

## Chapter 5

# The Concentration Camps along “The Euphrates Line”

Officially, the “Euphrates line” constituted, as we have said, the principal region in which the Ottoman authorities chose to “settle” the Armenian populations that had been “displaced to the interior.” In theory, the assets confiscated from the Armenians were to have been used to settle the new migrants in these desert regions of Syria and Mesopotamia, inhabited by a few thousand sedentary Arabs and Circassians and thinly sprinkled with tribes of Bedouin nomads.

Deportees were to be found on the Euphrates line from an early date. There were 15,000 of them there in early August 1915;<sup>1</sup> by late September, the number had risen to 23,300,<sup>2</sup> soaring to 310,000 by early February 1916.<sup>3</sup> These exiles were split up between Meskene and Der Zor. Throughout the period in question, this trajectory was synonymous with death for all the deportees. Strung out along this line was a succession of camps: Meskene, Dipsi, Abuharar, Hamam, Sebka/Rakka, and finally, the camps of Der Zor/Marât. The number of those interned in them did not, however, significantly increase until the winter of 1915–16: as we have observed, it was then, in January 1916, that the authorities decided to purge northern Syria of its deportees. The camps of Mamura, Islahiye, Rajo, Katma, Azaz, Bab, Akhterim, Munbuc, and Mârra, all located in the outskirts of, or at a relatively short distance from, Aleppo, were now shut down one after the next, and the survivors of these camps were sent down the Euphrates line or the trajectory of the *Bagdadbahn* toward Ras ul-Ayn.

### The Camp in Meskene

The camp in Meskene was the first important way station on the line leading to Zor; it lay at the point where the road from Aleppo intersects the Euphrates. Thinly inhabited at first, the camp grew rapidly in winter 1916. When Hoca-zâde Hüseyin Bey, a Çerkez from Munbuc, was named Meskene’s *Sevkiyat memuri* in January 1916 – he succeeded Muhtar Bey – barely 20,000 deportees were living in the camp. In the following weeks, its population jumped to 100,000.<sup>4</sup> The Sub-Directorate for Deportees thereupon decided to add several officers to its staff, including Naim Sefa, well known because he served as Aram Andonian’s informant, and another Çerkez from Munbuc named Ömer. After directing the camp for one year, Hüseyin was relieved of his duties in December 1916, at a moment when the camp had been virtually emptied of its internees. He was replaced by another Hüseyin, known as the One-Eyed Man (*Kör*). *Kör* Hüseyin had already distinguished himself as a convoy leader in the camp in Karlık on the outskirts of Aleppo, “where, with his brutality, he had acquired a reputation for terror. He was a short, fat, powerfully built, one-eyed man, and extremely depraved.”<sup>5</sup>

The camp in Meskene was one of the most deadly on the Euphrates line. Hüseyin Bey's official estimate of the number of Armenians who died there in 1916, carried off by typhus, cholera, or hunger, was 80,000, "although the real figure was much higher than the well-known *çeles*<sup>6</sup> kept by the chief gravedigger [*mezarçı başı*] suggest." Since the chief gravedigger was illiterate, Andonian wrote, he "contented himself with cutting a notch on one of his *çeles* for every body of which he took charge. Certain people learned from him that the number of bodies that had been simply buried did not include those that had been thrown into the Euphrates: approximately one hundred thousand people, at the very least." Andonian also indicates that there were only 2,100 people in the camp in Meskene in April 1916,<sup>7</sup> most of them craftsmen who would be liquidated by Kör Hüseyin early in 1917. The German consul, Rössler, confirms that "a Turkish army pharmacist who had been serving in Meskene for six months told [him] that 55,000 Armenians were buried in Meskene alone. A Turkish vice-commander had, moreover, cited the same figure."<sup>8</sup> These estimates of the number of people buried in the city or drowned in the Euphrates indicate that the daily death toll was as high as that registered in the other camps in the area north of Aleppo in which deportees were interned. The American consul Jackson reports similar statistics in a 10 September 1916 dispatch: "Information obtained on the spot permits me to state that nearly 60,000 Armenians are buried there, carried off by hunger, privations of all sorts, intestinal diseases and the typhus that results. As far as the eye can reach, mounds can be seen containing 200 to 300 corpses buried pell-mell, women children and old people belonging to different families."<sup>9</sup> Patriarch Zaven, who traveled through Meskene shortly thereafter on 22 September 1916, saw, above all, "bodies and bones" there.<sup>10</sup> Two reports by Armenians from Konya indicate that the *Sevkiyat*'s "inspector general," Hakkı Bey, a *çete* chief from Istanbul, arrived in Meskene on 16 August 1916 and had 200 orphans rounded up and "expedited" to Der Zor. Hakkı reminded the deportees that he was now their "second god" – that is, that he had the right of life and death over them. Hardly had the order to set out been issued then he took the lead of a squadron of *çetes* and proceeded to massacre all the males in the convoy on the banks of the Euphrates.<sup>11</sup> Hakkı embodies the symbiosis between the leadership of the *Sevkiyat* and that of the Special Organization. Indeed, he does it so clearly that one might well ask if the former was not merely an extension of the latter adapted to the context of the camps and camouflaged as an organization of the Ministry of the Interior.

According to a report by Karekin Hovhannesian, a native of Sivrihisar who had been deported on 5 August 1915 and had arrived in Meskene in early December, some convoys had been sent southward on *şahırs* – "two boats tied one to the other" that the deportees had to rent from Arab boatmen at their own expense – whereas the others either traveled down the right bank of the Euphrates through Dipsi, Abuharar, Hamam, and Sebka, or, more rarely, the left bank of the Cezire. The latter trajectory haunted the deportees' nightmares, for it required that they trek along mountain ridges where there were no bodies of water at all and where they were at the mercy of local nomads with a well-earned bad reputation.<sup>12</sup>

Like many other way stations, Meskene was both a concentration camp and a transit camp. Initially, the internees had been settled in a camp near the highway, in the highlands. Hüseyin Bey subsequently had them transferred to the bank of the Euphrates, while the transit camp was left in the highlands, near the barracks and the craftsmen's tents. In theory, the internees were to be placed in this center, as in all the others, for just a few weeks or even only a day or two, the time required to purge the convoys of their weakest members. They were then supposed to be put on the road to the next station and so on, until they reached Zor. But it was usually in the camp directors' interest to keep the internees who were capable of paying a kind of "fee" for the right to stay put. The longer these people remained

in a camp, the bigger the “fee” that the head of the camp collected. It was, moreover, by no means rare for the camp directors to complain that their colleagues were keeping the wealthiest deportees too long, those who still possessed means of payment requiring their signature. Before Salih Zeki Bey was appointed *mutesarif* of Zor in June 1916, a certain laxity was observable among the “officials” of the Sub-Directorate for Deportees for the reasons just mentioned. Nevertheless, two to three convoys containing a few hundred people each were sent toward Zor every week. They were basically made up of the least “interesting” deportees, since Hüseyin Bey saw to it that his most affluent wards remained in Meskene until nothing more was to be had from them.<sup>13</sup>

