

Social Interaction, Self-Reflection, and Struggles over Genocide Knowledge

Carmelite Christie—missionary, school administrator, and educator in the town of Tarsus in Turkey—writes observations about the Armenian genocide, which unfolded around her and throughout the Ottoman Empire, in her diary entries of 1915–19 (Minnesota Historical Society [MHS], n.d.). Christie's first preserved entry confirms scholarship according to which killings and deportations were in full force by the fall of 1915. On October 1, 1915, she notes that

Prof. Zenop Bezjian spent one night in Tarsus en route for Constantinople, whither he goes as the ecclesiastical representative for the Protestants of all Turkey. He told us of 60,000 exiles encamped between the end of the RR [railroad] journey, Osmania and Aleppo,—sent from home and business all the way along the line from Constantinople,—and not wanted in the regions to which they go. Multitudes are starving. They are without money, no work to be had, food scarce, even for those able to pay, sickness of all kinds prevalent, numbers dying every day. (MHS Box 28:2–3)

Christie writes about massacres in villages near Yozgat, the dead left unburied:

They told of a village of 300 where 200 had been butchered. There were many murders on the road, and women outraged in the usual manner, and young women stolen and taken away. Robbery was a daily occurrence. . . . I heard today of a poor woman at Gulek [Gülek] Station, who was without any money or food. . . . [The woman] threww [*sic*] her two little ones into the shallow stream . . . the inhumanity of man to man, of which we take daily knowledge is almost past belief. (MHS Box 28:2–3)¹

This testimony, together with that of hundreds of other observers and the experiences of thousands of survivors, accumulated, over the past century, to form a body of knowledge about the Armenian genocide. Testifying is often challenging. Even for a worker in the field of humanitarian aid like Christie, it takes courage to note the cruelties. After all, she has to operate under the regime that is responsible

for the suffering she seeks to alleviate. While entrusting a private diary with testimony for posterity is less risky than testifying publicly at the time of the atrocities, a diary writer still has to overcome a sense of caution and accommodation to the surrounding powers. The temptation to hold back information is encouraged by prevailing silences on the part of victims and perpetrators, and by denial, especially by the perpetrators.

Unlike Christie, most do not document their observations in writing. Yet they communicate, or seek to avoid communication, in millions of day-to-day interactions in which they silence, deny, or acknowledge. Through these exchanges they generate knowledge, an understanding of present and historical reality. Which aspect of reality prevails depends on which of these strategies dominates in a given collectivity. Most who grew up in post-atrocity eras know the mechanisms well. Born in 1951 in Germany and growing up in the decades following the Holocaust, this author's knowledge about the world missed essential aspects of the immediate past. Parents, teachers, clerics, neighbors—all to whom children and adolescents look up and from whom they seek to learn—silenced the Shoah. Only in the mid- to late 1960s was this silence broken. Acknowledgment set in, slow initially and then accelerating. When silencing was no longer an option, many responded with various forms of denial.

This generational experience motivates and informs this first chapter. Here I address patterns of communication in personal interaction and written texts as the first stage in the buildup of repertoires of knowledge about genocide. Eventually, millions of micro-level communicative exchanges aggregate into macrosociological outcomes. They become part of group-specific knowledge repertoires in a process of sedimentation that is the subject of subsequent chapters.

KNOWLEDGE: WHAT WE TAKE FOR GRANTED

We all have answers to questions about the world. They reach from the banal—say, what the safest place is to cross the street—to more challenging matters such as what type of education leads to occupational opportunities, or what family arrangements provide a healthy upbringing for children. They include difficult issues, for example questions about the origins of human life, human contributions to global warming, or the safety of nuclear energy or genetically engineered food. Closer to the subject of this book, many of our contemporaries have answers when asked about the Armenian genocide that began in 1915 or about the number of Jewish lives extinguished during the Holocaust. We consider our answers to these questions part of what we know about the world. Yet almost none of that knowledge results from our own scholarly or otherwise systematic exploration. Again, *knowledge*—in the sociology of knowledge tradition—is not certified knowledge, but simply the perceived “certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:1). Knowledge

consists of “matter of course assumptions” (Schütz [1932] 1967), which, in aggregate, constitute a “relative-natural world view” (Scheler 1992)—relative, in that it is specific to a collectivity’s place in the world.²

Some of our knowledge concerns the here and now—phenomena that surround us at the current time and in the places in which we live, work, play, or endure. Yet the meaning of the here and now is not always clear to us. We encounter new situations that appear to be chaotic and confusing. Consider exposure to mass violence and the disorientation it evokes. Noted Armenians such as Aurora (Arshaluys) Mardiganian, Kaspar Hovannisian, and the parents of Arsham and Sita Ohanessian, and hundreds of thousands of others less well known suffered the cruelty of eviction from their homes in the Ottoman Empire and the exhaustion of death marches from their villages and towns into the Syrian Desert. They saw their brothers killed and their mothers raped. Just a quarter of a century later, Jean Améry, Paul Neurath, Primo Levi, Maurice Halbwachs, and Jorge Semprún lived through pain and humiliation in Nazi Germany’s torture chambers and concentration camps. Deprived even of basic markers of their identity, they nevertheless communicated with others, even at the time of suffering, and through such exchanges, some made sense of their experience (e.g., Semprún 1981; Neurath [1943] 2005).

