

Intervention and Shades of Altruism During the Armenian Genocide¹

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Altruism during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 is a subject that has not been studied. Although many survivors have related incidents of external intervention which saved their lives, these episodes have always been parts of much larger stories of cruelty suffering, trauma, and seemingly miraculous personal escape from the fate that befell most Armenians in the Ottoman or Turkish Empire. In the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide the survivors were prevented from returning home, and they scattered around the world, while the perpetrator regime and all successive Turkish governments engaged in unrelenting campaigns of denial and rationalization. These developments have discouraged investigation of the degree to which altruism may have been manifested during the most disruptive and irreparable catastrophe in the long history of the Armenian people. In many ways, therefore, this study is a first attempt to assess and categorize the primary motivations for and frequency of intervention.

What must be stated at the outset is that seeking instances of altruism in a genocide should not and cannot obviate the enormity of the crime and its consequences. Identifying episodes of apparent kindness in the midst of the destruction of a people may afford some solace and provide some affirmation about inherent goodness, but it should not disguise the fact that for every case of intervention during the Armenian Genocide there were thousands of cases of participation in or approval of the measures applied. In fact, the proportion of public involvement was very high. The hundreds of thousands of Armenians in the deportation caravans were fair game to all who would attack them to strip them of their last few possessions, to abduct pretty girls and children, or to vent their killing rage upon the victims, often as previously arranged by the ruling Young Turk dictatorship and its Special Organization (*Teshkilat-iMahsusa*), whose responsibility was to oversee the deportations - that is, the process of annihilation. The Special Organization used as agents of death and destruction hardened criminals who were released from prison for the purpose, predatory tribes that were incited to wait in ambush for the deportee caravans as they passed through narrow gorges and defiles or approached river crossings, and Muslim refugees (*muhajirs*) from the Balkans, who were encouraged to wreak vengeance on the Armenian Christians and occupy the towns and villages that they were forced to abandon.

In the search for altruism during the Armenian Genocide there are, in contrast with Holocaust research, some insurmountable barriers. Since most of those who intervened on behalf of Armenians in 1915 were at the time already mature adults, usually between forty and sixty years of age, none of them is still alive. There is no way, therefore, to question them about their motivations, their upbringing, or

¹ Reproduced by the Armenian Genocide Resource Center from *The Armenian Genocide, History, Politics, Ethics*; edited by R.G. Hovannisian, St. Martin's Press. NY 1992.

their character, and to develop reliable profiles of them. As for interviewing their children and grandchildren about recollections or stories that may have been passed down, even this is not feasible in view of the ongoing Turkish denials and campaign to discredit all evidence pertaining to the genocide. Hence, we must rely almost entirely on information provided by the survivors themselves, most of whom were children in 1915.

Because of the politics surrounding the Armenian Genocide, the expulsion of the survivors, the uncompensated confiscation of Armenian goods and properties, and the abiding bitterness and trauma of the survivors and their progeny, virtually no contact occurred between the survivors after their rescue and resettlement and those who had intervened on their behalf. Moreover, in a significant number of cases it would be difficult or impossible, in the best of circumstances, to identify those who intervened, inasmuch as those individuals acted along the deportation routes for periods lasting from a few minutes to a day and remain nameless.

As a child in the San Joaquin Valley of California, I was often present when women who had survived the genocide would gather to visit, and over their oriental coffee and pastries exchange stories of deportation and suffering. There would be tears and even laughter, as survivors recalled humorous incidents to relate amid stories of death and torment. These exchanges were perhaps the only therapy that this generation of survivors was afforded. The women had been subjected to prolonged punishment, for, unlike most of the male population, they were not killed outright within a few days' march of their homes. Rather, they were force-marched for weeks and months toward the deserts, becoming personal witnesses and victims to the cruelest tortures and evils that humans could devise. Pillage, mutilation, disembowelment, impalement, abduction, rape, denial of food and drink, even at water's edge, having to choose which child to carry and which to abandon - all these images mixed with the coffee and pastries during those afternoons under the California shade trees, or in the evenings when menfolk went into the kitchens or screened porches to play cards and women sat in accepted segregation in the parlors of immigrant households.

Yet, running through many of the stories were unfamiliar names that were not Armenian, names that were recited with a certain reverence, names that I later learned included honorific titles such as *bey*, *agha*, *effendi*, indicative of high status in a Turkic society. A Zia Bey, Haji Effendi, or Mehmed Agha had intervened, and that act had been critical to the survival of the storyteller. The interventions were not seen as final rescue or emancipation - that came only after the First World War, when American and other relief agencies joined in Armenian efforts to seek out and rescue surviving women and children. The outside intercession was nonetheless central and critical to the ultimate rescue. Thus, intervention has always been part of survivor lore, yet never the subject for investigation or analysis.

THE ORAL HISTORY SAMPLE

This study is based on data derived from 527 oral history interviews with Armenian survivors. The interviews have been conducted during the past two decades as part of a course in Armenian Oral History at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). A little explanation is in order. Keenly aware of the rapid disappearance of the survivor generation and with it the loss of first-hand accounts and valuable information about life before and during the cataclysm, I introduced a university course on

oral history. For it I devised or adapted questions relating to the Armenian experience in the Ottoman Empire - home life, schools and professions, customs and holidays, social structures, intercommunity and intracommunity relations, and then the deportations and massacres, means of self-preservation, and finally rescue and relocation.

As may be expected, some of the resulting interviews are excellent, as both the student questioner and the elderly survivor are immediately compatible, the questions are well-formulated and open-ended, with proper and perceptive follow-up and with highly descriptive and detailed responses. In other cases, the superficial knowledge of the interviewer about key personages of the period, geography, and routes of deportation, or the interference of the survivor's family, or the frailness or reluctance of the interviewee to enter into detail, have resulted in scanty or incomplete information. Therefore, the 527 interviews vary greatly qualitatively and quantitatively, some being as short as twenty or thirty minutes and others as long as eight hours, with the average lasting two hours.

The questionnaire devised for the course places no particular emphasis on external intervention. This information, by and large, has been volunteered by the interviewees themselves. Nonetheless, intervention is so important in the stories of the survivors that it is safe to assume that nearly all such cases have been noted. Other qualifiers must be added. To date, none of the 527 interviews, more than 90 % of which are in the Armenian language, has been transcribed, as priority has been given to the collection process. In the preparation of this study, I have relied on the written summaries filed by the student interviewers in order to identify cases of probable intervention. From those summaries, 183 cases or 34.7 % of the total of 527 interviews were deemed to include information on intervention. These figures should be regarded as minimal, because it is likely that some student summaries fail to mention intervention and that a full listening to all the tapes would add more cases.

Of the 183 interviewees whose summaries indicate some instance of intervention, 96 (52.5 %) were males and 87 (47.5 %) were females. In listening to these selected 183 interviews, my research assistant and I tried to determine the place of origin and age of the interviewees, the ethnic identity and social and economic status of the interveners, and the motives for the interventions. We looked particularly for cases in which humanitarian or altruistic motivations were clearly dominant. Obviously, it is difficult to make determinations relating to the motives for intervention or to develop socio-psychological profiles of the personalities involved. Not only is it impossible to speak to the principals themselves, but the survivors' explanations come more than a half-century after the fact and may be colored or conditioned by time or by the stories of others.

Nearly three-quarters of this group of respondents were fifteen years old or younger in 1915. Of the 183 survivors who mentioned intervention, 71 (38.8 %) were 6 to 10 years old, 56 (30.6 %) were 11 to 15 years old, and 7 (3.8 %) were 1 to 5 years old, Only 37 (20.2 %) were 16 to 20 years old, and the number of those 21 to 25 years old drops sharply to 11 (6.0 %). These statistics are not a true reflection of the ratio of survival, since many in the older age-groups who experienced intervention are no longer living to tell about it. Nor do the 183 persons who experienced intervention, out of a total of 527 survivor interviews, reflect the actual proportion of interventions when measured against all deportees; the ratio applies to the proportion of interventions only among deportees who survived.

