, as in the case of my entire project, I think that the group's history should be taken into account for understanding what is visible for them from where they stand.

I have argued that the past of the Syrian Armenian community in the form of the memory of the Armenian Genocide and the subsequent traumatic experiences in their diasporic existence became an inseparable part of their social environment, and as such

¹⁷³ I am not arguing that these vulnerabilities, whether we call them trauma, the past, or history, were the only aspect informing their choices and decisions, but rather that they were also a factor and should be considered in understanding the position of the Armenians in Syria when looking into their life stories.

should be taken into account when understanding the choices and actions of the Syrian Armenians. Based on my participants' accounts, I showed the lived experiences of the Armenian community before the war, and at the time when the demonstrations and the anti-government movement began. These accounts show how diasporic minorities (in this case, the Syrian Armenians) negotiate their existence and their rights. I show that their decisions, whether as a collectivity or as individuals, have been well thought and informed, and that people were active participants in their everyday realities, successfully negotiating their priorities as a group.

Finally, I draw attention to the fact that, while there were Armenians who as private citizens were themselves engaged in the protection of their neighbourhoods and churches (and not the government), the status of "supporters" involved "doing nothing" against the government for most of them. As such, we might need a new, more inclusive conceptualization for parties and people trapped in war, other than the simplistic "pro-regime" vs. "against the regime" dichotomy.

My fifth chapter contributes to my overarching argument that transgenerational trauma becomes a relation of coordination that produces people's experiences as they happen while being produced and activated in people's doings.

With the same theoretical goal of bringing into view people's work, I go on to explore the next stages of the Syrian Armenians' experiences as they moved through the war, exploring how one makes the decision to leave one's life behind and what it takes to become a refugee. In the two chapters that follow, six and seven, I provide detailed material about the war, its challenges, and how and why the Syrian Armenians decided to leave the country and set foot on the path to refugeedom. While for Sunni Arabs, the

reason for leaving Syria might have been the political persecutions, one might wonder why the Syrian Armenians decided to leave the country if they were “protected” by the regime. My work shows that the Syrian Armenians had suffered numerous hardships during the war and were targeted by other groups (antigovernment ones, although it is not always clear from the interviews who exactly) and left the country for the following reasons: the falling bombs, the kidnappings and, for those families who had sons or husbands eligible for mandatory military service, in order to avoid it. These two chapters also start a discussion which is continued in later chapters, namely why the “homeland” (i.e., Armenia) did not become a home for Syrian Armenians. My findings from the participant interviews demonstrate that this was mostly for economic reasons, but some issues of belonging were also reported. The Armenian official assisting refugees I interviewed pointed toward reasons beyond economic ones as well.

In these two chapters my main goal is to shift our gaze from academic and legal concepts (such as refugee) to what people do for refugeedom to happen; how the asylum country, refugeedom, the transnational, the diasporic, the patriotic, the homeland, and once again the shared trauma-memory materialize in what ordinary people do; how all of this happens as coordination among people. I shed light on how this work happens between and across state borders and I demonstrate that Armenianness becomes a resource to draw upon not only in national but also in transnational space and provides a resource to aid people other than state and non-state actors. It also shows how the Canadian PSRP operates overseas and which of its aspects need improvement, which might be interesting particularly for policy makers.

In chapter eight, in order to continue bringing people's work into view, I explore the next stage of the Syrian Armenian experiences — this time in Canada. As in the previous chapters, here I focus on how local and translocal relations coordinate Syrian Armenian experiences, and how these relations are activated in people's doings. I show that the Canadian Private Sponsorship program operates as a context that makes this coordination possible and visible. It brings into light the diasporic practices and the shared interpretive frame of the Genocide, of the lost homeland, and of a common history and a past in general. It also demonstrates how what people do in certain locations at certain times is coordinated with what people do in other locations and at other times. Among my findings is that PSRP, while being a refugee program which is supposed to help people in extraordinary circumstances, does require work of refugees themselves, and oftentimes a very complicated operation of crossing borders, engaging with policies, and engaging diasporic connections and transnational ties (e.g., in order for them to ensure a co-sponsor, as required by PSRP, or to find a living arrangement in Lebanon or Armenia). My findings also suggest that a more inclusive vocabulary other than the imposed "refugee" is necessary, as people mentioned drawing on the work they do.

Finding jobs was the way to independence and renting a place of one's own. My findings suggest that the average job hunt lasted less than a month, excluding cases when the participants decided to study first and get a qualification before looking for jobs. A small finding is that the locations and communities of resettlement had a central role in settlement success. Montreal was reported to be a better place than Toronto in terms of finding jobs. The Arabic speaking community there was a helpful resource for the Syrian Armenians in the early stages of the job hunt.