Most of our knowledge, however, concerns events and phenomena far removed from our own experience. We learn about them through mediators: some close, such as grandparents or parents who experienced the past directly, or friends who have traveled to distant places; others more removed and formal, such as history books, the internet, or news media. When knowledge about the past is shared, acknowledged, and reaffirmed by members of a collectivity, we refer to it as *collective memory* (Coser 1992). Unlike the firsthand knowledge of Aurora Mardiganian or Jorge Semprún, the collective memory of mass atrocities is, for most of us, part of the body of mediated knowledge. We did not gain it through personal experience.

Addressing communication that supplies us with knowledge about genocide, I build on a branch of sociology that was inspired by pragmatist philosophy and phenomenology. It includes lines of work that purists separate strictly, but that have basic features in common. Its contributors share the notion that knowledge about the world is constructed through social interaction. Charles Cooley (1926), Alfred Schütz ([1932] 1967), Herbert Blumer (1969), Erving Goffman (1967), and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) are among the prominent representatives of this approach to the understanding of society. Closely related is the notion that knowledge is constructed through thought processes, inner conversations between the I and the Me (Mead 1934). When documented through writing, thought processes become externalized and objectified, subject to transmission to others, including new generations. Throughout chapters 1 and 2, we encounter such knowledge construction in the form of letters, diaries, and memoirs.

While scholars in the interactionist tradition thus focus on the micro-level of social life, they know that social interactions in the here and now do not occur in empty social space. Instead, they unfold in a world of social facts of which actors have to be mindful. They also know that social interaction has consequences. It leaves traces, solidifying and altering, albeit in microscopic steps, the social reality in which it takes place.

The history of the term *genocide* offers an example. At the beginning stood a dispute over the notion of state sovereignty, carried out between Raphael Lemkin, then a law student, and one of his professors at the University of Lviv. Lemkin, well informed about the mass violence against the Armenian people, was disturbed by the trial conducted in Berlin against Soghomon Tehlirian, the young Armenian assassin of Talaat Pasha, one of the main responsible actors in the genocide. In debating his professor, Lemkin came to challenge the notion of state sovereignty, ingrained in international law since the end of the Thirty Years' War and the Westphalian Peace Treaty of 1648, a principle that allows a government to act toward its subjects as it sees fit, with no legal recourse or threat of outside intervention. Lemkin developed the concept of genocide over subsequent decades, in publications, conference contributions, and manifold discussions with legal scholars, activists, and politicians. He fought desperately and succeeded in convincing the newly founded United Nations to draft and vote on the Genocide Convention—formally, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide—adopted unanimously by the UN General Assembly in 1948. *Genocide*, according to the Genocide Convention, “means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.”³ What began with communicative interaction, a dispute between student and professor, solidified and became a central concept in modern international human rights law.

A MICROSOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON SILENCING, DENYING, AND ACKNOWLEDGING GENOCIDE

Victims and perpetrators of genocide, and their descendants, face special challenges when they communicate about the history of genocide. They need to repair their spoiled identities and to manage stigma (Goffman [1963] 1986; Giesen 2004a; Savelsberg 2021). In interactions, they often silence the past, or they deny, challenging truth claims of the “other.” In the alternative, they recognize and acknowledge the deadly past. Acknowledgment among perpetrators, or those to whom perpetrators have passed on the stigma of perpetration, may take the form of confession.

Silencing is a common strategy in the immediate aftermath of genocide. So is denial, especially among perpetrator peoples once silence is broken and information about the genocide begins to seep to the surface of social life. Today, in fact, many have listened to testimonies that survivors of the Holocaust gave to school classes or have watched archived video recordings of survivor interviews.⁴ They may have viewed documentary films such as Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, with its ten hours of interviews with surviving victims and perpetrators, or one of the many documentaries on the Armenian genocide. Many today have read biographical texts, memoirs, or diaries, or have spoken with survivors and their descendants.

In the following, I draw on such sources in examining how various actors engage in silencing or denying the Armenian genocide, or in acknowledgment and recognition. I make use of autobiographical accounts, family histories, and memoirs as quarries from which pieces of information about interactive situations can be broken off and analyzed. Secondly, at a different level of analysis, I use autobiographical accounts, memoirs, and diaries themselves as data, as examples of inner conversations by the authors, or their conversations with imagined audiences. While elsewhere I examine strategies used by authors and in everyday interaction as forms of stigma management for post-Holocaust Germany (Savelsberg, 2020b), here I am primarily interested in the contribution of these strategies to repertoires of knowledge among Armenians and Turks.

Silence and Silencing

Silence is a state, silencing an activity. In social interactions, we may silence ourselves. "Biting one's tongue" is a familiar expression, and we can all think of times when we were about to utter a statement but stopped ourselves at the last second (or did not, but should have). We may instead silence others, by imposing rules of speech, cutting others off, or interrupting their utterances with discouraging comments or gestures (Smith-Lovin and Brody 1989). Silencing a dark past is common practice among victim as well as perpetrator groups.

Consider Peter Balakian, who grew up in an Armenian American family and became a writer, a Pulitzer Prize recipient, and a scholar. He wrote prominently about the Armenian genocide in *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (Balakian 2003). In an autobiography written a few years earlier—*Black Dog of Fate: An American Son Uncovers His Armenian Past* (Balakian 1997)—he tells his readers about family interactions that involved the fate of his ancestors, including stories about silencing. Consider young Peter secretly observing his grandmother, a survivor of the genocide, as she took a long ivory pipe out of her purse, prepared it, and smoked "in long puffs." Occasionally, she made the sign of the cross and repeatedly uttered "Der Voghormya" (Lord have mercy) and "Sourp Asdvadz" (Holy God)—while watching television news about the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. Daring to ask his mother, albeit after some delay, about his grandmother's strange rituals, Peter was told: "Oh, in the old country, at a certain age, women smoke pipes once in a while. It's a sign of wisdom" (Balakian 1997:16).