### The Camp in Dipsi

Located five hours from Meskene, the camp in Dipsi lay on the right bank of a dry riverbed “which was transformed, after storms or heavy rains, into an immense stream that flowed into the Euphrates.”<sup>14</sup> Transfers from Meskene to Dipsi were usually made by land under conditions succinctly described by Krikor Ankut, a young intellectual from Istanbul who spent more than a year in the area:

In mid-March [1916], we were transferred from Meskene to Dipsi. There were around one thousand people on foot and some fifty carts... Every step of the way, we came upon corpses, the dying, or exhausted men and women who no longer had the strength to walk and were waiting to die on the road, hungry and thirsty. On the road leading from Meskene to Dispi, we had encountered wandering gravediggers, whose job was, notably, to bury the dead. They were so utterly without pity that they buried the dying with the dead so that they would not have to do their job twice over. We constantly came upon the bodies of people whose heads had been bashed in. There were large numbers of dogs; they fed on the corpses.<sup>15</sup>

In this period, the camp comprised, Ankut says, 2,000 tents, that is, around 10,000 to 12,000 people:

The tents all belonged, without exception, to poor people; not a one was presentable. Each was inhabited by from two to ten sick people lying side-by-side and waiting for death. This bank was known as the *Hastahane* [hospital]. All the unfortunates who had been displaced from Meskene on foot or in wagons were brought to this place called the Hospital and abandoned. They remained there, naked, hungry, and thirsty, until death came and mowed them down. Every step of the way, we saw corpses; there were so many of them that the gravediggers were unable to bury all the dead. Absolute poverty reigned in this place, and had sunk to unprecedented levels. Day after day, with the arrival of people from Meskene, the number of tents in the Hospital increased. The poor people contented themselves with eating, unsalted, a plant called *ebemkömeci*, which grew plentifully on the banks of the Euphrates in springtime.<sup>16</sup>

It was understood that Dipsi was the place to which people from Meskene were brought to die; it was run the same way that Suruc was. This camp remained in operation for only six months, from November 1915 to April 1916, yet 30,000 people died there, according to Ankut. Toward the end of April, some 20 “gendarmes” came to evacuate the camp for good and all; they sent one last convoy to Abuharar, after burning the tents and those of their occupants who could no longer walk.<sup>17</sup>

## The Camp in Abuharar

In theory, the convoys dispatched from Meskene made a stop in Abuharar, after a trek of approximately nine hours. The place known as Abuharar in fact amounted to no more than two dilapidated caravansaries perched on the banks of the Euphrates. The concentration camp had been set up on a stretch of land very close to the river. On average, 500 to 600 tents – or around 3,000 people – were to be found there, even though Abuharar was originally supposed to be a transit camp. The reason was that people who had means of some sort could here too purchase the right to remain longer by bribing the sergeant in charge of the camp, one Rahmeddin Çavuş, who sent deportees on only after relieving them of everything they owned.<sup>18</sup>

## The Camp in Hamam

Setting out from Abuharar, one had to walk another nine hours to reach Hamam by a route one hour from the Euphrates on which there was not a single body of water. Hamam was an unimportant village lying on a height located five hours before Rakka. The camp there was used exclusively as a transit camp. It had been set up in a vast plain that stretched into the distance before the village; convoys stopped here for one or two days. The camp was run by a Çerkez named Isak Çavuş.<sup>19</sup> By spring 1916, the camp had been totally emptied of its inhabitants. A few families managed to survive by working on the construction of army camps established on the Euphrates line from May 1916 on in anticipation of a new British offensive on Baghdad.<sup>20</sup> Patriarch Zaven, who traveled through Hamam during the night of 23–24 September 1916, counted only 150 tents inhabited by deportees, for the most part women from Marash and Ayntab.<sup>21</sup>

## The Town of Rakka and the Camp in Sebka

By 1915, Rakka was already a fairly big town lying on a plateau located near the left bank of the Euphrates, half an hour from the river. The first deportees to reach it, in fall 1915, were Armenians from the regions of Sivas (Zara, Kangal, Yenihan, Koçhisar), Thrace, and Urfa, as well as female Armenian gypsies from Tokat whose men had been killed. A total of 7,000 to 8,000 deportees were, at the time, able to find lodging in the town after bribing the local authorities (the *kaymakam* and the commander of the gendarmerie) and the head of the *Sevkiyat*, who ruled over the camp in Sebka on the opposite bank of the river. These first Armenian arrivals provided the city with a non-negligible labor force, which was more important in the view of the population and the local authorities than the instructions received from Aleppo. In March 1916, while Krikor Ankut was living in Rakka, a military inspector came to investigate the most flagrant cases of corruption.<sup>22</sup> A new *kaymakam*, Deli Fahri (“The Madman”), had been appointed but, in exchange for a handful of gifts that were more than modest, he continued to protect the deportees, even when orders to deport them arrived from Der Zor. Since Rakka, located on the left bank of the Euphrates, was officially independent of Urfa, Fahri refused to carry out these orders, appealing for protection to the *mutesarif*, who did not wish to knuckle under to ukases from Zor.<sup>23</sup>

Officially, Rakka was one of the zones of relegation for the deportees. In theory, then, they should have benefited from the aid that the government had promised to give them to help them resettle. In fact, the modicum of aid that arrived came, as we have seen, from relief networks created by the Armenians of Aleppo with the support of Swiss and American diplomats and missionaries. Rakka nonetheless constituted, in many respects, a rather exceptional case, in that a few thousand deportees were indeed resettled there, even if the authorities had

nothing to do with this. A deportee stated the matter very well: to gain admittance to Rakka was to escape being sent to Der Zor and one's death. Until June 1916, at least, this population once again enjoyed, in some way, normal conditions of existence, and had the feeling that it could continue to live in the town on a permanent basis.<sup>24</sup>

A very different situation prevailed on the opposite bank of the river, in Sebka. The convoys of the last survivors from Asia Minor, who had been marching for weeks, succeeded one another there under much more appalling conditions. Our witness, Krikor Ankut, reports that a number of new corpses were observed there every day and that famine drove some people to cannibalism. In comparison, Rakka seemed like a paradise. All had sought to gain entry to it by bribing the head of the camp or *Sevkiyat* officials. In March 1916, when Istanbul decided to have done with the last deportees on the Euphrates line, the camp in Sebka was definitively evacuated and its last denizens were sent to Zor. Rakka's Armenian population found itself facing a similar fate, but momentarily escaped it thanks to the *kaymakam*, Fahri (who would soon be dismissed), and the populace, which did not wish to do without the resources that the deportees had brought to their town. Some of the exiles, the neediest ones, were recruited as craftsmen or assigned to help construct army camps on the Euphrates line. The result was that there remained only about 8,000 to 9,000 Armenians in Sebka by autumn 1916.<sup>25</sup> On 25 September 1916, when the patriarch traveled through the area, he saw only six families in Sebka, all of them from Karsbazar.<sup>26</sup>