Another finding is that during the resettlement period, receiving support was informed by the ties one had with the sponsor rather than by the commitment they undertook. PSRP does not mandate or has no way of supervising whether due support is provided by the co-sponsors/sponsors to the refugees. The smooth relationship between the sponsors and the refugees could have two reasons: first, that often the sponsor was a friend or a family member who knew who these people were and where they were coming from; second, even if they did not know the newcomers personally, their journey represented for them a personal story — the story of a lost home and migration, either as their own or of their ancestors. As such, there were no cultural, value-based or any other kind of misunderstandings that come from a lack of cultural competency to work with refugees, as is sometimes reported in the literature about the sponsor-refugee relationship. Whether, the Canadian PSRP is the best avenue for resolving the global refugee crisis, is outside the scope of this thesis. The refugees and their active work, however, must be factored in in those calculations.

My findings suggest that Syrian Armenian refugees had a relatively easy transition, finding a safe home in Canada, not facing any discrimination, were satisfied with their move to Canada and the lives they build here for themselves, and had no desire to return to Syria¹⁷⁴ (even if things get better there), but if they were to return somewhere, they would rather go back to the “homeland” (i.e., Armenia). This brings us to the concluding chapter, the one which explores what has been a coordinating relation for my participants — the discourse of home, homeland, being Armenian and being diasporan. Here I first

¹⁷⁴ Although the discourse around Armenia, even for those who had already unsuccessfully tried to settle there, is different.

present how my participants conceptualize those notions. Second, I show how those notions happen in people's actions. Finally, I illustrate how this global "doing being Armenian" becomes a lens to make sense of their experiences but also a resource to draw upon.

My findings suggest that home was a physical space first and foremost, a sanctuary, a place where people felt well and safe. For most, their home was in Canada, a place where they had found safety and a future. Homeland, meanwhile, was both abstract and real, territorialized and deterritorialized, an emotionally charged notion, a conceptual reality, much more complex than home. Syria was not considered homeland (in the best scenario it was considered a second homeland), and Armenia was homeland with varying borders.

As discussed in my last chapter and in the literature review, diaspora is conceptualized by scholars as either "discreet entities or groups" that are "out there" (Grossman 2019:1264, the quotation marks in the original), clearly (or not) definable and measurable (the objectivist view), or as a type of consciousness, a context, an experience, and as an interpretive frame (for this classification and references, see Grossman 2019:1265) (the constructivist view). I offer a new way of studying diaspora which is a social organization of knowledge and a coordination of practice. I show how the diasporic, the commemorative, the ethnic, and the transnational are embedded in people's everyday actualities; how these are connected to the doings of other people — ruled by relations that are local, translocal, and are mediated by institutional practices; and how people's doings and feelings as diasporic are informed by this trauma-memory.

The last chapter also illustrates how people's doings (also feelings and sayings) bring to life the diasporic, home and homeland in them.

What people do here is mediated by discourses, books, ritualized practices, visits to community centres and churches, being attached to other Armenians, following news of the homeland, donating, demonstrating for issues *in the homeland* while in their countries of residence. This chapter also explores the borders of two often inseparable notions: "being Armenian" and "being Diaspora Armenian," and what each involved. I offered loose categories that summarize what being Armenian, diaspora Armenian in Canada (both for the established Canadian Armenians and the newcomer Syrian Armenians) and in Syria involved and meant for the participants. In all categories, as seen in the last chapter, preserving the Armenianness (keeping the language and the culture in general) was important and central. In Canada, more hands-on help to fellow Armenians was expected of the established Armenian community.

My findings also suggest that the work of being Armenian also was heavily informed by the environment, the location, the setting, as well as how the "other" in that particular setting was constructed. Living among Muslims, in "their" country, as "foreigners," might have created the need for different kinds of work than living in Canada did. However, all of this should be seen as evolving, fluid and unfixed processes that change depending on both internal and external factors.

Summarizing my work, it is important to mention that as an IE project, it is never final and always has more to offer. I have mapped out the social world of the Syrian Armenians in Syria and across borders as they know it from where they stand. I demonstrated how certain abstract notions become materialized in people's doings, how

they are a large-scale coordination among people both locally and translocally and how this informs what people do in their “everyday and everynight” (Campbell 2006) work. I have shown how this type of large-scale coordination in particular can also become a resource or a resource to draw upon in multiple locations and across borders. As further research, each of those relations of coordination can be studied in more detail and be taken to the next stage to explore how they are produced, maintained, and brought to life through institutional practices and texts. Each of these relations (migration, transnational network, diaspora, ethnicity, etc.) can become an object of investigation, starting with what is visible from where people stand and to what is not known from their standpoint.

