

SOUNDWALKING

Through Time, Space, and
Technologies

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**'OUR VOICES REACHED THE SKY':
SONIC MEMORIES OF
THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE**

Gascia Ouzounian

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'OUR VOICES REACHED THE SKY': SONIC MEMORIES OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Gascia Ouzounian

In a letter dated 16 August 1915 and marked as having been 'conveyed beyond the Ottoman frontier by an Armenian refugee from Cilicia in the sole of her shoe' (Bryce, 1916, p. 20), we encounter an agonizing plea from a genocide survivor: 'In haste and in secret I seize this opportunity of bringing to your ears the cry of agony which goes out from the survivors of the terrible crisis through which we are passing at this moment,' she writes. 'They are exterminating our nation, mowing it down. Perhaps this will be the last cry from Armenia that you will hear; we have no longer any fear of death, we see it close at hand, this death of the whole people' (ibid., p. 20).

These tragic words—smuggled out of the Ottoman Empire in a shoe, presented to the British House of Parliament in 1916, and subsequently published as part of a 700-page volume of state papers documenting what would later become known as the Armenian Genocide (Bryce, 1916)—are unambiguous in relaying the scale of the crisis underway: an entire nation is being 'mowed down,' 'exterminated.' The unnamed writer evokes the horror of the moment by rendering it in a sonic register: she seeks to bring Armenia's 'cry of agony' to the ears of the reader. 'We are waifs who cry for the lives of our brothers,' she continues. 'These lines cannot describe our misery; it would need volumes of reports to do justice to that' (ibid., p. 20).

Still, in two short pages, the refugee from Cilicia describes the atrocities already underway in the nine or so months since the Genocide began: deportations and death marches wherein 'tens of thousands' of 'deported widows and children' have been on the road for 'from three to five months,' 'marched along naked and starving'; the wholesale murder of men and boys, who have been 'massacred or drowned'; the abduction and rape of young women and girls, 'three-quarters' of whom have been 'carried off, with the result that one does not see a single pretty face among the survivors'; and the 'Black famine' that plagues survivors, '60 per

cent' of whom 'are sick.' 'The whole of Armenia is being cleared out,' she closes her letter by stating. 'I sign this letter with my blood!' (ibid., p. 20).

In dialogue with this desperate attempt to render audible the pain of a nation, I wonder what it would mean for the cries of a nearly exterminated people to be heard over a century later: for the nearly extinguished, unheard, and concealed voices of genocide victims and survivors, as well as the sounds and sonic violence committed by perpetrators, to be excavated and listened to. Where do these sounds and voices reside? In which bodies, archives, territories, and memories do they continue to sound, and how can they be received, retrieved, heard, and shared? What could such an historical listening reveal about experiences of genocide and the role of sound and listening in its production of trauma?

To better understand the Armenian Genocide and how its traumas were experienced by victims and survivors, I seek here to listen to survivors' sonic memories of the Genocide: what they heard, and how they felt, interpreted, and remembered what they heard. I use survivors' 'earwitness' testimonies—testimonies of auditory and sonic experiences of the Genocide—as a basis for this listening (Schafer, 1994[1977]; Birdsall, 2009). Visual evidence predominates in studies of the Armenian Genocide as well as in the collective imagination of the Genocide. The public spaces of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan, the most important public site of genocide remembrance, for example, are almost exclusively devoted to visual displays and to interpreting photographic evidence. By comparison, sonic memories of the Genocide, which carry enormous emotional and affective weight, as well as historical and cultural significance, have generally been neglected as a site of research.

In engaging with sonic memory as a form of sense-making and a site of knowledge, I am particularly indebted to the work of Carolyn Birdsall, who examines the role of earwitnessing and the role of sound 'within personal and social contexts of remembering' (Birdsall, 2009, p. 169). Birdsall moves beyond the usual sonic archives of sound recordings, music, song lyrics, and sound technologies in seeking to recover and examine the audible past. Interviewing elderly residents of Düsseldorf, Germany about their auditory experiences of bombing during the Nazi era, Birdsall engages oral testimony as a site of earwitnessing, investigating 'how remembering and witness testimony are informed by auditory experience' (ibid., p. 170). Whereas, she writes, 'the common conception of the *eyewitness* upholds the notion of an observer who experiences and remembers in visual and semantic terms,' Birdsall investigates modes of sonic remembrance that move beyond 'the visualist associations with witnessing' (ibid., p. 169).

Engaging with earwitness testimony can profoundly reshape our understanding of the Armenian Genocide and its effects, since experiences of the Genocide extend far beyond what was visible, what was seen, and what victims and survivors were able to see. Indeed, as becomes clear from earwitnesses' testimonies, many survivors primarily or only had access to auditory experiences of certain traumatic events. Since those who were targeted were often hiding from the perpetrators of genocide, in many cases they had no choice but to interpret the events unfolding

around them primarily through listening. And, even in those moments when they *were* able to see (or engage in multiple modes of sensing and sense-making), a sonic memory sometimes emerges as the primary memory of an event. Further, in some cases, a memory of the Genocide has emerged *as sound*: for example, as an unwanted sound that continues to ‘resound in the ear’ of the survivor. In other cases, a collective memory has taken shape *as song*: for example, in genocide songs that survivors sang to collectivize the pain of the Genocide and to transmit knowledge of an event that was forbidden to speak about publicly and therefore to ‘know.’