Garabed Kapigian, who lived in Rakka for several months, provides very valuable details about the Armenian deportees' daily life in the city.<sup>27</sup> Kapigian, who had arrived in Suruc on 18 January 1916, together with somewhat over 1,800 other deportees, had had the good fortune to end up on the right side of the Euphrates and to be in a convoy that included Armenians from Erzerum who still had means at their disposal. He saw how on the opposite bank convoys arrived from the north every day, while others were sent southward. He notes in passing that those who could pay one pound gold were transported southward on rafts.<sup>28</sup>

At first, Kapigian's group was invited to pitch camp three hours from Rakka. Erzerum's notables, however,<sup>29</sup> rapidly secured permission to go to Rakka, where they made preparations to approach the *kaymakam*, Fehmi Bey, who agreed to allow the deportees from Erzerum – and them alone – to settle in the town in exchange for 500 Turkish pound gold, to be paid in cash. In other words, 400 deportees from Sivas, Tokat, Amasia, Samsun, Bafra, Niksar, and Suruc were not covered by the agreement and were therefore sent to camp in Sebka on the opposite bank of the river, whence they were deported to Der Zor.<sup>30</sup> It was with bitterness that our witness observed this incident,<sup>31</sup> which revealed certain character traits of the men from Erzerum. Their lack of solidarity and their extreme parochialism found, under the circumstances, unrestrained expression.

There were at the time 3,000 homes in Rakka, a large minority of which belonged to Çerkez *muhacirs* who had been settled in an isolated quarter 20 years previously. When the thousand and more Armenians from Erzerum entered the city, it had already been inhabited for months by around 15,000 deportees who had been "recruited" by the *kaymakam* Fehmi and the head of the local *Sevkiyat*, Abid Agha: every day, the two officials crossed the Euphrates and brought back with them families willing to pay five to ten pounds gold per head. This was "like a gold mine" for the two men, Kapigian observes.<sup>32</sup> These Armenians were from Thrace (Rodosto, Malgara, Edirne), Bythinia (Ismit, Adabazar, Bardizag, Bursa, Bilecik, Bergame, Eskişehir), Angora, Konya, Isparta, Burdur, Sivrihisar, Nevşehir, Yozgat, Kayseri, Everek, Tomarza, Marash, Ayntab, Birecik, Adana, Hacı, Antioch, Kesab, Dörtüyl, and Kastamonu and the surrounding areas – that is, from regions in western Asia Minor whose inhabitants had suffered much less from massacres and pillage than their compatriots from the eastern provinces. According to Kapigian, the local Arab population, particularly Rakka's notables, had given the Armenian deportees a good reception and had rapidly

grasped all the advantages that it could obtain from these unexpected arrivals. Kapigian also emphasizes that the city's businesses and crafts had benefited from the savoir-faire of the newcomers, who were obviously prepared to work for a minimal salary. Availing themselves of the services of the Post Office, Agricultural Bank, and Department of the Public Debt, the deportees who had relatives in the capital received transfers of money from the capital that redounded to the benefit of commerce in Rakka, as well as aid that was sent from Aleppo by various channels.<sup>33</sup> These overlapping interests did much to strengthen the bonds between Arabs and Armenians; the appointment of three new *kaymakams* in short order did nothing to change matters.

People's situations within the community of deportees differed widely. Women raising young children on their own were, of course, the most vulnerable: these undernourished families did not have the means to rent lodgings and in some cases lived in the street. It is in these circles, which could not maintain minimal health standards, that epidemics made most of their victims. These people were regularly rounded up in the streets, transported to the opposite bank of the river, and then sent to Zor.<sup>34</sup> A few pharmacists and doctors among the deportees, under the lead of Dr. Sarkis Selian from Arslanbeg, who had been appointed municipal physician, and Harutiun Bakalian from Amasia, nevertheless managed to combat disease and establish a basic health regimen. Our witness dwells in particular on the devotion of Dr. Selian, who remained in Rakka until spring 1919.<sup>35</sup> In this relatively peaceful desert area, the deportees were not completely cut off from the rest of the world. They were authorized to carry on correspondence, albeit only in Turkish, and some even received newspapers, such as the Istanbul daily *Zhamanag*<sup>36</sup> – one of the rare papers in Armenian authorized to appear during the war. In their day-to-day lives, deportees from the same localities usually stuck together and accepted all forms of work that could help them earn enough to eat. For example, a former teacher from the orphanage in Sivas was employed as a porter, thus ensuring the subsistence of both his family and his deceased brother's.<sup>37</sup>

This Armenian society was in fact a disparate structure made up of specimens of the Armenian communities in the provinces of Asia Minor and Thrace, speaking different dialects and originating in all the different social classes. What they had in common was the fact that they had all been torn from the environment with which they were familiar and were living together in a world recomposed by the hazards of the deportations. Garabed Kapigian's subtle account leaves its reader with the impression that all were aware that they were the last representatives of the society they had come from and had ended up in the Syrian Desert, where they were barely separated from the road to death by the Euphrates. As time went on, these peasants and city-dwellers came to know each other and established congenial relations. In this nascent community, a few personalities clearly stood out – a young Hnchak from Istanbul, Karnig Shahbazian, who had by some miracle gotten as far as Rakka and taken up the jeweler's trade; a resistance fighter from Urfa, Mgrdich Kiulahian, who was adopted and given privileged treatment by the deportees.<sup>38</sup>

The marriage of the Istanbul party activist with a young woman from Erzerum no doubt marked a new stage in the life of this community. Kapigian and the members of his household, where the bridegroom lived, acted as his parents and as such negotiated the conditions of the marriage. At the same time, they brought the bride's parents to agree that the ceremony would respect practices customary in Sivas. A village priest from Eskişehir, Father Ghazaros, who was living in Rakka under his secular name, gladly undertook to celebrate the match. The deportees were well aware of the symbolic dimension of this act. With the help of Biblical references, they compared their situation with that of the Jews deported from Babylon; the ruins of the ancient city were not all that far from Rakka.<sup>39</sup>

Another, more tragic human-interest story, which unfolded in spring 1916, is symptomatic of the atmosphere prevailing in Rakka. In 1916, the waters of the Euphrates rose unusually

high; this, followed by a storm, led to the death on 18 April of a German officer who was serving on a boat carrying ammunition and war supplies of other kinds to Baghdad. An Armenian priest officiated at the religious ceremony, which culminated in a eulogy delivered in German by Professor Sarkis Manugian, a teacher at the Sanasarian *lycée* in Erzerum, before the stupefied German officers attending the funeral.<sup>40</sup> One can readily imagine what was going through the minds of both the Germans, who had been privileged witnesses of the exactions perpetrated against the deportees on the other bank of the Euphrates and, from a very different standpoint, those of the Armenians, who continued to wonder at the German military's apparent indifference to these crimes.

