Haciendo historia oral sobre tabúes: proyectos sobre la memoria de los otros en Turquía
Doing Oral Histories on Taboos: Projects on the Memory of others in Turkey

CHAIR
Emine Tutku Vardagli (Turkey):
“Democracy, Remembrance and Public Diplomacy”

—

Arzu Özturkmen (Turkey):
“The Sounds of Silence: Turkey’s Armenians Speak”

—

Serhat Resul Çağan (Turkey):
“Kurdish Mothers Narrate Their Sons”
Democracy, Remembrance and Public Diplomacy.

Emine Tutku Vardagli (chair):
[Turkey]

Resumen: Este estudio delinea sobre las repercusiones de diplomacia pública de una iniciativa de la historia oral. En concreto, el archivo de historia oral de la Fundación de Lausana Tratado Emigrantes en Turquía es analizada como un complemento fundamental para los archivos oficiales. El grupo de emigrantes en la pregunta es la que había sido sometido a una migración forzada organizada y legitimada por la sociedad internacional, bajo los auspicios de la Sociedad de Naciones. Después de largos años de silencio, los emigrantes se reunieron en el marco de una organización líder en la sociedad civil. La primera y más importante logro de este líder de la organización - la Fundación de Lausana Tratado Emigrantes (LMV) - fue la generación de un archivo de historia oral para revisar el pasado.

Se sugiere que esta iniciativa de la historia oral tiene efectos duales, una transformación de la identidad del grupo y la otra la configuración de los esfuerzos de diplomacia pública entre Turquía y Grecia. En lugar de la función de transformación de esta iniciativa para la identidad de grupo, este estudio se centra en las repercusiones políticas a nivel macro. Se propuso que una vez producidos, los registros de la historia oral se han convertido en una entidad muy dinámica en sí misma y ha alcanzado un papel decisivo en la democratización de las relaciones simplemente proporcionando un espacio para la negociación entre los actores estatales y no estatales. Basándose en un análisis de contenido, este estudio examina las relaciones entre los discursos de los registros de historia oral, comunicados de prensa relacionados, cobertura de medios de comunicación y la diplomacia pública.

Abstract: This study delineates on the public diplomacy repercussions of an oral history initiative. Specifically, the oral history archive of the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants in Turkey is analyzed as a critical supplement to the official archives. The emigrant group under question is the one who had been subjected to a forced migration organized and legitimized by the international society under the auspices of the League of Nations. After long years of silence, the emigrants came together in the framework of a leading civil society organization. The first and foremost achievement of this leading organization- the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants (LMV)- was to generate an oral history archive to revise the past.

It is suggested that this oral history initiative had dual effects, one transforming the group identity and the other shaping the public diplomacy efforts between Turkey and Greece. Rather than the transformation role of this initiative for the group identity, this study is focused on the macro-level political impacts. It is put forward that once produced, the oral history records have become a quite dynamic entity in itself and attained an instrumental role in the democratization of relations simply by providing a venue for negotiations between the state and non-state actors. Relying on a content analysis, this study examines the relations between the discourses of oral history records, related press releases, media coverage and the public diplomacy.
This study delineates on the public diplomacy repercussions of an oral history initiative. Specifically, the oral history archive of the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants in Turkey is analyzed as a critical supplement to the official archives. The emigrant group under question is the one who had been subjected to a forced migration organized and legitimized by the international society under the auspices of the League of Nations. After long years of silence, the emigrants came together in the framework of a leading civil society organization. The first and foremost achievement of this leading organization, the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants (LMV), was to generate an oral history archive to revise the past.

It is suggested that this oral history initiative had dual effects, one is the reestablishment of the group identity and the other is shaping the public diplomacy efforts between Turkey and Greece. Rather than the role of this initiative for the reconstruction of group identity, this study is focused on the macro-level political impacts. It is put forward that once produced, the oral history records have become a quite dynamic entity in itself and attained an instrumental role in the democratization of relations simply by providing a venue for negotiations between the state and non-state actors. Relying on a content analysis, this study examines the relations between the oral history records, dissemination of these records, their reception by the people and the final influences over the public diplomacy efforts.

By an overview of oral history studies in Turkey, one can say that the oral history studies in Turkey gained some momentum especially in the last decade. Specifically, this alternative method of historicizing the past have been adopted by the spokespersons or civil society organizations of the minorities and migrant groups. So that the oral history method naturally assumed a democratic consolidation role by way of making the voices of the "others". The second point is that although the number of oral history studies is not still so voluminous, the impacts of these studies far exceed their number. Thanks to the documentaries, story-telling performances and the other media coverage, the oral history records were carried down from the dusty shelves and met the larger sections of society. Particularly, the extensive use of visual records facilitated the outreach. Thirdly, more studies in this field started to lean on the matters of recent past. Or from another point of view, the studies began to deal with the matters of the past lying generating the hard core of the current political debates. Lastly, as underlined and argued in this study the oral history method assumed a mediation role in peace-making or conflict resolution matters.

Specifically, the main problematic of this study is to deliberate on the relation between the oral history studies and public diplomacy initiatives. If public diplomacy can be defined as a venue for civil intervention into the mainstream official diplomacy, oral history can be formulated as an instrument of soft power politics that can used for different purposes. From another point of view, the case under question attracts attention to the cross-border reach of oral history. Whether specific oral history studies help or deteriorate the international peace-making efforts is another debate. It depends on the particular content of the matters, the will and intentions of the actors and the like. However, the democratization role of oral history stems mainly from its original mission to make the voices of lay men and women. In order words, as an instrument of participatory democracy, oral history ensures the plurality of voices and opinions.

Since the valuable contribution of Thompson, several fields ranging from journalism to communication studies, social anthropology to political science adopted and adapted this bottom-up method to increase the democratic sensitivities. In that sense, public diplomacy repercussions of an oral history project is the main problematic of this study. The main focus of this study, the oral history initiative of the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants clearly illustrates the relation between oral history and public diplomacy efforts. The civil society organization that initiated the oral history project under question is regarded as important as the oral history records themselves. For this reason, the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants as the initiator of this special oral history collection needs to be introduced at first, together with the special case of Lausanne Population Exchange.

---

THE FORMATION PROCESS OF FLTE

The Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants (FLTE) is a community organization bringing together the emigrants who had to move to Turkey due to the forced migration provisions of the Lausanne Population Exchange Protocol signed between Turkey and Greece in 1923 under the auspices of the League of Nations. Pursuant to the Protocol, Turkish nationals of Greek Orthodox religion in Turkey and Greek nationals of the Muslim religion in Greece would compulsorily exchange their settlements. About 2 millions of people from both sides of the Aegean were driven out of their homes as a result of this population exchange program. According to the LN Mixed Commission Reports, 1,221,849 Greek Orthodoxes and 355,635 Muslim were exchanged by this international protocol.

The Foundation of Lausanne Population Exchange Emigrants was officially established on May 2001. But the initial stages of the establishment process goes back to the 1999, the starting process of what we can consider as a new phase of civil dialogue between the peoples of Turkey and Greece. The 1999 earthquakes and the emerging "earthquake diplomacy" had a triggering impact on the establishment of the Foundation. Mutual and reciprocal activities of the charity and civil society organizations, the peaceful diplomatic speeches of the two foreign ministers George Papandreou and Ismail Cem and the support of the media coverage had generated a peaceful atmosphere just after the earthquakes. Why such a peaceful opening had not occurred before or is it a real peaceful opening in the true sense of the term is another question but the synergy of this atmosphere was one of the motivating factors in the establishment of FLTE. Or in other words, FLTE is an outcome of the 1999 process.

Concerning the establishment process of the foundation, the general secretary of the FLTE Mr. Sefer Güvenç says that, "the founders of the organization came together just after the earthquakes to provide a solid ground for the maintenance of this friendly environment". He knew well from the previous experiences that if it had not been supported on an organizational ground, such manifestations of good will would soon vanish into the nationalist atmosphere, as it happened for several times in the past. Therefore, the FLTE has not only been established as a community organization representing the emigrants of Lausanne in Turkey but also assumed a peace-making mission in the post 1999 period, as a civilian actor.

However, it should be noted that the International Conference organized by the Oxford University Refugee Studies Center helped to raise an international interest in this unique cross-border migration issue shortly before the establishment of the Foundation and the emergence of earthquake diplomacy. Underlining the Lausanne Population Exchange context rather than the Asia Minor Catastrophe, this conference helped the recognition of the Muslim and/or Turkish refugees in the international arena as the long neglected "other" subject of this reciprocal forced migration arrangement decided and undertaken by the international authorities. In short, this conference facilitated the work of the Foundation in the initial stage.

Here at this point, the actors of this civilian mission need further examination. In order to describe the member profile of FLTE in general, we can say that the majority of this population is composed of the urban, middle-class, university graduate, second-generation, males and females. To give some figures, we can note that %13 of the founding members is from the first generation of emigrants, %78 from the second generation and %9 from the third generation. So we can say that the organization is a second generation initiative.