Sonic memory is a site of historical, cultural, and affective knowledge; and sonic memories can be formed through individual as well as collective and shared processes of remembering. Listening to sonic memories can thus deepen our understanding of the Armenian Genocide both in terms of its historical dimensions—in better understanding what occurred—as well as in connection to its social, psychological, and emotional realms. Attending to sonic memories can also be a form of what I call ‘counterlistening’ (Ouzounian, forthcoming): listening *against* official narratives of the Genocide, and in this case, against the narrative of genocide denial that continues to be maintained by the Turkish state.

Introduction to the Armenian Genocide

Despite over a hundred years of genocide denial by the Turkish state—an official state policy I return to later—the contours of the Armenian Genocide have been well established and are widely agreed. Starting in 1915 and continuing with full force until 1917, with smaller massacres occurring until 1923, approximately 1.5 million ethnic Armenians living in the Ottoman Empire (present-day Turkey) were killed outright, or else died of hunger, thirst, exhaustion, disease, or suicide, as the result of a state-led campaign to rid the Ottoman Empire of its Christian subjects—principally, Armenians, Greeks, and Assyrians—in a bid to consolidate state power and render Turkey ‘for the Turks’ (Bryce, 1916; Morgenthau, 1918).

Hundreds of thousands of Armenians were killed outright by Turkish gendarmes and Kurdish peasants who received orders to rid the empire of ‘infidels’ (*gavûrs*, in Turkish). According to witness testimonies, victims were killed with rifles, knives, swords, clubs, axes, daggers, shearing scissors, and truncheons; they were hanged, drowned, beheaded, and dismembered; thrown into pits, wells, rivers, and valleys; buried alive, boiled alive, skinned alive, and burned alive.¹ A common method of mass killing was to gather the Armenian population of a town into barns or stables, soak the building in kerosene, and set it on fire. Survivors recall hearing the anguished cries of those who were burning alive, as well as the celebratory songs of the perpetrators. The survivor Shogher Tonoyan (b. 1901, Mush), who lost 60 members of her family in one such fire, recalls a harrowing scene whereby she and her cousin escaped a burning stable when its roof collapsed by ‘treading on burnt logs and corpses’ and coming out through a breach. ‘There we saw the Turkish soldiers dancing in a circle, swinging and striking their sabres

and singing merrily “*Yürü, yavrum, yürü!*” (Dance, my child, dance!)’ she recalls. ‘Up to this day that song resounds in my ears’ (Svazlian, 2011, p. 98).

In seeking to empty Armenian towns of men and thereby weaken resistance, Armenian men aged 25 to 60 were called to military service but were disarmed, shot, or forced to do hard labour (Bryce, 1916, p. 9; Morgenthau, 1918, pp. 302–303). At the same time, prominent Armenian men—industry leaders, religious leaders, and community leaders—were imprisoned under the false premise of anti-Turkish activity. In prison, many were tortured and executed. The use of *bastinados*—the caning of the soles of the feet with a thin rod until the feet ‘swell and burst,’ often requiring amputation—was reported in numerous districts (Morgenthau, 1918, p. 306). The genocide survivor Mikayel Mkrtych Chilingarian (b. 1904, Harput) says of his father, who was imprisoned for around one month in May 1915, and who was permitted to come home for one night to change his clothes, that ‘He was completely changed, he had grown thin and pale; he walked cautiously and slowly, as if he was not walking on his own feet’ (Svazlian, 2011, p. 269). Chilingarian recalls, ‘My father told us in a trembling voice: “All this is the result of the terrible daily beating; look carefully and never forget it.” Up till now, when I recall my father, I remember with horror that scene and his last words’ (ibid., p. 269).

Survivors report that Turkish gendarmes cut open the bellies of pregnant women in a ‘game’ to determine the sex of the baby (ibid., pp. 176, 216, 241, 292, 313, 344, 378, 387, 392). Many survivors also witnessed the beheading of children and adults, remarking that gendarmes used the decapitated heads ‘as a football’ (ibid., p. 353, 360) or threw them into pits (ibid., p. 432). The survivor Gyurdji Harutyun Keshishian (b. 1900, Zeytun) testifies:

They made us walk. On the way, they killed women, too, for our turn had come. And do you know what they did? There was a big pit in the desert; they were cutting the heads of women and children and throwing them into the pit. The poor children were dying like lambs When the gendarmes finished their work, they poured petrol in the pit to burn the corpses. The dead did not feel, but the voices of those alive would tear your heart into pieces.

