



T.C.
İSTANBUL
ÜNİVERSİTESİ

Türk-Ermeni İlişkilerinde Yeni Yaklaşımlar

The New Approaches to Turkish-Armenian Relations

Uluslararası Sempozyum / International Symposium

Yayına Hazırlayanlar

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15-17 Mart / March 2006

**JEWISH EVIDENCES AND EYE WITNESS ACCOUNTS
ABOUT THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE
DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

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I want to thank the University of Istanbul for inviting me to participate in this conference. It is a great responsibility to be with you, here, today.

I am here as a scholar who is dealing in his academic work with Holocaust and Holocaust education for more than 30 years and with Genocide, including the Armenian Genocide for almost 20 years.

But let me say that I join you also, and maybe firstly, as a human being, as a Jew and as an Israeli.

Therefore I want to emphasize that my approach to the study of the Holocaust, as well as the study and teaching of other genocides should be that the value of human life is the same for all humans, whether Jews, Roma, Tutsis, Armenians, Turks or Palestinians.

It is clear to all those who are involved, overtly and covertly, in Turkish-Armenians relationship -Turks, Armenians and also the rest of the world- that the attitudes of the Jews, and maybe especially the attitude of the State of Israel toward these issues has special moral significance. It is because the state in question -my state- is the state of people who was the victim of the Holocaust, and the unique significance which resulted of it.

Every civil society, I believe so, has to deal profoundly and honestly with its past, including the black pages, the black holes, in the history of each society and state.

But, it seems that different behaviors of denial are present in our life as individuals and as collectives - much more than we are ready to admit. Apart from political and other interests, the tendency to deny uneasy facts is rooted in every one of us, as human beings and as collectives.

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Let me say also that I am aware that my society -the Israeli-Jewish society- is not enough open to deal with the suffering of the Palestinians. Unfortunately, the history of the Nakba (the Palestinian tragedy, catastrophe of 1948, which is by no means genocide⁰ is not taught, almost at all, in Israel.

Let me also say that I use the terms "the Armenian Genocide" or "the Genocide of the Armenians" not to provoke or offend somebody, but because in my view as a scholar of genocide, what happened to the Armenians was a genocide, according to the scientific and legal definitions.

Eretz Israel During World War One

The small Jewish Yishuv in Eretz Israel numbered 85,000 people out of the 700,000 people living west of the Jordan River. It was a divided Jewish community. Half of them belonged to the "Old Yishuv" while the other half were Zionists who migrated to Eretz Israel with the start of the Zionist homecoming in 1881.

The Jewish People were divided, also in loyalty and geographical spread, between the warring Empires, and the Zionist Movement officially presented a neutral stand almost until the end of the War. Despite the huge difficulties, the Yishuv survived the war years. Its fortune could have been much worse. From that viewpoint, the Zionist policy was a success. The Yishuv knew about the annihilation of the Armenians and feared a similar fate. Evidence and diaries of that period testify that the people of the Yishuv and its leaders knew what was happening while the events were taking place.

The fear, of a similar fate for the Jews, was evident not only in the subjective feelings, but especially articulated in two events during the war: the expulsion of the Jews of Jaffa in April 1917; and the discovery of the pro-British spy network (the Nili Group) in October 1917.

Important studies have appeared in recent years which deal with the Jewish settlement in Palestine during the First World War. Among all of the events in Palestine during the period, we will concentrate on the aspects which relate to the Armenian Genocide from a perspective which has been given little attention before my study.¹

¹ The article is based mainly on my book *The Banality of Indifference* (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2000). The French edition will be published by the end of 2002.

Reports of the Armenian Massacre and Reaction to It

Reports on the atrocities against the Armenians during the First World War reached the public in Western countries in real time. Accounts appeared in the press while the massacres were being committed. In this respect, there is no doubt that both governments and the general public could have been aware of the events when steps could still have been taken to stop them. The means employed by the Turks made the mass murders difficult to hide. Consuls, missionaries, and others in the regions of the atrocities reported to them, and their reports reached the newspapers as early as spring, 1915. The *New York Times*, had published more than 100 articles by December 1915, most of them on the first pages of the paper. Similar reports were published in Britain, Australia, and other countries. Detailed reports of the acts of destruction were given wide coverage.² During the course of the war itself, a number of reports on the genocide were published, among them from the German missionary Lepsius, the Britons Bryce and Toynbee, and the former American ambassador in Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, Sr. At least some of the reports were apparently known, as we shall see, to Aaron Aaronsohn, a prominent member of the Yishuv in Palestine, a high official in the local Ottoman administration and the leader of the Nili spy network.

Examination of various sources from the period indicates - as I mentioned yet - that the Yishuv was made aware of the Armenian Genocide at an early stage despite Turkish efforts at strict censorship of letters and newspapers from abroad. Furthermore, the authorities forbade publication of all Hebrew-language newspapers in Palestine, with the exception of the officially supervised journal, *HaHerut* (freedom), which was, in effects, a government organ. But, we can, nevertheless, assume that ways were found to circumvent the censorship and, indeed, we find considerable evidence to that effect.