---

2 In this paper, FLTE is used to refer to the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants, LMV.
6 International Conference, "The compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey: an assessment of the consequences of the 1923 Lausanne convention" organized by the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre and Oxford Department of International Development on September 17, 1998.
Most of the Foundation members and those who initiated the oral history project under question have professional jobs and they provide an important human resource and professional support for the activities of the foundation, especially for research, publication and documentation activities. Here at this point, we should also note that because of the financial hardships, much of the activities of the foundation are shouldered by a very few people working on voluntary basis. Lastly, we should note that gender composition of the founding members is; %57 male and %43 female. Thus, we can say that there is a balanced gender composition. Women have equal access to the administration of the foundation.

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT:**
The collection of the memories of the first generation emigrants was the first and the foremost activity of the foundation. Their objective was to collect the memories of the direct witnesses of the forced migration, as soon as possible, because most of them had passed away. Besides that, the newly established organization and the reasserted communal identity required a memory and a past to attach itself. For this reason, the oral history project of the foundation is not just one of the activities of the organization but it is a very constitutive element of the organization itself.

FLTE have collected around 60 memories and made an archive out of them, like Center for Asia Minor Studies did for the Greek emigrants since the late 1920s. Unfortunately, the oral history collection of the FLTE is not comparable to that of Center for Asia Minor Studies for obvious reasons. The Lausanne Treaty emigrants in Turkey are quiet late to get organized and preserve their cultural assets in comparison to their fellows in Greece.

For just a brief overview of this oral history collection, we can say that most of the interviews are concentrated on a detailed articulation of the migration process and the personal data of the informants. The interview questions are grouped into three main parts. The first part tries to reveal the informant’s memory concerning their lives in Greece, the second part is concentrated on the migration event itself and the last part is reserved for their lives in Turkey.

To give a brief sketch of the informants, at first we can say that they are more or less evenly divided by locality, age, economic status and profession. Thus, we can say that it is more or less a representative sample of the community, except the gender criteria. The gender composition of the informants is; %22 women and %78 men. From the methodological point of view, I should note that the informants were chosen randomly in the literary sense of the term, because as I noted before, this was a very late initiative. Since it was very difficult to find the first generation emigrants in the year 2000, the informants were almost discovered rather than being selected from a universe of study. Now let us see an overview of the collection and its content.

The interviews are catalogued on the basis of the place of origin, or in other words the birth places of the first generation, denoting to the still strong emotional attachment of one towards his/her homeland. The current residences of the informants draw a big city profile, plus the other major cities where the emigrants were densely settled. The discrepancy between the first settlement and current habitation of the emigrants point out to the internal migration process after the first settlement. The birth dates of the informants are clustered between 1910 and 1920. This data points out that the informants were children or teens when they left the country. Unfortunately, the gender composition is not evenly divided. Concerning their occupational status, we can say that it is more or less evenly divided, although the farmer category prevails over the others. From another point of view, we can say that, it is also evenly divided by the lower and upper classes. The gap between the lower and upper social classes within the community is more

---

1These figures are given by the general secretary of the Foundation, Sefer Güvenç in his article, “80. Yılda Mübadele ve Güncel Sorunlar” in Yeniden Kurulan Yaşamlar: 80. yılda Türk-Yunan zorunlu nüfus mübadelesi. Ed. Müfide Pekin, İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2005.
2The Asia Minor Research Center has been officially established in 1930, but it had been collecting the traditional songs, folklore and the memoirs of the migrants since the second half of the 1920s. For further detail about the Center see, Paschalis M. Kitromilides, “Küçük Asya Araştırmaları Merkezi ve Küçük Asya da Yunan Kültürel Gelenek”, in Yeniden Kurulan Yaşamlar: 1923 Türk-Yunan Zorunlu Nüfus Mübadelesi. Ed. Müfide Pekin (İstanbul: İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2005), pp.27-39.
obvious in the education data. The informants are either primary school graduate or university graduate. And lastly about their language, other than Turkish they speak Greek, Macedonian language, Pomak language, French, English and Hebrew either as their mother tongue or as second language. Especially, the emigrants from Crete and also Ioaninna were the native Greek speakers and they have learnt Turkish after they moved to Turkey.

When we come to the content analysis of the interviews, we can say that we get some basic information about their lives in Greece; the places where they came from, whether they went to school in Greece and if they share the same neighbourhood with the Greeks, how was their relations with the Greeks, how they gained their livelihood and whether they think that this exchange was necessary. In general, they do not report animosity towards the Greeks, although they state that they were not in a good terms with the Greeks and also with the Bulgarians at the time of the Balkan Wars and the Turkish-Greek War. But some of the informants note that the trouble-makers were not their local Greek neighbours but the outsider Greeks or Bulgarians. Unfortunately, the ages of the informants do not enable us to go far back in time and learn about their relationships before the wars. Because the average birth dates of the informants is 1914. But here at this point, I should state that we cannot make a clear distinction between the real life experiences and the retrospectively constructed ones. From the point of the identification and the reassertion of the emigrant identity, what concerns us is the retrospective evaluations rather than a search for the “real” life experiences. Therefore, the age of the informants does not matter so much. In this regard, the second part of the interviews, the travel to Turkey, is the most interesting part of the interviews.

It is amazing how the informants remember their travel experiences. Most of the informants give very much detail about their travel. Almost all of them travelled by ship- except very few of them travelled by train. There are some traumatic experiences or traumatized articulations concerning their travel such as; the women giving birth in the ship or a child falling into the sea and the death people on the ship. It is quite interesting that the same stories about the dead people on the ship have been told many times by many informants. For example; it is believed that if there is a dead person on the ship and if it is not thrown into the sea, the rest of the passengers will not be able to arrive safely. The community of this ship passengers generated new myths and folk beliefs about dying during this travel. Moreover, it is understood that the experience of death people thrown into the sea had a traumatic influence over the survivors. One could feel how this fear of not being able to be buried properly captured those elderly people in the last years of their life.

I think, this emphasis on the travel event in their discourse and the image of the ship points out that the communal identity at present is reconstructed on the basis of a shared migration experience or in other words sharing the same fate. Because “To be in the same ship” means that the group of emigrants under question share the same fate and the passengers would constitute a new community from now on then regardless of they know each other before the travel. In this regard, the travel event itself is kind of a mediatory process between place of origin and the place of destination and for the most part, the communal identity is reconstructed through this mediatory process. In other words, the community in question redraws the communal boundary upon the image of the ship and its passengers sharing the same fate.

The third and the last part of the interviews involve the life stories of emigrants in Turkey. The questions are concentrated on; what they did when they just arrived, how they got along with the local people, how the property relations were, how they got their shelter and livelihood etc. In this part, people generally talk about their experiences in the refugee camps that they were taken when they just arrived. They usually consider it as a miserable and degrading experience but at the same time they see the inabilities of a recently established state and for this reason they were also thankful to the state authorities for supplying their basic needs, except the complaints over property losses. It should be kept in mind that this internationally unique settlement program was managed by the related state departments of Turkey and Greece under the management of the Mix Commission of the League of Nations. The same program
envisaged the exchange of the properties of the migrants as well. However, it seems that the efforts of the international community to cover the losses of the migrants could not relieve the grievances of the people who were treated as the properties to be exchanged. As Aktar states, “Cows and sheeps can be exchanged but not the people”.9

About their new life on the just settled lands, the informants talk about the degrading attitudes of the local people against them. They say that mostly because of cultural reasons, the local people did not see them very different from the “infidels” [giavours] who had just left the country. They did not see them as proper Turks and proper Muslims. Besides that the settlement and property issues have always been one of the major debates between the emigrants and the local people. The emigrants mostly make the point that they could not get the exact equivalent of their property in Greece because of the mismanagement of the settlement commission and the occupations by the local people. On the other hand, local people assert that they were also in miserable conditions since they had just fought the national liberation war but it was the “outsiders” who were rewarded after the victory. Thus, the conflicts between the local and migrant populations raised from the first years of the settlement and promoted the generation of closed communities of migrants. Besides, cultural and linguistic differences of the emigrants together with their strong emotional attachment towards their homeland in present day Greece framed an “in between” position or “third space” position for those people in Young’s words.10

The oral history initiative of the Foundation of Lausanne Treaty Emigrants helped to revisit all these issues of the past which were not mentioned publicly even in the family or at home for three generations. With the “earthquake diplomacy” in 1999 not only the accumulated energies of the Aegean continental shelf but also the long suppressed energies of the old memories burst out all of a sudden. Utilizing from this positive atmosphere, the children and grandchildren of the first generations emigrants in Turkey started to get organized and reopened the pages of history by recording the testimonies of the elderly witnesses.

