

THE MESKENEH CONCENTRATION CAMP, 1915-1917:  
A CASE STUDY OF POWER, COLLABORATION,  
AND HUMANITARIAN RESISTANCE  
DURING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE\*

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For almost a full year, from spring 1915 to spring 1916, deportees arriving in Ottoman Syria found a relative respite from massacres, only to fight starvation and disease in concentration camps. Ottoman authorities conceived of and ran these camps as sites of forced confinement, where control, terror, disease, and deprivation framed the prisoners' daily life.<sup>1</sup> In these camps, inmates caught between the threat of re-deportation and burial ditches sought a way out by collaborating with, appeasing, manipulating, or resisting the system. In this article, I examine these processes through a case study of the Meskeneh concentration camp.

CONCENTRATION CAMPS DURING THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Historian Raymond Kévorkian identified clusters of concentration and transit camps in Ottoman Syria: a network of camps near Aleppo (chief among them Islahiye, Rajo, Katma, Azaz, Bab and Mumbuj), several camps along the Berlin-Baghdad railroad (Suruc, Arabpunar, and Ras ul-Ain), and camps along the Euphrates River (Meskeneh, Dipsi, Abuharar, Hamam, Rakka, Sebka, and Der Zor, among others).<sup>2</sup>

Ottoman officials outlined the deportation and settlement process of Armenian deportees in a meticulous guideline (*talimatname*),<sup>3</sup> which laid out the administrative framework in areas designated for the settlement of Armenians in Urfa, Zor, and Aleppo. The guideline provided for rest, transit, and settlement sites each with sufficient deportation, nutrition, and storage officers; necessary food supplies, means of transport, comfort, and security provisions for convoys, paying particular attention to women, children, and the sick; and temporary shelter (tents), housing, cultivable land, livestock, and assistance for the poor. To say that this utopic ordinance stood in stark contrast to the situation on the ground is an understatement.<sup>4</sup> Deprivation,

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<sup>1</sup> While in available Ottoman records the term "concentration camp" is not employed, German diplomats in the empire used precisely this term: *Konzentrationslager*. See, for example, DE/PA-AA/BoKon/171; A53, 5989 Telegram from the Administrator in Aleppo (Hoffmann) to the Embassy in Constantinople dated 18 October 1915, in *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916*, ed. Wolfgang Gust, (New York: Berghahn, 2014), 424.

<sup>2</sup> Raymond Kévorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (New York: I.B.Tauris, 2011), 625-72.

<sup>3</sup> Head of the Directorate for the Settlement of Tribes and Emigrants (*İskan-ı Aşâyir ve Muhacirîn Müdüriyeti*, İAMM) Muftizâde Şükrü Kaya Bey prepared the guideline. BOA DH. EUM. 2. ŞB, 68/88 Copy of guideline, Kaya to Talat on 8 October 1915.

<sup>4</sup> Historian Hilmar Kaiser has argued: "The deportations created a huge 'surplus population' without land and income that the authorities had to deal with. The Ottoman government was practically bankrupt and needed Armenian assets to finance the war effort. It was not realistic to provide for hundreds of thousands of Armenian deportees." See Hilmar Kaiser, "The Armenians in Lebanon during the Armenian Genocide," in *Armenians of Lebanon: From Past Princesses and refugees to Present-Day Community*, ed. Aida

exposure, abuse, and danger were staples of the deportation and settlement process—the latter mostly a euphemism for leaving hundreds of thousands to their own devices in guarded concentration camps in the desert.

Dumped into these camps, deportees took their fate into their own hands. They huddled in tents sewn of rags and bits of cloth. Families and individuals were often taken in by compatriots, relatives, and acquaintances. Others sought shelter in tents vacated by the death of fellow deportees. Familial ties constituted the innermost circle of social support. Family members tried to perform their traditional functions as much as possible, attempting to create a sense of normalcy in the camps. A broader yet crucial circle of support was that of families from the same village or neighborhood. Yet there were many, including children, who were alone, trying to survive with whatever power they could individually muster, and more often than not succumbing to disease and starvation or turning into an easy target of violence and abuse by camp administrators.

#### GENERAL FEATURES OF CAMPS

Authorities standardized the camps' command chain and administrative structure. Camps in the outskirts of towns were connected to those towns, while those near villages with no administrative infrastructure were linked to the nearest administration.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, separation of deportees from the local population was deemed important. Camps were generally within an hour's distance by foot from the nearest village or town, with the roads and bridges between the two heavily guarded. Moreover, locals were often emphatically ordered to capture or report Armenian deportees who appeared in their area to the authorities, giving rise to episodes of citizen vigilantism described in Armenian accounts. Yet the camps themselves were semi-porous, with locals generally allowed to enter to sell products, purchase—or simply snatch—women and children, or steal and abduct during night raids, with gendarmes often passively observing or, worse, aiding and abetting the victimizers for a share of the booty.