Mordecai Ben-Hillel Hacoheh was one of the reliable and knowledgeable sources of information about the life of the Jews in Palestine during the period of the First World War. Hacoheh relates to the Russian attack which began in November 1915, perhaps intending to join up with the British forces in Mesopotamia. In January 1916, they launched another attack in Armenia, winning quick victories, and occupied the cities of Armenia – Erezrum, Van,

² Richard D. Kioian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: News Accounts from the American Press, 1915-1922* (Berkeley, CA: AAC Books, 1985).

Mush, Trebizond, and others – which had been held by the Turkish army and whose population had been slaughtered.

On February 2, 1917, in a journal entry entitled – “The Armenia Refugees,” Hacoen states:

A great number of Armenians have been exiled to Syria and Palestine, a surviving remnant of the thousands and tens of thousands whom the Turks evilly robbed, destroyed and annihilated in the cities of Armenia at the beginning of the way, before the Russians entered Armenia. In their nakedness and complete deprivation those wretched creatures have arrived here. Last winter in Damascus I already saw these pitiful women and children, starving in the streets. They told horrible stories of the grief and loss which have afflicted the Armenians, how parents sold their sons and daughters as slaves for one majida rather than see them die of hunger... The Armenians also have been brought to Haifa. The well-to-do in their community are trying to establish a public association that will care for the poor. This exiled people have learned from the Jews, the eternally exiled people, and they have also established an assistance committee and grocery shops and other public institutions to aid the weak and wretched until the storm of these awful events shall pass.³

Hacoen's reaction is one of shock and pity: “the wretched,” “grief,” “loss,” “awful events” are the words he uses to describe the situation of the Armenian refugees whom he describes as a “surviving remnant.” He also compares “this exiled people” to the Jews, “the eternally exiled people.”

The memoirs of Moshe Smilansky, a leader of the Jewish agricultural settlement and a writer, also serve as an important reference source of the history of the Yishuv during the war period.

In Smilansky's memoirs of the second year of the war we find, among others, entries like “Jamal Pasha's Attitude Toward the Germans,” “Fear of Death” (which descended upon the Jewish community in the country), and the “Massacre of the Armenians,” he writes:

And from the corner of the earth, from Armenia, shocking rumors have reached us. The government and the Kurds have committed a terrible massacre of all the Armenian inhabitants. They slaughtered every man and left only the elderly, the women and the children alive. And these they scattered to the edge

³ Mordechai Ben-Hillel Hacoen, *War of the Nation*, (Jerusalem: Yad Itzhak Ben-Zvi, 1985), p. 262.

of the country. They dispersed the Armenian exiles to Syria, to Transjordan, and to the Druse Mountains. And they sold the young girls in every marketplace. And the local peasants bought them for concubines and maidservants. People from Jaffa, who traveled to Syrian cities on matters of business, saw the encampments of these wretched people in every railway station. They were like herds of starving animals. Beaten, wounded, naked and barefoot. Their faces and eyes filled with horror and deathly fear...and in their eyes one could see how the young virgins were sold in the market for pennies...and a crowd of the "faithful" who gathered to look at the exiles, would point at them: these are to the slaughter

The testimony of eye witnesses aroused fear and panic in the audience. Who knows what would have been our fate, were it not for Morgenthau, the American representative in Constantinople, and the fear of the world press which is 'controlled' by the Jews.⁴

We don't know exactly when this excerpt was written by Smilansky. We can only estimate from its place in the memoirs, which he finished late in 1918, and from the chronology of events.⁵ It appears that the excerpt relates to the period of autumn 1915, or the winter of 1915-16, at the latest.

In addition to his deep shock at what had happened to the Armenians, Smilansky expresses anxieties about a similar fate, together with hope for rescue and deliverance. The fear of a similar fate is a motif that recurs in reactions at the time

The Nili Group and the Armenians

Nili - a pro-British spy group - stood out among the people of the Yishuv with its attitude in regards the Armenian Genocide. It helped the British during war in gathering information on the Turkish army. It was uncovered in October 1917, and some of its leading members paid with their lives.

The activities of the Nili Group have been documented by its members and by its survivors who saw themselves as the Nili's disciples and inheritors. The group's adversaries in the Yishuv and the Zionist movement – and they were numerous – also paid great attention to this small group which numbered no more than forty active members. The historiography of Nili, its activities and

⁴ Moshe Smilansky, *Memoirs*, Vol. 3, 1921, pp. 125-126.

⁵ Smilansky's memoirs which appear under the title, "The First Year of the War," were written as a diary.

members, is extensive, but it has not paid sufficient attention to the influence of the Armenian experience and its importance in Nili's activities. We will explore these issues, presenting some sources and documents which are published in my book for the first time.

An empathetic identification with the tragedy of the Armenians appears among a number of the central figures in Nili. We shall examine several of them.