Kapigian, a careful observer, notes the spring 1916 arrival of four Turks in hunters' uniforms. In his view, they were probably military men or delegates of the Ittihad sent to evaluate the deportees' situation. He finds support for his thesis in the fact that, during their one-week's stay, these men methodically visited the bazaar, which was mainly occupied by Armenians, and also the cafes that the Armenians had opened.<sup>41</sup> It is obviously impossible to verify this hypothesis, but it is easy to imagine that the capital wanted a precise assessment of the effects its policy was having on the deportees, as is shown by the many requests for information transmitted to the local authorities by the interior minister.

Kapigian also confirms that the *kaymakam*, Fahri, was locked in a wrestling match with the new *mutesarif* of Zor, Salih Zeki, throughout summer 1916. He also mentions the resistance that Rakka's Arab notables put up to the order to deport the Armenians from the city.<sup>42</sup> He sheds a great deal of light as well on the antagonism that developed between the army and the administration of the *Sevkiyat* around the question of the Armenian deportees – in other words, between the ranking Turkish and German officers charged with defending the Iraqi front on one hand, and the men of the *Sevkiyat* on the other, who, it was understood, answered to the orders of the CUP and its paramilitary branch, the Special Organization. At stake was obviously the Armenian deportees' labor-power and *savoir-faire*, both of which were indispensable to the military if it was to construct the basic structures it needed, especially the fortified stations stretching from one end of the Euphrates to the other, which were to be used to stock ammunition and supplies. Rakka's Armenians promptly grasped what was involved and, in a period when the "grand massacres" of Der Zor had already begun (in July), undertook to bribe the military commanders – and, simultaneously, the *Sevkiyat memuri* – in order to make sure that they would be enrolled in the labor battalions.<sup>43</sup> Needless to say, the question was referred all the way up to the authorities in Istanbul. An "inspector general" of the *Sevkiyat*, Hakkı Bey, who had been dispatched by the central authorities, arrived on the Euphrates line in August 1916.<sup>44</sup> Hakkı must have had orders from the very top of the party-state, inasmuch as he succeeded in having his way with the military and personally coordinated the systematic liquidation of all the concentration camps, from Meskene to as far away as Zor. The operation was carried out in extremely violent fashion, as all witnesses have noted. The special case represented by Rakka obviously did not escape the attention of the "inspector," who had probably got wind of the firm resistance shown by the local notables. In November 1916, when the liquidation of the deportees who had been driven to Zor was virtually complete, he went to Rakka and tried to convince the new *kaymakam*, Ali Kemal, to hand the city's Armenians over to him. The *kaymakam* cited the decree making Rakka a zone of relegation for the deportees to justify his refusal to comply.<sup>45</sup>

A count of these refugees, carried out at the request of the *mutesarif* of Urfa, provides interesting insights into the makeup of this population. Out of a total population of 8,000 to 9,000, there were a mere 400 Armenians from the vilayets of Sivas, Harput, and Dyarbekir, including 16 men aged between 16 and 60, as well as 45 boys under 15.<sup>46</sup>

The community in Rakka was fully abreast of the massacres perpetrated in Zor, which claimed, as we shall see, 200,000 victims. They were informed of them thanks to reports

from Çerkez in Rakka, who went to take part in these orgies of violence, and also by the survivors who had found refuge in the city. Shortly thereafter, the mufti invited the group to convert “as a guarantee” of their collective future. A total of 30 families accepted the offer. Dr. Levon Ohnigian, a native of Sivas and former student of Garabed Kapigian’s, did not hesitate to tell his teacher how much he had suffered after thus bowing to his fears.<sup>47</sup> However that may be, the Armenian community in Rakka was allowed to remain in the city, only to be then sucked into the serious crisis that affected the region when the fighting with the British forces around Baghdad grew more intense. Like the local populace, the Armenians too were victimized by the military requisitions that literally emptied Rakka of its food reserves, precipitating a terrible famine. Large numbers of children were left to fend for themselves as a result. The most generous deportees adopted them. Turkish and German officers on their way to the Baghdad front also showed these children great generosity, but such occasional assistance was not enough to save their lives.<sup>48</sup> The missionary Elvesta Leslie, who traveled through Rakka in early spring 1917, observes that the deportees there were dying like flies.<sup>49</sup>

In January–February 1917, the *mutesarif* of Urfa came to Rakka to recruit craftsmen; his city, he said, was in desperate need of them. Seven hundred to 800 women and a few men who had been reduced to dire poverty volunteered to go. One hour from Urfa, this convoy was detained in a khan and invited to convert in order not to “offend” the religious sensibilities of the Turkish population. Yet, even after this collective operation had been carried out, the new arrivals were not well received. Had instructions been given to impose a boycott? With the exception of a few specialists needed by Urfa and people who were recruited by the city government and army, the Armenians were sent to Karaköprü to “build a road.”<sup>50</sup> It seems that this operation was a trick, the sole purpose of which was to eliminate a segment of the Armenian deportees from Rakka.

The last event of note was the June 1917 mobilization of people of both sexes between the ages of 15 and 60. Operation Yıldırım, the purpose of which was to defend the Iraqi front, required massive supply transports via the Euphrates, which the military envisaged making by *şahıur*, the well known “raft” used since antiquity for river transport. Apparently, no one still knew how to make this kind of primitive vessel, and 2,500 deportees from Rakka were sent to Birecik and Jerablus to accomplish the task. Five hundred more were sent to Meskene for the same purpose. Among the remaining deportees, 600 were of draftable age.<sup>51</sup> The last of Rakka’s deportees were harassed by the new *kaymakam*; some fled to Aleppo. By October 1918, there were only 200 families left in Rakka.<sup>52</sup>

### ***Der Zor, the Last Stop on the “Euphrates Line” and the Culminating Point of the Second Phase of the Genocide***

With the camps in Der Zor and its environs, we broach the final episode in the 1915–16 massacres, the culmination of the second phase of the genocide. This phase began after six months of relative stability that might well have left the impression that the anti-Armenian persecutions were over. Before the deportees in the Syrian Desert met their tragic end, Zor had constituted the last stop for the Armenian survivors who reached it after crossing the desert. Despite the killings that reduced the number of deportees in the groups moving from one end of the line of the Euphrates to the other, camp after camp, tens of thousands of deportees arrived in Zor. According to a German witness who related his trip there to the German consul, Rössler, in early November 1915 there were already around 15,000 Armenians in this corner of the Syrian Desert in which “from one hundred fifty to two hundred people die every day. This, incidentally, is what explains the fact that the city can absorb the deportees, who continue to arrive by the thousands.”<sup>53</sup> As a result of the attrition due to



the killings, but also of famine and epidemics, Zor by and large respected the orders to maintain a “reasonable” proportion of Armenians in the area. When the norms were exceeded, the local authorities’ solution to the problem was to send small convoys to Mosul to restore the balance. This situation lasted for as long as the influx of new arrivals was compensated, as it were, by the more or less temporary placement of deportees in the concentration camps in the Aleppo and Ras ul-Ayn regions. As a result, around 15,000 Armenians were able to settle in Zor and even organize themselves there, while a transit camp was maintained, as in Rakka, on the left bank of the Euphrates.