First of all, it should be noted that this oral history initiative started as a quest for testimonial recording to uncover the past as it was. In terms of its larger implications, one can say that this project was also a response or a reply to Greek archives of the same kind to underline the reciprocal character of the Lausanne Population Exchange issue. It was a message for the international community as well to show the other side of the same coin. The project specifically displayed that other than those who badly suffered from Asia Minor Catastrophe, there had been some “others” on the other side of the Aegean who had also paid the bill of Turkish-Greek war of 1919-23. From the point of communal functions, the project can be regarded as a means of communal healing after the long suppressed trauma of forced migration, reassertion of an unspoken sub-culture in a favourable political atmosphere or simply reconstruction of a cultural identity in a changing world. All these assumptions can have some truth in themselves. The point here is that the impacts of this oral history project were greater than itself. The immediate impacts of this oral history initiative were so extensive. Shortly after the start of interviews, the project naturally assumed a role of a sound dialogue platform between Turkish and Greek emigrants. Because people have discovered that their common fate with the Greek refugees or emigrants as those forced to leave their homelands had persisted even after generations. Their hardships, difficulties and experiences as “outsiders” vis a vis the local community had been similar with the experiences of the emigrants in Greece. Following from this point, the Foundation tried to generate a sense of solidarity with the emigrants of the other side. Visits to the left homelands in Greece and meetings with the Greek emigrants and their associations followed this oral history project. As a dynamic and productive entity the oral history project of the Foundation evolved into something else after the first generation of emigrants almost totally passed away in the last few years. The visits to the fatherland to meet the refugees of the other side have become a natural extension of this oral history project or one can say that these visits replaced or substituted the oral testimonies. For the members and followers of the Foundation, these oral history archive was a means of smelling and feeling the flavour of the past and the lost homeland. Now, visiting the other

---

9See, www.twiceastranger.net
refugees in Greece with whom they believe to share the same fate replaced and substituted the memories of the past. Of course, this friendly group sentiment would help to improve dialogue between the peoples of the two countries. It should be noted also here at this point that the successful dissemination of this oral history archive and the related activities helped to extend and sustain this friendly environment.

**DISSEMINATION AND THE POLITICAL IMPACT**

Successful dissemination of the Foundation’s oral history records helped to extend its area of influence. So far, we have witnessed various methods of displaying oral history records, in TV programs, documentaries, websites presenting full transcripts alongside extracts and incorporating interactive elements, exhibitions with or without curatorial texts or objects or interactive public gatherings in national parks or in other public spaces and forms. The Foundation used most of these methods of dissemination. Establishing the Population Exchange Museum in a densely emigrant populated neighbourhood of Istanbul can be regarded as the most sound and sustainable dissemination and outreach activity of the Foundation. Parts of oral history records together with relevant objects of memory are exhibited in this museum. The museum also hosts seminars, conferences and other kinds of public meetings to further the dialogue on the issue. Therefore, the oral history collection under question was not left in the dusty shelves waiting for the rare researchers to come and discover and write an academic article but shared with the large sections of society both in the country and abroad especially in Greece. A series of collaborative activities especially between the Turkish and Greek refugees followed by this oral history initiative. Bilingual (Turkish-Greek) or multi-lingual publications and the other collaborative cultural activities such as the concerts, visits, public seminars and exhibitions can be listed among these collaborative acts bringing the people together from the both sides. Moreover, this oral history project of the Foundation gave an impetus for the projects and organizational attempts of the same kind. For example; two independent journalists, İskender Özsoy and Emin Akdağ, conducted and published their own oral history interviews with the first generation emigrants in Turkey. Then, the oral historical research and publication of the famous journalist of The Economist, Bruce Clark, helped further internationalization of the issue.

Lastly, the multi-media project inspired by the title of the book of Clark “Twice A Stranger” framed this forced migration event in a globally historical context by giving voice to the similar kinds of cross-border forced migration events. This multi-media project articulated the Lausanne Population Exchange issue together with the similar forced migration events took place in Cyprus 1964-1974, in Germany-Poland 1945 and in India-Pakistan 1947. Thus, the political significance and implications of the oral history project under question has been revisited in this multi-media project with another emphasis and mission for protecting global citizenship rights and standing against the potential forced migrations in current politics.

As the larger implications and impacts of this project reached beyond the national borders, its peace-making role came to be highlighted more oftenly. The main argument here is that once the oral history works are produced they become a dynamic entity in themselves. As Alistar Thomson points out the last paradigm change in oral history came along with the information age facilities and contributed further to the dynamism of oral history. Increasing dissemination opportunities started to highlight the soft power mission of oral history works. As in the case of the oral history project of the Foundation of Lausanne Population Exchange, especially the politically significant oral history records of the migrants, minorities

---

13 Here are some bilingual (Turkish and Greek) publications of the Foundation contributed by Turkish and Greek authors; Müfide Pekin, Konstantinos Tsitselikis (ed.) Meriç’in İki Yakası (İstanbul: LMV, 2008); Çimen Turan, Müfide Pekin, Sefer Güvenç (ed.) Hasretim İstanbul (İstanbul: LMV, 2010); Sefer Güvenç (ed.) Hasretin İki Yakası (İstanbul: LMV, 2013).
14 İskender Özsoy. İki Vatan Yorgunları (İstanbul: Bağlam, 2003); Emin Akdağ. Şahitlerin Dilinden Unutulan Büyük Göç (İstanbul: Zaman, 2005).
and any kind of subcultural agents can be used instrumentally for the public diplomacy purposes. The oral history project of the Foundation and its larger implications produced a great deal of public diplomacy job in the last decade. Besides putting forward a quest for communal recognition in the international arena, the same project assumed a peace-making role and voiced an internationally and globally significant pacifist discourse as the last multi-media project indicates. Especially, the changing voice of the mainstream media can be related with these public diplomacy outcomes.

A content analysis in one of the mainstream newspapers in Turkey, Milliyet, yields some interesting results. An analysis on the two indicators of hostile and pacifist discourses in the Turkish-Greek relations, the “dog fight” and “neighbour” concepts, points out that although the traditionally hostile discourse of the official diplomacy still sustains its relevance, there is a significant rise in the use of the pacifist “neighbour” title to refer to the Greeks. Statistically, between the years 1990-1998, the news about the “dogfights” took place 2,25 unit annually. Between the years, 2000-2014, the same news were slightly reduced to 1,92 unit annually. When it comes to “neighbour” references in the same newspaper, it was increased in the same period from yearly 72,1 unit to 92,6 unit. The content of the news coverage also varied in the last decade. This is to say that the news concerning Greece and its people are not just comprised of the traditional matters of official diplomacy. It is possible now to read many news and articles about travelling to Greece, its tastes and beauties, reciprocal visits and exchanges of the business people and any kind of cultural activity like concerts, festivals, exhibitions. So, one can speak about a relatively “detente” period in Turkish-Greek relations in the last decade. It is suggested here that the dynamism generated by the oral history initiative of the Foundation of Lausanne Population Exchange Emigrants had a considerable share in the development of this friendly atmosphere with its courageous debut. The most friendly messages were carried to the newspaper columns and headlines by the Foundation, its members and followers. For example; running the risk of racist insults, the Foundation members did not even hesitate to call the other refugees in Greece as their kins either literally or practically in one of the newspaper headlines.17

However, whether this oral history initiative of the Foundation can be regarded as a soft power instrument of public diplomacy is still a pending question. Such kind of the good will messages can be viewed as a manoeuvr of the soft power politics to strategically regenerate the legitimacy of official authorities. Here at this point, it becomes necessary to examine the position of this Foundation vis a vis the state and its role among the civil initiatives of the “other” migrant, displaced and minority groups.

In terms of their relation to the state, the general secretary of the foundation has made the argument that the emigrant community in Turkey had been promoted by the new republican state as the model citizens in many respects. So, the emigrants did not have a reason to separate themselves from the rest of the nation and organize among themselves. Another informant, one of the founding members of the organization paid attention to the point that the emigrant community did not want to pose a problem for the homogenizing ideology of the state as a repatriated community and also as a community of grateful refugees.18 Another informant pointed out to the settlement character of the emigrants. She indicated that the Muslims coming from the same village or same neighbourhood in Greece was settled in disperse places in Turkey in contrast to the Greek emigrants, thus they could not develop a communal identity among themselves.19 Of course, the Foundation welcomes the persons having different and even contrary ideological standings since it is not a communal organization and the membership is defined over one’s ancestors’ roots. However, it should be noted that an overwhelming majority of the founders and forerunners of the Foundation came from a political background of workers’ activism. All the interviewers from the founding members of the organization made the point that they knew each other from their years of left wing political activism in 1960s or 1970s and they discovered that they had the same geographical origin in the late 1990s. Today, the reassertion of the emigrant identity can be evaluated some how as an outcome of

17 “Kinships Resisting 90 Years of Time” Milliyet, 30.10.2013.
18 Interview with Müfide Pekin 30.8.2007 Istanbul LMV.
19 Interview with Çimen Turan 21.9.2007 İstanbul LMV. Sefer Güvenç also indicates to the same point.
the self-criticism of left wing politics in Turkey and is very much parallel to the internal discussions of left wing politics in the global level.