Levi Yitzchak Schneerson: Jewish Sensitivity

Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, a member of the Nili network, was deeply affected by the fate of the Armenians. Schneerson accompanied Aaron Aaronsohn on his trip to Constantinople in July 1916 for the purpose of establishing connections with the British. Aaronsohn continued on from Constantinople to Germany, Denmark and England. Schneerson returned to Palestine and served as the contact for the Nili members who had remained in the country to gather intelligence for the headquarters of the British forces in Cairo. While in Constantinople, he wrote in his journal, on August 12, 1916:

I have been to the American embassy. In the beautiful hall I saw a plaque with names of donors to the Armenian victims [...] The Jewish names are very prominent and the sums of their donations are very fat. There is some hidden sensibility, which arouses our Israelite brethren to come to the aid of the Armenians. Will not the fate of the Jews in Palestine be like that of the Armenians? Would that my dark prophecies be proved baseless.⁶

Avshalom Feinberg: "Pro Armenia"

Avshalom Feinberg was born in 1889 to a pioneering family. He was one of the central figures in Nili. In October 1915, Avshalom Feinberg sent from Alexandria, Egypt, a comprehensive 150-page report to Henrietta Szold in New York. Szold was one of the leaders of the Zionist movement in U.S.A and the secretary of the Board of Directors of the Atlit Laboratory.

Feinberg's report to Henrietta Szold appears to be the first written account from Palestine (although it was actually written in Alexandria) of the destruction of the Armenians in 1915. Under the title "Facts and Worrisome Rumors," Avshalom relates:

⁶ Lyova Yitzchak Schneerson, *From the Journals of a Nili Agent*, (Haifa: Renaissance, 1967), p. 24.

And now new disasters have come about. The Armenians are being murdered en masse. In Van alone, 35,000 were slaughtered at one time. Large numbers of their people in the work brigades are being shot. They are being starved and tortured, due, it is asserted, to premeditated incitement, which was instigated to take vengeance on the rebels! Soldiers, take fire! And the piles of bodies are food for the crows. In the air the question circulates among those who welcome it and those who fear it: When will our turn arrive.⁷

In the early document we can already discern, in addition to the shock at the facts and worrisome rumors, the fear that characterized the Yishuv throughout the war: *"When will our turn arrive?"*

Approximately a month later, on November 22, 1915, Avshalom Feinberg sent a report from Atlit to Lieutenant Leonard Woolley, an English intelligence officer in Cairo, who had been appointed by the British to oversee the activity of the nascent Hebrew intelligence ring.

This intelligence report, written originally in French, did not achieve its purpose and the contact with the British was cut off.⁸ The report included a section entitled "Pro Armenia."

It should be emphasized that both of Feinberg's reports were written before Sarah Aaronsohn returned from Constantinople to Palestine on December 16, 1915, with stories of the horrors of the Armenian massacre, some of which she witnessed, as we shall see, first-hand during a long and arduous four-week journey.⁹

Although the reports were sent to different people for differing purposes, in light of the mood and the opinions expressed in both reports, and the dates they were written, they appear to express identical positions of the writer regarding the "problem of the Armenians."

The "Pro-Armenian" section of Avshalom's report to Woolley has several components:

⁷ Aharon Amir, ed., *Avshalom – Papers and Letters of the Late Avshalom Feinberg*, (Haifa: Sikmona, 1977), pp. 364-365.

⁸ See Eliezer Livneh, *Aaron Aaronsohn: His Life and Times*, (Jerusalem: The Bialik Institute, 1979), pp. 209-210.

⁹ When Sarah Aaronsohn returned, Avshalom was already deeply involved in an additional attempt to reach Egypt, this time over land. In yet another attempt to reach the British in Egypt, in January 1917, he was killed.

- A description of facts and details of the acts of slaughter against the Armenians: The Turks reconquest of the city of Van, which had been in the hands of the Russians; a description of the convoys of refugees and those deported to forced labor; a description of the sale of Armenian girls and young women. In the beginning of the passage, Avshalom asks his contact, his English operator, *"Mr. Lieutenant, I turn to you as a young Englishman. Please turn a receptive ear to my words."* Later on he asks, *"Do not take consolation in the thought that what I am telling you is based on rumor... this information comes from eyewitnesses, and is confirmed, proven, official."*

- Expressions of emotions, the feelings of his stormy soul, and reflections on the massacre of the Armenians. In these sections his strong feelings as a Jew stand out, together with sharp criticism of the Christian (and Western) world which stands on the sidelines when help and rescue were within reach.

"My teeth have been ground down with worry. Whose turn is next? When I walked on the blessed and holy ground on my way up to Jerusalem, and asked myself if we were living in the modern era, in 1915, or in the days of Titus or Nebuchadnezzar? And I, a Jew, forgot that I am a Jew (and it is very difficult to forget this 'privilege'); I also asked myself if I have the right to weep 'over the tragedy of the daughter of my people' only, and whether Jeremiah did not shed tears of blood for the Armenians as well?!"