When compared with the total number of Armenian deportees in 1915, the incidence of intervention drops drastically,

The 183 survivors collectively experienced 233 interventions. Of the 223 incidents identified, 206 (92.4 %) were initiated by males, while only seventeen (7.6 %) were initiated by females. These figures reflect the sheltered position of women in traditional Islamic societies, yet it is clear that women played a key role *vis-a-vis* the Armenian survivors once they had been brought into the Muslim households. In half of the cases (49.1 %), the intervention affected only one person, but in the other half (50.9 %) two or more persons were saved. In only a third (31.4 %) of the cases was the intervention initiated or requested by the victims, and in just a quarter of them (24.8 %) was intercession based on prior acquaintance or friendship. As far as can be determined from the interviews, the ethnic origins of the interveners were; Turkish, 147 (65.9 %), Arab, 39 (17.5 %), Kurdish, 29 (13 %), and Assyrian, Circassian, Danish, and American collectively forming 8 (3.6 %). From other sources, it is learned that along the Black Sea coast and elsewhere some Armenians were initially sheltered by Greek families, although this was usually temporary because of the vulnerability of the Greeks themselves.

Based on socioeconomic classes or professions, 200 of those who intervened have been identified as follows: peasant or villager, 76 (38.0 %); notable (mostly rural), 35 (17.5 %); government official, 35 (17.5 %); soldier or gendarme, 33 (16.5 %); merchant, 21 (10.5 %). The duration of the intervention, in 158 identifiable cases, was as follows: day or days, 43 (27.2 %), month or months, 20(12.7 %), year or years, 95 (60.1 %).

The 183 survivors came from all parts of the Ottoman Empire, including the European districts near the capital city, Constantinople or Istanbul. Some came from the Armenian quarters and villages in the Turkish heartlands of western and central Anatolia, and many originated in the region of Cilicia, which lies at the north-eastern tip of the Mediterranean Sea and is relatively close to the Syrian deserts, the destination of most deportees. By the time caravans from other Armenian provinces reached Cilicia, they had already been greatly decimated. Those caravans came primarily from the six eastern provinces, known as Turkish Armenia or Western Armenia, and including Erzerum (Garin), Van, Bitlis, Diarbekir (Dikranagerd), Harput (Kharpert), and Sivas (Sepastia). The provinces of Van, Erzerum, and Bitlis were closest to the Persian and Russian frontiers, and nearly all Armenians from these regions either fled abroad or were massacred outright without regard to age or sex. Of those who were deported, few survived because of the great distances that had to be traversed to the desert and the organized ambushes and other perils en route.

Ironically, although some of the worst massacres took place in the province of Kharpert, which an American eyewitness labeled, 'slaughterhouse province,' a large number of women and children there escaped deportation through religious conversion and adoption by Muslim households. Of the 183 survivors, 43 (23.6 %) came from that large province. The figure reflects not only the relatively high rate of rescue from Kharpert but also the fact that many of those survivors resettled in the United States, where sizable colonies of Kharpert Armenians had existed since the end of the nineteenth century. Most of the survivors from Cilicia, on the other hand, resettled in nearby Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt, which were under French or British mandate at the time. In recent years many of these survivors

have migrated with their families to the United States because of the turmoil in the Middle East, thus adding to the pool of individuals that students in the UCLA oral history class are able to interview.

MOTIVES FOR INTERVENTION

The most problematic aspect of this study is the qualification and quantification of the motives of those who intervened. There are a few clear-cut cases of sexual exploitation, bribery, forced labor, piety or moral sentiment, and adoption by childless couples. I have shown the cause of most cases of intervention to be humanitarian, but if altruism means that there is no profit motive or gain for the intervener, then the majority of those cases would have to be reclassified or discarded. There is no doubt that humanitarian motives were present and strong, and some cases give not the least hint of anything but humanitarian sentiment. But there are far more instances in which presumed humanitarian intervention includes home or field labor by the person rescued, conversion to Islam and Turkification, or adoption. These may not have been the initial motives for intervention, but labor, conversion, and adoption are recurrent factors in many cases. Yet before discarding these instances, one must look at rural societies and realize that even in the most humanitarian of families, labor is a way of life for all family members, and, if the rescuers expected their own children to work in home and field, similar work by the women and children they took in was probably not considered a profit-motive.

There are cases, of course, when it becomes clear that the intervention was made in order to acquire economic benefit. Children, in particular, were a cheap source of labor, and the testimonies of the survivors bear this out. For the researcher, however, a gray zone develops, and arbitrary decisions have to be made as to whether to classify a particular case as humanitarian, even when some labor is involved, or to classify it as economic, even when those for whom the survivor worked were kind and humane. Multiple motivations were often present at the same time, yet based on the definitions of altruism used in studies of the Holocaust, a significant number of cases that we have termed as humanitarian intervention would have to be disqualified.

One other point should be mentioned that may weigh against altruism. Once the main waves of deportation and massacre had swept over all the Armenian communities, that is, by the end of 1915, many of the stragglers or survivors could be taken in or adopted quite openly on condition that they convert to and profess Islam. Unlike the circumstances during the Holocaust, therefore, at certain places and at certain times there was little or no risk in having persons born as Armenians in a household. This point underscores a significant difference between the Young Turk perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide and the Nazi perpetrators of the Holocaust. The Young Turks were extreme nationalists, but they were not racists in the Nazi sense. They wanted to create a Turkic empire and to eliminate all obstacles to the realization of that goal. The Turks had absorbed subject peoples for centuries, and the continued absorption of powerless and defenseless Armenian survivors did not jeopardize the fulfillment of their objectives. On the contrary, in some areas Armenian orphans were gathered into Turkish orphanages to be 'Turkified.' Hence, while many Muslims who took in Armenian women and children must be regarded as performing humanitarian deeds, on the whole they had little to fear in case of exposure.

SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

The major categories of motivation that I have listed are economic, religious, and humanitarian. Some cases fall outside these categories and may be termed exploitative. Thousands of women and girls were forcibly held in harems, and many gave birth to children fathered by their masters. Woman survivors often use euphemisms to imply sexual abuse, whether witnessed or experienced. This is a very sensitive issue, and few have had the courage of Satenig (b. 1901), from the region of Nicomedia or Izmid in western Anatolia, who confided to a female interviewer:

I saw the man had his eye on me. His wife was in Constantinople. I submitted to that man. Do you understand, I have not told this to anyone. It is the first time that I am revealing it. I submitted. And how did he look after me, do you know? just like his wife. He was careful not to show it to anyone, so many guests would come. I submitted. He looked after me. He named me "Samieh."

When nine-year old Trfanda Godabashian (b. 1906) of Kharpert was being deported, a Turkish woman offered to save her if she would marry her son. Infuriated by the girl's refusal, the woman gave her son a knife to kill Trfanda, but just then another Turk on horseback rescued her and took her home along with another Armenian youngster.

Flor Proudian (b. 1901) of Kharpert, says:

They came and took me. Supposedly there was a Turkish boy who had seen and wanted me. I said, 'It is impossible for me to become a Turk.' I went up the steps and rolled down, saying, 'I will not become a Turk and I'll die here,' but it did no good. Two women came, two Turks. They grabbed my arms and are taking me. I am shouting and screaming, saying, 'I won't become a Turk,' but they pay no heed. They took me and put me in their house, saying, 'You are going to stay here now. Although you are young, our son is also young.'

ECONOMIC MOTIVATION

Economic motives for intervention are dominant in 102 (43.8 %) of the 233 instances of intervention. Of these 102, 26 (25.5 %) were for bribes, 19 (18.6 %) for professional skills, and 57 (55.9 %) for domestic and field labor. The cases of bribery are the most clear-cut for economic profit, with nearly all of those involving Turkish officials, gendarmes, and soldiers, and usually of short duration. Bribes were used to get exemption from or to postpone deportation, to receive provisions or favors *en route*, or to be sent, at a critical juncture on the road to Syria, toward the relative safety of Aleppo rather than to almost certain death in the desert around Der-el-Zor. City dwellers usually had more resources with which to attempt bribery, but even so only a small percentage of those who used bribes actually managed to survive.