When it comes to the position of this oral history initiative among the initiatives of similar kinds carried out in Turkey, the first and foremost difference is that there is no clearly detectable notion of “other” in the discourse of this project. Because the emigrant community under question displays the characteristics of a community “in between” having multiple attachments. Categorically, the Armenian, Greek and Kurdish communities in Turkey can speak of a state violence, so that the generalized other becomes so clear-cut. But whom these exchanges will hold responsible for their displacement? Turkey, Greece, League of Nations? This “inbetween” position of the community attributes it a moderating role between the uncompromising parties. Therefore, if one can evaluate this oral history initiative as a means of soft power politics. That’s right. This is a soft power politics captured by a truly civilian authority. Mainly because, the openings of this project have proved that these testimonies are not all about discursive interventions into the official diplomacy but produced many sound collaborative actions\(^20\) with the involvement and equal participation of the “other” refugees in Greece.

CONCLUDING REMARKS
The notion of oral history is defined in this study as a dynamic process opening different pathways rather than an alternative type of archival material. It is suggested that the potential of oral history to contribute democratic consolidation has not been fully realized yet. Oral history can be evaluated as one of the most peaceful, deliberative and extensive ways of dealing with the problems of existing liberal democratic regimes, since the records became easily accessible for the citizens thanks to the information and communication technologies. Therefore, the oral history studies as an instrument of soft power politics can provide a good venue for the public diplomacy efforts as well. However, the question is who really holds this soft power at present given the availability of options for the citizens to make their voices by social media and other channels? It is argued that once the message is given to the public no one can completely control the receiving end of the message. Thus, in all likelihood, oral history studies helps to increase multiplicity of voices in a given polity.

The Sounds of Silence: Turkey’s Armenians Speak.

Arzu Özturkmen
(Turkey):

Resumen: Se centrará en los proyectos de historia oral llevado a cabo por la Fundación Hrant Dink (HDF), que fue fundada en memoria de Hrant Dink, periodista armeno de Turquía que fue asesinado el 19 de enero de 2007 frente a los Agos en Estambul semanalmente. Desde su creación en 19 de junio de 2007, la Fundación ha estado activa en las áreas de derechos humanos, la historia oral, las relaciones turco-armenias y educación. La historia oral ha sido un enfoque importante para examinar la historia de las relaciones turco-armenias. Pero proyectos de historia oral de HDF han sido los primeros en llevarse a cabo en Turquía entre los armenios que vivían como los ciudadanos turcos. Financiado por Olof Palme International Center, los proyectos de historia oral del HDF se centró principalmente en la memoria política y cultural llevada por los armenios en Turquía, sacando a la luz la continuidad de su cultura y que ilustra cómo los armenios ven ellos mismos y ‘otros’. Ar... Los sonidos del silencio: estudio este hablar de los armenios de Turquía se centrará en los proyectos de historia oral llevado a cabo por la Fundación Hrant Dink (HDF), que fue fundada en memoria de Hrant Dink, periodista armenio de Turquía que fue asesinado el 19 de enero de 2007 frente a los Agos en Estambul semanalmente. Desde su creación en 19 de junio de 2007, la Fundación ha estado activa en las áreas de derechos humanos, la historia oral, las relaciones turco-armenias y educación. La historia oral ha sido un enfoque importante para examinar la historia de las relaciones turco-armenias. Pero proyectos de historia oral de HDF han sido los primeros en llevarse a cabo en Turquía entre los armenios que vivían como los ciudadanos turcos. Financiado por Olof Palme International Center, los proyectos de historia oral del HDF se centró principalmente en la memoria política y cultural llevada por los armenios en Turquía, sacando a la luz la continuidad de su cultura y que ilustra cómo los armenios ven ellos mismos y ‘otros’.

Abstract: This study will focus on the oral history projects conducted by the Hrant Dink Foundation (HDF), which was founded in memory of Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist from Turkey who was assassinated on 19 January 2007 in front of the Agos weekly in Istanbul. Since its establishment in 19 June 2007, the Foundation has been active in the areas of human rights, oral history, Turkish-Armenian relations and education. Oral history has long been an important approach to examine the history of Turkish-Armenian relations. But HDF’s oral history projects have been the first to be conducted in Turkey among Armenians who stayed and lived as Turkish citizens. Funded by Olof Palme International Center, the oral history projects of the HDF focused mainly on the political and cultural memory carried by the Armenians living in Turkey, bringing to light the continuity of their culture, and illustrating how Armenians see themselves and ‘others.’ Armenians living in Istanbul, as well as in the various Anatolian cities, Diyarbakır and Ankara in particular, were interviewed between 2011-2013. Some participants were born into an Armenian identity, some knew they were of Armenian origin but felt the need to hide their identity. While some were born Muslims as their parents had converted to Islam, other interviewees were also born to converted parents but chose to came back to their Armenian identity.
This study will focus on the oral history projects conducted by the Hrant Dink Foundation (HDF), which was founded in memory of Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist from Turkey who was assassinated on 19 January 2007 in front of the Agos weekly in Istanbul. Since its establishment in 19 June 2007, the Foundation has been active in the areas of human rights, oral history, Turkish-Armenian relations and education. Oral history has long been an important approach to examine the history of Turkish-Armenian relations. But HDF’s oral history projects have been the first to be conducted in Turkey among Armenians who stayed and lived as Turkish citizens. Funded by Olof Palme International Center, the oral history projects of the HDF focused mainly on the political and cultural memory carried by the Armenians living in Turkey, bringing to light the continuity of their culture, and illustrating how Armenians see themselves and ‘others.’ Armenians living in Istanbul, as well as in the various Anatolian cities, Diyarbakir and Ankara in particular, were interviewed between 2011-2013. Some participants were born into an Armenian identity, some knew they were of Armenian origin but felt the need to hide their identity. While some were born Muslims as their parents had converted to Islam, other interviewees were also born to converted parents but chose to came back to their Armenian identity.

ON WRITTEN RESEARCH OF MEMOIRS OF ARMENIAN COMMUNITY IN TURKEY
Before we begin in exploring the HDF’s oral history projects, let us have a brief review of the Turkish research on Armenian culture and history in printed version, as this written sources reveal important structural aspects to understand why oral history research on Armenians was long delayed in Turkey. In the first six decades of the Republican era, written literature has been very limited and served only a genuinely interested group of readers than the mainstream audiences. Some of these were published in Armenian journals by Armenian writers residing Istanbul, like the works of Kevork Mesrob and Kevork Pamukçıyan. Between 1937-1974, Hrant Andreasyan wrote articles in Turkish, using sources written in Armenian language, on topics related to Turkish history. The articles of Kevork Pamukçiyan are perhaps best known among historians, mainly because they were published in a mainstream encyclopedia and history journals. By the end of 1970, there were a few Turkish researchers who wrote on Armenian-Turkish relationship through history. Beginning by the 1980s, scholarship on the genocide issue boomed on both sides, followed by a shift in paradigm during the 1990s and 2000s in Ottoman studies, where research on Armenian cultural heritage became more visible.

In 1992 appeared Migirdiç Margosyan’s Gâvur mahallesi (The Infidels’ neighborhood), an autobiographic story of the writer who was born in Diyarbakır. Brought later to Istanbul for his education in an Armenian school, Margosyan’s book told the story of a double-edged discrimination he experienced both as an ‘Armenian’ and an ‘Easterner’ living in Turkey. At the time, both publications got coverage in the national media. Margosyan’s book was then a first attempt to ‘voice’ a personal Armenian experience. The coming out of the book was so unique that it was launched in a meeting at the office of Human Rights Association. It was also the harbinger of many more books to come. In 1993, the founding of the Aras Publishers changed the way research on Armenian culture and history was so far handled. With an efficient group of editors, the publishing house soon produced a large repertoire of books in both Turkish and Armenian, which focused on a variety of topics, including memoirs, biographies, diaries of Armenian figures, on history, literature, humor, music and drama. One should also mention the importance of Belge Publishing House, which initiated a series called Marenostrum in 1996. This series contributed new memoirs and research on identity politics on Turkish and Armenian encounters. Yorgo Andreadis’ story of Tamama, a Pontic Armenian woman discovering her native language at her late age, was perhaps first published life-story on a converted Armenian.

---

In 1996 Agos weekly began to be published as a groundbreaking newspaper published in both Turkish and Armenian. Agos created a real impact by offering Turkish readers access to a continuing flow of information on Armenian culture, history and politics. Under the leadership of Hrant Dink (1954-2007), Agos introduced a wholly new discourse than other Armenian newspapers Jamanak (since 1908) and Nor Marmara (since 1940) published in Istanbul. Transcending discourses surrounding Turkish and Armenian audiences in Turkey, Dink asked strong questions, proposed new politics and actively took part in identity debates. His outspoken and genuine character, which was at times criticized by more conservative circles within the Armenian community, made him an already heroic figure even before his assassination.

INTERNATIONAL HRANT DINK FOUNDATION AND ITS PROJECTS

International Hrant Dink Foundation was established in 2007 after the assassination of Hrant Dink on January 19th, 2007. The Foundation’s main aim has been to continue Hrant Dink’s legacy, in the domains of democracy and human rights, regardless of ethnic, religious, cultural origin or gender. From the day it was founded, the Hrant Dink Foundation has been striving to focus on the issues that Hrant Dink raised and drew attention to during his lifetime. There are three amongst them which are undoubtedly of outstanding importance: dealing with ‘otherification’ processes, supporting the democratization in Turkey and studying history without the shackles of nationalism and racism.