Aram Andonian states that before the war there existed in Zor an Armenian Catholic church that served around 150 households, as well as to other churches belonging to Jacobite and Nestorian Syriacs. He adds that, among the Syriacs, a local notable, Georges Sevkkar, showed the deportees special generosity and mobilized all the influence he had to protect them.<sup>54</sup> What is more, Zor was set apart by the fact that its police chief was named Nerses Kiurdian – a kind of anachronistic survival from times past. As in Rakka, the Armenians had soon galvanized the local crafts and trade, encouraged by the *mutesarif* Ali Suad Bey, whom most sources describe as a well-educated man with a benevolent attitude. Alongside versatile people who were able to adapt rapidly to the new circumstances and find some sort of occupation, there was also a considerable number of women and old people, accompanied by children, eking out an existence under dreadful conditions in huts made of branches, outside in city limits on the left bank of the Euphrates. When Salih Zeki was appointed to succeed Ali Suad in July 1916, he judged that their situation was still too enviable:

The day he arrived, he toured the various neighborhoods, especially the one around the market, where he was especially irritated to see that the Armenians were flourishing. They had, in fact, created a veritable Armenia, and the market was largely in their hands. Most were craftsmen, who were, generally speaking, active, offering an odd contrast with the local population.<sup>55</sup>

Levon Shashian, a young Istanbul intellectual and comrade of Aram Andonian’s, with whom Andonian had organized a communications network connecting the different concentration camps – the celebrated “human newspapers” constituted by the young orphans who went back and forth between Meskene, Rakka, and Zor<sup>56</sup> – organized a system for the purchase and sale of the deportees’ assets. Thanks to it, the Armenians were not forced to sell their property for next to nothing. Located near the town hall, Shashian’s little agency was, above all, an office that handed out social assistance to the neediest. In exchange for a few gifts, Shashian succeeded in winning the favor of certain influential personalities in Zor, becoming an invulnerable figure who effectively served as the leader of the Armenian colony.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the Armenian deportees were in the process of settling permanently in this small town in the Syrian Desert. However, as the course of events was to show, the Young Turk government did not intend to allow them to put down roots there.

For lack of sources that might shed light on the CUP’s objectives, we have no choice but to decrypt the strategy worked out and implemented by the Sub-Directorate of the *Sevkiyat* through examination of its operations on the ground. The October–November 1915 establishment of the *Sevkiyat*’s operational structures in Aleppo, along with the creation of concentration camps, constituted the first stage of this plan. The aim was apparently to eliminate the deportees by creating health conditions of the kind that bred disaster.

The second stage plainly came in January 1916, when the authorities decided to shut down the concentration camps north of Aleppo and to begin expelling those interned there down the line of the Euphrates.<sup>58</sup> The third stage, the objective of which was the physical elimination of the surviving deportees, was probably discussed and decided upon between

late February and early March 1916. A formulation used in a 22 February 1916 wire from the interior minister,<sup>59</sup> which the prosecution cited as incriminating evidence at the trial of the Young Turk leaders, is one indication of this: “The text of the general communiqué about the cessation of the deportation of the Armenians has given rise, in some places, to an interpretation that has it that not a single Armenian more should be expelled from now on. For this reason, a number of harmful individuals among the people in question have not been sent away.” Marked by administrative formalism, this document is ultimately nothing more than an order to resume expediting people to the south; it announces the second stage in the plan. The Ottoman archives contain records showing that a total of 4,620 deportees arrived in Zor on 20, 21, 24, and 25 February 1916.<sup>60</sup> These figures give some sense of the rate at which people were being expedited at the beginning of the operation designed to concentrate them in Zor. The first large-scale massacres perpetrated in Ras ul-Ayn from 21 March on, which claimed 40,000 victims, represent the enactment of a decision that was necessarily made earlier.<sup>61</sup> The multiple deportation orders that in February and March 1916 affected categories of Armenians who had previously been allowed to remain in their homes, such as the families of soldiers, or Protestants, Catholics, craftsmen, and so on – we indicated the regions involved in the Fourth Part of the present study – constitute another indication that a decision had been made at the highest level of the party-state. The scope of the operation, however, and the massive number of deportees to be displaced meant that much more time was needed to complete the operations than had originally been anticipated: they went on for eight months – that is, until December 1916.

According to information that a Turkish officer gave the German consul, Rössler, there were in mid-April only 15,000 deportees in the city of Zor<sup>62</sup> – that is, about as many as in fall 1915. This figure, however, probably fails to take into account those interned in the camp on the left bank of the river. The *mutesarif*, Ali Suad, sought to respect the rules that allowed for a maximum of 10 per cent of deportees in the various localities of the region. The German vice-consul in Mosul informed Aleppo the German consulate that of the two convoys that had left Zor on 15 April 1916 and taken two different routes, 2,500 people had arrived in Mosul on 22 May, but that since then not a single convoy had,<sup>63</sup> although 21 groups had set out in that direction in summer 1916. In other words, only the convoys put on the road when Suad was *mutesarif* reached their destination. The case of 2,000 people who left for Mosul in mid-June and were brought back to Zor at the request of Salih Zeki, although that they had, after a month’s march, reached the region of Sinjar, halfway to Mosul, would even seem to indicate that the new *mutesarif* had been instructed not to let a single deportee escape.<sup>64</sup>

The liquidation in spring and summer 1916 of the concentration camps located on the way to Zor of course led to an exceptional increase in the number of convoys arriving there. The groundwork for this last stage was, moreover, plainly laid by an order that Talât Bey sent to the prefecture of Aleppo on 29 June, to the effect that the last Armenians should be expelled toward the line of the Euphrates.<sup>65</sup> It was probably with a view to managing this concentration of people at Zor, then evaluated at around 200,000 deportees,<sup>66</sup> that the interior minister called on Salih Zeki, whose activities at Everek we have already discussed, to replace the *mutesarif* Ali Suad in early July. The August arrival, on the line of the Euphrates, of the *Sevkiyat*’s “inspector general,” Hakkı Bey, was also most probably an ancillary measure taken by the central authorities in order to ensure that their orders would be properly carried out.<sup>67</sup> Acting in the guise of a state official, this *çete* leader was, on reports by Artin Manasian of Adabazar, Aram Manugian of Aslanbeg, and Hovsep Sinanian of Kütahya, the main organizer of the deportations from Aleppo to Meskene and on to Zor. They accuse him of having committed crimes against the convoys of deportees, set tents on fire, conducted Armenian children under guard from Meskene to Zor to be burned alive, and, finally, of having organized the massacre of 1,500 children from the orphanage in Zor.<sup>68</sup>

