

SMYRNA TRAGEDY,
CONTINUING ORDEAL FOR
WOMEN SURVIVORS OF THE

Armenian victims of Turkish oppression in Smyrna. Unlike Armenians in the rest of the Ottoman Empire, few Smyrna (Izmir) Armenians were deported or killed during the Armenian Holocaust from 1914 to 1918. This tragedy enveloped the city and its surroundings following World War I when the Kemalist forces fighting the Greeks entered Smyrna on September 9, 1922. The Greek and Armenian quarters were set on fire, and the population was driven out and subjected to a prolonged agony on the quayside squeezed between the sea and the burning city.

The lifelong memory of this cataclysmic event has affected the survivors and the generations born to them. Women survivors of the Smyrna tragedy, tape-recorded at the University of California, Los Angeles, spoke of their ordeal, the burning city, and the mass of refugees squeezed against the sea thick with corpses and parts of mutilated bodies while Allied warships stood as soulless spectators.

Atrocities by the Kemalist forces provided an opening for local Turks to join in looting and killing. Turks forced their way into Armenian and Greek homes, burning houses and a church

with hundreds of refugees inside. As a child, Malviné Khanjian lost her father and was separated from her mother and siblings during the assault on the Christians of Izmir. She speaks of a feeling of betrayal by Turkish acquaintances: "My father's Turkish partner came to our house and drove us out, confiscating all our money and belongings. We were left in abject poverty, my mother with four orphans" (Armenian Oral History Collection, Malviné Khanjian [née Papazian], born in Aksar in 1912 and interviewed on November 23, 1982).

There was also a sense of betrayal by the Allied powers. Survivors remember how sailors turned on a water hose to chase off those who dared to swim the long distance toward their ship. The beautiful Smyrna seashore had turned into a slaughterhouse. Through it all, the Europeans walked indifferently, filming the gory scenes. Arsenouhi Vrtanessian remembers the warships turning their spotlights on while the Turks were raiding, raping, killing, and abducting pretty young girls. "What the Young Turks did to us in two years, Kemal did in 15 days," Malviné declares. "A massacre like that of Izmir has never happened anywhere." That conviction governed her mind and inspired her life as a survivor of "the greatest tragedy on earth."

Some survivors have dealt with their ordeal by speaking out, telling and retelling their stories, trying to capture every detail that could help them explain the inexplicable, understand the incomprehensible. Others' stories, although revealing from a psychological point of view, are incoherent, unclear, and sometimes contradictory. But testimonies are human documents, and the troubled interaction between past and present manifests a gravity that surpasses concern with accuracy. Occasional lapses and improbabilities are only natural. The paralysis of language is itself evidence of the ghastly ordeal. The women survivors and witnesses break into tears. They have not learned to articulate their ordeal. The mere utterance of a broken word or two draws back the curtain on a scene of utter

suffering: a Turk raping a young woman and then cutting her breasts off and leaving her to bleed to death.

Some have tried to suppress the memory by not speaking about it. Arsenouhi Vrtanessian says, "My daughter asks me to tell her my story, but I don't want to remember my sorrows" (Armenian Oral History Collection, Arsenouhi Vrtanessian [née Martikian], born in Izmir in 1902 and interviewed by Tamar Der-Megerdichian on February 23, 1987). Yet the sorrows are there; the memory is there, deep in the layers of the mind. Arsenouhi is afraid of sharing her memories with her offspring lest she injure their innocent souls. She is afraid of those memories' painful surging to the surface, as she "reconstructs an episode that continues to haunt" her.

These survivors' stories can only enrich an understanding of the Armenian genocide, the childhood memories of places that ceased to exist with the blow of the holocaust, and the traditional cultural traits that were buried with 1.5 million people and forgotten in the New World. They provide a human dimension or a humanistic insight for the Smyrna tragedy, but more important, they show the lasting impact of such catastrophes on women survivors and the generations they raise.

—Rubina Perroomian

See also Armenian Holocaust

References and Further Reading

- Armenian Oral History Collection, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). There are more than 800 interviews of survivors of the Armenian genocide in the UCLA collection. Out of these interviews, some 15 were with survivors of the Kemalist conquest and the sacking of Smyrna. This article is based on recorded interviews totaling about 48 hours.
- Dadrian, Vahakn N. 1995. *The History of the Armenian Genocide*. Oxford: Berghahn.
- Dobkin, Marjorie Housepian. 1988 (1966). *Smyrna, 1922: The Destruction of a City*. Kent, OH: Kent State University.