HDF’s Oral History Projects aim at tracing the political and cultural memories of the Armenians living in Turkey, Armenia and diaspora. The projects tried to reveal the continuity of cultural forms and practices and to reflect how people defining themselves as Armenians of Anatolia and claimed an Armenian identity perceived themselves and their “others” today. Through the projects, those who were not able to express themselves freely about their personal stories have been reached out and given the chance to speak out openly. Personal stories about the Armenians in Anatolia were explored, revealed, documented and shared. While these projects helped to confront the past and contribute to the compilation of a collective memory, they also served to the reconstitution of the freedom of expression of Turkey’s Armenians. These projects were conducted under the title of The Sounds of Silence, producing three different books at the end.

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE I- TURKEY’S ARMENIANS SPEAK

HDF’s Oral History Projects began with a general theme, framed as ‘the Armenians of Turkey.’ Interviews were conducted with 21 women and 19 men. Some of them were born into an Armenian identity, while others were belonged to converted families. Throughout the first year, it was not easy to convince people to speak. The fear, which was transmitted from generation to generation, taught them precaution, and to remain silent, a barrier difficult to break. The project team, who began working in January, could gather only around 10 interviews by the summer, after being rejected by 30 people. This required the Foundation to be more effective and assertive. The power of the word-of-mouth within the Armenian community also helped the project as former interviewees recommended the project team to others. At the end, HDF were able to reach 40 informants who accepted to talk.

Two different focus group interviews were also conducted throughout the project. These meetings were held with 10 non-Armenians living in Turkey who debated the Armenian issue. The research team, composed of 8 women and 4 men, were trained by sociologist and the project consultant Ali Bayramoğlu in interview techniques. Only four of these researchers had previous experience in this field. The book, which was published at the end of the year, compiled 15 of these interviews, from people ranging from 19 to 70 years of age. It was on best-seller lists for a long time and its first edition was sold out immediately.

The first narrative of the book is what we will quote here as an example which hints upon many aspects and dilemma of being an Armenian in Turkey. This is the story of a man who has been transmitted the traumatic narrative of their grandparents from Ottoman times and who himself had his own experience of citizenship under the growing nationalist policies of the Republican regime:
On my father’s side we are from Tokat. After the deportation they went back to Tokat again. In fact I was able to trace back my family’s genealogy to 1816 in the Ottoman Archives. I couldn’t find anything that dates back earlier. The first record I found was dated 1816. It is a court document stating one of my ancestors as a witness. Towards the 1840s there are several records from different places where they were referred to as ‘efendi’, ‘bey’, ‘serseri’ [tramp – t.n.]. So there are records mentioning my family in both a positive and a negative way. After the deportation the family went back to Tokat but shortly after, they moved to Istanbul because of the rough time they were giving Armenians there. In 1921, the remaining family members, I mean those who were able to come back after the Deportation, reassembled in Istanbul. The last mansion where my family lived in Tokat was used as the City Hall for some time, and then became a girls’ school. Later on they tore it down, sadly, and it is now a park. How could they tear down a building like that, it is difficult to imagine. That lovely building was torn down. I have pictures of it before it was torn down. The family’s remaining properties are still there.

In 1915 my father’s family was decimated. Only one fifth survived. In those days nobody fled to foreign countries. Before that, during the 1895 events, one of my great grandfather’s brothers settled in America. I found this out when I was browsing dailies in America. He owned a factory there, and he lived on the top floor. One night there was a blast in the factory and he died. We learned that he died as a result of that blast, from the newspapers in America. Everything I know about 1915, I learned from my family. My grandmother told us all about it. And since my father was 9 years old at the time, he remembered the events well too. They lived in hiding for a year in Amasya in the famous shipowner Sitki Koçman’s family house. My grandfather dressed as a woman and roamed the mountains with his family for 6-7 months in 1915. And then they went to Amasya... Sitki Koçman told me about all that five or six months before he died. I’ve known my family’s story since I was a child. My grandmother told us all about it. Sitki Koçman was the Turkish representative of the Krupp firm and a shipowner. My grandfather and my father had a good relationship with him and always acknowledged the moral debt they owed him.

My grandfather and grandmother were really noble people. They were much more educated than people who run around like Ottoman efendis these days... My father survived 1915, he had no schooling or anything, he had to earn his living. My grandfather knew Armenian, Turkish and French. And although I went to Armenian schools we used to speak Turkish at home. This is one of the reasons why my mother forgot her Armenian. Armenian was not spoken at home. And not because of oppression or anything, that’s how it was. But my mother would speak to me in Italian and in French. So I learned Armenian, Turkish, French and Italian at a very early age. I hadn’t learned to read in French but I worked on it by myself, and I made considerable progress. We used to speak Armenian with my grandfather.

When my grandfather came to Istanbul in 1921 he began manufacturing pickaxes, shovels, ploughs, buckets and sacks in the Perşembepazarı district. So he starts off in life for the third time. There’s Tokat before the Deportation, Tokat after the Deportation and finally Istanbul... But then the Wealth and Revenue Tax really embittered him. After the Wealth and Revenue Tax my grandfather did not speak a word for 8 years, until the day he died. He did not say a single word, he didn’t leave the house, he spoke only with gestures as if he was mute. I remember very well, they had moved from Harbiye to Osmanbey, he had an armchair there in front of the window, that’s where he used to sit. He would have me sit on his lap, he would stroke and caress me for hours, he was so affectionate but he wouldn’t say a word. Because that’s a very severe trauma, how many times are you going to start off in life again? My father took everything upon himself and saved my grandfather, he went himself... But my grandfather turned his back on life. For example, I never saw my grandfather in the street. He was a sturdy man, he wasn’t ill or anything. He never went out and he never spoke.

I’ve known that I’m an Armenian from the day I was born. I didn’t have to make a special effort to be Armenian. I was born an Armenian and I stayed an Armenian. I’ve worked in my father’s business all my life and even though I tread every inch of Anatolian soil to do business with municipalities, local administrations and rural administrations, I’ve never once hidden the fact that I was Armenian, and I’ve never thought of changing my name either. Of course I ran into some trouble a couple of times, but nothing
really significant happened. Those were more personal issues, for example once a guy in the Van Roadworks Directorate was stalling my payment, he would say things like “Armenians are this and that” to inflate his ego. I put up with that to a certain extent and then I put pressure on the General Directorate and received my dues.

When I go to Armenia they treat me as if I were from the Diaspora and when I go abroad they treat me as if I were a Turk. Here they see me as an Armenian. I’ve never been able to figure this out. But life goes on. We go on living our lives and I can’t complain in fact. I like to put up a fight. I was in Armenia in 2001 and when I spoke Turkish people would make nasty remarks. And I defended myself. What I mean is I like to defend myself whether I’m in the diaspora, or in Armenia or in Turkey.

THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE II: DIYARBAKIR’S ARMENIANS SPEAK (2012)

On its second oral history project, HDF decided to focus on one particular locality to analyze the demographic, social and economic transformations. The town of Diyarbakır, one of the important Armenian settlements was chosen, as it stood along one of the main routes of forced migration in 1915. The town also hosted a number of Armenian women who survived by converting to Islam..., who later became grandmothers. Our interviews were not only conducted with the Armenians of Diyarbakır who still live in Turkey, but also who live in the diaspora and Armenia. Out of 81 interviews conducted; 22 was held in Istanbul, 16 in Diyarbakır, 9 in Lebanon, 9 in New York, 7 in Montreal, 4 in Toronto, 4 in Los Angeles, 4 in Yerevan and 3 in New Jersey. 41 of the interviewees were female and 40 were male. Among them, there were those who maintained their Armenian identity, those who converted or tried to convert to their Armenian identity after a period of Muslim experience, or those who identified themselves as both Muslim and Armenian. Working in Diyarbakır was, in many respects, more at ease for the researchers, since it was their second year. The foundation was now more experienced in planning and execution. Compared to the first project, it was much easier to reach Armenians of Diyarbakır. In fact, some informants approached the Foundation themselves, to take a record of their experiences. HDF received almost no rejections this time, which can be explained in two ways.First of all, the Project was a continuing one and the book of the first year was available for new Armenian informants to examine as an example of the outcome of the project. The strict anonymity, confidential record-keeping and the trust confided in the Foundation were convincing new informants to come forward to tell their narratives. Second, Armenians of Diyarbakır, who had an important place in the long-standing Kurdish struggle in the area (many were themselves Kurdified) had a more assertive will to claim their identities than those living in western parts of Turkey. These people, who attended the Armenian courses offered by the municipality and who strived to learn their native tongue years later, shared their stories with us openly and with no fear. But when asked which one they would prefer if their students found out that they were an atheist or an Armenian?", the answer of a teacher clearly showed that “being an Armenian” was still a matter to disguise from public knowledge. In the second project, HDF conducted two focus group meetings. One of them was held in New York, with Armenian participants who debated the issues of Diyarbakır and “hailing from” Diyarbakır. The second focus group was held in Diyarbakır, with local journalists. 10 journalists attended the meeting and talked about the perceptions of a special Armenian issue in Diyarbakır and how it was made news. The Project was conducted by 12 researchers. 8 men and 4 women made up the group, including 9 researchers from the previous project. The research team was trained in oral history methodology and approach by Arzu Öztürkmen and developed more experience throughout interview processes. The book included 16 of the interviews, made with 8 women and 8 men. 6 of them were residents of Diyarbakır, who survived the 1915 events by conversion to Islam, and who are claiming or trying to claim their Armenian identity back. 5 of them lived in Istanbul with their Armenian identities. 2 of them lived in Lebanon, 1 in Yerevan, 1 in Los Angeles, 1 in New York and 1 in Toronto. In some cases, those who were from abroad, had lived for a short period in Diyarbakır, while others were born after their families’ migration.