Serop Chiloyan (b. 1903) of Kharpert recalls that his father paid a Turkish *agha* or notable to protect his family. Nonetheless, several family members were deported and the rest were forced to work the lands of the *agha*. Richard Kaloustian (b. 1901) of the Arabkir region of Kharpert notes that

his father, like other rich Armenians, knew the chief of police and repeatedly gave him bribes, but eventually the family was deported. Yet perhaps the delay had spared them from the ferocious massacres to which the first caravans were subjected. Anna Torigian (b. 1906) from one of the villages of Kharpert was saved by a Turk whose shop was next to that of her father's. After receiving payment, the neighbor helped store all of the family's merchandise and offered to keep Anna. She was saved in this way, while the rest of the family was deported.

Baghdasar Bourjikian (b. 1903), Vahe Churukian (b. 1906), and Beatrice Ashkharian (b. 1902), all of Kessab, were able to avoid deportation to Der-el-Zor through the bribes paid by their families. On the road of exile from their native Hadjin, Gassia Kahayan's family bribed the gendarmes to send them towards Urfa rather than to Der-el-Zor. Samuel Kadorian (b. 1907) also reached Urfa from his native Kharpert through bribes his mother paid a guard. Yervant Cholakian (b. 1907) of Hadjin was able to reach Aleppo through his father's bribes. In Aintab, the father of Ohannes Karamanougian (b. 1906) repeatedly paid city officials and gendarmes to exempt his family, but a new governor later refused to spare them and all were deported. Marie Aprahamian (b. 1901) of Aintab, whose family eventually reached Port Said, emphasizes that the possibility of survival was much higher if one had a lot of money. In all these and similar cases, the profit motive is clear and involves almost exclusively Turkish soldiers, gendarmes, and officials who intervened in exchange for payment. Bribing their way out of immediate deportation spared some Armenians, but their survival was by no means guaranteed, for they still faced starvation, dehydration, epidemic, and recapture by other Turkish gendarmes.

The 19 cases of escape ascribed to professional or special skills constitute only 8.1 % of the 233 interventions in this study. Garegin Sahakian (b. 1895) of Marash was saved at Berejik, along with his relatives, because Turks who needed an ironsmith took them to Hromkla. They remained there until 1918, when they had to flee because of a new, intolerant *kaimakan* or district governor. The family of Armenouhi Sousamian (b. 1900) of Urgup in Caesarea province was deported to Syria, but because her father was able to repair the mill at Rakka, the family was allowed to stay there for the duration of the war. Max Tangarian (b. 1898) of Bursa was taken in with his family by a baker in Konya to make bread for the Turkish army. Makrouhi Sahatjian (b. 1897) of Erzerum was in a deportation caravan when she arrived with her sister in Suruj, where the two girls were taken in as seamstresses for the wife of a Turkish official.

Mampre Saroyan (b. 1887) of Bitlis explains:

I was the shoemaker for the Kurdish mayor of Khnus. I said, 'Bey, all the shoemakers from here are being deported.' He replied that if I would stay he would protect me and my family.... He gave me 50 pieces of gold to purchase materials. He gave me the keys to a shop. I sat down and worked. There were no Armenians left in the city, And I showed myself to be a Muslim. The Kurdish mayor would come and warn me to be careful and have little to do with the Turkish soldiers there.

Garabed Merjanian (b. 1904) of Marash was *en route* to the desert when an unexpected intervention occurred:

When we arrived at Meskene, one of my father's old customers said, 'Mr Panos, the deportation officer has a bad toothache,' and he took my father. Father returned two hours later. He had treated the teeth and made the officer well. At that time the Armenian caravan was leaving Meskene, and my father asked to rejoin it. But the officer said, 'Are you crazy! They are going to death, and you want your family to join them?' My father was a barber and understood dentistry. So the Turkish military official arranged for us to remain in Meskene for a year.

Beatrice Kitabdjian (b. 1907) of Aintab describes her father as 'something like a real estate agent' in the government:

He was highly literate. The Turkish *effendis* told him to stay and to inventory all the houses, properties, and lands of the Armenians. For that reason my father remained. The *effendis* liked him very much. They told him to stay in their village a half-hour from Aintab. And it happened that way. He stayed there, and we remained in our home in Aintab.

Of the interventions for economic purposes, domestic and field labor and herding are the reasons most commonly given. The majority of these rescues were not devoid of humanitarian components. The survivors frequently attest to the fact that they were not mistreated and express gratitude that the intervention spared their lives. Only a few are as resentful as Anoush Shirinian (b. 1898) of Caesarea, who saved her daughter from a Turkish abductor with the help of a Kurdish woman. The Kurd then took mother and daughter to a Turkish household, where for four years, 'we were forced to work like slaves.' Anoush, whose name was changed to Jamileh, was eventually thrown out. Vertaim Sarkissian (b. 1906) of Yozgat was rescued by a Turkish woman after having been left alone for three days among the bodies of her massacred townspeople. She was taken to the village of Bektash, where she became a servant in a Turkish household. Siroon Tashjian (b. 1907) of Kharpert was given away by her mother to a Kurdish woman for safekeeping. She lived with the family for four years and did all kinds of work, forgetting her Armenian identity until her rescue after the war. Lloyd Kafesjian (b. 1910) of Tamzara, Sivas province, was taken in with his mother and sister by an affluent Turk, in whose household all three served. Later, Lloyd was given to an elderly Turkish woman, for whom he ran errands and tended garden. Kourken Handjian (b. 1907) of Erzinjan, Erzerum province, extols the Turk who sheltered him and his mother and put them to work, 'He was a very kind man, a very kind man, because he had quite a few Armenian servants in his home.' Rebecca Doramdjian (b. 1907) of Urfa, on the other hand, says that she served in several Muslim households, in some places treated kindly and in other places badly.

Some survivors show great pride in their labor. Vartan Misserian (b. 1902) of Sivas, for example, relates the following story:

I remained in a Turkish family for ten or twelve years. They named me Bertdal, and they took me as a child and especially as a servant.... The Turks issued an order that all who were keeping Armenians must give them up. The man comforted me, saying not to be afraid, as he would not turn me over to the Turkish gendarmes. He had some land and he sent me there, and I hid there for a time until the police were gone. There I grazed their animals, and then, when I was able to do quite a bit of work, I can say, putting my hand on

my conscience, that I provided for that household, because the man didn't look after the house very much but was always gambling. I would go to the fields of others and help in the harvest, and with the money I earned provide for our house. The man's mother continued to look after me like my own mother.

Quite a few of the survivors were taken in by Arabs for herding and field labor. Beatrice Megerdichian (b. 1898) of Aintab recounts:

From Aleppo we were to be deported to the desert. There was this Arab sheikh who was the chief of a tribe. He wanted some of the Armenian families to go with him and work his lands. We went there and worked for about a year and a half. This way we were spared the march to the desert.

Artin Kopooshian (b. 1906) of Adana was taken in by an Arab as he lagged behind the caravan, and thereafter tended sheep. Garabed Aroushian (b. 1905) of Severeg, Diarbekir province, became a camel-herder for an Arab after losing his family on the way to Der-el-Zor. Hovnan Dostourian (b. 1907) of Yarasa was given to an Arab as a servant and stayed with him for four or five years. When the war was over and he was rescued, Hovnan ran away from the orphanage to return to his Arab family.

Nerses Nersesian (b. 1899) of Everek, Caesarea province, speaks fondly of his Arab family:

It was 1916. Only we two brothers were left. We had heard that the Arabs would adopt Armenian boys and take them to their tents, feed them well, and make them their servants. An Arab woman came and asked my brother, 'Will you go with me to our tents?' Brother said he would go. A little later another woman came and adopted me in the same way. We went to her village. The husband came and looked at me. 'Is this the boy you have adopted?' he asked his wife. 'How can he be helpful to us?'

His name was Mahmud al-Khalil and his wife was Khadija. This man was so good and kind that you can't imagine. After looking at me for a moment, he went and brought a large dish of yogurt and several breads. I told myself now I'll eat all of this, but I scarcely ate a piece of bread. It wouldn't go down; my stomach had dried up so much.

