

“When I was quite mature and had a child, I felt my father’s pain”:

**Comparing life stories, thoughts and opinions of
second-generation Holocaust and Armenian Genocide survivors**

By Mariam Kurshudyan and Yair Rubin¹ (June 2018)

Prologue

We come from different nationalities, different fields of interest, professions, societies, cultures and genders. We come from similar backgrounds in the sense that we both come from traumatized nations, from peoples that carry the scars of horrible historic events. These events still echo in almost every aspect of life – political, social and cultural – in our societies. So, despite the differences and because of the similarities, this article uses the first-person plural since what we wrote is agreed upon by both of us. This joint project originated in the Impact Group 'Common Remembrance, Future Relations' organised by IFAIR e.V. in 2017 and we would like to thank the organizers for the opportunity to meet, learn and create together.²

We argue that personal memory is the basis of collective memory. Personal memories become public knowledge through books, education, memorial events, and the media, thereby shaping collective memory, which in turn generates cultural guidelines for remembrance culture. We also accept the idea of transgenerational transference, which describes the transference of traumatic experiences by those who experienced trauma to their offspring through psychological and behavioural mechanisms (Kellermann 2001; Ofer 2004). Our project aims to discover the similarities and differences in the effect of a national trauma – the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust – on individuals from two different peoples like Armenians and Jews (Matosyan 2005). The article compares memories, lives and opinions of second-generation individuals of the Armenian Genocide and Jewish Holocaust survivors from Armenia and Israel.

It is *not* a comparison of the pain or the extent of the trauma.

It is *not* a 'suffering contest'.

¹ Mariam Kurshudyan is President of “4FEM Women’s Rights NGO” in Armenia. Yair Rubin is the founder and manager of “Face to Face”, an Israeli NGO for youth exchanges between Israel, Germany and Poland.

² For more information see: ifair.eu/impact-groups-en/common-remembrance-future-relations/

We maintain that studying the similarities and differences in those personal life stories benefits all of us; it is an essential step towards knowing and understanding others and empathizing with them. This can bring people together while strengthening remembrance culture on the one hand and fighting the hatred and racism that led to these atrocities on the other hand. We believe that cooperation in the fields of research, remembrance culture and education is essential. May this article be our humble contribution.

Methodology

We conducted two in-depth interviews with a self-compiled questionnaire. There are two criteria that we settled on before the interviews: First, we decided in advance that both interviewees should be from the respective 'Homelands', Armenia and Israel. Both nations have a big and significant diaspora, but we focus on those who live in the national-social frame of the people's Homeland. There is no doubt that living in the national Homeland influences personal and collective memory. The role of the national state in creating memorial days and sites, the role of the educational system in publishing, teaching and shaping consciousness – all of that contributes to the structure of collective and personal memory, and that in return creates national identity. Coping with immigration and being a minority, the way Armenian and Jewish Diasporas cope, and the influence that these factors have on the development of memory, consciousness and views, should be the subject matter of another research project. The second criterion is the fact that our interviewees are female. We did not intend to only interview women to begin with, but it so happened that we chose a female Israeli interviewee, and since we knew that we were going to have only one interviewee from each country, we decided to prevent gender differences by also choosing a female Armenian interviewee.

Analysis and Comparison

Our Israeli interviewee is T., 60 years old, born in a Kibbutz³ and a member of it, married and a mother of three. She was an educator, a school mistress, a guide in the Ghetto Fighter's Holocaust Museum and in the Children's Memorial⁴, and retired. Our Armenian interviewee is A., 72 years old, mother of two with one of them living in the USA. She is the head of the Art

³ The kibbutz, an egalitarian and primarily agricultural community, is unique to Israel and based on the values of Zionism and socialism (Rosner et al. 1990).

⁴ “Yad Layeled” is part of the Ghetto Fighter's House Museum. It is dedicated to the memory of 1.5 million Jewish children killed in the Holocaust and to teaching the subject to children in a suitable-for-their-age way. (Ghetto Fighters' House Museum, 2018)

department in the Art & Aesthetic Center in Ajapnyak district of Yerevan, and a pianist and Qanun player in a Kindergarten. To their request, they are not identified by their full names.