(Svazlian, 2011, p. 432)

Those who were not killed outright were forced to march to the deserts of Der Zor (present-day Syria), where the average temperature is 40° Celsius in summer and 2° Celsius in winter, thus ensuring death by exposure (Dolbee, 2020). During these death marches, Turkish gendarmes rode on horseback, keeping Armenian deportees, who mainly travelled barefoot, in line with rifles and whips. Survivors testify that they were ‘driven like sheep’ (Svazlian, 2011, pp. 244, 259, 274, 304, 313, 352, 389, 432, 445, 448). Hundreds of thousands of Armenians died of starvation, thirst, disease, and execution on these death marches. The survivor Ashot Ohanian (b. 1905, Bursa) says, ‘We were walking on foot for days and weeks. Our feet were

bleeding. The policemen were beating us with whips. Many could not endure the sufferings and died on the road' (ibid., p. 399).

Those who survived the death marches were typically relocated to refugee camps and orphanages where many, succumbed to disease. Cholera and typhus were pervasive, as were dysentery, trachoma, pneumonia, and diseases borne of malnutrition. One orphanage in Alexandropol (present-day Gyumri), managed by the charity Near East Relief, housed 25,000 children. A survivor from Moosh recalls the moment her group arrived at Alexandropol, travelling on foot. They found that 'thousands of refugees had gathered and typhus was devouring innumerable victims' (ibid., p. 96). Her group set off to Tbilisi, Georgia—some two hundred kilometres away—the very next day.

During these tragic years, some Armenians committed suicide to escape murder, rape, or forced Islamization. Some survived by marrying Muslims or by being 'adopted' by Muslim families. These survivors were forced to renounce their Armenian-ness and their Christian religion, and to discontinue speaking the Armenian language. Many Armenian women and girls were sold into sexual slavery, including by public auction, and forced to join harems (Bryce, 1916, p. 7). Photographs of their tattooed faces line the walls of the Armenian Genocide Museum in Yerevan today.

Despite the measures taken by the Ottoman government to suppress communication with the outside world (Sunny, Göcek, and Naimark, 2011), news of the events circulated globally at the time they occurred, including through detailed reports and testimonies by diplomats, journalists, doctors, humanitarians, missionaries, travellers, survivors, and witnesses; through photographs that were smuggled out of the empire; as well as through articles in numerous international journals and newspapers.

While most historians agree that the deaths of Armenians and other Christian subjects in the Ottoman Empire were the result of a state-led campaign of mass extermination, the Turkish state maintains that these deaths were the result of a military strategy of 'relocation' and, in the Armenian case, a justifiable response to Armenian separatism and nationalism. In present-day Turkey, it is considered a crime of 'insulting the Turkish nation' to recognize the Armenian Genocide as such. This crime carries a sentence of six months to two years in prison according to Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code.

The denial of genocide by the Turkish state is not only notable in how long it has persisted in the face of incontrovertible evidence and international pressure, but also in that the principal orchestrators of the Genocide, known as the Three Pashas—members of the Young Turk party and leaders of its far-right Committee of Union and Progress—were sentenced to death by Ottoman Military Tribunal in 1919 for bringing the empire into war and 'organizing massacres against Armenians and Greeks' ('Turkey Condemns Its War Leaders,' 1919; see also Sunny, 2015). Given this early recognition of war crimes by the Turkish state itself, the denialism that followed can be thought of as part of a larger project of nation-building, most notably marked by the replacement of the Ottoman Empire (a sultanate) by the

(constitutional) Republic of Turkey, established in 1920–23 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who served as its first president until his death in 1938.

Soundwalking through history

In seeking to trace what survivors heard during the Armenian Genocide, and how sonic violence formed part of its injuries (and violent tactics), I have consulted contemporaneous news articles and diplomatic and humanitarian reports, as well as secondary genocide literature. My main source here, however, is the essential volume of survivors' testimonies collected over a 50-year period by the Armenian ethnographer Verjiné Svazlian and published in its English translation in 2011 as *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Svazlian, 2011). Starting in 1955, when, as she stresses, 'it was not possible to speak explicitly about the Armenian Genocide in Soviet Armenia,' Svazlian went from village to village, recording and transcribing verbatim some 700 survivors' 'memoir-testimonies,' including 315 'song-testimonies' or genocide songs: Armenian and Turkish-language songs that memorialized the events of the Genocide, and that some survivors spontaneously sang as they recalled those events.

We can think of Svazlian's act of collecting testimonies—one that she began while still a university student and continued over a period of decades despite the significant personal risk—as an original act of counterlistening, and even as a form of soundwalking. 'In [Soviet] Armenia, under the scorching summer sun and in the icy winter cold,' she recalls, 'I went on foot, from district to district, from village to village, searching and finding eyewitness survivors miraculously rescued from the Armenian Genocide. I approached them tactfully, without diverting their attention with irrelevant questions, and let them freely express their immediate impressions. I wrote down (and also tape-recorded) the bewildering memoirs, the impressive stories and the diverse historical songs, which they narrated and sang' (Svazlian, 2011, pp. 7–8).