We stayed with those Arabs for two years, until 1918. I learned good Arabic. Mahmud al-Khalil loved me. He would say, 'I am going to bring a *hodja* to teach you the Koran and make you a *hodja*.' I was already Arabized, and they had named me Mirza.

Nearly all of these testimonies show that even as small children the survivors were expected to work. It bears repeating that the family in rural societies is a unit of economic production, and descriptions of Armenian family life before the genocide demonstrate that children often helped in tending the livestock, working the fields, and cooking, weaving, and other family chores. Thus, the outside parties had something to gain from the extra help afforded by the free labor of the Armenian children, but in most cases they treated the youngsters decently and provided them with food, clothing, and shelter.

RELIGIOUS MOTIVATION

Religion and piety figure in many of the interviews. In cases of economic or humanitarian motives for intercession, there are frequent references to conversion, Muslim customs and attitudes, and 'Turkification.' Still, only 10 (4.3 %) cases of intervention seem to have been based foremost on religion. Of these, two or three entail pious opposition to the persecution of Armenians, whereas more often the rescue and conversion of Armenians are good deeds essential to the physical and spiritual well being of their new wards. Exemplifying the first group is the episode related by Vabram Morookian (b. 1900) of Everek:

A Turkish mullah, bearded, who was very friendly to the Armenians - no matter that the Turkish government did not want anyone to help us and declared that no Turks should protect an Armenian - this man nevertheless, with several others who shared his views, considered it an obligation to lead us as far as Tarsus so that nothing would happen to us on the way.

Religious sentiment may also have affected the situation at Zonguldak, where, according to Hagop Adayamanian (b. 1896), the *kaimakam*, a pious man, was on good terms with the Armenian priest and saved 600 people by persuading his superiors to spare them. In this category, too, are individuals such as the Arab family that rescued Siranoush Husinian (b. 1905) of Urfa and took her for medical treatment to Mardin, exclaiming repeatedly, 'Whoever did this to you, God will punish them.'

Piety as a motive for converting Armenians runs throughout the accounts. Vartouhi Boghosian (b. 1905) of St Stepanos explains that the Arab woman who was like a foster mother to her for three years wanted her to convert for her own good. 'If you are a Muslim, you will go to heaven, but if you convert to Islam from Christianity, then you will go to a heaven ten times greater.' Haroutiun Kevorkian (b. 1903) of Charsanjak, Kharpert province, asserts that he was kept by a Kurd because 'in the Muslim faith whoever frees a person and converts him will receive great rewards in heaven. If you change your religion, whatever sins you have committed will be forgiven. They named me Husein.'

In written testimony, Aram Haigaz (b. 1900) of Shabin-Karahisar, Sivas province, states that his mother urged him to convert to Islam and find a way to escape from the deportation caravan. A group of Turkish women gave him the *selevat* oath of profession and then took him to their sheikh, who awaited permission from a higher authority to adopt the boy. Aram was converted and renamed Muslim. His sheikh was warm and caring, and also provided shelter for an Armenian woman, who was very sick, and her two children. But because the woman had resisted conversion to Islam, upon her death the Kurds refused to accord her a burial and rolled her body down a hill. Her two children were then converted, renamed, and adopted.

Only one case has been found in which the outside party discouraged Armenians from converting, Hovaness Basmajian (b. 1909) of Kessab fled with his brother and two sisters from Damascus to an Arab village, where the brother served as assistant to a shoemaker, for which he received a gold piece each month. Hovaness remembers the villagers as extremely generous people. The shoemaker was

exceptional in that he told the Armenian brothers and sisters that it would be wrong for them to renounce their Christ for Muhammad.

The broad gray zone in assigning a primary motivation in cases where there is overlap is evidenced in the story of Grigor Ookhtentz (b. 1909) of Sivrihisar:

My brother and I were adopted by Turks, in the direction of Chai. After we stayed there five or six months, they asked us to become Muslims, because there were no longer any Armenians. They were all dead and gone. I knew Turkish and could speak it, but then I forgot how to speak Armenian. Thus, they changed our religion and named me Hasan, and my brother, Mahmed. We stayed with those families until 1918. I was a servant with Khalil Ibrahim, but he looked after me well, as he had no other children. The place where my brother stayed was worse.

Shukry Kopushian (b. 1901) of Hadjin lived among the Arabs for seventeen years, grazing sheep:

They were Muslims and I had to become a Muslim with them, having to pray according to their religion. I had to do it, to do what they would do:

*La ilaha illa Allah
Muhammad rasul Allah
Haya ala al salat
Haya ala alfala ...*

We learned this and performed the *namaz* [prayers].

Cut off from the outside world, Shukry married an Arab girl and had two children before he learned quite by chance that his sister was alive. Joining her in Beirut, he remarried and resumed an Armenian life.

There were also instances of government-sponsored conversion. Haroutiun Tabakian (b. 1907) of Hadjin states that his brother bribed an Arab to guide the boy to the safety of Aleppo. Once there, however, Haroutiun and 300 other orphans were taken by train at night to Balekesir in Anatolia. Turkish officials gathered the orphans in the Armenian church there and began teaching them Turkish. All were converted to Islam. Haroutiun ran away and never found out what happened to the other children.

HUMANITARIAN MOTIVATION

The humanitarian factor shows up in at least three-quarters of all the interventions and is listed as the primary motivation in 120 (51.5 %) of the total of 233 incidents reported. It is in this category that acts of altruism are found. Sometimes it was the Turkish or Kurdish neighbors of Armenians who intervened selflessly. Previous friendship was an important though not overriding factor in humanitarian intervention. Where there was no previous acquaintance, the sheltering of helpless women and children was regarded as both humanitarian and pious, especially as many of the children were converted and adopted. In their own altruism, many converted Armenians tried to help other Armenians. Examples of

incidents involving both previous and no previous acquaintance will illustrate the strength of humanitarian sentiment among the small segment of the population that was moved to intervene.

Prior acquaintance was instrumental in saving a caravan of 3500 deportees. Missak Parseghian (b. 1895) of Aintab explains that when they reached a town between Hama and Homs in Syria, the *kaimakan*, who was a native of Aintab, recognized them and helped them very much. 'He was a Turk by the name of Mahmed Agha. There were loads of good Turks who saved the lives of Armenians.' Intervention took place more often on a personal level.

Arsen Magdessian (b. 1903) of Yozgat recalls:

My mother fell on her knees before Tahir Agha. Even though he was a Turk, Tahir's eyes brimmed with tears. He said, 'Get up, my daughter. Whoever has caused this, let both eyes be blinded.' He turned to his brother and said, Khurshud, you need a son. They are to be pitied. We have eaten much bread from their hands. Take this boy.' Khurshud said, 'This boy is clean. I shall take him.'

Nazar Nazarian (b. 1904) of Aintab declares, 'Mustafa was a good man. My mother sent me to him because my father knew him. He kept me with him until the end of the war and did not tell anyone in the village that I was an Armenian.' Yeghsapert Terzian (b. 1895) and Tavrez Tatevosian (b. 1903) were working in their villages of Tadem and Bazmashen, Kharpert province, when they were warned by Turkish acquaintances from neighboring villages of impending danger and were able to go into hiding while most of the villages of the province were emptied and the population set out on the death marches.

Noemi Minassian (b. 1912) of Kharpert, who was only three years old during those marches, explains that prior friendship could help even along the routes of deportation:

One of those officials knew my father from Kharpert. He freed us and took us to his home. There, my mother was a servant for a year and would do needlework for the wife. My mother says he was very good to us. Apparently, there are some good ones among them, and we met up with those good ones.... [After the war], the man decided to send us to our relatives. He knew that there was a large caravan, and we were to be a part of it and go to Aleppo. That Turkish official told the caravan captain, 'If any harm comes to any one of these people, I will hang you on the gallows.' He said that so that the caravan leader would get us safely to our destination.