Not surprisingly, his mother's answer, by silencing much, raised new and more urgent questions in the boy's mind. He knew that "the old country" meant Armenia, but his notion of Armenia was a blurry one, and he did not know why its mention made him feel uneasy. When he sought to inquire, adults would change the subject. If it is not "really around anymore," as his mother told him on another occasion, where had it gone? An absence of physical markers accompanied the silence. Where others to whom a place is dear might display a map or a photo, there was emptiness in the Balakian home, adding to young Peter's unease.

Peter Balakian's story is neither universal nor unique. It is one of millions of moments of silencing among survivors and their descendants, inhibiting the transmission of knowledge across generations. Simultaneously, Balakian's story shows that silence is rarely *total* silence. While his mother avoided the difficult topic of genocide, she did refer to "the old country." Silences, especially partial silences, may speak. Balakian's mother thus communicated not just a void to her son, but unease. This transmission of unease may not be generalizable, but the way silence speaks is again not unique to the Balakian family.

Recent interviews with French citizens of Armenian descent reveal similar stories about silencing.⁵ For example, a prominent Armenian-French man—editor-in-chief of a renowned ethnic magazine and a leader in organized French Armenian life—tells me about his grandparents, who had survived the genocide and migrated to France from Greece in 1920: "They did not speak to their grandchildren about the genocide, to protect them; but they talked among each other and expressed their hatred of Turks" (paraphrased). His parents, however, did speak to their son about the Armenian experience during World War I. Another prominent French person of Armenian descent, editor-in-chief of a prestigious academic journal dedicated to Armenian issues, similarly reports that he talked with his parents, but not with his grandparents, about Armenian issues. And a young Armenian-French scholar shared the experience of learning little from his grandfather, who had escaped the genocide, about his suffering.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, in the thin Armenian diaspora of Minnesota, an Armenian American revealed his experiences at an event entitled "How it was to grow up Armenian in...", organized by the Armenian Cultural Organization of Minnesota. He spoke to his audience about the absence of April 24 commemorations in his childhood, and recalled that his parents did not talk much about the Armenian past. He attributes their silence to their fight against outsider status in their new country, to which their own parents had migrated from the Ottoman Empire, but in which they were born.

Silencing comes in different shapes. A leading activist for the cultural association *Vigilance Arménienne contre le Négationnisme*, for example, grew up in a dense Armenian-French community, and she remembers attending somber annual ceremonies on April 24, the Armenian day of genocide commemoration. Yet elders did not explain the meaning of those ceremonies, leaving her with a

diffuse awareness of something dark. The shock came—and the silence was broken—at age eight, when she discovered a book with images of the genocide.

Again, silencing histories of mass atrocity is not universal, and below we will encounter different stories, ones of active denying and of acknowledging. Yet silencing is widespread, and Armenians share it with other groups whose history involved genocidal victimization. Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi and Chana Teeger write about “social silences,” with a focus on the Jewish experience. They distinguish between overt silence, a literal absence of speech, and covert silence, “covered and veiled by much mnemonic talk and representation” (2010:1104). Both types may serve the aim of either memorializing or forgetting. A “moment of silence,” for example during Israel’s Memorial Day for the Holocaust, serves the preservation of memory. It contrasts with overt silence practiced by groups that “actively do not wish to remember” (2010:1110). On the side of covert silence, Vinitzky-Seroussi and Teeger identify “bland commemoration,” a selective way of memorializing, in which some aspects of history are silenced (e.g., the genocide) while others are cultivated (e.g., music and culinary traditions). From this, they distinguish “cacophonous commemoration,” exemplified by days of commemoration of troubling events that are coupled with the commemoration of one or several other occurrences. Consequently, the undesirable event is crowded out.

In the interactive situations reported above for Armenians, social actors typically engage in two of these four types of silence: overt silence with the goal of forgetting and covert silence by way of “bland commemoration.” Yet their stories show that even overt silence with the goal of forgetting is never complete silence. Occasional referents to the repressed past tell recipients that something unpleasant is being avoided, that there is a proverbial elephant in the room (Zerubavel 2006).

At times, silence is only verbal silence. Cultural anthropologist Carol Kidron (2009) interviewed fifty-five descendants of Holocaust survivors in her native Israel. While her respondents confirm the preponderance of verbal silence, they simultaneously report nonverbal forms of communication. Examples include embodied practices such as the habit of keeping one’s shoes close to the bed, passed on to children and grandchildren. Getting into shoes quickly might confer enhanced chances of survival in the camps. Respondents also report about person-object interactions, such as the spoon a respondent’s mother used in the Auschwitz camp to eat her soup. The spoon had become a matter-of-course object in the household with which she fed the interviewee as a little child. The daughter adds: “Look, she won, she survived with that spoon” (Kidron 2009:11). While such statements reveal triumph rather than trauma, other quotations appear to reflect at least ambivalence. Kidron quotes one of her interviewees who reports how her mother’s nightly screams woke her frequently when she was a child: “I didn’t know why she was crying, I knew she was having a bad dream, that it must have been something very frightening or painful and that it was about the Holocaust. I think my father may have told me it was because of the Holocaust. I didn’t

know what she was dreaming about the Holocaust or really what the Holocaust was, but . . . *I knew it was about what I didn't know*" (Kidron 2009:5–6). Obviously, the cries of this respondent's mother provided some knowledge, further advanced by her father's words (Holocaust as a "painful" experience that, decades later, causes nightmares—"bad dreams"); but other knowledge was missing ("what the Holocaust was"). The situation Kidron's respondent reports thus reveals awareness (knowledge) of ignorance (not knowing), resulting from a mix of verbal and non-verbal communication. I heard similar accounts from non-Jewish Polish friends whose parents had survived the camps.