Because after all, inasmuch as the Christians – of whom not a few sometimes boast that they have a monopoly over the commandments of love, mercy and brotherhood – have been silent, it is imperative that a son of that ancient race which has laughed at pain, overcome torture and refused to give in to death for the last two thousand years, should stand up... It is imperative that a drop of the blood of our forefathers, of Moses, of the Maccabeans who rose up in the scorched land of Judea, of Jesus who prophesied on the banks of the blue sea of Galilee, and the blood of Bar Kochba... That a drop of the blood which was saved from annihilation should rise up and cry: Look and see, you whose eyes refuse to open; listen, you whose ears will not hear, what have you done with the treasures of love and mercy which were placed in your hands? What good have rivers of our spilled blood done? How have you realized your high ideals in your lives?

Later on, Avshalom requests: *"[P]lease forgive me for the tone of my words, Lieutenant, for in this land I have roots in the past, and dreams for the*

future, and I have graves here, and a home; I have a mother and sister, and a new generation in my sister's daughter, a dear small child eight years old (the same age as the Armenian children who were sold). Here does my heart bleed, and scream. Forgive me."

- A request, essentially a demand, to take action on behalf of the Armenians, as an expression of his own suffering and the fact that he is "powerless and weaponless":

And while only a night's journey from here sit idle thousands and thousands of Englishmen, Canadians and Australians, all of whom volunteered and came to fight, a handful of Arab dogs and Turkish hyenas roll around in the pile of bodies which they diligently build. Consider that a few whiplashes would suffice to disperse this band of cowards. Good heavens, what torture to be powerless and weaponless!

But the brave soldiers who were to have aroused a hallelujah of liberation and rejoicing, do not come.

And while the bloody Germans fill the world with their printed lies and slander, which have been elevated to the level of a 'manifesto,' while the agencies of their *Nachrichten Bureau* [a German news service] defile our cities with photographs of their 'heroes,' descriptions of their 'glorious victories' and maps of their 'conquests' – why do you remain silent? Repugnance and silent contempt are indeed noble, but has not Ecclesiastes said, 'There is a time to remain silent and a time to speak out'? Would it not be worthy to oblige every soldier, or at the very least, every English-French officer, to carry in his pocket a reminder of the heroic deeds of the Turks and Teutons?

It is not a duty to distribute such reminders in millions of copies among the poor Americans, uplifted in their innocence, to pull them out of their wicked neutrality which has become so harmful at this time? But first of all, is it not the duty of righteous people to speak up, or is it once again a bitter young Hebrew who must do this?

Whatever one's opinion of the actions of the Nili Group may be, and no matter what one's position is about espionage as a means to achieve political ends, one cannot deny the existence of a deep moral component -universal, Jewish, and Zionist- in the attitude of Avshalom and the other Nili members toward the massacre of the Armenians and its significance for them.

Alexander Aaronsohn: "Armenians, My Brothers!"

Alexander Aaronsohn, Aaron's younger brother, was very close with Aaron and Avshalom when they decided, in the course of 1915, to embark on pro-British intelligence activities.

On September 3, 1915, he sailed with his sister, Rivka, to the United States where he remained for most of the war -until July 1917- and took part in propaganda and diplomatic activity.

Alexander Aaronsohn was horrified by the massacre of the Armenians. Like Aaron and Avshalom, who had not discussed the matter among themselves, he wrote a short but stirring document entitled "Armenia," in which he called the Armenians to join with the Jews in a joint struggle against the Ottoman Empire. The complete document, in English, can be found in the Nili Archives and is published here for the first time.¹⁰ We do not know to whom the document was sent or whether it was publicized at the time.

Armenia!

The fields are deserted, around the well of the hamlets no Armenian maidens are filling their jars. The Turks have passed there! And can you picture in your imagination what that means, can you understand the horror, the nightmare these words convey? The Turks have passed there.

It means a sudden attack of thousands of armed Kurds and Bedouins and regular Turkish troops on peaceful unarmed villages where the Armenians have been living a life of toil and aspiration for centuries. The young Armenians have been disarmed; they have no weapons to defend the honor of their sisters, mothers and sweethearts. Before their very eyes beastly Turks are outraging the fair Armenian virgins. Babies are killed and smashed on the rocks; men are tortured and outraged.

A million Armenians killed in less than a year! Unarmed, having committed no crime, a million people killed, because they have the heroism of their convictions, because they cannot sell their soul for the sake of their body, because they prefer to die than to embrace the religion of hatred, of bestiality, of rape.

¹⁰ Nili Archives, Aara A.1/5. In a short book that Aaron Aaronsohn wrote in 1942, *Sarah: The Flame of Nili*, the first chapter is entitled, "The Cry of the Armenians," and contains an excerpt from the document written by Alexander in 1915. See Alexander Aaronsohn, *Sarah: The Flame of Nili*, Kami 1965, pp. 111-115. (Henceforth: *Sarah: Flame of the Nili*.)

And because for almost two thousand years the Armenians have been the bearers of the Christian banner among barbarians. Because they have carried the ideals and aspirations of higher civilization, the Armenians have paid with their blood and soul.

Armenians, my brothers, a Jew is talking to you. A son of a race persecuted, outraged, wronged, as your race is. You are suffering because you won't abandon the faith that Jesus has given the Christians, and we suffer because we have given Jesus to the nations that call themselves Christians.