Before going to Zor to assume his functions, Zeki spent several days early in July 1916 in Aleppo (where he stayed in the Hotel Baron)<sup>69</sup> in order to meet with the vali, Abdülhalik, and the head of the Sub-Directorate for Deportees, Nuri. Thereafter, he went to Meskene. According to Andonian, Zeki there met with the director of the camp, Hüseyin, and then all the directors of the concentration camps set up along the line of the Euphrates as far as Zor.<sup>70</sup>

According to Armenian sources, Zeki made a priority of liquidating the men still present in Zor as soon as he arrived there, but clashed on this point with the military authorities, who, like their counterparts in Rakka, were then recruiting able-bodied individuals to construct the basic structures needed to implement Operation Yıldırım. According to information gathered by Andonian, when Zor's military governor learned that a first convoy of 18,000 people was about to be sent to Marât – that is, toward the killing fields in the Kabur valley – Nureddin Bey sent a telegraph to his superior, General Halil Pasha, requesting permission to create a battalion of worker-soldiers without delay. One thousand two hundred family heads volunteered for the battalion. Assembled in Salihîye in the northernmost tip of Zor, they were supposed to leave for Hamam to join the recruits from Rakka. It seems, however, that Zeki refused to obey the military men's orders. Significantly, he had these recruits locked up in the hospital in Salihîye and then issued orders to send them to Marât with their families – in other words, to massacre them. A second attempt to recruit soldiers among the deportees in Zor, which involved 550 young men between the ages of 21 and 30, failed in much the same way. Assembled in the barracks in Kışla, also to be found in the Salihîye quarter, these men were left without food or water for seven days; the survivors were finally sent in chains to Suvar by the direct desert route. On the way, Chechen *çetes* recruited by Zeki in Ras ul-Ayn killed them in small groups, despite an attempt at resistance.<sup>71</sup> Cast in the guise of recruitment campaigns, these two operations probably had no other purpose than to liquidate all the adult deportees in Zor while eliminating all risk of resistance. It cannot, however, be ruled out that the military authorities had indeed wanted to make use of this labor-power, but came up against contrary orders from the Minister of the Interior.

After getting rid of these men, Zeki surely drew the lessons of these initial massacres, coming to the conclusion that he would need additional recruits to finish the job. In the course of a short trip to Ras ul-Ayn, he recruited 100 more Chechen *çetes* from the ranks of those who had taken part in the massacre of the inmates of the camp in Ras ul-Ayn a few months earlier.<sup>72</sup> With that, the genocidal apparatus had been set in motion. As soon as some 10,000 deportees had been concentrated on the other side of the Zor Bridge, Zeki organized their expulsion to Marât, another camp lying five hours to the south at some distance from the Euphrates. As a general rule, the gendarmes there put the deportees entrusted to them in the hands of Zeki's Chechens, who set about selecting the people who still possessed financial means: these people were methodically stripped of their property and killed on the spot, so as not to risk leaving these resources to the Bedouins who had been charged with accomplishing the final liquidation of these convoys deeper in the desert. Marât was a camp in which the deportees were sorted out and put in new groups. Big convoys were broken down into groups of 2,000 to 5,000 people and gradually expedited to Suvar, a place in the Kabur Valley at a two days' march by the desert route. In Suvar, the last surviving men were separated for good – that is, killed in the surrounding area – from the women and children. Thereafter, continuing to sort and divide, the authorities grouped people together on the basis of their place of origin.<sup>73</sup> Women and children, after spending around ten days on a scanty diet in these desert areas, were put on the road to Sheddadiye, where they were, as a rule, killed behind the hill that looked down on this Arab village. A total of 21 convoys were dispatched from Zor, six big ones and 15 smaller ones. The first

convoy, comprising around 18,000 people, left the camp near the Zor Bridge around 15 July 1916, bound for Marât. Only one group of women escaped the common fate: led off to Haseke, north of Sheddadiye, they were turned over to the local tribes, probably as booty.<sup>74</sup> These operations were carried out by the Chechens; there were not, however, enough of them to liquidate tens of thousands of deportees. Zeki therefore called on the services of nomadic tribes living in the region lying between Marât and Sheddadiye, “especially the Beggars, who lived between Zor-Marât and Suvar, the Agedyids, who wandered between Suvar and Sheddadiye, and the Jeburis, established in Sheddadiye and its environs; he dazzled them with the prospect of plunder.”<sup>75</sup>

Zeki had not only to contend with the problem of managing the convoys that came from the north and, generally speaking, camped on the other side of the Zor Bridge, but also faced the urgent task of clearing the city of Der Zor of the thousands of deportees who had been living there for months. To be sure, he had already gotten rid of their leader, Levon Shashian, and most of the heads of families, but there remained a large number of women and children who had entered fully into the city’s social and economic life. Andonian provides a summary of the way Zeki went about his work:

[Zeki] had the town criers announce that the city was full of rubbish, which could cause epidemics; that the regions of Sheddadiye and Ras ul-Ayn been set aside as settlement areas for [the deportees]; that they would no longer face privations there; that those who had money could build homes there; and that the government would provide for the poorest. The town criers also announced that on such-and-such a day, the people living in such-and-such a neighborhood would have to set out, and should accordingly make the necessary preparations for their journey. He first expelled the natives of Zeitun from their homes, assembling them in the street in a pouring rain. On the other side of the [Zor] bridge, Chechens had been gathering like ants, but no one knew anything about that, for they had been subject to close surveillance and not one had the right to leave [his neighborhood]. Zeki had also brought a group of Chechens into the city and charged them with guarding his residence. One or two weeks later, Arabs informed the Armenians that the Chechens had been mobilized to liquidate them. In the space of around two weeks, all the Armenians in the city were gradually transferred to the area on the other side of the bridge. Only Armenian women who had married a Muslim or were working as maids in Muslim homes were allowed to remain behind. The local Arabs had a considerable number of Armenians in their homes and could have taken in still more. Thanks to extremely thorough searches, however, these Armenians were discovered. [Zeki] promulgated an order to the effect that no Arab had a right to more than one [Armenian] woman as a wife or domestic; those who had more would be brought before a court-martial. The others were registered. The domestics were simply given passes guaranteeing them safe conduct, while those who had married received documents identifying them as Muslims. Thereafter, whenever an Armenian women was spotted at market, she was immediately arrested and subjected to a serve interrogation.<sup>76</sup>

In this way, Zeki managed to expel a large proportion of the deportees who had settled in Zor. He did not, however, manage to empty the city of all its Armenians. Those who remained were harassed for several weeks.