Svazlian's process of collecting testimonies was therefore rooted in walking and listening. She had no choice but to walk from village to village, since many survivors, dispossessed and living on the margins of society—'plundered, left destitute' (*ibid.*, p. 13)—resided in remote areas that were difficult to reach in any other way. She also walked because of the radical, dissident nature of her work, which would have prevented a more public form of movement and research. Svazlian's process was equally rooted in focused listening: she listened, as she says, without diverting survivors' attention. Indeed, it is only because of Svazlian's original, self-sacrificing act(s) of listening that we can now 'listen' in a collective, shared, or public way. It is notable that Svazlian's sensitive approach to listening enabled survivors to speak *and sing*, given that many had never previously shared their experiences of the Genocide. Her listening enabled survivors' memories to come to the surface, be transmitted through speech and song, and through the recording, transcription, publication, and circulation of these memories, it has enabled us, too, to listen.

Svazlian herself uses a sonic metaphor to describe the force of emotion that arises from concealed and denied memory. The work of collecting survivors' testimonies 'has no end,' she writes, since 'there is not a single Armenian family, who has not suffered human and material losses as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide' (ibid., p. 9). 'For that reason,' she continues, 'the theme of the Genocide raises its voice and roars in the blood of the Armenian people' (ibid., p. 9). In attending to survivors' sonic memories, my aim is to hear this voice-in-the-blood, and for this voice to leave the blood and enter the air.

Earwitnessing genocide

In engaging with a deeply contested history—one that, if addressed publicly in present-day Turkey can cost one's freedom or even one's life (Freely, 2007)—it is important to convey from the outset that I regard survivors' testimonies as sacred utterances whose truthfulness is sacrosanct.² I do not reference survivors' testimonies as 'proof' of the Armenian Genocide, even as they serve, in my opinion, as its most important body of evidence. As a descendant of genocide survivors (each of my grandparents or great-grandparents was a survivor), I do not qualify so-called 'debates' on the Armenian Genocide by engaging with them as such. Such debates are only alive because of state denial, and I see them as a continuation of the violence perpetrated by the Turkish state towards Armenians.

Still, I do wish to reflect on the special *quality* of truth that emerges through survivors' testimonies, both individually and as a collection. On the one hand, an evidentiary or historical truth emerges as similar experiences are reported by people from different regions who could not have had any knowledge of one another. But a deeper, cultural truth emerges as well: a truth about a people who shared a common language, customs, and traditions—ways of feeling and ways of remembering. An endangered (nearly exterminated) culture is transmitted through survivors' testimonies, including through such linguistic phenomena as turns of phrase; through *what* is recalled and *how*; and in the expression of certain kinds of pain and sorrow. In the case of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, this includes the spontaneous recall of genocide songs—what might be understood as a form of sonic resistance and survival: a way of memorializing a traumatic past that has been concealed by the state; transforming that pain into song; and using the medium of song to retain collective memories and ensure their circulation and survival.

Regarding the testimonies collected by Svazlian, it is notable that many are remarkably detailed; one survivor, Karapet Tigran Kelekian (b. 1904, Everek), for example, recounts each leg of the journey he was forced to take on foot as a child of 11 years, 'walking daily eight hours' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 373). He remarks that 'the length of our route was 677 km. But it was planned so that we shouldn't use built roads, so the route must have been at least 800 km long' (ibid., p. 373). Many testimonies are also strikingly imagistic, whether they depict visual or sonic scenes. The survivor Mesrop Manvel Mesropian (b. 1900, Yozgat), for example, describes a scene whereby the Biblical Day of Judgment had 'become a reality.' He testifies:

Abandoned by God and friends, unprotected in the open field, the widespread horror of death waved like a huge flame driven by a terrific blast over the heads of 10,000 innocent, sacrificial Armenians....

The terrified children's screams, the wail of the mothers whose children had been relentlessly grasped from them, the heart-rending cries of the children who were being taken away from their mothers, the moans and groans of those in agony blended into an awful funeral dirge, which joined the curses and clamors of those who were waiting for their turn to be martyred. Thunderbolts were sent to heaven: 'God, smell our innocent blood and take vengeance.'

(Svazlian, 2011, pp. 348–349)

Earwitness testimonies such as Mesropian's go far beyond relaying the *events* of the Genocide. They give voice to textures of experience of genocide, conveying the full force of the brutality that occurred and the depth of the suffering that was endured. The suffering that Mesropian witnessed was manifested, among other ways, in *and through* sound. He heard terrified children's screams; the wails of mothers whose children were being taken from them; the moans of the dying; and the curses of those awaiting execution. For him, those sounds 'blended into an awful funeral dirge' as though each of those tormented voices was a distinct part in a chorus of suffering.

Those sounds also caused him to suffer. They transmitted the torment and suffering of others, and, by earwitnessing them, Mesropian himself felt and 'absorbed' that torment. Attending to traumatic sonic memories such as Mesropian's can therefore not only help to establish the facts of the Genocide, but it can also enable a more nuanced appreciation of how victims and survivors sensed and interpreted its manifold overwhelming traumas.

Announcing exile

The first sounds that many survivors recall of the Armenian Genocide are the voices of Turkish town criers who arrived at Armenian districts on horseback, announcing the orders that Armenians should either convert to Islam or be exiled. Nouritsa Kyurkdjian (b. 1903, Aintab) says, 'One day, we heard horse hoofs from the street. The town crier, Moukouch, announced, "Listen, hey, people! In twenty-four hours, you must either change your homes or your religion"' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 453).