Armenians, my brothers, we can expect nothing from the nations, we have only our souls to offer and that is of no marked value. The Turks have an army that counts. Let us give up hope of a salvation brought by others. Let us get up and defy the world that calls itself progressive and just. Let us join hands and stand up for our rights and not beg for mercy. And if it is God's will that we die, if it is written in the book of our destiny that no redemption is possible for us, let us at least die with the sweet feeling that our virgins, our old men, our babies, our youths have been avenged.

(New York, November 1915)

Sarah Aaronsohn: A Shocking Eyewitness Testimony

Sarah Aaronsohn returned to Eretz Yisrael from Constantinople at the end of December 1915, to become another central figure in the underground Nili Group.

She was born in Zichron Yaakov in January 1890, and finished her schooling in the village. Under the supervision of her brother, Aaron, she began to assist him in his scientific work. She was very close to her family and involved in the affairs of the village. When her parents sent her to Switzerland to finish her schooling, homesickness brought her back to Zichron Yaakov. In the spring of 1914, she married a well-to-do Bulgarian Jew who resided in Constantinople. The marriage apparently did not work out and the time in Constantinople was the gloomiest period of her life.¹¹

In mid-August 1915, while her husband was in Vienna and Berlin on business, Sarah was already deep in her preparations to return to Palestine. Her

¹¹ Eliezer Livneh, Yosef Nedava, Yoram Efrati, eds., *Nili: A History of Political Daring* (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Shoken, 1980), p. 244. (Henceforth: *The History of Political Daring*.) This new, revised edition was edited by Yoram Efrati.

return surprised her family in Zichron Yaakov. Aaron writes in his journal on Tuesday, December 13, 1915, in Zichron Yaakov: *"We have received a telegram from Sarah announcing that since Chaim plans to return to Germany on business, she will be coming to spend the winter with us. The telegram took four days to reach me"*¹²

On December 16, 1915, Aaron welcomed his sister (during the intervening three days, there are hints in his diary of espionage activity); he records in his diary:

*Her trip took exactly three weeks, and what sights her eyes have seen! She has known exhaustion, suffered from want, and in front of her very eyes has seen the Armenians tortured by the Turks. She saw hundreds of corpses of Armenians, thrown aside without a decent burial, while dogs fed upon them. She saw how dysentery and typhus ravaged the soldiers around her. There is no reason to repeat all of this here, since my Sarah has promised me that she will write a full account of her journey.*¹³

Her account of events has never been found, and we do not know whether Sarah never wrote the story of her trip or whether it was written and later lost. In any event, it has not survived in written records.

When Aaron Aaronsohn reached London, in November 1916, he brought his sister's testimony as part of "Pro Armenia":

A sister of the writer traveled from Constantinople to Haifa in the month of December 1915. She was never hysterical before, but since that trip whenever any allusions to Armenians are made in her presence she gets into a fit of hysteria. A few of the things she had actually seen: hundreds of bodies of men, women and babes on both sides of the track and dogs feeding on these human corpses. Turkish women rummaging in the clothing of the corpses in the hope of some hidden treasure.

At one station (in Gulek or Osmanieh, the writer can remember no longer where it was), thousands of starving, typhus-stricken Armenians were waiting for days for a train to carry them southwards. They were lying on the ground near the main track and on the sidings. When the train arrived, the engineer, on

¹² *The Diary of Aaron Aaronsohn*, Aaronsohn House. This period of his diary is not included in his published journals.

¹³ The above excerpt appears almost in its entirety in *A History of Political Daring*, p. 95. The last sentence, which does not appear there, is of great importance.

seeing Armenians on the rails, purposely pushed his locomotive into the mass of Armenians and overran and hurt about fifteen of them. He then triumphantly jumped off his engine, ribbed his hands in joy, and called out to a friend of his, "Did you see how I smashed maybe 50 of these Armenian swine?"

The same witness has seen trains arriving packed with 60-80 Armenians in each car when 40 would have over crowded the car, and at the station 10 or 20 dead (of hunger or typhus), Armenians used to be thrown out of the car and a respective number of live Armenians packed in their stead. Needless to say, not even a symbolic effort was made at disinfection.¹⁴

The Jewish-Armenian context continued to be very significant for Alexander Aaronsohn as late as the early 1940s, during the Holocaust, when he wrote with overflowing feelings the final chapter of the book he dedicated to Sarah.¹⁵ Alexander describes the last three days of Sarah's life, as she lay dying from her self-inflicted gunshot wounds (October 2-5, 1917). He presents a would-be quote from Sarah:

*The cry of the Armenians sliced through my ears. My eyes saw the agonies and I prayed that I might be blind so as to see no more...your are murderers, bloodthirsty predators, bastards, and I, a weak woman, stood alone to defend my people, lest you inflict upon it what you have done to the Armenians...By myself, with my own hands, I have dug your grave... It is too late for you! You will not survive... You have tortured me in vain...In vain shall you torture the innocent...You are lost...The redeemers are coming...I have saved my people, I have avenged the blood of the Armenians, and my curse will pursue you to the end of generations.*¹⁶

And the old man [the father, Ephraim Fishel Aaronsohn] who did not cease, all through his terrible agonies, to cry: *'Hear Oh Israel, the lord Our God, the Lord is One!'* and his daughter, whose lovely body was blackened from torture, lifted her arms, her hands burned by white hot irons, her

¹⁴ Aaron Aaronsohn, "Pro-Armenia," Memorandums presented to the War Office London., 16 November 1916. The original handwritten manuscript is in the Nili Archives in Zichron Yaakov, Israel.