Most strikingly, both interviewees show that the 'content' of being second-generation is emotional; their transgenerational transference revolves around emotions but not information. Both women describe their childhood in the shadow of something horrible that had happened, but they were not told what had happened. There were feelings of anxiety, fear and hate – like T.'s mother says, “all Polish are bad”, but without any details of the events. T. found out that her father himself did not know what exactly had happened to his family, and as many of his generation he did not want to know. In A.'s childhood stories we can find silencing and concealment, like the story of the photo of her uncle in Dro⁵ uniforms that disappeared or the fact that children were not allowed to stay with the adults in the room at family gatherings. But the lack of words did not prevent the transmission of deep pain and memories of lost lives: “He [A.'s father] did not like to talk about the Genocide... He talked to me about what happened when I was already a student; when I asked him about my grandparents he did not like to answer those questions”. In her studies and in her professional life, T. looked for information about the Holocaust, mainly because she realized that being second-generation had influenced her emotionally but did not provide her with knowledge: “We thought we were experts, I thought I was an expert, and when I came to my MA studies, I found out that I didn't know enough. It was a lot of feelings without knowledge... my tendency is to know people, their stories, what they saw, but generally I didn't know the wide perspective of the historical process.”

Second, family - nuclear and extended - is very significant for both women. The family's history in old documents (A.) or in the father's diary (T.), the family gatherings they remember from their childhood, the impact they had on their growing up and the shaping of their consciousness, their deep identification with their parents' suffering, all these are significant parts of their identity. The success of their children, their marital status, and the 'normality' of their lives as well as the quality of family ties are extremely important to them as a testimony to their mental health. Emphasizing the importance of family, A. keeps repeating that she is the last of her family, a well-respected and well-known bloodline. She

⁵ An Armenian army unit, comprised of Armenian POW that chose to fight in the German army in WW II instead of staying in Genocidal terms of POW's camps, and was led by Drastamat Kanayan, known as Dro. (Chalabian & Chalabian, 2012)

presents herself as the “document keeper” of her family and it seems that this is part of her struggle to keep the family memory. Nevertheless, it is important for her to also connect the personal to the collective – the family documents are in the Genocide Museum's archive, linking personal and collective memory. Both women attach great importance to the way their children view the Holocaust or the Armenian Genocide. A. says: “My children also feel bad about the Genocide, though they feel much calmer about it”, and T. says, “they have this knowledge as part of their lives but it is not the centre of their lives”. It seems that transgenerational transference has a different set of attributes when it concerns the second and third generation – it is more knowledge-based and emotionally moderate, taking into consideration the children’s needs and their mental health. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the past, both on personal and historical level, is a very significant part of the third-generation identity. In the interviewees’ relationship with their parents, however, there is an interesting difference: T. describes very complicated relations with her mother, saying “my psychologist told me that my mother delivered a mother, not a baby. In my life, I am taking care of my mother instead of her taking care of me”. At the same time, she describes conversations with her father and her reading his diary. In her attitude towards the home she grew up in, she refers to both parents and to the feelings and knowledge she absorbed from both of them. A. hardly talks about her mother and she mainly refers to her father – the things he said, his memories, and how she could only feel his pain once she had grown older. One can only speculate as for the reasons of that difference, but without a comprehensive research we cannot know whether it stems from the specific family or is it evidence to a wider phenomenon.

It is important to note that there is a fundamental difference in the way the women view psychological assistance. For all of T.'s family members psychological help is a legitimate way of getting support that allows a healthy way of coping with the subject. T. sees traces of the trauma in her and her husband but says, “our children grew normal”. Whereas in A.'s family no one uses psychological support – “They don’t have anything like that” – a dismissal of psychological support because it is evidence to mental needs. This might be influenced by the fact that for T., the Holocaust is not only a memory, it is an indisputable historical event, while the denial of the Armenian Genocide is a significant and painful fact in A.'s life. A substantial part of A.’s social and political views is influenced by the struggle for the international recognition of the Genocide, the fight for returning to the territories that were taken from the Armenian nation and her attitude towards Turkey and the Turks. T. sees her

life decisions stem directly and unavailingly from her being second-generation: “I did what was expected from me to be a good child for my parents and to be a good member for my community, so sometimes I did things that were not always what I wanted or that were good for me”. In the way, she talks about her current life we could hear a critical, realistic observation: “If I could I would have tried to know more about what I want in an earlier age, and not only what society or the Kibbutz wants me to do. I would have tried to know more about who I am before my fifties”. She describes the change she was going through in recent years: “it was very clever to work in the museum because it opens all kinds of windows that were closed, so I sing more, and I laugh more, and I study, I am alive”. A. does not talk a lot about emotions, about the pain she grew up with and how it was manifested when she was a child. She is too busy living, fixing, improving, building and presenting normality. It seems that psychologically speaking she 'closed the door' to the past, but her growing up and her becoming a mother brought her closer to her father and to a greater identification with his suffering: “When I was quite mature and had a child, I felt my father’s pain, and felt being Armenian”. At this point we can see the overlap of the personal with the national identity, when feeling closer to her father also brought her closer to her national identity. We can see how the memory of the Genocide is one of the components of Armenian collective identity.