In a 29 July 1916 dispatch, the German consul Rössler states that Zeki had taken rather swift action. “On 16 July,” Rössler wrote, “we received a wire informing us that the Armenians had been ordered to leave the city. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, all the clergymen and notables were thrown into prison... Those who were left behind are now to be liquidated in their turn. It is quite

possible that this measure is bound up with the arrival of a new, pitiless *mutesarif*.”<sup>77</sup> Late in August, the interim consul, Hoffmann, reported that

on the official version of events, they were conducted to Mosul (a route on which only a small minority has any chance of arriving at its destination); the general view, however, is that they were murdered in the little valley lying southwest of Der Zor, near the spot where the Kabur flows into the Euphrates. Gradually, all the Armenians are being evacuated in groups of a few hundred people each and massacred by Çerkez bands recruited especially for that purpose. A [German] officer received confirmation of this information from an Arab eyewitness who had only recently been present at a scene of this sort.<sup>78</sup>

These dispatches, however, represent no more than bits and pieces of what actually happened; only first-hand accounts by survivors can give a true picture of the events. We have published a volume of such accounts.<sup>79</sup>

It is worth pausing over the liquidation, under dreadful conditions, of the 2,000 orphans living in Zor and of a few hundred others whom Hakkı Bey had brought together on the Meskene-Zor line. A witness has described the conditions under which these children had been living in the “orphanage” in Zor:

Their miserable plight was beyond description. They walked about, for the most part, barefoot and naked, the burden of fatigue on their shoulders, and lacking even the spirit to run away and beg for a crust of bread in the vicinity. The arms and legs, as well as the reddened shoulders of many of them were covered with untold wounds that had become horrible sores. Since the wounds had not been treated, these sores were devoured by worms that the poor little children pulled out with their fingers. Before throwing them to the ground, however, they hesitated, standing stock still in order to observe the fat bodies of these worms that wrapped themselves around the tips of their fingers. They gazed at them as if they had the feeling that it was a terrible waste, as if they would have liked to eat them: they were so hungry... They endured, for a while, a great many hardships in this hell that had been christened an orphanage, and were then...packed off in carts and put on the road.<sup>80</sup>

Long protected by the mayor of Zor, Hacı Fadıl, these children survived on the strength of their wits – scavenging something to eat, for example, from garbage and animal excrements – before being sent to Suvar. There, some of them were blown up in their carts with dynamite in an utterly uninhabited spot in the desert, while others were put in natural cavities in the ground, sprinkled with kerosene, and burned alive. “Zeki Bey found a legal reason for sending them off,” Andonian writes,

He had the *müdir* of Zor, a Turk, write a report indicating that, given the increase in the orphans’ numbers, there was a danger that they would spread contagious diseases. Only two children survived this massacre. One of them, thirteen or fourteen years of age, was a boy from Rodosto [Tekirdağ] by the name of Onnig who had not died of smoke inhalation because he had managed to withdraw to a remote corner of the cavity and then make his way to the surface. This boy was able to return to Zor on his own, but was so sick and had been so badly traumatized that he lived for only another three or four months. The other survivor was a girl from Şabinkarahisar named Anna, the sister of an army officer. She escaped death under the same conditions and was able to flee all the way to Urfa.<sup>81</sup>

Investigations conducted after the Mudros armistice revealed that it was the police chief, Mustafa Sidki, who supervised the slaughter of these children from the orphanage in Zor on 9 October 1916, followed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of the same month by that of some 2,000 more orphans whom Hakkı had rounded up in the camps to the north. Here they had been tied together in pairs and thrown into the Euphrates.<sup>82</sup>

According to information gathered by Aram Andonian, 192,750 people fell victim to the massacres in Zor in the five months that it took Salih Zeki to cleanse the region, from July to December 1916.<sup>83</sup> The indictment of the Young Turk leaders, read out at the first session of their trial on 27 April 1919, states that 195,750 people were murdered in Zor in 1916:<sup>84</sup> 82,000 people were liquidated between Marât and Sheddadiye and another 20,000 were liquidated at the fort of Rav near Ana under the supervision of Lieutenant Türki Mahmud.<sup>85</sup> A report drawn up by the Information Bureau of the Armenian Patriarchate in Constantinople indicates that, in addition to the *mutesarif* of Zor, Salih Zeki Bey, a Çerkez, the Young Turk deputy from Zor, Muhammad Nuri; Şükrü Bey, Zeki's assistant; Tiki Mahmud, the local chief of the *Sevkiyat*; Muhammad, a mufti; Hasim Hatar, a magistrate; Ali Saib, the *mutesarif*'s secretary; Muhammad El Kheder, the *müdür* of Hindin; Abdüllah Pasha; Ayntabli Mustafa Sidki, the police chief; Bedri and Mahmud Abad, police lieutenants; Salaheddin, the military commander; and Muhammad el Senia, an officer in the gendarmerie, were mainly responsible for organizing the liquidation of more than 195,000 Armenian deportees. They were aided and abetted by several notables from Zor: Yasin, the son of the mufti Muhammad; Hasan Muhammad; Halif Abdüllah; Helal el Kerzat; Halid Tetarye; Hamad; Mustafa Natar; and Yapusli Abdüllah. The *çete* chiefs who directed the massacres were Yeas Yekta (a Chechen from Heczet), Süleyman Sadullah (from Fevren), Muhammad Gaza (from Murad), Şeyh Süleyman (from Sivad), Rebban Lefe, and the şeyh of Yegidar.<sup>86</sup>

Patriarch Zaven traveled through the city of Zor on 27 September on his way into exile. He was lodged in the town hall and received with a degree of respect by Salih Zeki. There, he even encountered a dozen priests from western Anatolia, apparently the last surviving Armenian men in Zor.<sup>87</sup> On the other hand, further south in Miadin, where Zaven arrived on 29 September, he observed that all the Armenians had been expelled, as had all those in Abukemal, where he had encountered (on Sunday, 1 October) only a boy from Aslanbeg, a blacksmith from Adabazar, and a few bakers who had been allowed to stay behind because they were indispensable. The next day he discovered, first in Kayim and then in Nehiye, six worker-soldiers from a battalion of 150 Armenians and 100 Greeks, most of them from Afionkarahisar and Kütahya, who were constructing a road to Ana. He learned that, two months earlier, the 1,600 Armenians there had been deported to Der Zor. Eight bakers, blacksmith, and masons and their families had, however, been allowed to remain behind, along with three female "servants" of the *kaymakam*'s from Urfa, and two wagon-drivers from Ayntab and Tarsus.<sup>88</sup> In other words, a number of the Armenians who had been sent toward Mosul had thronged into these localities before being wiped out in summer 1916.