Kidron's second major point challenges much of the literature on silence. She argues that the effect of verbal silence is not necessarily disturbing or traumatic. Instead, silent traces transmit tacit knowledge of the past within everyday family life. These arguments pertain to the quality of knowledge, in that it matters if knowledge is verbally articulated or embodied. They speak secondly to the affective consequences of verbal silence in combination with nonverbal communication. Kidron's conclusion certainly contrasts with the unease that quotations from the interviews and biographies above overwhelmingly reflect. Might it be that Kidron's findings and conclusions are reflective of the specific Israeli context, characterized by a sense of relative cultural safety in a new, post-genocide state (as opposed to diaspora) and surrounded by a world in which many share in the respondents' experiences? Contrast this with stories about Jewish life in the diaspora.

Philippe Sands, an international lawyer and professor of law at University College London, conveys such stories in *East-West Street* (Sands 2016). The author tells us that he learned little about his grandfather Leon's life before 1945, in Lemberg (today, Lviv) and Vienna. "The past hung about Leon and Rita [his wife], a time before Paris, not to be talked about in my presence or not in a language I understood" (16). He remembers his grandfather's words "C'est compliqué, c'est le passé, pas important" (17) (It's complicated, it's the past, not important). He also remembers—similar to Peter Balakian—the "absence of photographs" (15), and he quotes psychoanalyst Nikolas Abraham: "What haunts us are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others" (7). If Kidron is right that the silenced past of her respondents is not necessarily haunting, then Philippe Sands's experience might have been different had he grown up with his grandfather in Israel.

In short, the experience of silence is crucial in social interactions between survivors of genocide and their descendants, be they survivors of the Shoah or of the Armenian genocide. Silence may take different forms, but it is never total silence. At times, it is but verbal silence, paired with nonverbal forms of communication. At other times, it is partial silence, whereby participants in interactive situations communicate something verbally, but in a way that leaves obvious gaps. On yet other occasions, silencing consists of aborted or disrupted utterances. No matter the form of silencing, silence may or may not be traumatizing, depending on

context. Most importantly here, social silence is one form of social interaction and communication that contributes to the generation of knowledge—often ambiguous, at times troubling—about a horrific past.

Silence is an experience shared by descendants of the victim group and of the perpetrator group, but the motivations and consequences differ. We find similarities to this author's memories of silence in post–World War II Germany in many biographical accounts of the children and grandchildren of (at times just suspected) German perpetrators (e.g., Leo 2014; Schenck 2016; Mitgutsch 2016). Such literature shows how silence among the perpetrator people is profoundly disturbing to at least some, especially when paired with information from other sources. Different from what Kidron observed, social silences do not easily enter into the calm flow of everyday life where the silence of perpetrators is concerned. Silence instead interweaves with a sense of secondary guilt—guilt for loving (or having loved) those who perpetrated (or possibly perpetrated), and guilt for not inquiring decisively about their past. The inheritance is associated with stigma. It is dyed into the fabric of those who succeed their elders. Those who are born into the collectivity out of which evil had grown inherit shame and stigma, be they Germans or Turks.

If some survivors of the Armenian genocide and of the Shoah practiced silence, and if silencing the history of the Holocaust was common in Germany, then we may assume that silencing was also a common practice in the perpetrator people of the genocide against the Armenians. Yet perpetrators and their descendants may also be tempted to engage in another strategy of managing stigma or a spoiled identity. They may deny, and that denial mixes with silencing to produce particular repertoires of knowledge.

Denial and Denying

Among the three concepts at the center of this chapter—silence, acknowledgment, and denial—the latter is the dominant subject of scholarship, and probably of everyday talk. A Google book search shows at least a hundred titles that include the word *denial*. A well-known example is historian Deborah Lipstadt's (1993) *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory*. In 1999, historian Richard Hovannisian edited *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide*. Two years later, Stanley Cohen (2001) published *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering*, a criminologist's take on denial of government repression and mass violence. Finally, 2015 saw the appearance of historical sociologist Fatma Müge Göçek's magnum opus, entitled *Denial of Violence: Ottoman Past, Turkish Present, and Collective Violence against the Armenians, 1789–2009* (2015). The latter book is the most impressive effort thus far to document and explain denial of the Armenian genocide. Göçek's volume, based on a detailed analysis of more than three hundred memoirs of prominent Turks, addresses denial in four stages of Turkish history.