We have at least two British reports based on Aaron's work, "Pro Armenia," which is, in our estimate, his most comprehensive and important report and which was edited by the British and retitled "Turkish Treatment of Armenians." (Document 242528, December 1, in file 221220, collection F.O. 3712783. The same report appears again as document 253852, F.O. 3712781).

¹⁵ Sarah: *The Flame of Nili*, pp. 111-115.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 88, 103.

fingernails crushed, lifted her arms to her Father in supplication: 'Our blood is the blood of the Armenians, the blood of all the persecuted!'

Obviously, the description of events presented above as Sarah's words should not be viewed as an exact quote or as a factual historical source. There can be no doubt, however, that the description expresses the manner in which the members of Nili, or at least some of them, wished to immortalize their activities. There may also be an expression of Sarah's outcry and of her feelings. But first and foremost this document is an expression of what Alexander estimated his sister's thoughts and feelings to be before her death. This excerpt has become part of the ethos, or even the myth of Nili, which its members shaped and continue to shape. And a key component of this ethos is the Armenian massacre.¹⁷

Sarah bore her torture heroically, and even the opponents of the Nili remark on her courage and endurance: she revealed nothing, and her agonies only grew worse because her aged father was tortured in front of her. Ivria Lishansky, the daughter of Yosef and Rivka, who was held in the torture rooms together her brother, Tovia, was witness to this horror and describes it in her memoirs. Because she was a young child, she was allowed to wander between the rooms. Ivria relates that Sarah's voice would rise and fall, and when her elderly father screamed and wept, she let go not even a groan. She cursed her tormentors in French, Yiddish, and Arabic. Sarah would repeat certain phrases over and over during the long hours of torture: They would get nothing from her; don't think that because she is a woman she will ask her torturers for mercy or beg; she had no partners in her activity. And Sarah mentioned, a number of times, the murder of the Armenians.¹⁸

It should be added that, according to various reliable testimonies, Yosef Lishansky, another member of the Nili group, who was hanged by the Turks,

¹⁷ A similar version is found in Yehuda Yaari-Polskin's work, *The Nili* (vol. 4: Sarah) (Tel Aviv: Masada, 1940), pp. 142-143. "I alone did the job and dug their grave. The grave is already open for them. Tomorrow the day of redemption will come. Certainly it will come. And you shall fall into the pit I have dug for you. And why have I done it? Because I saw with my own eyes how you spilled the blood of the Armenians, with my own eyes I saw how you rounded up the wretched and the defenseless into a camp between the railroad tracks, and sent the trains to run them over! – Trample, trample my flesh!"

¹⁸ According to *A History of Political Daring* (1980), p. 309, in the chapter entitled "The Sacrifice [of Isaac]." In the earlier edition of the book (1961), p. 273, it is said that Sarah's words during her torture were recorded by various people who heard her, and they are preserved in the Aaronsohn House Archives. To the best of our knowledge, there is no detailed testimony of this.

also mentioned the Turkish massacre of the Armenians during his final days, even as he stood on the gallows.¹⁹

The elements of the Nili ethos which derived from the Armenian context were: horror at the massacres, identification with the Armenians, hatred and loathing for the Turks, protest, a demand for vengeance, struggle: "Lest they do to my people what they have done to the Armenians."

Eitan Belkind: An Eyewitness to a Terrible Tragedy

Eitan Belkind (1887-1979), the son of early pioneering founders of Rishon LeZion, went to Constantinople on his own initiative at the age of fifteen, to study at the military high school. When the war broke out, he was conscripted into the Turkish army as an officer and assigned to the headquarters of Jamal Pasha. In March 1915, he was assigned to assist Aaron Aaronsohn in the battle against the locust plague and became one of the founders of Nili. As an officer, he enjoyed the trust of his commanders and moved freely between the cities and villages, enabling him to pass intelligence information to Nili. He spent time among the Druse in southern Syria and with the Armenians in northern Syria.

In his book of memoirs, *So It Was*, which he wrote sixty years after the events, Eitan Belkind presents his eyewitness testimony of the massacre of the Armenians which he saw during his service as an officer in the Turkish army.²⁰ Belkind was assigned to the Fourth Army in order to organize the war against the locusts in the region of Mesopotamia and northern Syria, together with two others: Yaakov Bachar, another Jew from Palestine, and an Armenian agronomist by the name of Shirinian, who was a reserve officer.