The survivor Yeghiazar Karapetian (b. 1886, Sasun) remembers the voices of Turkish town criers as emerging against a backdrop of silence and the foreboding caws of black crows. 'On Monday morning, the 29th of June [1915], the streets were empty, no human being was seen: there was neither whisper nor movement,' he recalls. 'Only the ominous caws of thousands of black crows were heard from the tall poplars. At the moment when the sun had quite risen in the sky, all of

a sudden the shrill voices of the Turkish town criers were heard in the Armenian districts' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 83). The criers ordered local Armenians to gather with their carts, mules, property, and family and report to the local government building; those who refused to obey the order would have their property confiscated and would be 'exiled by force' (ibid., p. 83).

Along with the voices of Turkish town criers, survivors recall hearing the terrifying sounds of cannonade and gunfire as the killings got underway. One survivor recalls, 'At the time when thousands of cannons and guns were thundering over the Armenian quarters, pitiless voices of the town criers were heard from the Turkish districts' (ibid., p. 83). Another survivor, who was seven years old at the time of the events, recalls, 'We heard the cannonade of the Turks. We hid behind rocks. I used to cry out of fear The cannonade sounded like thunder' (ibid., p. 161).

Several survivors recall hearing 'drum and zurna' (the zurna is a reed instrument) as Turkish gendarmes descended upon Armenian villages and towns. These instruments were sounded for several reasons: to signal Turkish presence and power, representing a form of sonic territorialization; to accompany the celebratory sounds of Turkish victory over the vanquished—and thus a form of sonic triumphalism (as in the song that Shogher Tonoyan heard as her family burned); and to mask the sounds of torture and murder. In *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (Morgenthau, 1918), Henry Morgenthau, who served as the American Ambassador to Turkey between 1913 and 1916, details the various methods of torture that Turkish gendarmes used on Armenian prisoners. 'These cruelties,' he writes, 'were usually inflicted in the night time. Turks would be stationed around the prisons, beating drums and blowing whistles, so that the screams of the sufferers would not reach the villagers' (Morgenthau, 1918, p. 306). In the early stages of the Genocide, it was advantageous not to raise alarm and thereby inspire resistance. Therefore, the sounds of drum and zurna were sometimes deployed as a military tactic: to mask the sounds of suffering and hide genocidal intentions.

As the killings and deportation orders spread, survivors recall hearing 'turbulent noises' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 528) and general 'noise and clamor' (ibid., p. 366). In survivors' memories, these noisy soundscapes are often contrasted with the idyllic soundscapes of village and town life. Many survivors remember their villages and hometowns with profound affection and longing, and associate them with the comforting sounds of rivers, birdsong, church bells, and festivities.

The turbulent noises of the starting genocide are also contrasted in survivors' testimonies with the terrified silence of victims. Heghnar Gabriel Ghoukassian (b. 1896, Pasen, Delibaba Village) testifies, 'We were to pass the canyon without any noise or voice. Not a stone would stir under our feet Mothers [were ordered] not to take out their nipples from their babies' mouth, even if the child got choked, so that any crying voice would not be heard. We passed by night, we passed without any noise' (ibid., p. 121). Many survivors report that families were forced to hide or abandon their babies for fear that their cries would attract Turkish soldiers: 'They left the babies under the trees, for they were crying. They did not keep any babies, because the enemy would hear their crying' (ibid., p. 89).

'My uncle's voice stopped'

Among earwitness memories of the Armenian Genocide, memories of voices—whether the shrill voices of Turkish gendarmes, or the weak and fading voices of the dying—are recalled in particular emotional detail and depth. Survivors often specify the *quality* of the voices they heard, conveying the emotional landscape that was wrought through the voice. They describe, for example, 'faint voice' (Svazlian, 2011, pp. 236, 238, 339); 'trembling voice' (ibid., p. 269); 'heavy voice' (ibid., p. 238); 'low voice' (ibid., pp. 262, 315, 357, 375); 'shaky voice' (ibid., p. 321); 'quivering voice' (ibid., p. 334).

In Svazlian's volume, there are over 250 references to 'crying,' and many to 'shouting,' 'screaming,' 'wailing,' 'yelling,' 'pleading,' 'moaning,' 'groaning,' and 'lamenting.' The survivor Souren Sargsian (b. 1902, Sepastia/Sivas) describes a scene in which women 'were crying and lamenting over their children, screaming and cursing their fate and their luck in hoarse voices' (ibid., p. 319). He also describes a scene in which 'thousands of voices' came together in a plea for salvation:

Eight to ten gendarmes armed with bayonets and fifteen to twenty Kurds surrounded us, made us sit in a sandy mound in rows, according to age and height. A woman came to save her little boy. One of the gendarmes cursed and pushed her roughly into a pit. She got up screaming plaintively: 'Help, they're slaughtering the children!' Suddenly voices of thousands of women rose in the darkness to heaven. The chief of the gendarmes ordered to open fire towards the people. They took the rifles and fired towards the people: no more voices were heard, only the moan of the wounded women.