All these books treat denial as something morally abominable. Given that *denial* can also refer to a rejection of falsehoods and outrageous claims, the authors cited above obviously mean something more specific. They generally refer to the denial of historic events documented by overwhelming evidence, including scholarship.⁶

Types of denial. Denial is a difficult and even confounding concept, in that it embraces distinct phenomena. Thankfully, Stanley Cohen helps by distinguishing between three forms of denial. The first is *literal denial*, “the assertion that something did not happen” (2001:7). This can also be called *factual denial*, and cognition is at stake. The second type, *interpretive denial*, poses greater challenges. Here “the raw facts (something happened) are not being denied [but instead] . . . given a different meaning from what seems apparent to others” (2001:7). This type of denial concerns *morality*. Yes, someone argues, many human lives were lost, but those losses were not the result of murderous violence but rather the unavoidable side effect of war. A more specific instance of interpretive denial can occur when meaning is captured in legal terms. When social actors categorize mass killings as genocide, for example, this form of denial challenges their attempt to subsume evidence under the legal category; most prominent in this regard are challenges to the subsumption of intent.

Criminologists know interpretive denial well, recognizing such strategies of neutralization as enablers of deviance (Sykes and Matza 1957). Deviant actors neutralize by denying responsibility, victimization, or injury; by condemning their condemners (e.g., accusing them of having provoked the violence or having engaged in even worse atrocities); or by appealing to higher loyalties (e.g., the nation’s honor over norms of international law). In all these cases, they do not deny that others have been harmed, but they seek to defend their identity as moral actors and upright citizens, shielding it from potential moral and legal damage.

Factual and interpretive denial often overlap, and their deployment begins *during* genocidal regimes. Raul Hilberg ([1961] 2003) reveals such strategies in the first major historical study of the Holocaust. He shows how the regime built an arsenal of defenses, including social mechanisms of repression, to help its murderous agents overcome moral scruples that result from a long civilizing process (Elias [1939] 2000). Such mechanisms include hiding the ultimate aim of the actions (controlling information); forcing those who know what is occurring to participate, in order to secure their silence and denial (“blood kit”); prohibiting criticism; eliminating destruction as a subject of conversation; and cultivating camouflaged vocabulary (e.g., avoiding the term *killing*). Once introduced, these strategies likely spill over into the post-genocidal era, no longer motivated by the desire to enable mass killings, but by the need to face a new world that abhors the evils of the immediate past.

Cohen distinguishes a third type of denial: *implicatory denial*. Such denial accepts the facts and their conventional interpretation, but “what are denied or

minimized are the psychological, political or moral implications that conventionally follow” (Cohen 2001:8). This type of denial again concerns *morality*, in terms of not accepting responsibility.⁷ Historians of genocide also engage with implicatory denial. Again, Hilberg ([1961] 2003) provides an example, writing about mechanisms of collective and individual rationalization. The former may include justification of the destruction process as a whole, for example by defining the target as evil. While such collective rationalization still falls under the category of interpretive denial, individual rationalization involves methods through which actors seek to claim helplessness in the face of larger forces, even if they were directly involved in the killings. They include reference to the doctrine of superior orders, also found in the famous Milgram experiment (Milgram 1963) and in Arendt’s (1963) notion of the banality of evil; insistence that no personal vindictiveness was involved, for example by telling stories about one’s “good deeds” toward Jewish neighbors; blaming others; or diminishing one’s own importance (“I was just one among many”). In other words, those engaging in implicatory denial accept that terrible deeds were committed, and also accept their definition as genocide, but they insist that they could not really do anything about them; they were tools in the hands of others, deprived of agency. Implicatory denial comes even more easily to bystanders than to perpetrators.

Like the practice of silencing, denial occurs at different levels of social life. We find it in official pronouncements, where it is easily institutionalized (a subject of subsequent chapters). Yet it is also common at the micro-level. There it leaves its traces in social interactions and inner conversations reflected in diaries, memoirs, or other autobiographical texts.

Denial by Turkish memoir writers. Perpetrators most commonly practice denial. Accordingly, Göçek’s analysis of more than three hundred memoirs of prominent Turks focuses on related strategies. Let us consider two of her examples. The first is Dr. Mehmet Şahingiray, a member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP; the Young Turk party) and of the Special Organization, the chief executor of the mass killings. Şahingiray, reflecting on the mass violence against Armenians in 1915, claims there was intense hostility and armament among the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, aiming to “drive the Turks from [the latter’s] beloved ancestral homeland of eight or ten centuries” (quoted in Göçek 2015:249–250). He continues by asking his imagined audience: “[Why should] the Armenians not be punished? Which ‘civilized government’ would have remained just an onlooker? Which government would expose its political survival to such danger? Just as the government is obliged to undertake precautionary measures, it is also natural for there to be a danger for the Muslim populace to get carried away by their emotions, reacting in kind to the rapacious and terrible murders of the [Armenian] element with which they had lived for so many centuries, considering them [fellow] citizens and brethren” (quoted in Göçek 2015:250).

Göçek challenges Şahingiray's arguments by reminding the reader of crucial distinctions in the size and nature of suffering between Turks and Armenians: yes, two million Turks lost their lives in the violence of World War I, but those deaths occurred mostly on the battlefield, in the fight against Allied soldiers, absent any contacts with Armenians. "Armenian suffering [instead] was empire-wide, with the Ottoman state, government and military forcibly and systematically removing and subsequently destroying civilian Armenian communities of mostly women, children and the elderly" (Göçek 2015:250). In Cohen's terms, Göçek considers Şahingiray's reflections a form of interpretive denial. Her second refutation concerns (at least partial) literal denial: the equation of the scale of Armenian militancy, which destroyed an estimated sixty thousand Muslim lives, and the death toll of at least eight hundred thousand among the Armenians.