I have spent much time in this thesis investigating the transgenerational trauma as happening in people’s doings, but there is still much to study. For example, a further topic to study could be how the “trauma institution” operates through certain organizations such as Genocide institutes, museums, monuments, also digital images of artefacts, texts (including film and songs), and how people activate those texts by reading them around the world and by participating in commemorative ceremonies in different locations; what it is that these organizations say and do and how they coordinate it with similar organizations around the world; how this dialogue in general is connected with other dialogues of other trauma communities (such as the Holocaust, the Genocides of Rwanda, Darfur, Namibia, Cambodia, Kosovo, etc.); how the multidirectional aspect of memories (Rothberg 2009) is organized and who does what for that to happen the way it does. My hope is that my current work will be a map for myself and perhaps others, to enter into the complex world of ruling relations in a non-objectifying and people-oriented way.

My methodological contribution to IE is that first and foremost I take IE outside its traditional domain. As already mentioned, institutional ethnographers traditionally have not directed their gaze toward trauma, diaspora, belonging and war. My work demonstrates that the ontology of IE can be at the base of any ethnographic project which is people oriented, non-objectifying, feminist in its nature and committed to discover truths that often depart from dominant discourses, which are often put forward by those in power. Such an approach can also help direct the scholar's gaze onto what is important for people, rather than solely for policy makers or academics, and create knowledge *for* them rather than *about* them. It also demonstrates a case where "institution," a core concept at the base of IE, does not always have set boundaries, such as education, healthcare, or immigration, but can also be something as fluid and unfixed as a transgenerational trauma or diaspora and that it can operate through a multiplicity of organizations and texts across time and space.

My work also demonstrates what IE ontology can help us to achieve even if one does not follow all the steps that IE scholars do. The main empirical contribution of this work is showing how the social world happens in people's actions, rather than in separation from them and on a conceptual level. I demonstrate how different groups of refugees can have different experiences even when avoiding the same war and the same or different perpetrators, and how history can change depending on one's standpoint. I also generate knowledge on a less studied (or unstudied altogether) group among both the Canadian refugee population and among those who were affected by the Syrian war. I join the few scholars who raise the importance of learning about the newcomer's pre-refugee selves and bringing to light the otherwise invisible work done by refugees. I

demonstrate that the biographies and histories of groups are an important and necessary aspect for understanding their experiences and their choices. Last but not least, with my work, I create a space for the narration and memorialization of trauma: both past and present.

APPENDIX A. WHAT IS GENOCIDE?

The term genocide derives from the Greek word *genos* (tribe, nation, race) and the Latin *cide* (kill) (Kuper 1985:9). It was coined by a Jewish lawyer from Poland, Rafael Lemkin. In his *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944) he writes: “Generally speaking, genocide does not necessarily mean the immediate destruction of a nation, except when accomplished by mass killing of all the members of a nation. It is intended rather to signify a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups [...] The objectives of such a plan would be the disintegration of the political and social institutions of culture, language, national feelings, religion, [and] economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups” (Lemkin 1944).

In “Genocide as a Crime under International Law” (147), Lemkin writes: “The crime of genocide involves a wide range of actions, including not only the deprivation of life but also the prevention of life (abortions, sterilizations) and also devices considerably endangering life and health (artificial infections, working to death in special camps, deliberate separation of families for depopulation purposes and so forth)” (p.147).

According to the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, genocide, “whether committed in time of peace or in time of war, is a crime under international law which they undertake to prevent and to punish’ [...] any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing

serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (United Nations 1948). While this definition was political and not inclusive, later genocide scholars came up with more inclusive definitions (e.g., including also political and other groups, or cultural genocide (for a detailed discussion of cultural genocide see Kuper 1981:30-31)). Dadrian, for example, defines it as follows: “Genocide is the successful attempt by a dominant group, vested with formal authority and/or with preponderant access to the overall resources of power, to reduce by coercion or lethal violence the number of a minority group whose ultimate extermination is held desirable and useful and whose respective vulnerability is a major factor contributing to the decision of Genocide” (Dadrian 1975:204). Leo Kuper notes the necessity for the inclusion of political groups (Kuper 1981:39); Chalk and Johanson define genocide as “a form of one-sided mass killing in which a state or other authority intends to destroy a group, as that group and membership in it are defined by the perpetrator.” (Chalk and Johanson 1990:23) and Fein defines it as “sustained purposeful action by a perpetrator to physically destroy a collectivity directly or indirectly, through interdiction of the biological and social reproduction of group members, sustained regardless of the surrender or lack of threat offered by the victim” (Fein 1993:24). Interesting work about the conceptualization of genocide is Tasha Hubbard’s “Buffalo Genocide in Nineteenth-Century North America: ‘Kill, Skin, and Sell’,” where she argues that “slaughter of the buffalo constitutes an act of genocide” (2014:293).