(Svazlian, 2011, p. 320)

Several survivors report listening to fading or disappearing voices as a marker of death—as evidence that a loved one was no longer alive, as in the story recounted by Ronia Terzian (b. 1920, Aleppo):

In the silence of the night we heard the sound of whipping and my uncle's voice calling, 'Help! Help!' My mother was crying, was pulling her hair and was rolling on the ground. Then she lost consciousness. The strokes of the whip were heard for a long time. My uncle's voice became weaker and weaker. I was crying for my uncle and my mother. The neighbors sprayed water on my mother's face. She opened her eyes, said 'Aram, my brother,' and closed her eyes again. My uncle's voice stopped, and the whip strokes stopped.

(Svazlian, 2011, p. 525)

As these testimonies show, the voice can be a crucial site of listening to genocide. Victims cried and screamed from sheer pain and terror, but also because they wanted others to hear their pain. The voice was often the only tool victims had to express

their suffering. Attending to sonic memories of victims' voices can therefore be a way of recovering these concealed voices, and a step towards recognizing their pain.

'We walked among corpses'

In the sound studies literature, walking is typically posited as a methodology that enables a more active, intimate, and embodied exploration of a sonic place. In this literature, soundwalking is justifiably celebrated as a means towards producing a lived, sensorially rich knowledge of a sonic environment: embodying a sonic choreography of an urban environment by 'walking the sonic city,' for example. By contrast, the stories of walking relayed in survivors' testimonies are of walking as a means of mass extermination, torture, and dispossession.³ As Henry Morgenthau writes, from April 1915 'despairing caravans' set forth from 'thousands of Armenian cities and villages.' At first, 'the individuals bore some resemblance to human beings'; soon, however, 'the dust of the road plastered their faces and clothes, the mud caked their lower members, and the slowly advancing mobs, frequently bent with fatigue and crazed by the brutality of their "protectors," resembled some new and strange animal species.' Morgenthau attests that, from April to October 1915, 'practically all the highways in Asia Minor were crowded with these unearthly band of exiles. They could be seen winding in and out of every valley and climbing up the sides of nearly every mountain—moving on and on, they scarcely knew wither, except that every road led to death' (Morgenthau, 1918, pp. 313–314).

Survivors recount how, after walking barefoot for weeks while deprived of food and water, many deportees simply lay on the ground and perished. Azniv Grigor Siradeghian (b. 1909), a survivor from Sepastia who was exiled to the Surudj desert, and who was only six years old at the time of the Genocide, set off on the road with her mother and four younger siblings. All died on the road, 'of hunger and exhaustion' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 339). 'For we walked and walked up one mountain, then the next, we went up and down seven mountains,' Siradeghian recalls. 'Mother was carrying her baby; she was so exhausted that she could not walk anymore; she fell down We walked every day, we walked among corpses' (*ibid.*, p. 339).

Many survivors of the death marches describe the anguish at being forced to leave their dead and dying relatives behind, and at the horror of seeing so many unburied corpses on the road. The survivor Kadjouni Toros Gharagyoizian (b. 1905, Shabin Karahisar) testifies:

On the road, everywhere, we met devoured and rotten corpses of women and children. We saw there a dead mother and her dead baby; another elder child had fallen on his mother's breast; he was still alive and was writhing and crying in a faint voice. We passed by these pitiful scenes with indifference: thinking that one day we would be in the same state People died, succumbing to hunger and the tortures of the road.

(*Svazlian, 2011, p. 236*)

The sounds of the death marches were the sounds of subjection and terror. Survivors recall hearing whip strokes, gunshots, and the yelling of Turkish gendarmes; the screams and wails of the deportees; the groans and moans of the dying; and the 'deafening howling' of wild animals such as jackals and wolves that devoured corpses at night (Svazlian, 2011, p. 387). The survivor Galoust Gevorg Soghomonian, who was born in 1905 in Bolou, and whose father was a second cousin of the celebrated Armenian priest and composer Komitas Vardapet, remembers the moment his family was 'forced to join the multitude of Armenian exiles, of which no beginning and no end were visible' (ibid., p. 389). Moving forward under whip strokes, they learned they would be taken to the Der Zor desert. 'Cries and wails were heard from everywhere,' Soghomonian recalls. Those who fell behind were shot or killed with a bayonet, the Turkish gendarmes saying "'*Geber, gâvur!*" ["Die, infidel"]' (ibid., p. 389).

Soghomonian describes a brutal, terrifying soundscape on the road to exile. Each day began with the yells of the Turkish gendarmes, who woke up the exhausted deportees. He recalls:

I was, at that time, ten years old and I clung, terrified, to my parents. I felt very anxious on hearing the loud shouts of the Turkish gendarmes, the cries and moans of the hardly moving people, the gun-shots resounding from all directions. I wanted to be near those sounds and see with my eyes everything going on around me; I wanted to help those poor people, but the horror I felt as a child made me cling more and more to my parents' hands. I felt that every gun-shot took a human life away. Those who did not obey orders were pierced with a bayonet or had their head cut with a sword.