Zabel Apelian (b. 1907) of Diarbekir was rescued by an army officer known to the family. During the deportations, her mother implored the officer to take Zabel and her sister to his family in Mardin. Since the sisters kept crying and asking for their mother, the officer went back looking for the woman and found her near death in a ditch. In her interview, Zabel relates the joy she and her sister felt when their mother was brought to join them.

The family of Aram Kilichjian (b. 1903) of Kirshehir and some other fellow townspeople were for unexplained reasons brought back from the deportation route to their homes, already nothing more than heaps of rubble. Yet that night several neighboring Turkish families brought soup so that the children

could eat. Aram's brother was in the Turkish army and his commander took a special interest in the Kilichjian family. The episode includes humanitarian, religious, and coercive aspects, all at once:

My brother's commander, Zia Bey, whose word the Turks respected, came and said, 'Give this boy to me.' When the man saw that my mother and sister didn't want to give me up, he summoned a Turk he knew, gave him a donkey, and told my mother, 'Go with him and see what they are doing to young Armenians.' My mother went to the place called Giulasar and saw that many Armenians had died there and were being ripped apart by vultures. Finally, my mother was persuaded and delivered me to that man. Zia Bey took me to his village near his family. They were not my mother and father, but the people loved me and looked after me.... The man had a grown daughter, who would take me in her lap and cuddle me.

After a month, I saw that there was a commotion in the house and that preparations were being made.... I thought it was something like a wedding. It was a circumcision ceremony for Zia Bey's son. They came and found me, too, and tried to circumcise me at the same time. I fled to the garden and hid, but they came and found me and did it to me. Afterwards, Zia Bey's son lay on one side of the room and I lay on the other - but the man liked me very much. And they gave me the name Said.

It was a time of famine ... There was a bread that was called 'vasika' bread. One room of this man's house was filled with flour. This man's wife, whom I called *abla* [auntie], would say, 'Get up and take these breads to your mother and family.' In those difficult days our family was well-fed. That woman was very good and liked to help. If I say she was better than my mother, believe me.... The woman and her daughters would get cloth from their store and sew clothes for my mother and sisters, who by that time had been Islamicized at the urgings of the family that had taken me. My sisters had married Turkish boys. Naturally my mother wept and said, 'I'll die but I won't become a Turk.' Zia Bey said, 'Don't cry, no one will take your religion from you, but I want you on the surface to show yourself to be Turkish, so that they won't kill you.'

In one of the few interviews conducted in English, Henry Vartanian (b. 1906) of Zara, province of Sivas or Sepastia, talks about Ali Effendi, who had operated a mill with Henry's father:

My father was well recognized in government circles. He had a friend by the name of Ali Effendi.... He is a Turk, but a beautiful man. A man with a soul.... The systematic exile and genocide began. Ali Effendi said that he has to bring us from Zara, because it was too dangerous there. One of his wives was vacationing and her house was empty. So, he said, 'I will take you to that house.' We were six children and my mother. Ali Effendi told us specifically not to make our presence in his wife's house detected. 'I don't want any Turk or anyone in the area to know that you are here.' He used to lock the door and go to his work. He would bring us food and then lock up and go. He kept us there for three months.

Intervention based on friendship had limits. Henry continues by saying that orders came from Istanbul a second time for the Armenians to be deported. Ali Effendi came to Mrs Vartanian:

He said, 'I don't want to hand you over to the government. But,' he said, 'there is only one way in order that I don't get hurt. I know,' he said, 'that this is not right, but this is a necessity.' He said, 'You should change your religion.' My mother is mad. She says, 'No! Ali Effendi.'

I tell you he was a wonderful man. He said, 'Well, I don't blame you. I would have felt the same way. But let me give you a little advice.... Remember that if I hand you over to the government they will exile you immediately and once you cross the bridge at the outskirts of the city they would kill your children in front of your eyes, and a Turk will take you as a wife, because that is permitted by the law. I don't want my best friend's family to be killed.' He said, 'You in your heart be, remain a Christian, but outwardly you accept the Muslim religion. This way you can survive. One of these days the war will be over, and then you can go back to your religion.'

I guess my mother realized the danger and decided that the best thing to do was to change our religion. Ali Effendi managed to help us in that. We were given Muslim names, and we became *donmes*.

Mabel Morookian (b. 1908) of Marsovan, Sivas province, also shows that even influential officials could not protect Armenians for long if they retained their identity:

My grandfather was a wealthy merchant and a good friend of the *kaimakan* of the city. That *kaimakan* for a while, a month or two, kept us. Later he said, 'I can no longer keep you. You either have to go, or I can save you one other way. You must change your religion, become Turkified, and in that way I can say that all those living with me are Turks'. . . . Then one day what did we see? Armenian people wearing Turkish headgear and having become Muslims. They gave us all Turkish names and Turkish identity papers.

Continuing his story, Haroutiun Kevorkian of Charsanjak speaks affectionately of the prominent Kurdish family who harbored him. When the massacres began, his mother took him to the home of the local Kurdish *agha*, with a bedroll and some lard. She pleaded with the wife, Khadra Khanum, to keep the lard for herself but to allow Haroutiun to stay there and sleep in the bedroll. Khadra Khanum, however, said she had no need of anything:

That kind woman did not take a hair of Armenian goods. Three Armenians - I, Baghdasar, and a small girl - stayed in her house, and Khadra Khanum treated us very well. If I say that I didn't feel my mother's separation, believe me. Before my mother left, Khadra Khanum told her, 'Your son is my son. If you return, he will be yours, and if you do not return, I will take good care of him.'

The Kurdish *agha* and Khadra Khanum nonetheless converted Haroutiun and renamed him Husein. Three-quarters of the interventions were by individuals previously unknown to the survivors. As in cases based on prior acquaintance, adoption and conversion often accompanied the humanitarian acts. Children were deprived of a sense of person-hood as they were given away, shared, or moved from one home to another. It was extremely traumatic to be picked out of a crowd for adoption and to be separated from parents and siblings. Christine Avakian (b. 1903) of Adana complains: 'It was like we were a piece of furniture or some object.' Children were no better than 'pets or senseless creatures.' On the deportation route at Killis, Christine's father entrusted his two daughters to a Kurd, who kept

one and gave the other to his brother. Despite her bitterness, Christine goes on to speak affectionately about her Kurdish 'mama' and 'papa.' By and large, the survivors intermix their tears over the loss of parents and siblings with praise for their adoptive Muslim parents, this even as they express seething resentment against the Turkish government and even against the Turkish people collectively.

Missak Shiroyan (b. 1901) of Erzerum states that by the time his deportation caravan reached Kharpert most of the people in it had already died:

Turkish officials came to gather the children. They collected as many of us as there were. They brought us to Mezre and put us into a house, of course one that had belonged to an Armenian. Their purpose was to save our lives and to Islamicize us. They began to take Armenian children and pass them out to Turks and Kurds. They adopted me as their child and named me Fayek, a Turkish name. The family that adopted me was a man and wife, the man at least 60 or 65. I was a cute little boy at the time. They had no children, and I must say that they pampered me like their own child.

Also deported from Erzerum, Manoushag Meserlian (b. 1907) reminisces:

They cared for us very well, be it food or clothing. Of course, however much, they didn't look after us like their own children. They tried to Islamicize me, and I think they named me Fatum.

Aghavni Mazmanian (b. 1895) of Sivas relates that while she was being deported:

A Turk came to me and said, 'I shall find a good place for you. Don't cry.' He was a Turk from Malatia, but he was a very good man. He had seven Armenian orphans in his home. He went and found another Turk. 'Khalil,' he said, 'this kid is to be pitied. Take her to your home.' My *agha* was like a saint, and my *khanum* [his wife] was very kind. They cared for me like a mother and father.

Speaking in English, Virginia Oghigian (b. 1908), also of Sivas, points to the conflict that often arose when, after the war, relatives came to rescue children adopted by Muslim families:

I was given away to a Turkish woman who took me to her house. So my younger brother and I were taken to this home to become their children. They changed our names and gave us Turkish names. My name was Shahseda. In this Turkish home, we had to follow Turkish rules. Girls had to cover their faces when speaking or spoken to. There were about five Armenian orphans in the house.