We will quote here two narratives from the Diyarbakır project. The first of these include many elements of a mixed sense of belonging to place, language, religion and ethnic identity. Here again the story begins from the survival of 1915 events and tells us the road to a painful adjustment:
As for those who remained here... İbrahim and Garabet didn’t stay in their own village. Everyone had been murdered after all. They went and settled in a village close to Batman, Beşiri, because their maternal uncle had a home there. They both got married once they grew up. Garabet married a relative. And my grandfather İbrahim married an Armenian girl from a nearby village. In other words, they both married Armenians, but they were still called İbrahim and Süleyman. Yet they continued to live as Christians. Sometime in the 1950s Garabet was murdered by a Kurd. He said, “You’re Armenian. Your bones are sinful even if you convert to Islam.” And killed him just like that, in broad daylight. This was how Garabet, who had become ‘Süleyman’, was murdered. But the family continued. Today, there are 500 people who descended from those two people. After Garabet was killed, my paternal uncle Reşşo stayed with his paternal uncle İbrahim. They shared the same home. My uncle İbrahim married his daughter to him. My uncle Reşşo carried out his duty of hajj. He was fulfilling the requirements of Islam ten times more than the Kurds that lived there. Why did they do that? I believe they did it to make others forget about them and to alleviate that pressure, so that they could say, “Look, we are Muslims too now.” If someone fasted for one day, he would fast for five. Call it what you want, ‘neighbourhood pressure’ is the fashionable term now, or pressure from your social environment...

The main source of the pressure was religion. People regarded him as an infidel; they called him “giaour.” And so he, in order to alleviate the pressure a little, committed himself to religion... My İbrahim grandfather has died, my father is alive. He is a hajji, too. I mean their religion was forcibly taken from these people. They were given no chance to fulfill their Christianity. Their language was taken form them. We became a family of 500 from those two children, but there is not a single one among us who speaks or understands Armenian. You cross the border, it is only 10 kilometres from Iğdır, and our relatives there speak their language, and practice their religion. They can have their children baptized. But the youngest of our children don’t even know they are Armenian, they think they are Kurdish. Their language is Kurdish, and their religion is Islam...

Like the first narrative from Diyarbakır, the second also illustrates how conversion has been a strategy for survival. In this case again, different senses of belonging blur:

My grandfather wanted to know what had happened to everyone else, some must have survived, he thought. He always used to tell me stories, because I was his eldest grandson, and because I was the first to study in the family. “I trust you, I know you will somehow find them,” he used to tell me.... I tried to get a passport a few times, too, but I wasn’t issued one because I was involved in politics. I was in prison in 1992, anyway, for political reasons. My younger brother, too. We were involved in the Kurdish movement back then. You were forced to choose between the state, the PKK and the Hizbullah anyway. We didn’t take sides with either of them, I mean, we couldn’t adapt to their ways... There was a district governor in our town, he summoned me for a private meeting... “Are you Armenian?” he asked me. “Yes, I’m Armenian,” I replied. “But how come, you are Muslim, too?” he said then. “Yes, I am Armenian, and I am a Muslim. One is a religion, the other an ethnicity. If you don’t believe me, look to history.” He got angry, “Get out of here,” he said. A while later, he summoned me again. The region was in political turmoil. “You should leave, I am afraid that you will be murdered,” he said...He did save our life, I still remember him fondly. Because I left Silvan that night, and my house was ambushed immediately after I left.

Now the family has been divided in two. My younger brother and I are here, the others are still in Silvan. When we came out of prison in 1992, we came and stayed with our relatives in Kurtuluş, Istanbul. We had never met before. They are our relatives from my grandmother’s side, they know my grandfather. My wife is from their family, too. Some of them are Muslim, some are Christian. I am Muslim, they are Christian. God bless them, may Allah be pleased with them. They looked after me like my own mother, sister, or father. They knew I was Muslim, yet that blood tie is strong enough to overcome everything, it turns out.
THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE III: ANKARA’S ARMENIANS SPEAK (2013)

In 2013, the third project focused on Ankara, the capital city. Ankara had a more different experience of 1915 than what was lived in Diyarbakır. HDF heard narratives about the past and present, about being an Armenian in the heart of the bureaucracy, in the capital. Just before World War I, the Armenian population of the Ankara province was 28,858 people. Today, the remnants are only a few hundreds and most of them live hiding their identity, having two names. The interviews were held in Ankara, Istanbul, France and Austria. As in previous years, the interviews were conducted with people who live with their Armenian identities and who were Islamized Armenians. It was not easy to find Armenians of Ankara, nor convince them to talk. This may be due to a couple of reasons: while the Apostolic Armenians identify themselves as an ethnic identity, Catholic Armenians of Ankara identify themselves as a religious identity and thus, their Armenianness comes second to their Christianity. HDF encountered people who said “I am Catholic” and did not feel particularly Armenian. It would also be useful to point out that there are Apostolic Armenians in Ankara.

The interviews, conducted with people identifying themselves as Armenians, generally show that it has not been easy being an Armenian in Ankara. The difficulties may be summarized succinctly with the words of an interviewee: “This is Ankara, the heart of the state and democracy. If you are an Armenian here, you have to be careful.” Reasons such as the lack of Armenian educational facilities throughout the Republican period and the fact that the worshipping Apostolic Armenians were forced to frequent the French Catholic Church, the only church of Ankara, made it even harder to preserve the Armenian identity in Ankara. Ankara’s Armenians who currently reside outside of Ankara, especially in Istanbul, were more relaxed in granting interviews and in the actual process of the interview. Throughout the year, HDF conducted 40 interviews and received 10 rejections. There was no focus group meetings in 2013. The research team was composed of 12 researchers, 10 women and 2 men. Most of them were newcomers. The researchers started their work after an oral history training in April 2013 by Arzu Öztürkmen and a historical/archival survey of Ankara before 1915 by Osman Köker and gained experience throughout the year. The book included 10 of the interviews, 6 were women and 4 were men.

According to a review article in Sunday Zaman, being an Armenian in the capital city required “Turkish-Armenians in Ankara spend their entire lives without learning their language, practicing their religion or using Armenian names.” The article also quotes the research of Raymond Kevorkian, a French historian of Armenian descent in giving detailed numbers about the Armenian communities at the turn of 19th century. Kevorkian states that the population of Turkish-Armenians in Ankara was 11,246 in 1914, dropping to around 300 in the present day. The article continues:

“Turkish-Armenians in Ankara, who used to work in the textile sector in the past, want to become public servants, but they can only work as contract personnel in public institutions. The majority of them cannot speak Armenian, and they have already become accustomed to mixed marriages, which they avoided in the past. They either have a Turkish name in addition to their Armenian names or only a Turkish name [...] One Turkish-Armenian, who has served as principal clerk for the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality for a long time and asked to remain anonymous, also said, “As a Turkish-Armenian, you can have only limited space within the system.” Among the Turkish-Armenians who live in Ankara’s Yenikent district, which used to be an Armenian village called Istanoz, as well as Ulus and the neighborhoods close to Ankara Castle, young Armenians usually avoided disclosing their identity when interviewed by the foundation. A young Turkish-Armenian expressed his concern about disclosing his identity, saying that he had applied to a public institution for a job and he was afraid of being rejected if his Armenian identity was revealed. Although Turkish-Armenians in Ankara are much more silent that Turkish-Armenians in Istanbul and other cities, they are now expressing themselves more freely.”

---

Ferda Balancar, who acted as the coordinator of the three oral history projects of the HDF expressed also gave an interview to Today’s Zaman and expressed that many of the interviews preferred to hide their Armenian identities, and the most common practice to ensure this was using a Turkish name or giving their children Turkish names. Balancar also reminds that their narratives reveal that despite adjustments, it is difficult to state that they overcame the traumas of the past, “they have just swept everything under the rug”.6

Narratives we will quote here are excerpts from the Ankara research, raising many of the issues of the conflicting positions of being an Armenian and living in Ankara:

“I NEVER LIKE THE SENSE OF BELONGING”
I would have gone both the Political Science Faculty (SBF), School of Press and Broadcasting of Ankara University. I did not want to go to Political Science Faculty because I think that I would never be an ambassador, governor or bureaucrat because of my Armenian identity. If you are an Armenian, the system allocates a very small room for you. In 1968 when the street skirmishes between rightist and leftist groups were fueled, I went to School of Press and Broadcasting of Ankara University. I never involve in the clashes between rightist and leftist groups, because for the both sides, I was the man who is irrelevant. And no one wanted to lure me to their sides. I never like the sense of belonging. I have never developed a sense of belonging to any group.

