

When silences speak

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I first heard the word “Armenian” while eavesdropping on the conversations of elderly Muslim women. Back when I was a child in Istanbul, there was a small bakery my grandma would send me to for the best yufka in the neighborhood. The place was owned by a modest couple, a short woman who never smiled and her shorter husband who always did. Coming home from there one day, I found a group of women in our living room sipping their teas and praising the yufka of this small bakery as they reached for the pastries. Then I heard one of them ask, “Are these bakers Armenians?” My grandma nodded as she said: “But isn't it obvious? They are such a hard-working couple.” One by one the women shared with each other memories of the Armenians they knew back in their childhoods in Sivas, Erzurum, Van, Istanbul, etc.

Trying to cross the information I'd just heard with my image of the bakers in the neighborhood, I had this vision of an insomniac couple baking all kinds of bread every night in their little shops. The scene seemed pretty pleasant to me, almost mystical. Eager to learn more about these people and their ways, I interrupted the chitchat in the room and asked, who on earth were these Armenians? Since that day, it is not the answers that remain anchored in my memory but the silence that followed. I remember the women being somewhat annoyed by my question, and then, annoyed by my very presence in the room. Although I had been sitting in front of their eyes for the past half hour, they had only now taken notice. Suddenly, I had become an **outsider**.

Recalling that memory, I tend to liken it to a widespread and deeply-rooted reaction in Turkish daily life concerning the “Armenian question.” We can easily converse about the Armenians in the serenity of our living rooms, we can recall distant memories of a past when we used to live together with our good old Armenian neighbors, and we can even be critical of the Turkish state ... provided there are no “outsiders” around. We ourselves, on our own initiative can and do frequently remember the Armenian neighbors we once had, but we do not like to be *reminded* of them. That afternoon in that living room, I couldn't help but notice my interruption caused uneasiness and a decline in enthusiasm among the women to keep talking in the same vein.

There was a nuance that equally remains etched in my memory. Whenever she uttered the word “Armenian,” my grandmother lowered her voice without realizing it -- her voice dwindling to an almost confidential whisper. To this day, Grandma's intonation changes when she talks about an Armenian, any Armenian. Clearly, she does not do it deliberately or malevolently. When I ask her the reason why she cannot utter this word aloud, she looks back at me in surprise. Does she lower her voice? Sure she doesn't.

In the passage of time, I came to realize I was not asking her the right question. When the word is “Armenian,” it is not the sound of the word itself necessarily, but the silence that conveys the uncharted depths of oral history of elderly Muslim women in Turkey.

I conducted the same test on the women of my mother's generation and then the women of mine. The results were somewhat different. Younger women in Turkey had no real difficulty in pronouncing the word “Armenian” aloud, as if it was just any other word for them. They didn't have any reason to pause because they didn't have any particular story to tell. They didn't have any particular story to tell because they had no common experience with Armenians. Somehow, somewhere, a body of knowledge was lost between generations of women. Thus, those who were young and didn't know much were the ones who would speak, but, didn't have anything personal to tell. Those who were old and had something personal to tell were the ones that kept quiet, and as such, their stories could not be heard. In either case, the “Armenian question” remained unspeakable.

History does not only mean written and documented history. History is also oral history. The elderly women in Turkey remember the things Turkish nationalist historians cannot possibly bear to hear. In almost every household in Turkey today, there is a woman of my grandmother's generation. The crucial question is: how can we ever bring that experience out? How can we decode the silence? It is my belief that if we are to look into the dusk of the past and shed light on the atrocities we Turks have allegedly committed against the Armenians, we should not only focus on the archives or written documents, but also pay attention to the unwritten volumes of women's oral histories.

We need to listen to the suppressed memories of the Turkish grandmothers. For, unlike the Turkish nationalists who keep reacting against every critical voice in civil society by systematically propagating “collective amnesia,” these elderly women *do* remember.