While gendarmes watched the routes in and out of the camp, control within the camp was entrusted to civilians. Referred to as *bekcis*, these men were often selected from the camp's very population. They were expected to be ruthless, and ruthless they were towards their fellow Armenian deportees. The head of the guards, the *bekcibaşı*, was also Armenian, and was selected by the camp director.<sup>6</sup> These directors reigned supreme in camps and, in these remote encampments in the desert, their personality often dictated as much of the reality in the camp as orders from above. They stalled in the implementation of re-deportation orders to extract more and more bribes from deportees, they killed, tortured, and raped with impunity, while few of them tried to improve the lot of their inmates, or at least did not cause as much harm. Camp directors had assistants, whose numbers depended on the camp population size. Other officials under the director included the *sevki memuru*

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Boudjikianian (Beirut: Haigazian University Press, 2009), 31. Realistic or not, the ordinance was drafted to give a semblance of legitimacy to the deportations.

<sup>5</sup> Abuharar, for example, was connected to Meskeneh, Hamam to Rakka, Tibni to Der Zor. See BOA DH. EUM. 2. ŞB, 68/88 Copy of guideline, Kaya to Talat on 8 October 1915, Article 4.

<sup>6</sup> Deportees who were not privileged enough to serve as guards tried to secure positions with lesser, but still desirable, privileges, like cart drivers and undertakers.

(deportation official), who directed the re-deportation process, and the *anbâr/ iaşe memuru* (warehouse and supplies official).<sup>7</sup>

Camp officials controlled large inmate populations by creating hierarchies and delegating certain responsibilities to a select group of inmates. These tasks included maintaining order and gathering intelligence inside the camp, controlling epidemics, burying corpses, and transporting people. The advantages of holding a position in camps were numerous, and the temptation to hold on to the little authority these Armenians wielded over fellow deportees was difficult to resist. Deportees tried either to join this fleeting elite or to influence it through connections and bribes. Much of camp life, from the selection of the spot where a newly-arriving deportee's tent was set up to the time and mode of that person's re-deportation, was determined by this elaborate network of connections and the person's ability to furnish what survivor Grigoris Balakian refers to as the "customary bribe."<sup>8</sup>

Arriving from the north or north-east, these deportees passed through a series of rest areas and transit camps, or even a brief stint in a *khan* in a major city, before they reached Ras ul-Ain or the first cluster of camps north of Aleppo. After spending anywhere from a few weeks to several months there (depending on bribes and connections they had) these deportees were typically sent in the direction of the great bend of the lower Euphrates, where another cluster of major camps sprung up—from Meskeneh to Der Zor and beyond—holding, between fall 1915 and summer 1916, hundreds of thousands of Armenians.

The liquidation of these camps under study occurred in two distinct phases. The camps around Aleppo were liquidated beginning in winter 1915,<sup>9</sup> and the deportees were pushed either towards Ras-ul Ain or the lower Euphrates, while the camps in Ras ul-Ain and along the river were emptied beginning in Spring 1916, and the survivors were marched to Der Zor.

#### MESKENEH: A CASE STUDY

When Hagop Seropian's family arrived in Meskeneh after an arduous journey in fall 1915, they were ushered in by a group of Armenian camp guards headed by *bekcibaşı* Yervant, from Izmit.<sup>10</sup> Seropian observed that the Armenian guards were underlings of the local director of deportations, the Circassian Hussein Avni Bey. They abused their power and benefitted from their position.<sup>11</sup> The Seropian family

<sup>7</sup> There are numerous articles in Şükrü Kaya's ordinance referring to warehouse officials and the process of distribution of food and other supplies to deportees. (See, for example, articles 3, 14, 16-18, 20, 22, 23, and 41.) Yet, as we shall see, the camps received little if any supplies earmarked for deportees, and the distribution process itself was corrupt.

<sup>8</sup> Grigoris Balakian, *Armenian Golgotha: A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1918* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), 247.

<sup>9</sup> By January 1916, Bab had shrunk from 5,000 tents to 1,000. In January, the liquidation of the camp picked up pace, and most deportees were forced out. Aram Andonian Archives at the Bibliothèque Nubar, Paris (henceforth, BNU/Andonian), Folder 42: "The situation in Bab during the last sevkiyat in 1916," The deportation of Armenians of Bab, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Hagop A. Seropian, *Yegheñi Husherês* [My Memoirs of the Great Crime] (Beirut: Photogravure Paklayan, 2005), 106-7. Deportees from Izmit had arrived in Meskeneh in droves. Survivor Hagop Arsenian recounted that "all the families who had come from the Izmit area, and only one from Ovajik [whence Arsenian came]... had settled on the banks of the Euphrates." See Hagop Arsenian, *Towards Golgotha: The Memoirs of Hagop Arsenian, a Genocide Survivor* (Beirut: Haigazian University, 2011), 109. References to Armenians from Izmit at the camp are also in Toroyan's testimony. See Zabel Yessayan and Hayg Toroyan, "Zhoghovurti mẽ hokevark'ë," *Kordz* 2 (1917): 67.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

was allocated a spot a little farther away from the tent city. They soon encountered some compatriots from Konya, who set their tents next to them.<sup>12</sup>