Oh well, one day my mother finally came to see me and to take me with her. She told me very bad things about what had happened to Armenians. She took me by the arm and wanted me to pay attention to what she was saying. I didn't listen because I was mad at her, since she had left me alone for so long. I didn't want to talk to her.

Arshaluis Setrakian (b. 1912) of Gurun, Sivas province, recalls:

They were a large family, and I would help care for the little ones. I think I stayed there two years. I liked that home very much, because they looked after me, food and drink were plentiful. This was the home of a very rich man.... In the evenings they, together

with several other wealthy households, would pass out bread to Armenian refugees. When my mother came to retrieve me, it was very difficult. It was with wails and tears that I was separated [from my adopted family].

Among the cases that come closest to altruism, the following may be taken as representative examples.

Vartan Melidonian (b. 1899) of Erzinjan, Erzerum province, straggled into Kharpert after weeks of torment:

All members of my family had died, and I was the only one left alive, but I was wounded in several places. I set out and entered a village. A Turk told me to follow him. He took me to his home and then brought yogurt, bread, cream. I could not eat it. My stomach had dried up and nothing would go down. All I wanted was to die and join my parents. They took me to the barn and covered me. I stayed with that Turk until 1922. The Turk, Hasan Effendi, was wealthy and gave me a home in his village, Adav. The man had four children, and he looked after me like one of them.

Lousvart Tashjian (b. 1909) of Mush, Bitlis province, was orphaned at an early age and was on vacation with her grandmother and sister when the massacres began. A Turk took Lousvart in, while the grandmother and sister were rounded up. When the Russian army invaded the Mush region in 1916, the family fled to Diarbekir and then to Adana and Mersin. After the war, Armenian volunteers in the French army took her away from her Turkish family. She cried for many days because of her grief at being separated from the only family she knew.

Mary Ishkhanian (b. 1909) of Malatia, Kharpert province, was taken in by a woman who had eight sons. During the first few days, Mary cried incessantly. Annoyed by the wailing, one of the sons shouted, 'Shut up, *gâvur* [infidel], The woman slapped her grown son and warned him never again to address the girl in that debasing way. Mary lived happily in that household for three years.

The family of Haig Setrakian (b. 1902) of Konya found shelter in Tarsus for four years:

I must say that we encountered good people. In Tarsus we found a house. The landlord was a Turk who worked in the military. Every two days, the town-crier would pass through the streets calling upon anyone harboring Armenians to turn them over to the government. This man, no matter what, did not lay a hand on us. We hid in a place dug into the ground, and until the end this man did not lay a hand on us. In this way we passed very difficult days.

Finally, there are many instances of Armenians, albeit converted to Islam and given new Turkish identities, trying to help other Armenians. Sirvart Chadirjian (b. 1899) of Kerasond, for example, was forcibly married to a Turkish soldier. He was kind to her and helped her assist other Armenian women to escape. After Haroutiun Kevorkian of Charsanjak had been converted and renamed Husein, he did not forget his origins:

When a caravan of Armenians passed through our village, I was able to save a woman. I took her to my *agha's* house and there she stayed with us as a servant for a year and a

half. On another occasion, I found an Armenian boy. It is shameful to say but the Turks had sodomized him. I got him and brought him to our house and gave him my bed. I was now able to free whomever I could. I was now a dyed-in-the-wool Muslim. I was all of fourteen years old at the time.

CONCLUSIONS

Several conclusions may be drawn from this investigation. Any study of altruism during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 is bound to be problematic for several reasons. Foremost among them are the total absence of those who intervened and the inaccessibility of their family members or others who may have had information passed down and who could cast light on the personalities of the interveners. The unwillingness of all Turkish governments since the First World War to face up to the genocide is a major hindrance to scholarly inquiry and compounds the difficulties. The main source of information, therefore, is to be found in the accounts of survivors, and the present study is based on 527 taped survivor interviews in the Armenian Oral History collection at UCLA. They are, however, general interviews and have no specific focus on intervention. These limitations notwithstanding, the statistics and categories that have emerged from the 183 interviews that mention intervention are significant, because the sample is a large one.

The most obvious conclusion is that in the extreme situation caused by the genocidal policies of the Young Turk rulers of the Ottoman Empire, there were numerous individuals, families, and even entire villages that were moved to intervene. Without such intercession, many Armenians could not have survived the death and destruction that surrounded them and lived to tell their stories.

Varied motives for intervention appear in the 183 selected interviews. Sometimes they are simple and straightforward—people acting as if instinctively on emotions of empathy, sympathy, piety, and concern. These emotions in some instances were reserved only for friends and neighbors, but more often they extended to anyone in acute distress. At other times, the motives overlap and are more complex. On the one hand, humanitarian factors are evident in many instances of economic motivation; on the other hand, humanitarian intercession often brought economic or other benefits to the intervener. It is for this reason that I have used the term altruism sparingly, since a strict application would disqualify many whose primary motivation is listed as humanitarian.

Further study may allow some refinement of the categories of motivation and help to broaden our understanding of the subject. It would be useful, for example, to assess the risk, burden, and cost of harboring Armenians. Serious moral issues also need to be addressed. How, for example, should one view the childless couple, or the family with no male children, who rescued, converted, and adopted Armenian infants and youngsters, who loved and provided for them, even as they did everything possible to make them forget their ethnic and religious origins? To what degree were humanitarian and altruistic motives compromised in the attempts by adoptive parents to prevent the return of these children to surviving relatives after the collapse of the Young Turk regime and the end of the First World War? A comparative approach would undoubtedly be helpful in making these determinations, inasmuch as a significant corpus of relevant materials has already been developed on the Holocaust.

Finally, it is hoped that additional studies may begin to break down stereotypes and show that even in the extreme circumstances of 1915, there were thousands of Turks, Kurds, and others who opposed the persecution of the Armenians. Some of them tried to intervene. The testimony of the victims attests to the fact that kindness and solace were manifest amid the cruelty and suffering, and that the human spirit was never fully extinguished.

The end of denial by the Turkish government, together with a repudiation and renunciation of the genocidal policies of the Young Turk regime, would go a long way in alleviating the continuing Armenian trauma. Such a positive change could open the way to a possible *rapprochement* that would honor the memory of the victims of genocide and make some form of compensation while allowing for due recognition of those Turks and others who intervened during the most extreme situation in the long history of the Armenian people.

**Table 8.1 UCLA Armenian Oral History Project
Summary of Interviews**

	<u>Actual number</u>	<u>Percentage of total</u>
Total number of oral history interviews	527	100.0
Number of interviews in which intervention was indicated	183	34.7
Gender of survivors:		
male	96	52.5
female	<u>87</u>	<u>47.5</u>
Total	183	100.0
<u>Age groups of survivors in the year 1915</u>		
1-5 (born after 1910, before 1915)	7	3.8
6-10 (born after 1905, before 1910)	71	38.8
11-15 (born after 1900, before 1905)	56	30.6
16-20 (born after 1895, before 1900)	37	20.2
21-2 (born after 1890, before 1895)	11	6.0
26-30 (born after 1885, before 1890)	<u>1</u>	<u>0.6</u>
Total	183	100.0
<u>Place of origin identified</u>		
Bitlis	6	3.3
Diarbekir (Dikranagerd)	6	3.3
Emcrum (Garin)	25	13.7
Harput (Kharpert)	43	23.6
Sivas (Sepastia)	22	12.1
Van	1	0.6
Cilicia	34	18.7
Other regions	<u>45</u>	<u>24.7</u>
Total	182	100.0
	Actual Number	% of total
Total number of interventions	233	
Number of rescuers identified		
Male	206	92.4
female	<u>17</u>	<u>7.6</u>

Total	223	100.0
Ethnic origin of rescuers identified		
Turks	147	65.9
Arabs	39	17.5
Kurds	29	13.0
Assyrians	3	1.4
Americans	2	0.9
Circassians	2	0.9
Dane	1	0.4
Total	223	100.0

	Actual number	Percentage of total
Socio-economic status of rescuers identified		
peasant	76	38.0
notable (mostly rural)	35	17.5
government official	35	17.5
soldier or gendarme	33	16.5
merchant	21	10.5
Total	200	100.0