APPENDIX B. LITERATURE ON THE AFTEREFFECTS OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Scholarship on the effect of the Genocide on second-generation American Armenians mainly focuses on the fact that there was a transmission from the first generation to the second, and on the impact of the genocide denial on the second generation. The second generation, having a direct link to the survivors, are often witness to the psychological effects of the event on their parents, which in turn affects them. The worries, the guilt, the fears of the parents, Aftandilian (2016) argues, had an impact on the children and their behaviour as well. Boyajian and Grigoryan (1998) have studied the children of the survivors and their feelings (and what they have faced) informed by the genocide for about twenty years. Their research sheds light on the behaviour of the children of survivors and shows that it was affected by the trauma the parents bore. They suggest that the children feel anger as a result of the denial, a sense “of inadequate recompense, appreciation and recognition of the efforts, sacrifices, and achievements of the survivors” (p.516) and, finally, a strong awareness of their identity. Surveying the scarce literature on the effects of the Armenian Genocide, Kay (2015) suggests several directions for future research, two of which are “examining the impact of the centennial commemoration on the identity of Armenians in both Armenia and the various diasporas” and “promoting research that examines centers of Armenian population other than in the United States and the similarities and differences among them with regard to long-term effects of the genocide” (p.132) These are the directions my research also takes. Mangassarian (2016) points out the importance of understanding “the effects of the intergenerational cultural trauma among Armenians” (p.372) as they are bearers of it. Using the trauma treatment model

of the constructivist self-development theory (CSDT), in her article she reviews the existing scant literature “on the intergenerational cultural perspectives and manifestations of past cultural group trauma, combined with the themes of survival and preservation of the Armenian heritage in the United States” (p.373), and offers some clinical implications. She further discusses the effects of this trauma (whether directly or through transmission, e.g., familial accounts or through culture) on a person’s development (e.g., self-worth, trust of others and tolerance) (p.375). Miller and Miller (1993) study the psychological effects of the genocide and its responses among the survivors and their children. They identify several major responses (e.g., avoidance and repression; outrage and anger; revenge and restitution; reconciliation and forgiveness; resignation and despair; explanation and rationalization) (cited in Mangassarian 2016:376). Karenian and colleagues (2011), studying psychological trauma, point out that trauma has been a contested term; however, the agreed upon definition includes the following elements: “(a) an event having caused intensive stress; (b) the psychological difficulty of a person to control, assimilate and cope with the event; and (c) a cluster of symptoms including spontaneous re-experience of the event, autonomous arousal, behavioural and emotional withdrawal” (p.327). Assuming that trauma can be transmitted both individually and collectively, they study the transmission and “search for signs of secondary trauma related to the events of 1914–1918 among Armenians currently living in Greece and Cyprus. The main research hypothesis was that at least the older, second-generation Armenians, especially those having a close relative killed during those events, would often present characteristic post-traumatic symptoms. An additional aim of the study was to identify some common mental schemata and feelings generated by the same events

among contemporary Armenians” (p.328). Karenian and colleagues’ findings showed that the sample had the following attitudes (to different degrees): “supporting the persecuted, cause of national pride, pro-social attitudes, hardworking, family bonds, revenge, sense of maturation, persisting distress, fears, shame, helplessness, guilt” (p.333). The two top rows (74.9% and 72.1%) were enhancing community ties among Armenians, and solidarity and supporting other persecuted groups. The findings suggest that the majority of the Armenians in this study experienced traumatic symptoms during their lifetime that was linked to their knowledge of 1914-1918. Kupelian and colleagues (1998) studied three generations of Armenian families and how they were affected in different spheres (e.g., the Armenian ethnic identity, family congruence and Armenian community cohesion) as informed by the Genocide, exile, and the history of persecution and discrimination in the Ottoman empire. Altounian (1999) studies “the intergenerational psychic transmission of collective trauma on the basis of [her] personal experience as a descendant of victims of the Armenian genocide of 1915” (p.439). According to her, the two elements of the collective trauma are the annihilation of the families (and ancestors) of the descendants along with their culture and ancestral lands and the exile of their parents from everything they had and knew. Altounian tries to bridge together the survivor’s (her father’s) writing to her own.

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