In his memoirs, Belkind relates that he had written a report on the Armenian massacre at the time it occurred, but the report has not been found. Even if his testimony should be received with caution because of the lapse of time, no one can reject it for this reason. Moreover, his testimony fits with what is known from other sources. Belkind's shock at the massacre of the Armenians should be contrasted to the reactions of the Chief Rabbi of Turkey and his cousin, who rejected – as he tells – any involvement or contact with the issue, even though the degree of their personal risk was considerably less than

¹⁹ See Moshe Neiman, *From Petach Tikva to the Valley of Gloom, Memoirs of a Man of Nili*, Jerusalem, 1964, pp. 55-56. Also see the testimony of Divsha Erlich, *A History of Political Daring*, pp. 345-349.

²⁰ See Eitan Belkind, *So It Was* (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense Publishers, 1977), pp. 115-125.

Belkind's. The following are parts of the excerpts of his report dealing with the massacre of the Armenians:

After a weeks stay in Aleppo, we were given a carriage harnessed to three horses. We departed Aleppo, turned northeast and reached Ras al-Ayn, where we viewed the construction of the Djerablus bridge over the Euphrates, which the Germans were building for the Berlin-Baghdad rail line. From there we continues southeast, along the banks of the Euphrates.

On the second day of our journey we saw a corpse floating in the Euphrates River. We were astounded but the soldiers who accompanied us assured us saying that it was only the corpse of an Armenian. We learned that nearby, on the other side of the Euphrates, there was a camp of Armenians who had been exiled there from Armenia. The face of our comrade, Shirinian, went pale when he heard this, and he beseeched us to cross the river and go to the Armenian camp.

We found an encampment of several hundred people, living in small huts made of grasses around them. The area was clean and the huts were built in straight rows. We walked past the huts and looked in. Shirinian recognized one of his aunts, who told him that all the men had been murdered and only the women and children were left.

Shirinian had not known what was happening to his Armenian people. He was deeply shocked, burst out weeping on his aunt's shoulder, but Yaakov Bachar and I comforted him and we told him that we must continue in the duty which had been assigned to us. We continued on our way, and as we progressed we saw more corpses of Armenians floating on the water, feed for the fish.

... After we received our riding horses and an escort of soldiers, Yaakov Bachar continued on to Musul in his assigned region and I went on to my region, along the Khabur River. The night before we left on our journey, we heard bitter, heartrending cries of women. The Armenian encampment was a kilometer from the house in which we were staying, and the cries continued all through the night. When we asked what was happening, we were told that the children were being taken from their mothers, to be sent to boarding schools in order to continue their studies. But in the morning, when I started on my way and crossed the bridge over the Euphrates, I was astounded to see the waters of the river red with blood and the decapitated corpses of children floating on the water. The sight was horrifying – and we were powerless to help.

We reached the Khabur River, at the place where it meets the Euphrates. We proceeded north and arrived at a tribe of destitute Bedouins, farmers raising wheat...I continued north, and all along the way I came upon corpses of Armenians – especially children, who had not survived the wanderings and had been left by their parents to die by the roadside.

After a three day ride I reached the heart of Mesopotamia where I was witness to a terrible tragedy. There were in that place two camps – that of the Armenians and, next to it, a camp of Circassians, who were occupied in the destruction of the Armenians. In the Circassian camp, Arab sheikhs had also gathered who were choosing for themselves the prettiest girls and women. While I was there, two Armenian women came up to me, gave me their pictures and asked that if I should sometime get to Aleppo and find their families -whom it is doubtful were still alive- that I give them greetings.

A Circassian officer who saw me conversing with the two Armenian women, ordered me to leave the site – but I remained to see what would happen to the Armenians. The Circassian soldiers ordered the Armenians to gather thorns and thistles and to pile them into a tall pyramid: Afterwards they tied all of the Armenians who were there, almost five thousand souls, hand to hand, encircled them like a ring around the pile of thistles and thorns and set it afire in a blaze which rose up to the heavens together with the screams of the wretched people who were burned to death by the fire. I fled from the place, because I could not stand to see this horrifying sight. I whipped my horse to gallop with all his strength, and after a mad run of two hours I could still hear the piteous screams, until they were silent. Two days later I returned to this place and saw the charred bodies of thousands of human beings.

Belkind mentions in his memoirs several times that he wrote a report about the massacres of the Armenians, and sent it to Nili members but efforts to find this document were futile.

Nili's Leader: Aaron Aaronsohn

The leader of the Nili Group was Aaron Aaronsohn, a charismatic, highly educated man, with far-reaching vision. Aaronsohn reacted to, and documented what happened to the Armenians. He tried to help them until his mysterious death on May 15, 1919.

He referred to the Armenian tragedy several times in his journal and in his letters during the years 1915-1916, and was very active in the desire of

creating a Jewish-Arab-Armenian alliance that was mooted in the years 1917-1919. (The central figure behind the idea and the attempts to carry it out was the British diplomat, Sir Mark Sykes).