Meskeneh, situated at the great bend of the southern branch of the Euphrates, was a tiny village. Its population interacted closely with the concentration camp nearby, and its mayor was embroiled in a months-long investigation involving members of the military and deportees interned at the camp.<sup>13</sup> Around the camp, as one survivor recalled, there was “nothing more than a building, masquerading as an inn, a couple of miles from the course of Euphrates and hard against some bleak hills,”<sup>14</sup> and a telegram center near the inn on the western banks of the river.<sup>15</sup> Construction on a military supply line began in early May 1916.<sup>16</sup> That work was already underway when survivor Yeghisheh Hazarabedian arrived at the camp in early spring 1916. “The whole thing was under the orders of a captain and his company who, when not working on the construction of the barracks, lived in the inn. Outside of the inn there were some fifty Armenian laborers who had volunteered to work on the project so that they would escape being driven farther down the river... to Deir ez-Zor,” he explained.<sup>17</sup>

The camp itself was a ten-minute walk from the *khan* in the direction of the river.<sup>18</sup> In early 1916, as tens of thousands poured into Meskeneh, deportees set up tents on the heights overlooking the *khan*, while authorities reserved the area near the river for those scheduled to be re-deported next.<sup>19</sup> Deportees who wanted to put off re-deportation at any cost tried to secure permission to move to the camp on the hills. Most camps in the region had a section at a distance from the main encampment allocated for administrators and their assistants, with some deportees also allowed to set tent there, for a price. Thus, when Fr. Yetvart Tarpinian arrived in Meskeneh in March 1916, Avedis Kaselian, a physician from Hadjin who enjoyed the privilege of living in a secluded area of the camp on the hills, moved the priest near his tent and made him responsible for health matters.<sup>20</sup> By the end of 1916, when the camp was nearly empty, camp director Hussein Avni moved the remaining deportees from the heights to the area near the Euphrates.<sup>21</sup>

Listed as a transit camp in the September 1915 guideline,<sup>22</sup> Meskeneh had operated as such from the onset of the deportations, but its importance grew with the closure of camps around Aleppo city in January 1916. Prior to that, deportees had trickled steadily into Meskeneh. In early May 1915, the U.S. consul in Aleppo reported: “From Zeitoun about 350 families, or about 2,000 persons have been sent to Marash and from there to Aintab, and are expected to arrive in Aleppo about May 15, to be sent to Meskeneh, while about 250 or more families are expected to follow before

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> *Arşiv Belgeleriyle Ermeni Faaliyetleri, 1914-1918* (Cilt VII) [Armenian Activities in the Archive Documents, 1914-1918 (Volume VII)] (Ankara: Genelkurmay Basimevi, 2006), 254-56.

<sup>14</sup> Account of survivor Yeghisheh Hazarabedian in *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, ed. Paren Kazanjian (Boston: Hye Intentions, 1989), 293.

<sup>15</sup> Yessayan and Toroyan, “Zhoghovurti,” 67.

<sup>16</sup> *Arşiv Belgeleriyle Ermeni Faaliyetleri, 1914-1918* (Cilt VII), 257.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Yessayan and Toroyan, “Zhoghovurti,” 67.

<sup>19</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The camp directors of Meskeneh,” 74.

<sup>20</sup> *1915: Aghed yev Veradzenount* [1915: Disaster and Rebirth], ed. Levon Mesrob (Paris: Arax Publishing, 1952), 459.

<sup>21</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The camp directors of Meskeneh,” 74.

<sup>22</sup> BOA DH. EUM. 2. ŞB, 68/88 Copy of guideline, Kaya to Talat on 8 October 1915.

May 20 to report to the governor of Aleppo.”<sup>23</sup> While many of these early arrivals were re-deported to Der Zor, others were interned at the camp for longer periods. On his journey from Aleppo to Baghdad, Toroyan passed through Meskeneh (15 November 1915) where—on the right bank of the Euphrates<sup>24</sup>—he saw an estimated 1,500 Armenians “sheltered under 10-15 umbrella-shaped tents.”<sup>25</sup> The majority were women and children from Mersin, Harput, Adana, and Izmit; the few men among them were mostly from the western provinces.<sup>26</sup> Survivor Hagop Arsenian arrived from Bab with his family on 12 December, noting “the endless desert land devoid of grass and greenery.”<sup>27</sup> In the three weeks Arsenian spent in this transit camp, he witnessed the ravages caused by disease and hunger, and he himself spent more than two weeks in bed after contracting gastrointestinal flu.<sup>28</sup>