Göçek provides another example that links factual and interpretive denial. She quotes from the memoir of an Ottoman officer who writes of how he encountered "on the two sides of the road [between Meskene and Deyr Zor] unburied corpses of those among the [Armenian] refugee convoys who had fallen sick and died" (Göçek 2015:205). While expressing sorrow, he continues thus: "The CUP government was forced to remove these Armenians from the regions near military conflict due to the inevitability of [the conditions] of war. But during this migration executed without any organization or transportation, some among the Armenian refugees died due to exhaustion and disease. Yet, according to our calculation at the time, THE LOSS OF THE TURKISH POPULACE WAS MUCH MORE THAN THAT OF THE ARMENIANS" (caps in original; quoted in Göçek 2015:251). Again, equalizing the numbers of deaths constitutes at least partial literal denial, while attributing the deaths to unavoidable exhaustion is an example of interpretive denial.

Denial is not limited to the perpetrators themselves. It extends, in many cases, to their children (e.g., Sands 2016:240) and even to their children's children, who grew up with the love grandchildren develop for their grandparents, though they may learn later about the dark chapter in their grandfathers' past (Welzer et al. 2002). Welzer and his collaborators have found, in the case of Germany, that grandchildren tend to redefine, minimize, and rationalize their grandfathers' involvement in Nazism. They also find that this tendency intensifies in the context of growing public recognition of the horrors of the Holocaust. In other words, acceptance in public life motivates implicatory denial at the family level. Denial and acknowledgment at the macro- and micro-levels of society move in opposite directions.

Importantly, in all cases of implicatory denial, by the perpetrator generation or its descendants, literal and often interpretive acknowledgment are implied. At times, implicatory denial is a reaction to acknowledgment of fact. Boundaries between acknowledgment and denial are thus blurry.

In short, when a collectivity acknowledges involvement in mass atrocity, implicatory denial is a common practice in everyday communication and individual

reflection. Alternatively, by practicing factual or interpretive denial, collectivities offer individuals an escape from challenging situations. Many former Young Turk politicians and military laid the ground for such denial, as Göçek convincingly shows in her study of memoirs. The new Turkish Republic, eager to engage them in its service after its foundation in 1922, embraced their interpretation. Later chapters show how their seed bore rich fruit within Turkey—how denial in individual reflections, in memoirs and in everyday communication, became sedimented. Yet today's broad public recognition of the Armenian genocide in the contemporary West suggests that, despite denial and silencing, acknowledgment was at work as well.

Acknowledging and Bearing Witness

Traces of acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide occasionally appear in writings by agents of the perpetrator state, even those written while the atrocities were still unfolding. In addition, and following a long period of silencing and denial, acknowledgment today advances cautiously among some courageous Turkish intellectuals. Within the victim group, pulled for many decades between silencing and acknowledgment, recent decades have witnessed organized efforts to document survivor testimonies, archive them, and make them available in places such as the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation. Such testimonies merge personal and collective knowledge that has accumulated over decades, and they reinforce collective memory.

Perpetrator people: Turkish acknowledgments. One of the Turkish memoirs analyzed by Fatma Müge Göçek was penned by Ahmed Refik, director of dispatches of the Ottoman government in the early phase of World War I. With the imperial capital under threat of occupation during the 1915 battle of the Dardanelles, Ahmed Refik was sent to the town of Eskişehir to coordinate the possible relocation of the seat of the Ottoman government. Having arrived in Eskişehir, Ahmed Refik witnessed the violence committed against the Armenian population. He was horrified by his observations, and his memoir provides one of the strongest examples of acknowledgment, embedded in the sea of denialist statements by his compatriots that Göçek collected in her volume. Refik writes:

[When gathered at the train station for deportation,] no one wanted to move for all [the Armenians] believed that a fearsome force awaited them there [death]. Forests around the mountains were filled with the armed bands the CUP government had sent from İstanbul. In order to stay alive, the people were willing to stay in Eskişehir. . . . [Additional observations justified such fear:] Rivers are filled with human torsos and heads of children. This view tears one's heart to pieces. But won't people be one day called to account for this? . . . No government at any historical period has committed murders with such cruelty. (quoted in Göçek 2015:153)

Göçek, a Turk of the grandchildren's generation, writing a century after Refik, herself engages in acknowledgment. She does so through scholarship that lays open what Turkish witnesses of the Armenian genocide observed, and how they simultaneously engaged in denial. In the autobiographical preface to *Denial of Violence*, Göçek introduces the book as "the end result of a long journey, one that was not only scholarly but also intensely personal" (Göçek 2015:vii).

Having grown up as the daughter of an upper-class family in cosmopolitan İstanbul, availed of the best educational opportunities her country had to offer, she also became aware of "prejudicial and discriminatory behavior" (Göçek 2015:viii) against non-Turkish and non-Muslim groups. Yet only as a graduate student at Princeton University did she learn from one of her mentors, the renowned Middle East historian Bernard Lewis, "the role non-Muslim minorities had played in the empire. . . . [N]ot only was the role of non-Muslim minorities unrecognized, but their presence and participation had gradually dissipated during the ensuing republican years" (Göçek 2015:ix). Göçek writes about the silencing of various other episodes of violence and repression in Turkey's past. She summarizes her previous scholarship and her efforts to bring violent occurrences into some temporal ordering. Her account culminates in an epiphany, a recognition of how this intellectual journey led her "to arrive at the foundational violence that had not only triggered but also normalized the subsequent practices: it was through this line of inductive reasoning that I arrived at what had happened to the Armenians in the past, in 1915 to be exact, because it was the earliest instance of collective violence that had still not been accounted for by the Turkish state and society" (Göçek 2015:ix).