(Svazlian, 2011, p. 389)

Soghomonian's testimony gives voice to the sonic experience of the death marches from the perspective of a young child. He describes a chaotic acoustic scene that made him 'very anxious': he wanted instinctively to see what was happening around him and help those who were suffering, but he was terrified to do so. As a child, the sounds he heard were larger than life: he heard gunshots as 'resounding from all directions' and felt each one as taking away a human life. The sounds were both all-encompassing and piercing; both overwhelming and paralyzing. The feeling that a soundscape was both captivating and traumatizing is repeated across survivors' testimonies. *Not* listening to violent sounds was not an option if one wanted to survive; yet hearing violence and suffering was itself a form of injury and trauma.

Indeed, some survivors testify that during the death marches they 'became deaf to the pain of others as a form of self-preservation. By mentally blocking out traumatic sounds, they were more able to withstand the trauma of the events unfolding around them.⁴ As one survivor says, 'The gendarmes ... brought the girls in white clothes. In the darkness of the night, they impaled them all with the

sharp stakes. Our ears became deaf to their and their mothers' screams, cries and heart-rending clamors' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 321).

The death marches were a form of mass extermination as well as of dispossession. After all, deportees were being marched *away* from their homes, towns and villages, families, livelihoods, and possessions. Even when the assigned destination was reached, there was a strong chance that the deportee would be killed at that spot—burned alive, killed with swords, or shot and thrown into rivers. It was not a euphemism to say that the waters of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers ran red with the blood of Armenians during these years: they were said to be 'the sepulchre of thousands of Armenians' (Bryce, 1916, p. 14). The survivor Kadjouni Toros Gharagyoizian (b. 1905, Shabin Karahisar) recalls a scene at one such final crossing, describing the moment when his group arrived at the Euphrates River:

Everybody was crying, shouting, screaming. Our voices reached the sky. Women were praying to God for salvation. We stood before two kinds of death—either we had to throw ourselves into the river or be driven by force to the cave to be slaughtered by the hands of the executioners. Someone set an example: the mother of a family gathered her children closely about her, raised her hands, crossed herself and shouted praying, 'Oh Lord, you did not help us, now we ourselves are coming to you. We are innocent.' Many followed her example.

(Svazlian, 2011, p. 236)

Water features heavily in survivors' testimonies of the death marches, although sonic memories of water are not of pleasant waterscape sounds as is typical in the sound studies literature, in which water sounds are often cited as a marker of a 'healthy' or desirable sonic environment (Schafer, 1994[1977]). Rather, survivors recall being so thirsty that they drank water out of the footprints of camels (Svazlian, 2011, p. 380) and from 'dirty puddles' in which bugs were visible (*ibid.*, p. 254). Some survivors even recall diving beneath corpses in the Euphrates to drink. Aharon Melikset Mankrian (b. 1903, Hadjn) testifies:

The water of the Euphrates was bloody, it was impossible to drink it; the corpses floated down the current and we dived to the bottom of the river in order to drink clear water ...

Those who could no longer walk, sat on the ground or lay down whispering 'water—water' and died. There were dried corpses all around.

(Svazlian, 2011, p. 428)

A prominent memory of a 'water sound' during the death marches, tragically, is of the sounds of people begging for water as they perished, and agonizing pleas for salvation at the river's edge.

Locating traumatic sonic memories

As survivors share their sonic memories of the Armenian Genocide, several use the expression that a sound is 'in their ears.' On one hand, this expression can signal the enduring presence of a memory: a sound is felt as *still present*. A sound in one's ear can also be a form of the past 'calling' to the present, seeming to speak directly to the listener. Heghnar Ghoukassian (b. 1896, Pasen), who recalls her hometown of Delibaba Village with deep affection, says, 'A river ran through the village. I have become old now, sometimes my ears whisper, and it seems to me it's our river whispering. Or, from afar, the noise of our millstone reaches my ears' (Svazlian, 2011, p. 121).

For some survivors, the feeling of sound being 'in the ear' can be a source of connection to the past. The only memory that some survivors have of a murdered relative, for example, is of the sound of their voice. Aram Momdjian (b. 1909, Marash) says, 'I was six years old when they came and drove us to exile. I hardly remember my father I remember my mother also quite dimly: only her words are in my ears: "They're taking us to Der-Zor to kill us. At least, let our children live"' (ibid., p. 449).

Sonic memories that live 'in the ears' can be a site of both pain and attachment—the connective tissue between a lost generation and a living one. Locating a sound in one's ear can also be a way of giving memory body: keeping the voice of a loved one alive and close by locating it *in* the body.

For some survivors, however, traumatic sonic memories continue to 'resound in their ears' in an unwanted fashion, or what might be thought of as involuntary sonic recall.⁵ As Shogher Tonoyan testifies, the song she heard her family perished continues to resound in her ears 'up to this day' (ibid., p. 98). Such sonic memories can be a site of re-traumatization: painful sounds are recalled involuntarily and, being present 'in the ears,' continue to disturb the listener who has no choice but to hear them.⁶

For Tonoyan, the horror of the Genocide was not only encapsulated in the fire that killed 60 members of her family and many of her fellow townspeople, but also in the sonic triumphalism that accompanied it—a triumphalism that was both manifested in and *produced through* song: a 'merry song' that raised the morale of those who were committing acts of genocide—a song that lubricated their violence, and that continues to torment one who heard it. Through her testimony, Tonoyan transmits an impression of those sounds, which have been inscribed 'onto' her ('in my ears'), and which continue to resound 'in' her. The injury that was done to Tonoyan was therefore not only the violent murder of her family, but also the *sonic imprint* of that crime, which remains. The song she continues to hear decades later is an example of what Mhamad Safa has theorized as the 'aftersound' of a violent event: a sonic aftershock that continues to produce trauma in its unfolding and resounding *over time* (Safa, 2022; Ouzounian, 2022).

