

Reading 6 — WOMEN AND THE DEPORTATIONS

The deportation of Armenians from villages across the Ottoman Empire followed the same pattern. Families were given a few days to collect their belongings. Their property was sold off or given to the local population. Men were rounded up and killed. Convoys of the elderly, women, and children were sent on the road and subject to robbery, looting, and murder at the hands of the special operations units and local tribesmen.

Children were often separated from their parents, some were forcibly converted to Islam and joined Muslim families, and others were killed. A number of women were given a chance to convert and compelled to join Muslim families; countless women were raped. Their stories, often recounted by witnesses, or recorded on scraps of paper, were given to sympathetic strangers who in turn passed on the papers to journalists or those working for Armenian relief groups. An Armenian woman from Bitlis told a witness about the brutality she and other Armenian women faced during the deportations. The witness recorded her story.

All the old women and the weak who were unable to walk were killed. There were about one hundred Kurdish guards over us, and our lives depended on their pleasure. It was a very common thing for



Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, courtesy of Elizabeth Boyajian Roberts.

Armenian survivors from Kharpert on a forced march to Baghdad in 1916, pictured here on the banks of the Euphrates River at Der-Zor, Syria.

them to rape our girls in our presence. Very often they violated eight-or ten-year-old girls, and as a consequence many would be unable to walk, and were shot.

Our company moved on slowly, leaving heaps of corpses behind. Most of us were almost naked. When we passed by a village, all the Kurdish men and women would come and rob us as they pleased. When a Kurd fancied a girl, nothing would prevent him from taking her. The babies of those who were carried away were killed in our presence.

They gave us bread once every other day, though many did not get even that. When all our provisions were gone, we gathered wheat from the fields and ate it. Many a mother lost her mind and dropped her baby by the wayside.

Some succeeded in running away, and hid themselves in the fields among the wheat until it was dark. Those who were acquainted with the mountains of that region would thus escape and go back to seek their dear ones. Some went to Sassoun, hearing that it had not yet fallen, others were drowned in the Mourad [Lower Euphrates] River. I did not attempt to run away, as I had witnessed with my own eyes the assassination of my dear ones. I had a few piastres left, and hoped to live a few days longer.

We heard on our way from the Kurds that Kurdish Chettis (bands of robbers) had collected all the inhabitants of Kurdmeidan and Sheklilan, about 500 women and children, and burnt them by the order of Rashid Effendi, the head of the Chettis.

When we reached the Khozmo Pass, our guards changed their southerly direction and turned west, in the direction of the Euphrates. When we reached the boundary of the Ginj district our guards were changed, the new ones being more brutal. By this time our number was diminished by half. When we reached the boundary of Djabaghchour we passed through a narrow valley; here our guards ordered us to sit down by the river and take a rest. We were very thankful for this respite and ran towards the river to get a drink of water.

After half-an-hour we saw a crowd of Kurds coming towards us from Djabaghchour. They surrounded us and ordered us to cross the river, and many obeyed. The report of the guns drowned the sounds of wailing and crying. In that panic I took my little boy on my back and jumped into the river. I was a good swimmer and succeeded in reaching the opposite shore of the Euphrates with my precious bundle unnoticed, and hid myself behind some undergrowth.

By nightfall no one remained alive from our party.⁸³

Two days after giving her account of the deportation the woman's son died of starvation. She was later tracked down and killed.

CONNECTIONS

- ✧ How do you respond to such unspeakable horror? How do you understand the brutality this woman faced if you have never experienced it? What do you know after hearing stories like this that you would not know otherwise?
- ✧ Much of this book has emphasized choice and decision-making. But in accounts like the one in this reading, the victims are faced with what Professor Lawrence Langer refers to as “choiceless choices.” In *Versions of Survival*, a book about survivors of the Holocaust, Langer describes these as decisions made in the “absence of humanly significant alternatives—that is, alternatives enabling an individual to make a decision, act on it, and accept the consequences—all within a framework that supports personal integrity and self-esteem.” What distinguishes a “choiceless choice” from other decisions? Why does Langer believe that normal standards for judging behavior will not apply to all the “choices” of victims?
- ✧ Donald Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller have studied the testimony of women who survived the deportations. They believe the conditions of the deportations had tragic consequences for Armenian parents and required Armenian mothers to make unthinkable choices. They frame some of those choices:
 1. Whose life is of more value? My own or those of my children?
 2. If I cannot care for all of my children, which lives shall I seek to preserve?
 3. Is it better that we, as a family unit, all die together, or that some family members perish while others survive?
 4. Is it preferable to give my son or daughter to a passing Turk or Kurd, knowing that he or she will thereby lose all consciousness of their Armenian as well as religious identity—but thereby survive—or is it preferable that they die? ⁸⁴

How are the choices they describe like the “choiceless choices” that Langer writes about?

- ✧ Systematic rape and forced prostitution were not specifically subject to international law until the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia included them in its mandate in 1993. The first conviction for rape as a crime against humanity came in February of 2001 in a case where Muslim women were systematically raped by Bosnian Serb soldiers. Why do you think it took so long for crimes against women to be recognized and prosecuted?