Göçek's work thus challenges silence and denial of the foundational violence of the Turkish Republic. She seeks to help break Turkey's path-dependent history of violence and to advance its democratic potential. Importantly, she is not the only Turkish scholar to work toward acknowledgment. Other examples include Taner Akçam (2006), Seyhan Bayraktar (2010), Hamit Bozarslan (2013), Hakan Seckinelgin (2019), Buket Türkmen (2019), and Uğur Ümit Üngör (2015).

In addition to these scholars' public and political mission, a confessional function may be a motivating force for perpetrators or their descendants who acknowledge. German sociologist Alois Hahn (1982) traces historically how new methods, including the writing of diaries and biographies as well as testimonials in psychotherapeutic settings, supplement traditional, religious forms of confessions (see also Berger and Luckmann 1966). Engagement in scholarship about the dark past of one's own nation and of one's forebears may be but one mode of responding to (collective) responsibility (or even to a sense of guilt). The goal today is the overcoming of traumata, and, possibly—in line with David Riesman's notion of the "other-directed self"—a new form of adaptation to externally generated pressures or expectations (Riesman et al. [1950] 2001).⁸

Scholarship is only part of this new engagement with the past. Göçek, in the final substantive section of her book, elaborates on "three spheres of knowledge

production and reproduction where the Turkish official narrative has begun to be contested and countered . . . : newly transliterated and penned texts [as the 1928 script reform had made many documents inaccessible to young Turks], activities at newly established private universities, and public interpretations of a new generation of Turkish journalists and intellectuals” (Göçek 2015:466). Her expression of hope preceded the new authoritarianism during the late reign of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a brutal rigidity especially evident after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016.

The victim people: Armenian voices in the visual history archives. Acknowledgment plays a more prominent role among the victim people, despite early temptations to silence the painful past.⁹ In some cases, the transmission of knowledge sets in early, in historical eyewitness accounts and lines of communication from survivors to their children and grandchildren. Claire Mouradian, one of my interviewees, was raised by her grandmother, who had endured terrifying experiences and survived a massacre under a pile of corpses. She told her granddaughter about the great catastrophe of the Armenian people, including her personal experience, inspiring Mouradian to enter a life of scholarship dedicated to the fate of her ethnic group, a case to which I return in detail below.

We find similar intergenerational transmission of knowledge among Armenians in the United States. Kaspar Hovannisian, having escaped from the Ottoman Empire, arrived in the United States on August 30, 1920. His son Richard Hovannisian (1971) wrote the first history of the Republic of Armenia, and Richard’s son Raffi Hovannisian became foreign minister of the newly independent country after the breakup of the Soviet Union. In *Family of Shadows: A Century of Murder, Memory, and the American Dream* (2010), Garin Hovannisian, Raffi’s son, writes about the fate of his family, and the cultivation and transmission of knowledge about the Armenian genocide. The process began in the first generation, with his great-grandfather Kaspar in Tulare, California, where he had settled after immigrating. Kaspar was intensely involved in Armenian life and immersed in the Armenian newspaper *Hairenik*, delivered daily from Boston. Yet the transmission of knowledge was gender-specific, excluding his newlywed wife, Siroon. In Garin’s words, Siroon “did not know the man she served. She did not understand . . .” (Hovannisian 2010:44).

Growing temporal distance allows for new forms of acknowledgment. Consider testimony by Armenian genocide survivors and witnesses, made available by the Visual History Archive of the USC Shoah Foundation, in the form of interviews conducted between the 1970s and the early 2000s by J. Michael Hagopian, himself a survivor of the genocide and creator of the Armenian Film Foundation, producer of the recordings. Encounters between Hagopian and other survivors are interactive situations, but they differ from those examined above. They do not unfold in everyday life. Instead, their very purpose is the establishment of a record of testimony about the genocide.

In analyzing a random sample of sixty videotaped interviews among those conducted in English, we coded statements about forms of victimization, references to perpetrators, public responses to atrocities, attitudes toward Turkey and Turkish people, and explanations of the genocide. Merging accumulated knowledge absorbed by respondents during their lifetime with personal memories, these statements reinforce sedimented genocide knowledge. Many themes well known from the historiographic literature appear in these sixty depictions: deportations (thirty-nine); forced marches (twenty-nine); starvation and dehydration (fifteen); robberies (twenty-five); and massacres and killings (forty-three), specifically shootings (twelve), mutilation by stabbing or cutting (ten), decapitations (seven), beatings (eight), and rapes (seven). Perpetrators are most often referred to neutrally as “they” (forty-two), frequently also as “Turks” (thirty-four), with some specifications such as “Turkish soldiers” (twelve), “gendarmes” (twenty), “police(men)” (twelve), “Turkish government” (twelve), and references to members of the Young Turk ruling triumvirate generally or by specific names (eleven). We find only one reference to “Muslims.” In the following paragraphs, I focus on accounts of victimization.

Interviewees report generally known facts, probably not based on their personal observations—for example, that the first victims of the genocide were male intellectuals, and that other men and boys between the ages of fourteen and sixty-five were targeted next. Some refer to personal observations, though, when they report how perpetrators used guns, bayonets, and daggers to massacre people. Women, too, experienced violence, often in a gendered form. Emma Modrisoff recalls Turkish civilians and soldiers invading Armenian homes, butchering their inhabitants, raping young girls, and mutilating pregnant women. She reports how bodies were thrown out of windows and piled several feet high in streets and alleyways. One survivor, Haroutune Aivazian, describes soldiers forcing women, with children in their arms, from their homes and whipping them through the street.