HRANT DINK WAS EXPRESSING MY FEELINGS
Hrant Dink wanted to live as a Turkish-Armenian and serve his country. He was expressing my feelings as well. Hrant Dink has a huge influence on me. On the day when I learned that he later died, I was ruined. Will I be Turk when I say I am a Turk? A person cannot change their ethnicity, but I am a good person from Turkey. I carried Turkish flag, red poem on Turkish national days. I get emotional when I heard our national anthem, or see our flag. But do not want to see Flags and Atatürk posters at everywhere. I am ready to do, and already doing my best to unite at common denominator of being form Turkey and work the for the sake of this country.

I WANT TO LIVE AS THE FIRST-CLASS CITIZENS OF THIS COUNTRY.
My uncle felt in love with a Greek girl, They ran away together and settled in the US. They had 5 daughters. He opened a tailor’s shop and he was earning good money. They had a good life. Both my uncle and his wife passed away 5 or 6 years age. Although he had good life, he always used to say: “I wish hadn’t left my country.” He went to the US, and had a more comfortable life, but he always longed for these land. I do not want to be like my uncle. I want to live in this country as a first-class and equal citizen.

I TEACH TURKISH TO MY GRANDCHILDREN IN AUSTRIA
When I was a member of the Social Democratic Party of Austria, secretary-general of the party asked me if I have been oppressed while living in Turkey because of the Armenian ethnicity. This was the first time when I understand what discrimination is. I told I have never been discriminated which was the truth. I am an Armenian but I am from Turkey. I love our country. Although I live in Austria since 1979, I follow every development in Turkey, and I teach Turkish to my grandchildren in Austria.

AN ERA HAS ENDED AND A NEW ERA HAS STARTED.
What has changed, so that we can discuss the Armenian issue more freely? I believe, the coup cases have put an end to an era and started a new one. Negotiation is required while trying to do something. For example, while talking about re-opening of the Halk Seminary on the island of Heybeliada near Istanbul, the issue of re-opening of Turkish mosques in Greece should not be ignored. Allowing one time a year worship at the Cathedral Church of the Holy Cross, in the Akdamar island in Lake Van is a symbolic but very important and positive move. There are very positive developments, and you cannot ignore them.

SINCE THE ARMENIANS HAVE GONE, THE PROSPERITY HAS BEEN GONE TOO

In the recent year, the 1915 incidents and the sorrows Armenians that have gone through is being discussed. Unlike the past, he media also extensively cover this issue. However, extensively discussing these issues has both positive and negative impacts. It is not good thing to twist the knife in that wound. I am cautious about this issue. Look at what happened to Hrant Dink. He was working for the sake of this country. He wanted to introduce peace between Turks and Armenians. I do not understand why the people of this country have gone through great pains. The both side have suffered. There is a proverb in Anatolia saying: “Since the Armenians have gone, the prosperity has been gone too,” but the number of people who think killing of Armenians or forcing them to migrate was a good thing is not small.

Let us conclude with the words of Hrant Dink, who gave an interview to Defne Asa a few days before his death. Dink was extremely upset by the cases brought against him and to the question of whether he would leave Turkey or not, he gave the following answer:

“We thought a lot about leaving or stay. But I always wanted to stay. And, there is no place to go either. Where will we go anyway, to Armenia? If I go to Armenia, I cannot live a day standing the different groups there. They would not let me be, and I cannot stand. Going to the West, living in Europe here and there, well when I go, I get bored in three days, I cannot stay. I am not a person of ready-made paradise, my struggle is to turn my hell into heaven, this is what I like, this is what gives me the feeling of living in a paradise. So there is no place to go. And leaving is also betraying people who struggle for democracy in this country. Leaving means in a way accepting failure, this is why one should not leave. But when you stay, you go into a particular state of mind. What kind of a state of mine, well imagine a dove. I also wrote about this, you can see if you carefully follow, the head of a dove is always on the move, in an instance it would turn right, it would turn left. It is timid, anxious, uneased. This is that kind of a state of mind I live in. This is not fear. I am not a coward, really. But even curiosity makes me timid. What does this person think about me? Had this man know me? Was I able to express myself? But there is something which comforts me. The majority of this country does not harm the dove. Doves are in smalll streets. They are timid but they are free. This is that kind of a state of mind I am, I live in.”

---

Kurdish Mothers Narrate Their Sons.

Serhat Resul Çağan  
(Turkey):

Resumen Mulberry Tree colectivo proyectos qué vemos cuando exploramos los kurdos, especialmente aquellos que han sido asesinados en las montañas, en las calles, o bajo custodia durante los 30 años de guerra civil en el este y el sudeste de Turquía. Esta pregunta no necesita respuesta como una “Estadística”, sino como una “historia humana”. Qué familiares de morir siente los kurdos? Más allá de todo, cómo las madres recordar y narrar sus hijos e hijas después de su pérdida? Este estudio aborda las narrativas kurdo no como el ‘hinchas’ o ‘opositores’ de la cuestión, sino como historias expresadas hacia fuera a través de sus madres. Representa la voz de las madres que narraron a sus hijos a partir de su infancia. ¿Donde nacieron sus hijos? En qué condiciones que crecen? Cómo ellos se politizan? Cómo lo mataron? Aunque este estudio también incluye historias de los ‘supervivientes’, se centra esencialmente en historias de vida de “hijos moribundos”.

Abstract: What do we see when we explore Kurds, particularly those who have been killed on the mountains, in the streets, or under custody during the 30 years of civil war in the East and the Southeast of Turkey. This question needs not to be answered as a “statistic” but as a “human story”! What do relatives of dying Kurds feel? Beyond all, how do mothers remember and narrate their sons and daughters after their loss? This study approaches the Kurdish narratives not as the ‘supporters’ or ‘opponents’ of the issue, but as stories voiced out through their mothers. It represents the voices of mothers who narrated their sons starting from their childhood. Where were their sons born? In which conditions did they grow up? How did they become politicized? How were they killed? Although this study also includes stories of the ‘survivors’, it essentially focuses on life stories of ‘dying sons’.
Dut Ağacı Kollektifi (Mulberry Tree Collective) was built by a group of young people in Turkey, in the cities of Diyarbakır, Urfa, Van and Istanbul in 2004. In 2011, after seven years of experience, the Collective has been reorganized, to become a formal association, focusing mainly on three areas: social production of knowledge, social transformation projects and oral history.

The main objective of the group has been doing oral history research especially among Kurdish people, whose stories circulated in oral communicative processes, but not documented in either oral or written forms. Kurdish language was banned in Turkey for decades, until very recently. As it could not pass onto writing during these decades, transmission of historical knowledge among Kurds did not allow people to write and read their own history. Because teaching in native language was not allowed the rate of illiteracy has always been very high in the region. However, this situation led the community to develop a strong collective memory, transmitted through oral communication. The fact that documenting this memory would be possible only with oral history approach and methodology was the main motive for the Mulberry Tree Collective began to develop more interest in the field of orality and oral history.

The Collective runs as voluntary based. Not being funded through a determined financial source stands as the biggest advantage to the Collective to conduct independent research. However, it has also been difficult to overcome several problems during the process of foundation. To begin with, oral history was not a widely taught field at the universities in Turkey, particularly in Diyarbakır and Urfa surroundings. Additionally, the Kurdish issue was a risky topic in the university circles, which made it difficult to access and benefit from the academic field. Universities in the Kurdish region were highly controlled and many professors hesitated to get involved in the Kurdish issue at the academic –and also political- level. As state universities, they usually preferred to conform the mainstream politics of the government. The Mulberry Tree Collective tried therefore to reach those academicians and institutions from the “westwen” part of the country, especially from Istanbul.

Members of the Collectives began by participating to oral history workshops organized by the History Foundation as a theoretical and methodological initiation to the field of oral history. After these first steps, in 2007 there emerged a need to organize a particular workshop ourselves. With the participation of oral historian Prof. Arzu Öztürkmen and anthropologist Prof. Nükhet Sirman of Boğaziçi University and political scientist Yücel Demirer from Kocaeli University, the Collective held up an oral history workshop in Diyarbakır to discuss the outcome of the preliminary research conducted so far. This workshop was very important for the Mulberry Tree Collective to achieve an academic visibility and to develop further oral history research.

The themes of the oral history projects explored by the Mulberry Tree Collective emerged from the genuine questions which surrounded curious young minds in the region. Of the main questions was the following: What do we see when we explore those who have been killed on the mountains, in the streets, or under custody during the 30 years of civil war in the East and the Southeast of Turkey? This question has been approached in Turkey more in ‘statistical terms’ than ‘human stories.’ How do they feel the relatives of Kurds who died? Beyond all, how do mothers remember and narrate their sons and daughters after their loss?