<u>Length of intervention</u>		
day(s)	43	27.2
month(s)	20	12.7
year(s)	95	60.1
Total	158	100.0

<u>Number of persons affected by intervention</u>		
one	110	49.1
more than one	114	50.9
Total	224	100.0

<u>Identified case of intervention initiated by</u>		
victim	64	31.4
rescuer	140	68.6
Total	204	100.0

<u>Identified case of intervention based on</u>		
prior acquaintance	53	24.8
no prior acquaintance	161	75.2
Total	214	100.0

<u>Primary motivation for intervention</u>		
economic (see breakdown below)	102	43.8
piety	10	4.3

missionary/christian	1	0.4
humanitarian	120	51.5
Total	233	100.0

<u>Breakdown of economic motivation</u>		
bribes	26	25.5
professional/artisan	19	18.6
home/field labor	57	55.9
Total	102	100.0

Shades of Altruism during the Genocide

Figure 8.5 Ethnic origin of rescuers

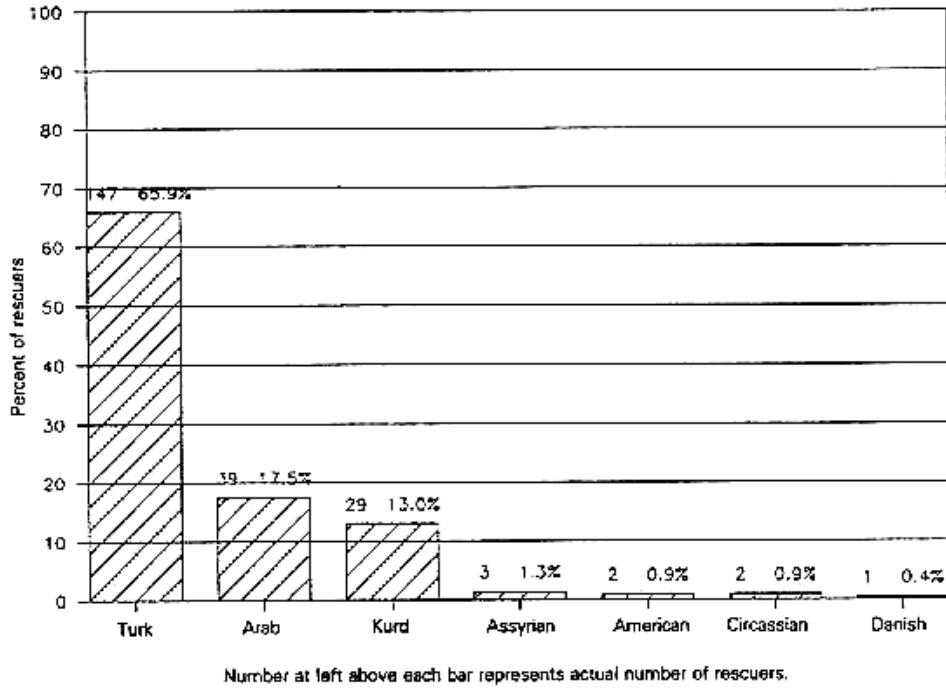
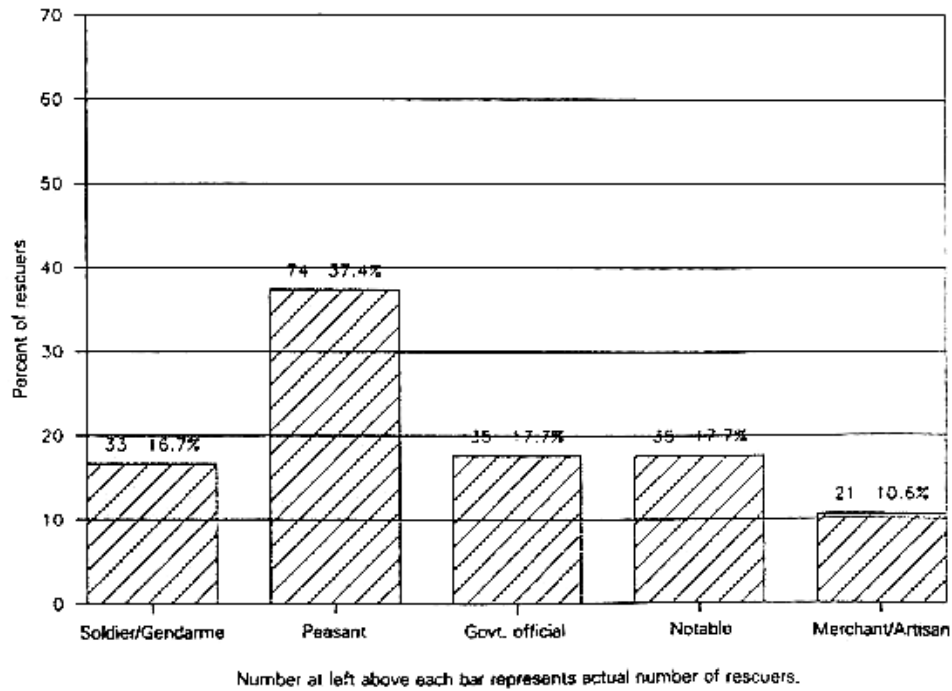


Figure 8.6 Socio-economic status of rescuers



The Armenian Genocide

Figure 8.7 Length of intervention

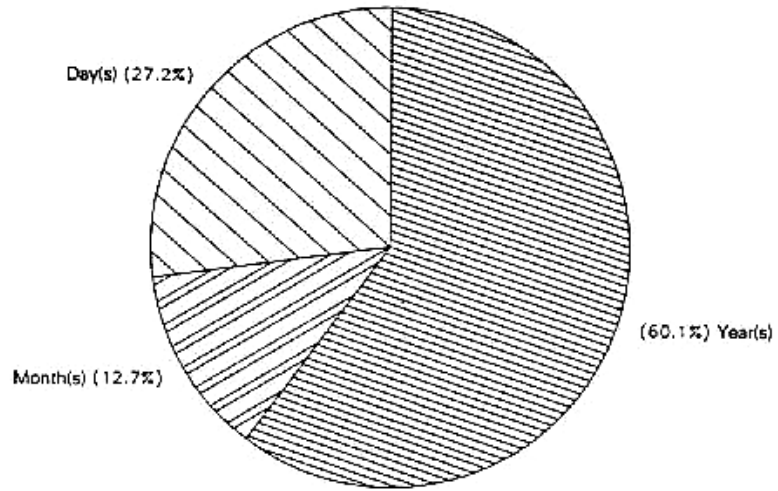
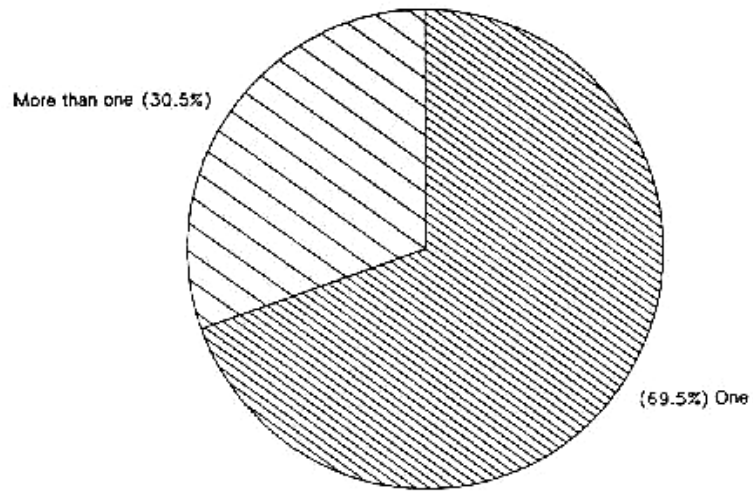