Counterlistening to genocide

The value of sonic memory to knowledge is not only evidentiary; it also lies in the emotional matter that sonic memories can carry and transmit. If we seek to understand the incomprehensible—an historical event of such tragic proportions that it confounds human comprehension—we must seek to better understand the nature of those emotions and the role of sound and listening in producing and shaping them. This can enable us to better understand not only an ‘historical event’ (the concept itself is arguably a misnomer since the effects of genocide are not contained within any violent act but unfold across time and space)—but the conditions of the survivors themselves: their pain, terror, and sense of loss; how they feel, remember, and share traumatic experience; and how those traumatic experiences can emerge in connection to sound and listening.

Sound is both a manifestation or expression of trauma—as in the sounds of screaming, crying, lamenting, and moaning—and it can be traumatizing in and of itself. Sounds can transmit trauma between people through shared affective experience: hearing suffering causes suffering. Listening is not a neutral way of engaging with the world; it can be injurious, even when sounds are remembered and recalled versus heard ‘in the moment.’

As earwitness testimonies of the Armenian Genocide show, sound can be deployed as a weapon of mass extermination (as in the gunshots that induced terror in Armenian deportees); as a means of territorialization (as in the sounds of drum and zurna that signalled Turkish power); as a military tactic (as in the gendarmes’ use of noise to mask the sounds of torture); and as a way of asserting state control (as in the voices of town criers that carried deportation orders, or the yelling of gendarmes that kept deportees in line). Thus, sound played a key role in *producing* the Armenian Genocide and its traumas.

However, we must not only pay attention to how perpetrators of genocide used sound. Even as they were left to die, victims had voice. The sonic memories of survivors transmit those voices, whether the faint voices of the dying, the anguished voices of the crying and lamenting, or the desperate voices that came together in collective pleas for salvation, mercy, and justice. Listening to sonic memories can enable voices that were brutally suppressed—and that the Turkish state continues to conceal and deny—to sound and to be heard. Through listening to the voice-in-the-blood and the ‘voices that reached the sky,’ we can hope to better understand the incomprehensible, the unconcealable, the undeniable: that which continues to resound.

Dedication

This chapter is dedicated to my beloved grandparents Smpat Ouzounian, Armenouhie Ouzounian (née Kargodorian), Antranig Hamboyan, and Sirvart Hamboyan (née Margarossian). May they have peace, and justice.

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Notes

- 1 These methods of killing are all described in Verjiné Svazlian's *The Armenian Genocide: The Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors* (Svazlian, 2011).
- 2 Survivors of trauma are considered unreliable narrators by some psychologists and sociologists in that they 'often tell their stories "in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which undermines their credibility"' (Herman, 1992, p. 1, cited in Greenberg, 1998). I nevertheless regard genocide survivors' testimonies as an attempt, however fragmented or imperfect, to convey truth—and as an undeniable *will to truth*. By 'truth' I am referring not only to historical or scientific fact, but also the truth of experience—the truth of how individuals and communities make sense of their lived experiences. It is particularly in the realm of experience that sonic memory, as a form of sense-making, can be 'telling' as a site of knowledge.
- 3 As a result of this painful history and the continued denial of the Armenian Genocide by Turkey, acts of walking, marching, and pilgrimage hold special meaning for Armenians. Each year on 24 April, Armenian Genocide Remembrance Day, Armenians around the world take part in mass marches to commemorate the Genocide and protest Turkish denialism. Armenians have also undertaken pilgrimages to the sites of the death marches, both to commemorate the tragedies that took place there, and to collect evidence, such as bones and skulls, which continue to be unearthed in archaeological digs (Semerdjian, 2018).
- 4 In recovering traumatic sonic memories, it is important to recognize how deeply painful it was for victims and survivors of the Armenian Genocide to hear the suffering of others—to the extent that some 'blocked out' these sounds to survive. In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Susan Sontag famously questioned the sensationalist and sensationalizing aspects of war photography, as well as the problematic nature of *looking* at photographs of victims of war, asking 'Who are the "WE" at whom such shock-pictures are aimed?' (Sontag, 2003). Sontag's question is an important one to revisit in the context of 'listening to the pain of others,' because 'we' can listen to other people's pain from a distance. The sonic archive affords that distance, just as the medium of photography does.
- 5 See Birdsall (2009) on 'involuntary remembering' in earwitness testimonies.
- 6 Birdsall (2009, p. 178) makes the salient point that, since some earwitnesses re-experience a sound in the present moment, it is questionable whether this should be called a sonic *memory*.

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