These were the questions which gave way to the first organized oral history research of the Mulberry Tree Collective. This first project which was initially entitled as “Ben öldüm, Beni sen anlat” (I died, You tell my story) soon turned out to be called “Kurdish Mothers Are Speaking” in the public. The research was based on 126 people’s life stories who died during the civil war between the Turkish Army and Kurdish Movement. The life stories were collected from the closest relatives of the victims, mostly by their mothers. During this work, the researchers tried to collect the life stories of people from their childhood until their death. The main aim was to understand the meaning of these stories within their familial circles. In that way, despite the fact that the topic had a direct political implication, the research could stay within a more human framework in contrast to dehumanized way the mainstream approached these deaths.
“Kurdish Mothers Narrate Their Sons” approaches the Kurdish narratives not as the ‘supporters’ or ‘opponents’ of the issue, but as stories voiced out through their mothers. It represents the voices of mothers who narrated their sons starting from their childhood. Where were their sons born? In which conditions did they grow up? How did they become politicized? How were they killed? Although the study also included stories of the ‘survivors’, it essentially focused on the life stories of ‘dead children’.

When the research was designed as ‘I died, You tell my story’, the original plan was to conduct interviews with both sides, including the mothers of Turkish soldiers and the Kurdish militants as well as other victims of the war. However, this original plan failed, as mothers of those who were killed during their military service were concerned to lose the support they were receiving from the state. While the Kurdish side welcomed the project, the Turkish side hesitated to have an interview with us. Only in Urfa, we contacted 40 families of victims from the Turkish side. In the beginning they accepted to be part of this research, but soon we learned that they changed their mind later. In search for understanding – and hoping to get a solution for – their concern, we realized that they were alerted by the Turkish military. Apparently, they were advised to decline any demand to be involved in the research, particularly not to talk about their children’s death. One should mention here the importance of the first oral history book on the memory of war of Turkish soldiers. This was journalist Nadire Mater’s Mehmedin Kitabı (The Book of Mehmed). The book contained 42 interviews with soldiers who completed their military service between 1984-1998, in southeastern Turkey under state of emergency. Although the book did not come up with any sociological nor political claim, the book was banned for a few years to be republished again in 2001. If succeeded, ‘I died, You tell my story’ would be the first account of Turkish mothers who lost their child in the military service.

Thus, including a few exceptions from the Turkish side, the research included the stories of Kurdish victims, narrated by their mothers, and sometimes their sisters or fathers. The interviews were made in the language where the narrator felt more comfortable. Some people preferred to talk in Turkish while the others in Kurdish. The process of conducting interviews took a long time, as many of the interviewers were volunteers. The research team conducted 126 interviews between 2004-2005. By the end of two years, 60 interviews were published as a book in 2006, by Belge Publications under the title of “Ben öldüm, Beni sen anlat” (I died, You tell my story). A short documentary accompanied the book, using some of the interviews. The Collective decided to share the interviews with the general public also in the form of an exhibition in Diyarbakir. The exhibition was a successful event, calling great attention and it was visited by many people until its third day when the signing, arresting some members of the Collective. Unfortunately, some of these members were convicted and decided to immigrate to other countries in the following year. Some of the interviews are still not published but they are open to researchers to make some further research.

Here are some excerpts from the poignant narratives of mothers who talked about their children:

From Hasret Ergin’s mother, the story is originally told in Kurdish:

“It was morning. I just recognized that she has wore a coat, and a sweater. A vintage sweater, on the coat. “Hasret”, I said, “you never wore two different clothes, what is happening?” She said, “mom, it is too cold!”. She walked toward to the door, turning on me, and said “mom, adieu”. I said, “as if you are going to marry!”. She said, “everything is possible, an accident etc”...
She went, and never came back. She went, and never turned back.

From Siti Gun’s mother:

"Her grandmother had given her name. My mother had given it. She was always complaining and saying "My name is not nice, you have not given me a nice name". Then, she grew up. She was tall and slim. Her curves were very nice. The curves were so beautiful that none of my other daughters has such kind of height and curves. She went away. she disappeared. She became a dream for us.

One narrative belongs to a wife. From Mehmet Ayan’s wife, the story is in Kurdish:

"He went out. I was preparing the fishes to cook. The phone rang. No, I just saw that his nephew came inside. He said ‘my uncle, Mehemed!’ and he could not complete the sentence. I said, ‘what did happen to your uncle? He just left here!’ he just said ‘my uncle, Meheme…’ and the phone rang. I held the phone, someone from Peyasê. She asked” Birgul, what did happen to Meheme?”. “come on, what has happened to Meheme, he just left here” I said. She answered “nothing happened, nothing”. Then the nephew said “my uncle meheme” he said, ‘he is killed in Kurucesme”

Another oral history project of Mulberry Tree Collective has conducted was a research entitled as “12 September by 12 stories”. This project was based on the life stories of 12 people who were imprisoned during the military coup in Turkey, in 1980. The interviews which began in 2011 were conducted by a team of 4 women and 2 men researchers. Coordinated by Ercan Aktaş, the team collected interviews from men and women prisoners of the 1980s who experienced the conditions of Diyarbakır, Metris and Mamak prisons. The interviews from different people who were harshly affected by the military coup, were usually centered around their lives in these prisons. Narratives revealed stories of torture, humiliation, and imprisonment during long years. The main objective of this project was documenting traumatic life stories of these individuals, to call attention to the effects of the traumatic memory of the military coup in 1980. The fact that many expressed their sense of loss from their lifetime, losing their physical and at times mental health, showed how the military coup deeply affected a whole generation. As children of this generation, Ercan Aktaş expressed how important it was to give voice to particularly women’s experience in the prison context, a domain long neglected in the study of military coups in Turkey. The project which started in 2011, was more efficiently pursued and completed, to be published as a book funded by the Christian Eberlein Stiftung, in 2013. This book is not sold in bookstores, but exchanged with other books in organized book exchange events, to be distributed to prisoners.

Here are some excerpts from the women’s narratives collected in “12 September by 12 stories”:

From the narrative of Gültan Kışanak:

“When I went to Elazığ after getting out of prison, I understood the real impact of the 12th September [military coup]. When we were inside, we thought: We will come out one way or another, we will get organized again, we will fight, we will get revenge. […] We thought we suffered because we were inside, imprisoned. We did not imagine that they would make the whole society suffer as such. But once we were out, I realized that the entire society was locked up within such grip of a prison.”

From the narrative of Mine Nazari:

“A resistance began in Sultanahmet prison against the "single type" applications. They had given some kind of blue uniforms to the prisoners obliging them to wear, and the prisoners had torn them. So, they had kept prisoners with torn clothes for a while. They did not allow any other clothes to be brought them inside. Everything was forbidden. Visit, taking an outdoor break, radio, television, books, notebooks…”

From the narrative of Ayşe Yılmaz:

“IT was the 18th February, in 1982. My father was thinking that I had graduated from school and was assigned to a post. However, one day, he goes and check, only to find out that I have no post! The moment he learns that I was not assigned, he directly gives a petition to the state of emergency office and reported.
"My daughter is a Marxist-Leninist as well as a Maoists communist" he says in his report. This is how my story of 12th September begins....

Beside the collective works of the group, some members of the Mulberry Tree Collective have also conducted their own personal research. My own interest has been in Kurdish oral narratives, which particularly included historical events, stories, songs, and at times other themes. My focus has been on the Dengbêjî, a kind of Kurdish oral tradition. After three years of training and oral history research, I wrote my master thesis on the Dengbêjî tradition among Kurdish-Kurmanj communities, focussing on the performance of these narratives during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.30 There I argued that Dengbêjî is a kind of oral history, documented as musical storytelling and it should be classified as a "genre" by itself. As a society which is based on orality rather than script, Kurdish people have transmitted their history through the Dengbêjî tradition which is performed by specialists called the Dengbêj. Based on my own personal experience, and the Mulberry Tree Collective’s works, I believe oral history emerges as the most important methodology to do research on Kurdish history and culture.

I would like to conclude where Mulberry Tree Collective stands today. In the aftermath of a decade long voluntary work and research, one of our main aim is to oppose all kinds of otherification processes, to face ourselves, and to stay out of any power network. To do so, we want to produce social knowledge out of our own dynamics. There the Mulberry Tree Collective has also a critique to ‘knowledge centers’ which turned to be institutionalized, converting knowledge to a power tool. This process, we believe, make people homogenous, objectified and standardize ways of reasoning and behavior patterns. The Mulberry Tree Collective does not want to teach anything to anyone, but to share instead, to get empowered altogether and act with solidarity. We want to learn together to be changed, and to change. We give importance that our studies remain to be multilingual, multicultural, interactive and to reflect different points of views and expressive forms. This is why our future projects will continue to be the stories of the oppressed, the loosers and the invisible. With this awareness of approaching history, we believe one can also become agents of future.