Figure 8.8 Number of rescues initiated by rescuer



Shades of Altruism during the Genocide

Figure 8.9 Number of persons affected by intervention

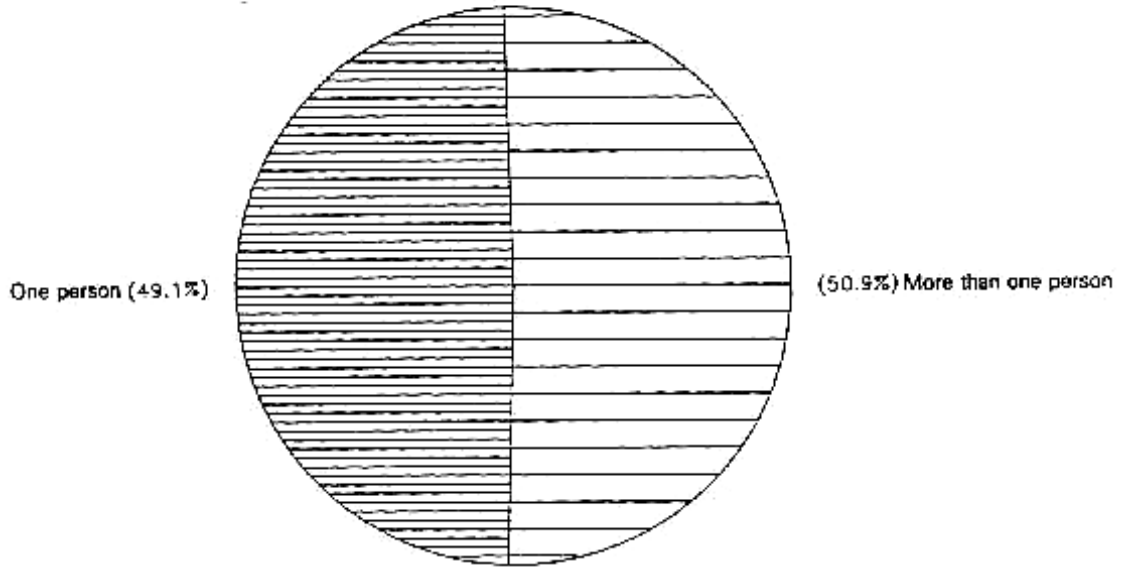
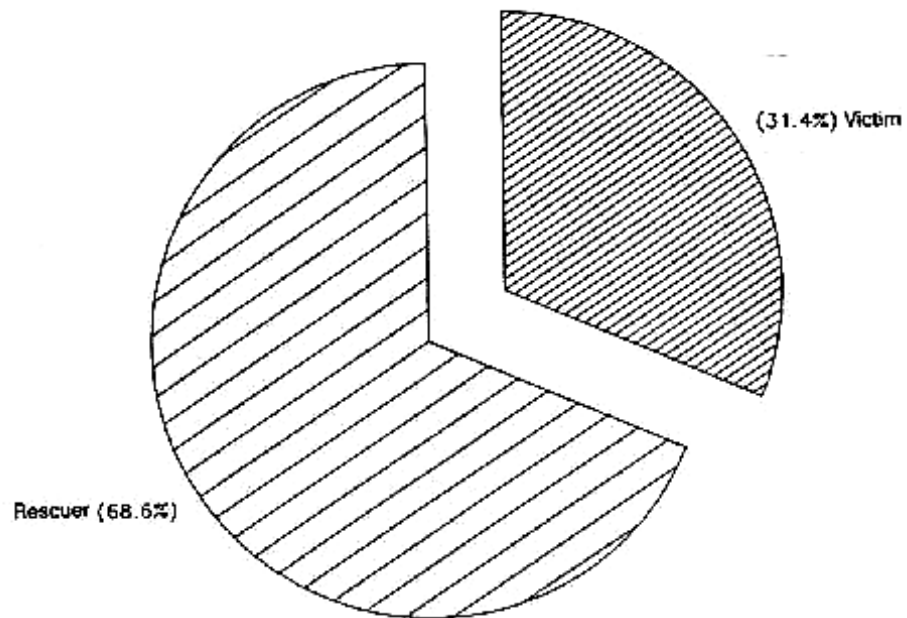


Figure 8.10 Initiator of intervention



The Armenian Genocide

Figure 8.11 Basis for intervention

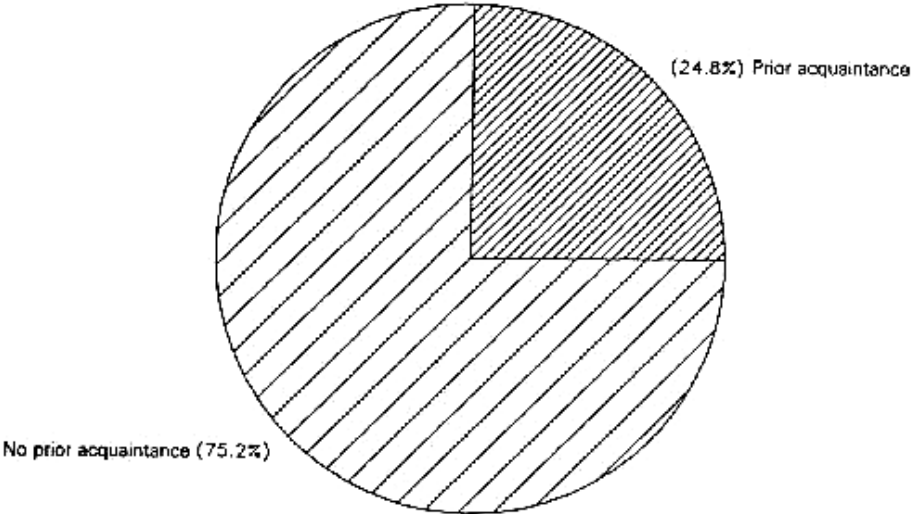
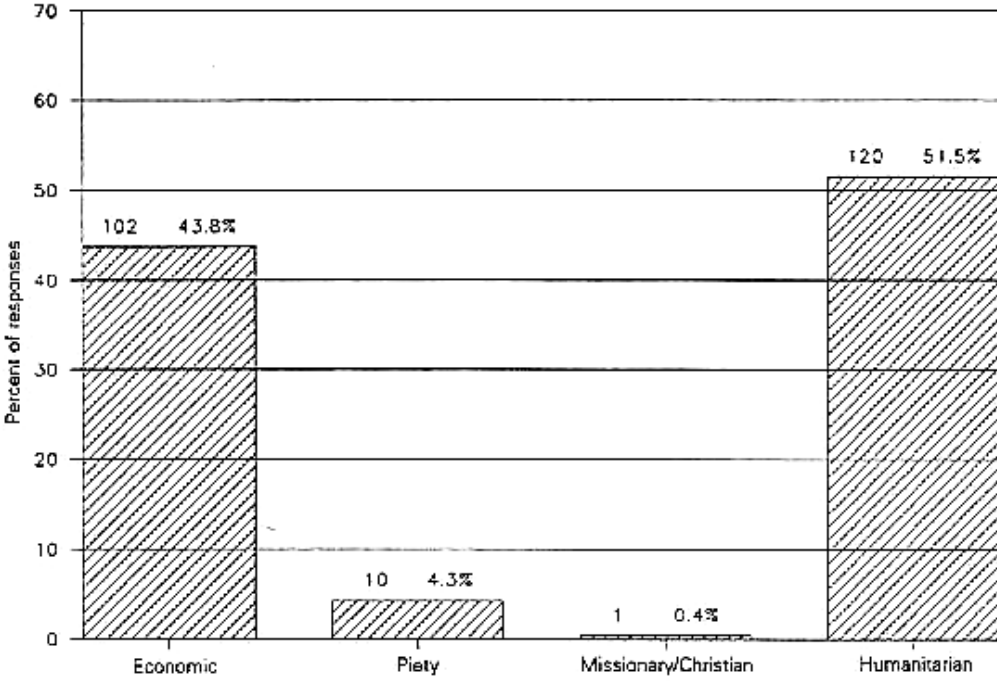


Figure 8.12 Primary motivation for intervention



Number at left above each bar represents actual number of responses.

Shades of Altruism during the Genocide

Figure 8.13 Intervention based on economic motivation