With the arrival of deportees from Bab, Meskeneh metastasized from an encampment of a few hundred tents to several thousand. When German diplomat Wilhelm Litten passed through Meskeneh on 3 February 1916 he witnessed “a large campsite with over 2,000 tents. More than 10,000 people.... Apparently no latrines. All around the town and the campsite a broad belt of human excrement and refuse, through which my carriage also had to drive for a while.”<sup>29</sup> Hazarabedian provided a similar estimate of 2,000 tents.<sup>30</sup> Upon his arrival in early spring 1916, he “found that the people here had been brought from Aleppo, Bab, Jerablus, and that this camp was only a temporary staging area from which one threw himself into the cauldron of Deir ez-Zor.”<sup>31</sup> Toroyan too witnessed the arrival of deportees:

In that period new deportees arrived from Aleppo. They were unable to even sit down; they threw themselves on the ground and slept, unconscious.... The Armenians who were there did not show any interest in the new arrivals—everyone was burdened with their own pain. Lines of people, fallen, sleeping, one weeping, another sobbing, and no one came to ask about their suffering.<sup>32</sup>

From May 1915 to April 1916, 110,934 deportees passed through Meskeneh according to camp director Hussein Avni. The re-deported constituted 28,834 Armenians; 80,000, or some 72 percent, died at the camp from various causes. The remaining 2,100 deportees were still there in April 1916.<sup>33</sup> According to Meskeneh’s Turkish military pharmacist, 55,000 Armenians were buried in the camp by July 2016.<sup>34</sup> Auguste Bernau, a German employee of the American Vacuum Oil Company who slipped into the camp in August-September 1916 to distribute funds secretly,

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<sup>23</sup> NA/RG59/867.4016/72 Report from Jackson to Morgenthau on 12 May 1915, in *United States Official Records on the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Ara Sarafian (London: Gomidas Institute, 2004), 40.

<sup>24</sup> There were thousands of more deportees on the hills farther inland.

<sup>25</sup> Yessayan and Toroyan, “Zhoghovurti,” 67.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Arsenian, *Towards Golgotha*, 109. Another deportee would call it “an arid bowl of sand.” See Kazanjian, *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, 293.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Litten journeyed from Baghdad to Aleppo in late January-early February 1916 and upon the request of the Rossler wrote a detailed report about what he saw. See DE/PA-AA; R14090; A 05498; Report from the Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 543-55.

<sup>30</sup> Kazanjian, *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, 293.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Yessayan and Toroyan, “Zhoghovurti,” 67.

<sup>33</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The corpses brought by the Euphrates,” 60.

<sup>34</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14093; A 21969; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 29 July 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 608.

adduced another figure. “Information collected on the spot allows me to confirm that around 60,000 Armenians were buried there,” he estimated in a meticulous account of his journey.<sup>35</sup> Andonian pointed out that 300 to 500 people died in Meskeneh every day when he was there.<sup>36</sup> Even the most conservative numbers are staggering: roughly one of ten deportees arriving in Syria-Mesopotamia died in Meskeneh.

However, as we shall see, deportees did not wait idly to die. They organized life in the camp, set up an orphanage, tried to establish continuous lines of communication with other camps, and attempted to protect themselves from looter and bandit attacks. Dozens managed to bribe their way back to Aleppo, while others escaped, not always successfully, and in some cases, not just once.

There was little to eat. The authorities have “no care about feeding them,” observed Bernau. “Happy are those [who have] a little money which enables them to get flour, if they can get some, and at this time some watermelon from the neighboring villagers or some sick sheep for the price of gold from passing nomads.”<sup>37</sup> Arab women came from nearby areas to sell food and other necessities to the deportees, at inflated prices. “Barely one *okha* (oka, 2.83 lb) of straw for burning was sold for 20 paras,” noted Toroyan.<sup>38</sup> Even gendarmes arriving in the area brought bags of flour to sell to deportees at gouging sums.<sup>39</sup> While those who could afford the flour prepared bread dough and threw it on the fire, children nearby begged them—sometimes their own relatives—for a piece. “But people, in their extreme and superhuman suffering, had become unsympathetic and heartless, not even heeding to the pleas of starving children,” Toroyan recalled.<sup>40</sup> And thus, those who couldn’t afford anything, particularly the children, would “throw themselves voraciously on anything that falls into their hands: they eat grass, earth, and even their own excrement,” described Bernau.<sup>41</sup> According to Hazarabedian, children were “reduced to urchins, to beggars—that is if they were strong enough to beg.”<sup>42</sup> Warehouse officials (*iâşe ve anbâr memûrları*) provided the bare minimum, and sometimes not even that. Often, deportees did not receive anything for weeks, and officials blamed the deprivation on lack of supplies. In fact, much of the supply was sold to deportees at exorbitant prices, leaving the majority of the camp to starve.

Bribes were key to staying in the camp and, in the case of a fortunate few, to make it back to Aleppo. “The poor people couldn’t do anything. There was only one way to salvation: if they had the financial resources, they could satisfy the camp official, so that he would be lenient with them,” explained Seropian.<sup>43</sup> The Seropians and five other families from Konya collected 100 Ottoman liras and asked camp director Hussein Avni to be re-deported last. He agreed and ordered them to set their tents far

<sup>35</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14094; A 28162; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 653.