Other survivors report that the genocide began with deportation notices. They recount that sometimes lists of three hundred to five hundred families were posted on churches; other times, notices were hung directly on homes; and occasionally, town criers announced upcoming deportations. Some victim-witnesses tell how families were given days’ or weeks’ notice, while others were taken the same day. Only few families were fortunate enough, they report, to prepare food and purchase caravans and donkeys to carry some of their possessions, which they typically lost during the marches. Once evicted from their homes, victim-witnesses observed Turkish civilians and soldiers plundering them, setting looted homes aflame, burning churches and destroying religious texts and artifacts.

Many testimonies speak to the fate of children. Survivors of forced marches regularly describe their mothers carrying their infant siblings in their arms, many of whom died from starvation. Some women decided to end their young children’s

lives instead of letting them endlessly suffer; others abandoned their children on the sides of streets, hoping that someone with more resources would take care of them.

Some victim-witnesses report decapitations before and during the marches. Agnes Dombalian, a child at the time of the genocide, recalls Turkish soldiers separating men and women and forcing women to identify their husband or father. Soldiers then forced the man's head on a log and cut it off with an axe. Dombalian was among the children who lost their fathers that day. Often, mutilated bodies were thrown into rivers. Two survivors report that decapitations and stabbings were so common that the Euphrates River ran red. Abductions and rapes by civilians and soldiers were also routine, according to the surviving witnesses.

Interviewees further report that soldiers and civilians stole from dying or dead victims, including clothes and shoes. Occasionally, people suspected of swallowing pieces of gold were cut open. Krikor Baldikian recalls a Turkish man nearly cutting off his finger for a ring before his mother freed him from the man's grasp.

On the deportation marches, deprived of food and water, victims were forced to walk for hours until their feet were too swollen to continue. One survivor, Sarah Koltookian, describes soldiers forcing her and others to climb repeatedly up and down a mountain, beating to death with clubs and rocks anyone who stopped. Survivors recall drinking from mud piles created by animal footprints and from rivers in which corpses floated. They ate any plants they could find on the ground and cooked the stems with contaminated water. The desperation of victims was so extreme that they began feeding on the flesh of corpses. George Messerlian remembers a young boy in the Syrian Desert telling his mother, "Mother don't cry. When I die, don't give my meat to nobody. You eat [it] yourself." Gendarmes shot and killed those dragging behind. Corpses surrounded the deported on all sides, in rivers, on the sides of streets, under bridges, and next to campsites. Once arrived at their desert destinations, many victims were abandoned and left to starvation. Survivors returning to these sites found piles of bones, many belonging to young children.

These victim-witnesses were mostly young children during the genocide. They survived, but most lost family and home, and some lost their identity. Paranzan Narcisian, orphaned, is among the typical cases; she bemoans the loss of her family. Only a few survived with their parents or as a complete family. J. Michael Hagopian, in his interview, explains the pain of losing one's home: "I've come to realize that leaving your native land is probably the worst punishment you can get; to be exiled, that you can never go back to your home is a horrible thing." Finally, some survivor-witnesses report assuming Turkish identities under pressure. Harry Kurkjian, for example, describes his forced conversion to Islam and denigration of his heritage when he was coerced to urinate on Armenian graves. While many survivors regained their Armenian identity, some, like Jirair

Suchiasian, report that the violence left them with no knowledge of who their parents were or where and when they were born. Suchiasian says, “I am somebody, but I am nobody”—spoiled identity indeed. The interview does not reveal how long it took this survivor to break the silence.

CONCLUSIONS: INTERACTIVE STRUGGLES OVER GENOCIDE KNOWLEDGE

Silencing, denying, and acknowledging in the aftermath of genocide and mass atrocity unfold at different levels of social life. This chapter has focused on the micro-level—on communication and thought processes, and their externalizations in written texts or video recordings—during times of violence and in later periods. When a troubling past has left actors with the spoiled identity of victims or perpetrators, silencing and denial are tempting responses (Goffman [1963] 1986). Yet confessing, providing eyewitness testimony, and acknowledging are realistic alternatives, and their chances increase over time. They became a rich source of knowledge on many episodes of mass atrocity, including the Shoah and the Armenian genocide.

Importantly, social interaction, communication, and negotiation over an appropriate understanding of troubling experiences are rarely harmonious. Often, survivors and their descendants confront members of the perpetrator group. Within the perpetrator group, intergenerational conflict intensifies when children of the perpetrator generation challenge their elders. They may condemn their parent generation’s involvement in or toleration of past atrocities and demand acknowledgment. Alternatively, descendants of perpetrators may hope to free family members (or their group or nation) from stigma through continued silencing and denial. Even on the side of victim groups, silencing is common, despite substantial variation across contexts and time.

Finally, and again, this exploration of silencing, denial, and acknowledgment is part of a sociology of knowledge project. It addresses the social construction of reality. It does not challenge the notion of reality: the history of violence is very real. Millions were killed; were starved; lost their limbs, health, and dignity; were raped and driven from their homes and ancestral lands. Yet we know about such atrocities only through cultural processing. As this chapter has shown, social interaction and reflection play a crucial part in the generation of this type of knowledge. Another form is the systematic documentation by eyewitnesses—for example, in the form of diaries that humanitarians on the ground in Turkey wrote during the genocide. These diaries are the subject of the next chapter.