But the most important documentation among all the reports and documents and the diary he left -in my opinion- was his intelligence report "Pro Armenia." He submitted that report to the British War Office in November 1916. The British related to the document with high regard and it was sent to the highest levels after being edited and summarized and having its title changed to "The Turkish Treatment of Armenians." Aaronsohn's report dealt with the key questions relating to immanent emergence of genocide (even though that precise term was not yet in use) such as: Who knew about it, which part of the Turkish population had participated in the destruction, the role of the Germans in the genocide, a critical reading of the Lapsius account, how the Powers reacted, etc. In his report Aaronsohn also expressed his personal, human and moral reaction to the murders, and looked at it from a Jewish point of view too. It is beyond our possibilities here to analyze the text in detail. The analysis of the British deletions from it are also very significant but are beyond the scope of this article.²¹

I just want to mention briefly one significant issue in Aaronsohn's report: The German culpability. The British deleted Aaron's accusations of German failure to stop the destruction of the Armenians, as well as his fairly detailed treatment of the Lapsius report.

Aaron Aaronsohn is extremely critical of the Germans, and comments that the German mentality and the imperialistic political reasons are the explanations for the German approach to the Armenian question. Aaron Aaronsohn writes that he spoke with tens of Germans: officers, physicians, and others, who were in the heart of the region of the massacres and this is what he found:

All and every German was individually horrified at what he has witnessed. Trained with a superstitious respect of property, order, etc....a German cannot be expected to look in cold blood placidly at the robbery, massacres, etc....To say therefore that the Germans were leading the massacres, or even taking directly a hand in them, as it has often been repeated, is doing them a wrong or at least advancing things that can never be proved,

²¹ See in details Auran 2000 (op. cit.), pp. 196-208.

whereas the Germans will always be able to prove by testimonials, diaries, protocols, etc....that in each their soul revolted.

But slaves to discipline, having been given every individual thought or movement the Germans who were ordered to duty in the massacre area, saw the outrage, felt indignant, but made no move to stop it. That is certainly, from a higher moral ground, participation even if not direct.

Aaronsohn ends his report: *"The Armenian massacres are the carefully planned acts of the Turks, and the Germans will certainly be made for ever to share the odium of this act."*

It has to be remembered that compared to Lepsius or the British Toynbee and Bryce who were, at the time, composing a "Blue book" about the Turkish massacre of the Armenians, Aaron Aaronsohn's situation was different. Lepsius, the German, and Bryce and Toynbee, the Englishmen, and quite a few others, protested the massacres and did not stay on the sidelines. They are among those few who stand between the murderer and the victim and give aid to the victim. But they themselves and the members of their group are not in jeopardy.

Aaronsohn, who raised a moral protest against the massacre, is not in their position. In his view, he, too, together with his family and people, may become victim of a Turkish massacre – "the next in line." This fear arouses in him existential anxiety and is an additional motive for his action.

Conclusions

In those or similar circumstances, humans do not hold identical views nor behave in a single manner. The present study offers the opportunity to examine an important case-study of a general phenomenon, which is separate from both the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish aspect, that is: The reactions of the bystanders to the occurrences of mass slaughter. The greater part of my study deals with what I call "the reactors," but it is appropriate to note that the great majority of the Yishuv was indifferent and did not relate to the Armenian catastrophe, even though people knew of it while it was happening. The almost total concentration on the Jewish cause –in effect, the Zionist cause– constituted one of the major factors for the leaders of the Yishuv and the Zionist Movement ignoring or remaining indifferent to the Armenian tragedy.

In this article I have mentioned some individuals and groups within the Yishuv and the Zionist Movement who did more than note the occurrence of the Armenian Genocide, or express sympathy for the pain and suffering of the Armenians. The reactions took the form of a moral sensibility, an attempt to arouse public interest in the tragedy and to spark others to action. The people who reacted were, for the most part, unable themselves to act directly, and expressed their pain at their helplessness, both as Jews and as human beings.

Those who related, reacted, protested among the Yishuv and the Zionist Movement against the Armenian Genocide, which caused them to undergo a moral, human and sometimes explicitly Jewish shock, are typified by two qualities. Firstly, most of the reactions, to a great degree, were natives of Israel as compared with the newcomers of that time. Secondly, the reactors and those relating to the event were in one way or another exceptions – non-conformists, “troublemakers”, people with critical views of the Zionist establishment.

The emerging and increasingly clear picture of the attitude toward instances of genocide is a portrayal of the banality of indifference. The reaction of a great many people towards the victims is characterized by indifference, conformism and even opportunism. The Jews, too, in the given circumstances of the time and place, have not been detached from this banality, except for a few “exceptions.”

However, even though the special significance of the attitude of the Jews towards the Armenian calamity was mentioned and even emphasized (as well as the attitudes of the Zionist Movement, and the State of Israel) it has not been researched and discussed systematically until this study. It includes documents and eye-witness account from the period of the First World War that have never before been published, and reveals chapters in the history of the Zionist Movement that have been overlooked. Even though a few reminders of the supportive and empathic identification of the Nili Group with the Armenian tragedy are recalled from time to time, it is the first detailed analysis and comprehensive scholarly illumination on this subject.