<sup>36</sup> Aram Andonian, *Medz Vojirë* [The Great Crime] (Boston: Bahag, 1921), 19.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p652.

<sup>38</sup> Yessayan and Toroyan, “Zhoghovourti,” 68.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>41</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14094; A 28162; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 653. The conditions were similar all along the Euphrates. Survivor Armen Anush remembered how in Der Zor “[i]t was impossible to eat anything unperturbed, as packs of boys, five, ten at a time, turned up from nowhere to attack you and grab what you had. For this reason, every time we found some food, we were careful not to eat it in plain view of the people.” See Armen Anush, *Passage Through Hell, A Memoir* (Studio City: H. and K. Manjikian Publications, 2007), 68.

<sup>42</sup> Account of survivor Yeghisheh Hazarabedian in Kazanjian, *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, 293.

<sup>43</sup> Seropian, *Yegheṛni Husherës*, 109.

from the re-deportation campground. Their reprieve had lasted no more than a month and a half when Hussein Avni's Armenian guards informed them that the *sevkiyat* was near complete. Their turn had come.<sup>44</sup> Arsenian, too, paid bribes simply to remain in the camp while he was sick, "[a]s if we had rented the spot where we pitched our tents and every day, through Mr. Charkejian, we sent payments to the officials, so that during my illness they would not touch us and would not dismantle our tents."<sup>45</sup> When Odian arrived in Meskeneh towards the end of the re-deportation process (barely 1,500 Armenians remained), deportees who were working on road construction told him that some Armenian bakers and grocers avoided re-deportation through bribes and other ways.<sup>46</sup>

Deportees foraged for food, attended to the sick, and plotted a way out. Gurji Ananian from Marash arrived in Meskeneh in summer 1915, and escaped from the camp twice, trying to return to Aleppo. His first attempt, with 34 other inmates, turned into a weeklong ordeal during which they were robbed twice by Arabs in the desert, captured by gendarmes, and dragged back to Meskeneh. He succeeded in his second attempt and made it to Aleppo after being beaten, harassed, and nearly buried alive along the way.<sup>47</sup> Others tried leveraging connections. Member of the Ottoman Parliament (from Marash) Hagop Agha Kherlakian, for example, pleaded with Talat to order the return of a relative from Meskeneh to Marash. Despite the intervention, the relative was apparently re-deported to Der Zor, whereupon Talat himself telegraphed the Aleppo governor demanding an explanation.<sup>48</sup> While in Aleppo, the Dishchekian and Hazarabedian families also tried to leverage their kinship with Kherlakian to avoid re-deportation "since he has been able to get permits from Talaat Pasha, Minister of the Interior, for all his relatives to remain in Aleppo for the duration of the war."<sup>49</sup> That and subsequent attempts did not yield results, however. The two families were sent to Karlık, then to Meskeneh and beyond.<sup>50</sup>

Many deportees were too ill to flee. Dysentery, typhus, and typhoid fever wreaked havoc. "Sweeping dysentery has made many victims among them, especially among the children," lamented Bernau.<sup>51</sup> But if illness did not kill an inmate, it could delay deportation. Articles 13 and 25 of the guideline for re-deportation stipulated allowing the sick to rest and providing them with medication.<sup>52</sup> Pharmacist Kevork Kutnerian

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 110. On paper, re-deportation employees at the camp were instructed to notify those slated for re-deportation 48 hours ahead of time, and to make the necessary arrangements for transportation. BOA DH. EUM. 2. ŞB, 68/88 Article 44 of the guideline prepared by Kaya. Such notification was reserved for those who bribed camp officials heftily. Most re-deportation proceedings were hasty, last-minute procedures, whereby tents were overturned and deportees were beaten to hasten their preparation and get on the road, often on foot.

<sup>45</sup> Arsenian, *Towards Golgotha*, 109.

<sup>46</sup> Yervant Odian, *Anidzyl Dariner, 1914-1919* (Accursed Years, 1914-1919) (Tehran: Armenian Prelacy, 2005), 212.

<sup>47</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: "On the Road to Meskeneh," 61-64.

<sup>48</sup> BOA DH. ŞFR, 64/194 Telegram from Talat to Aleppo Governorate on 27 June 1916.

<sup>49</sup> Account of survivor Yeghisheh Hazarabedian in Kazanjian, *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, 292.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 292-93. Hazarabedian provided significant details about this intervention in his account. Initially, Talat telegraphed the Aleppo governor asking him to keep the two families in Aleppo. The governor in turn contacted the district police chief to inquire about the families, and upon his recommendation had them deported to the desert anyway. We do not know, however, whether the telegram from Talat cited earlier (BOA DH. ŞFR, 64/194) is related to a member of these families, or another close relative of Kherlakian.

<sup>51</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14094; A 28162; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 653.