Another similarity among the two women is that they are both educators. For A., it is a way to contribute to change, to influence ways that prevent future violence: “I teach little children patriotic songs, but not the way ‘let’s go and fight’, but to be careful and think before acting for the benefit of all people”. Although in her daily life she does not deal with the subject of the Armenian Genocide directly, there is no doubt that it influenced her professional choices. T., until recently, dealt all her adult life explicitly with the subject of the Holocaust in various ways – she studied history, managed a school that followed the educational philosophy of Janusz Korczak, she worked as a guide in the Ghetto Fighter's Holocaust Museum and in the children's memorial, and today she studies Jewish culture before the war: “If you look at my life, all my life I have been dealing with the Holocaust, working with it...”. Dealing with it has two layers: on the one hand “it is some kind of therapy”. On the other hand, it means “to be a good child for my mother, this is the way I keep the story without dealing with her, but with others”. T. would like to see a change in Israeli remembrance culture. She maintains that the responsibility should rest with the state: “but it should be more about the life of culture before and not the annihilation of existence”. T. knows that it is a significant change that not everybody would like: “It could lead to a conflict with the survivors who will want to keep on

telling the story of killing the Jews, but I will say no, we'd rather speak about life". For A., the Genocide is directly related to current politics. In her view the government should solve the problem of the international recognition in the Armenian Genocide, and to take responsibility of preserving memory: "I think it has to be solved on the political level". But she feels that the struggle to recognition is useless: the repeated demonstrations, the repeated denial of the Genocide, the understanding that the land, the family's land and the nation's land, will never be returned, the feeling that there is no real intent to solve the issue. All that brought her to concentrate on the personal and family aspects of life. She teaches tolerance and does what she can in her personal and professional life, saying, "the government should regulate these issues. It is their responsibility". Sadly, she thinks that even if there was a solution it would not heal the pain or bring reconciliation.

Finally, both women have a worldview revolving around compromise, both talk about stepping away from historical injustice. For them the past has a moderating influence on their political opinion as T. says, "I hate it when people use the Holocaust as an excuse to treat others badly, for example Arabs." Similarly, both women do not deal with blame, condemnation or negativity towards the perpetrator's decedents: "I don't have poison in me as the second-generation towards anyone, even Turkish people" (A.). So, even though they both talk about childhood and growing up in the shadow of difficult emotions towards the perpetrators, those emotions have not become part of their social-political views. Both believe it is impossible to relieve the pain or find atonement, and yet they prefer to learn about life before the Holocaust (T.) or to look to the future (A.). They both want that everything will be done in order to better the life of future generations. Importantly, however, the women know practically nothing about the national trauma of the other, and neither of them learned about it – in school or elsewhere. It seems that in both nations there was, and maybe still is, a tendency to focus on the national tragedy while not paying attention to other tragedies, even if they might be similar. The reasons and the effects of that tendency should be the subject of another research.

Epilogue

Each of the women we interviewed grew up in a home that sprung from death and loss; both felt the shadow of bereavement, anger, helplessness and longing to what was lost; both grew up with parents who tried to protect them from the inconceivable cruelty, from a world of betrayal and murder. And both chose life. Both take pride in their children who are getting

away and that trauma is not a major part of their identity. Both of them emphasize the life before the national trauma and the future after it. More than telling the stories of victims, they want to tell the story of life, be it the story of cultural and community life of the Jews before the Holocaust, or the story of the renewed Armenian life after the Genocide. They both do not believe that telling the stories of the victims (T.), or acknowledging the Genocide and returning the lands (A.), would heal their pain or benefit their current societies. It seems that this is the perception that lies beneath their political stances, which emphasize compromise and humanistic values - the lessons they derive from the historical events. In both we can see similar transitions from personal memory to collective memory, from personal responsibility for family's history to the state's responsibility for collective memory and remembrance culture. They have wishes and ideas about the content of that memory, but as far as they are concerned it is the responsibility of the state.

We see similarities in certain things and differences in others, but it is obvious to us that there is a need to continue researching before anyone can say something definite about the resemblance and differences between the Jewish second-generation in Israel and the Armenian second-generation in Armenia. It seems that in the end we have more questions than answers. We are sure that there are lots of things to study, to research and to find out in relation to that subject. As the reader can see, there are two places that we specifically wrote "should be the subject of another research". We think that trying to answer those questions is essential for the development of the remembrance culture in both countries, and we hope that it will be possible to conduct such a full-scale research in the near future.

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