<sup>52</sup> BOA DH. EUM. 2. ŞB, 68/88 Copy of guideline, Kaya to Talat on 8 October 1915.

was among the few even vaguely qualified to help the sick, and he wrote reports to help secure exemption from immediate re-deportation.<sup>53</sup>

Death and burial were daily routines. The burial ground was a large area near the camp.<sup>54</sup> “Every morning the number of dead reached hundreds due to the cold, filth, lack of hygiene, malnutrition, and lack of medical care to treat the many diseases we were exposed to,” Arsenian recalled. He lost his mother on December 22, and Father Arsen, a priest at the camp, conducted the funeral “and we buried her among all the other refugees there.”<sup>55</sup> Interment was typically far less dignified. Many deportees waited for days for buriers to take the bodies from their tent.<sup>56</sup> Buriers dug a huge pit, filled it with corpses, and then covered it with a mound of sand.<sup>57</sup> “One counts by the hundreds the anonymous burial mounds... [for] these victims of a barbarism without name,” wrote Bernau after his journey through Meskeneh and Der Zor.<sup>58</sup> Not all were buried, and those who were sometimes did not remain interred. “Oftentimes, the corpses would be dragged out and eaten by dogs,” with the stench from scattered limbs and skulls filling the air. The deportees, who walked to the Euphrates to get water, had to pass these horrors every day, and at some point, “our nose no longer picked up the smell.”<sup>59</sup>

Deportees realized that sharing information between the two campsites at Meskeneh and between Meskeneh and other camps along the Euphrates was key to survival. They prepared handwritten flyers reporting developments and rumors. When a new convoy arrived, the “reporters” would approach the new arrivals and ask them for information about conditions in the towns and camps whence they were deported.<sup>60</sup> Andonian noted that he himself had prepared many such flyers. In general the news sheets did not carry dates, because the reporters rarely knew what day it was, he explained.<sup>61</sup> The flyers offer a window into daily life in the camp, and broaden our understanding of events.<sup>62</sup> One entry announced: “A new camp director has arrived in Meskeneh. He is a Circassian by the name of Hussein. On the day of his arrival there were 20,000 deportees in this accursed place. They were piled on one another, and in terrible condition. The director instituted some order and assigned a doctor and a pharmacist.”<sup>63</sup> Flyers also informed deportees of outrages experienced by convoys, abuses by camp officials, the frequency of re-deportation from Meskeneh, and other such warnings. One particularly chilling entry simply said: “Final news: Do NOT go down[stream]. Do NOT go down[stream].”<sup>64</sup> Few, however, had the means to take heed.

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<sup>53</sup> Seropian, *Yegherni Husherēs*, 110. The pharmacist died at Meskeneh. Securing a note from a designated doctor or pharmacist at camps was a way to delay re-deportation at other camps as well. When Odian arrived in Hamam, farther downstream from Meskeneh, his friends told him they knew the camp doctor and suggested that he pretend to be sick to avoid immediate re-deportation to Der Zor. See Odian, *Anidzyl Dariner*, 216.

<sup>54</sup> Account of survivor Yeghisheh Hazarabedian in Kazanjian, *The Cilician Armenian Ordeal*, 293.

<sup>55</sup> Seropian, *Yegherni Husherēs*, 109.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14094; A 28162; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 652.

<sup>59</sup> Seropian, *Yegherni Husherēs*, 109.

<sup>60</sup> BNu/Andonian, Folder 52b: “Handwritten Armenian flyers in Meskeneh,” 86.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Several copies of these flyers have survived thanks to Andonian.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.



There were also the “human newspapers,” orphans at Meskeneh who sneaked out of the camp and conveyed messages to other camps as far away as Der Zor. It took these children 12 days to get to Der Zor and return, as they had to make stops to beg for food. Otherwise, a journey to Der Zor and back would have taken several days less.<sup>65</sup> The deportees experimented with different forms of concealing messages that these boys were tasked with transporting. They tied pieces of paper to their testicles, or concealed it in their mouths, or wrote the information on the youngsters’ backs, and then covered the writing with dirt.<sup>66</sup> The orphans who served as “human newspapers” challenge tendencies in the historiography to view children as passive victims caught in the miasma of mass violence. Although studies have explored the destruction of Armenian children during the genocide,<sup>67</sup> a history of children *as agents* is yet to be written.

Deportee perception of camp officials and employees, from the director to the camp physician to the buriers, was influenced by a combination of personal experiences, experiences of others, rumors, and prejudices. A bad and corrupt pharmacist for one could be described as good and helpful by another. Yet taken together, these accounts allow us to learn much about the *modus operandi* of certain camp officials. Hussein Avni, a Circassian from Mumbuj, is a case in point. Avni was the third and most important camp director in Meskeneh. It was during his tenure that the number of deportees spiked from 20,000 to more than 100,000 in spring 1916.<sup>68</sup> He accepted exorbitant bribes to provide preferential treatment and better “real estate” at the camp or to delay re-deportation but, unlike others, he was not brutal and murderous. And for deportees who were trying to eke out survival, a camp director who did not torture and murder could pass as “good,” no matter how corrupt.

Deportees praised Avni for not mutilating and murdering people. Andonian, for example, noted that during the several months he spent at Meskeneh during Avni’s tenure, he never saw him resort to violence.<sup>69</sup> The one complaint Andonian had was that Avni never punished or tried to curb the abuses of *bekcis* and carriage drivers.<sup>70</sup> Survivor Karekin Yeghpayrian, who had good relations with Avni,<sup>71</sup> spoke highly in particular of Avni’s wife, noting that she cared for the deportees back in Mumbuj despite the risks, and Avni never prevented her from doing so.<sup>72</sup> Avni remained camp director until spring 1916, when he resigned and İAMM replaced him with Kōr Hussein.

When the camps in Aleppo province were closed and the deportees were pushed towards the Euphrates line, the central authorities assigned deputies to Avni so that

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Vahakn Dadrian, “Children as Victims of Genocide: The Armenian Case,” *Journal of Genocide Research*, 5:3 (2003): 421-37. In this article, Dadrian only focuses on the different means Turkish authorities employed to annihilate Armenian children.

<sup>68</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The camp directors of Meskeneh,” 72. Andonian did not remember the name of the first camp director. The second was a man named Muhtar Bey.

<sup>69</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “A tragic statistic about Meskeneh,” 66.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> After the British entered Aleppo, Yeghpayrian asked Andonian to do all he could to help Hussein Avni. Evidently, the tables had been turned. It is also through Yeghpayrian’s help that Andonian met with Avni in Aleppo and secured from him the statistics about deportee arrival, departure, and death at Meskeneh from April 1915 to April 1915, in return promising that Yeghpayrian would not provide the British with negative testimony about Avni. See BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “A tragic statistic about Meskeneh,” 66-67.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

he could cope with the sudden influx of inmates.<sup>73</sup> The deputies were Ömer, a Circassian from Mumbuj; Sarıklı Hasan from Antakya who was dispatched to Meskeneh from Aleppo; a man by the name of Ahmed who joined later but did not remain there for long; and Naim Sefa Bey.<sup>74</sup> A heavy drinker and gambler, Naim Sefa Bey was generous with decisions easing the plight of deportees—as long as they paid up. Through him, many Armenians managed to save themselves by bribing their way back to Aleppo.<sup>75</sup> Sefa Bey was recalled to Aleppo after one of the Armenians thus saved was arrested and confessed, but despite being imprisoned for many days, he did not divulge the names of others who had escaped the Meskeneh camp and disappeared in the fabric of the metropolis.<sup>76</sup>

Deportees spent anywhere between a few days to a few months in Meskeneh, depending on the re-deportation schedules at the camp and the bribes they could pay. Re-deportation from Meskeneh occurred both by land and, for a short period, in double-boats or barges called *shahtoor*s by locals. The deportees were attacked and robbed, often with the tacit approval of the accompanying gendarmes, who shared the booty and asked the deportees to pay for the bullets they fired to protect them. Many others died of exhaustion. On his journey upstream from Der Zor to Meskeneh, German diplomat Litten kept a chronological record of every corpse he saw along the road. He concluded, “I have seen with my own eyes around 100 bodies and almost just as many fresh graves on the road from Der Zor to Meskeneh. I have not counted graves which in some towns were combined to form cemeteries. I have seen around 20,000 Armenians. I have restricted all my estimations of numbers to those I have actually seen for myself.”<sup>77</sup>

Survivor Karekin Hovannesian was deported from Sivrihisar in August 1915 and arrived in Meskeneh many weeks later. As his turn came to be re-deported, they tried in vain to convince the re-deportation official at the camp (*sevki memuru*) to send them by land.<sup>78</sup> The deportees from Sivrihisar rented two barges for the journey and left on 16 December 1915. They were attacked by Arabs who robbed everyone and overturned the boat, killing most of the 132 people on board. Only 11 people, including K. Hovannesian and his brother, managed to swim ashore and survive.<sup>79</sup> They continued on foot, only to be attacked and robbed again by Arabs.<sup>80</sup> “Totally naked, we were confused and did not know what to do. It was late and it got very cold. One of our friends, Bedros, who had managed to survive with his son, took his son on his lap and sat on the road. He was unable to continue on,” he remembered. The others went on to Abuharrar. The next day, they heard that Bedros and his son had died. The second *shahtoor* arrived intact in Abuharrar shortly thereafter. The

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<sup>73</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The camp directors of Meskeneh,” 72.

<sup>74</sup> This is the same Naim Bey who provided official documents pertaining to the Armenian Genocide to Andonian after the war. The authenticity of these documents continues to be the center of controversy, although they are, by and large, corroborated by other sources and material.

<sup>75</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The camp directors of Meskeneh,” 72. Andonian provided a detailed picture of these escapes from Meskeneh, during which each family brought along with them in their carriage an Armenian intellectual (writers, teachers, and the like), thus saving several such luminaries and educators.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-73.

<sup>77</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14090; A 05498; Report from Rossler to Hollweg on 27 September 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 553.

<sup>78</sup> BNU/Andonian, Folder 52b: “The camp directors of Meskeneh,” 67. According to Hovannesian, the deportation official was receiving a cut from the boat captain in return for the business he provided them.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

surviving deportees from Sivrihisar were re-deported to Rakka, again on a *shahtoor*. According to Andonian, the *sekvikat* with *shahtoors* was discontinued after the attack on the Sivrihisar deportees.<sup>81</sup> That re-deportation by boat may have been the last one, but it wasn't the first.<sup>82</sup> A few days earlier, several other barges that left Meskeneh were also attacked. Arsenian recalled that on 13 December 1915:

6 to 7 large barges sailed on and were filled with all the Izmitsis, under the leadership of Onnig Khachadourian, to be moved unknowingly to the great and final slaughterhouse: Der Zor. They were happy that they had taken the shortest and easiest way. Later the news reached us that these boats were attacked, many of the people had been killed, and others drowned in the treacherous waters of the Euphrates.<sup>83</sup>

Andonian learned the history of these attacks immediately after the war from the Meskeneh camp director himself. They were plotted by Mahmoud Nedim, the director of the Mumbuj municipality, who established the system of re-deportation by *shahtoors*, and ordered the Arab bandits to attack them.<sup>84</sup> Mahmoud Nedim, who was notorious at the Mumbuj camp for his brutality and corruption, ordered the abduction of women from caravans and gifted them to gendarmes and other officials.<sup>85</sup>

#### ANNIHILATION

When the decision to empty camps and push remaining deportees in the direction of Der Zor was rolled out in spring 1916, Meskeneh, like most camps farther downstream, was emptied and reduced to a tiny encampment where the remaining few hundred languished. K r Hussein, who replaced Hussein Avni after the latter's resignation in December 1916, came to Meskeneh with a clear assignment from İAMM: to liquidate what was left of the camp and shut it down as quickly as possible.<sup>86</sup> "Six black tents near the river banks, made of goat hair, sheltered 150-200 old women, mostly sick or dying, some not even capable to move. Many defecated in the tent itself. They had no one to help them. The stench was so strong at a few of those tents that it wasn't even possible to go near them,"<sup>87</sup> wrote Andonian. Near the barracks stood the tents of the coachmen and handymen. Hussein isolated the two camp grounds from one another, and through a series of brutal measures liquidated the rest of the camp, with most deportees dying in Meskeneh or dragged to Der Zor.<sup>88</sup> By then, the Interior Ministry had sent a telegram to provinces and provincial districts in the region prohibiting the entry of foreign nationals or non-Muslim merchants into areas of deportation and settlement of Armenians.<sup>89</sup> The Armenians could now be killed out of sight. A reinforced gendarmerie, alongside Circassian

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Accounts of attacks on barges leaving from Meskeneh abound in Armenian sources. See, for example, Angele Torossian's testimony in Hovhannes Domardzatsi Torossian, *Badmut'wn hay Domardzayi* [History of Armenian Tomarza] (Beirut: Central Publishing Committee of Tomarza History, 1969), 3:2099.

<sup>83</sup> Arsenian, *Towards Golgotha*, 109-10.

<sup>84</sup> BNu/Andonian, Folder 52b: "About the re-deportation by *shahtoors*," 71.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> BNu/Andonian, Folder 52b: "About the re-deportation by *shahtoors*," 74.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 74-77.

<sup>89</sup> BOA DH. ŞFR 61/32 Telegram from the Interior Ministry's General Security Directorate to several provinces and provincial districts on 13 February 1916.

bands from the district, proceeded to massacre more than 200,000 deportees around Ras-ul Ain and Der Zor.<sup>90</sup>

By the end of August, “[t]he road from Aleppo to Der Zor ... has become relatively quiet,” observed German vice-consul Hoffmann. “[A]way from Meskene, the camps have significantly been reduced.... Der-el-Zor only has a few craftsmen left who were working for the troops, whereas at the latter place only 8 weeks ago many thousands (estimated by another side as being 20,000) were still in the camp.” According to him, all others interned in camps or settled in houses in the region “had disappeared.”<sup>91</sup> Armenians who sent letters and postcards from Der Zor to missionaries also went quiet, “which confirmed the rumors we heard about the massacre that had taken place there,” wrote U.S. consul in Harput Leslie A. Davis.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See, for example, Raymond H. Kévorkian, “Earth, fire, water: or how to make the Armenian corpses disappear,” in *Destruction and Human Remains: Disposal and Concealment in Genocide and Mass Violence*, ed. Elisabeth Anstett & Jean-Marc Dreyfus (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014), 107.

<sup>91</sup> DE/PA-AA; R14093; A 25739; Report from Hoffmann to embassy in Constantinople on 19 August 1916, in *The Armenian Genocide*, ed. W. Gust, 617.

<sup>92</sup> Leslie A. Davis, *The Slaughterhouse Province: An American Diplomat's Report on the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1917* (New Rochelle: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1989), 94.