In the following months, however, the authorities brought deportees of the Hama-Homs-Damascus line back into the region. Odian, who spent more than a year in Hama, was himself deported to Zor by way of Aleppo early in 1917. On his way there, he observed that 1,500 Armenians were still living in Meskene;<sup>89</sup> they were presumably deportees from Rakka who had been working for the army. Further south, in Hamam, he met Hayg Goshgarian, a bookseller and the editor of the humor magazine *Gigo*, as well as Sahag Mesrob, who had just arrived.<sup>90</sup> In Zor, these men were recruited as street repairmen, although they were rather more accustomed to wielding the pen.<sup>91</sup> The Armenian presence in Zor had by then been reduced to a young woman from Adabazar who had escaped the massacres in Marât and been taken to wife by a gypsy with whom she exhibited a monkey and bears, and 100 emaciated Armenians held in the *konak* in Zor and awaiting their departure for Ana.<sup>92</sup> Odian

and his companions, who were relegated to Miadin somewhat later, where 100 survivors of the massacres in Marât were also living, somehow eked out an existence in this village in the midst of the desert.<sup>93</sup> In May 1917, the government had Odian brought to Busara, a few dozen kilometers south of Zor. He later wrote that one year earlier the little town had boasted as many as 8,000 to 10,000 Armenians; they had been massacred at Suvar and Sheddadiye by the Chechen *çetes*, although a few Armenians were still left there. The *müdir*, for example, was holding a young woman, a little girl, and a 14-year-old adolescent from a well-to-do Bursa family that had been massacred; all three had been sold by Chechens.<sup>94</sup> Odian, who did not know Arabic and was little used to this country way of life, was hard put to find a place in this society. Like many others, he had gotten wind of the benevolence with which the Yezidis of Sinjar treated Armenian refugees and dreamed of going there. Notwithstanding the risks involved, he set out on this long journey, which would lead him down the banks of the Euphrates to Baghdad disguised as an Arab beggar. Promptly robbed by two Bedouins, who took money and tobacco from him, he was thereafter stripped of all his clothes and forced to return naked to Busara, where this intellectual found himself literally dying of boredom.<sup>95</sup> His second attempt to escape his bitter fate led him, on 31 August 1917, to Zor, where his friends Sahag Mesrob and Hayg Goshgarian were still living. With their help, he found work in a military enterprise in which some 20 Armenians from Ayntab worked manufacturing uniforms. Around 400 women, primarily widows, were still to be found in the city.<sup>96</sup> Shortly thereafter, Odian was drafted as a translator for Zor's military commander, who was not able to communicate with the German officers serving there.<sup>97</sup> Now sporting a uniform, Odian took advantage of his good knowledge of French at meetings between Turkish and German soldiers.<sup>98</sup> Somewhat later, he even became the *ordonnance* (assistant) of the military commander Edwal, a former Swedish officer in the Iranian gendarmerie and the commander of the German garrison in Zor.<sup>99</sup> One can readily imagine the oddity of his situation, which had made an Armenian exile the indispensable interpreter at meetings between Turkish and German military men. Odian was, moreover, a witness to the sharp tensions between the German officers and the Turkish civilian authorities, especially over the Armenian wagon-drivers who had been given responsibility for military transports between Aleppo and Zor, contrary to the authorities' wishes.<sup>100</sup> The authorities also prohibited the Armenians working in the German barracks from leaving the city or even crossing the bridge across the Euphrates.<sup>101</sup> The *mutesarif* repeatedly demanded, Odian observes, that the Armenians working for the Germans be turned over to him, reminding the Turkish officers that Armenians were not allowed to serve in the army. The antagonism between civilian and military authorities over the status of the Armenians is palpable here. Moreover, the local commander pointed out to the high-ranking civilian officials that a number of Armenians were serving in all the Ottoman armies as doctors, pharmacists, and dentists and that no objections had been heard from the War Ministry.<sup>102</sup> According to Odian, the nephew of the former parliamentary deputy Armen Garo was the last of the deportees from Istanbul to be murdered in the prison in Zor, on orders from the police chief Ayntabli Mustafa Sidki; he was killed in January 1918, at the moment that news of the fall of Jerusalem reached the city. The famine that broke out here, Odian further reports, drove a number of women and children living among the Bedouins to rally in Zor. After providing relief to an emaciated woman from Istanbul, Odian took charge of three brothers from Smyrna, the Atamians, who had until then been living as refugees in the Suvar area. When the British forces reached Ana and the Germans began to evacuate their garrison in Zor, the lives of the Armenians working there were endangered, the more so as the Germans never considered taking them with them.<sup>103</sup> Basing his estimate on the "best available sources," Odian puts the number of Armenians living in Arab and Turkish homes in Zor at this time, such as that of the head of the post office or of the mayor, at around 2,000, to which we must add some 10,000 Arabized

children. There was not a police officer or government official who was not keeping a woman from Harput, Bursa, Bardizag, Adabazar, Ismit, or Ayntab in his house.<sup>104</sup>

### *The World of the Concentration Camps*

Our inventory of the 20 or so concentration camps set up by the Sub-Directorate of the *Sevkiyat* in the northern part of the vilayet of Aleppo, on both sides of the Amanus mountains along the trajectory of the Bagdadbahn in Ras ul-Ayn, and on the line of the Euphrates, has not allowed us to broach certain crucial points – who ran these camps, how they were organized, and what their social life was like. Without making any claim to exhaust the subject, which calls for a much more thoroughgoing study, we think it is useful to sketch a few essential points as have been suggested by the many survivors' accounts that we have published.<sup>105</sup> After examining, in the fourth part of the present book, the day-to-day experience of a few convoys of deportees bound for the south, we now need to observe from the inside the concentration camps, which functioned like a system of connecting vessels. This examination is all the more necessary as around 700,000 people passed through these camps.

### Those in Charge of the Camps

In most survivors' accounts, the armed men who escorted the convoys are identified either as "gendarmes" or as Çerkez or Chechen *çetes*. However, on the basis of the information found in these accounts, it can be said that the generic term "gendarme" used by the deportees bears in the present case on people recruited locally, in Syria or Mesopotamia, as "gendarmes," leaders of convoys, or camp directors, by the Sub-Directorate for Deportees in Aleppo. The same accounts show that such recruitment proceeded in line with methods like the ones employed by the Special Organization: irregular militiamen and auxiliaries were recruited from among common-law criminals, notables, and local Arab, Çerkez, or Chechen tribes. In other words, the Sub-Directorate for Deportees operated the same way the Special Organization did in this respect, behind a legal facade: it supposedly answered to the Interior Ministry, yet in fact clearly seems to have been under the direct authority of the CUP's Central Committee or that of the *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa*. In this connection, it is not really surprising to see that the collection of documents published by the *Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri* contains virtually no telegrams from the General Director of Deportations, Şükrü Bey, to his subordinate Nuri. This suggests, at the very least, that the orders received in Aleppo came directly from another agency.

The personnel recruited in this fashion basically constituted two corps: one was responsible for the convoys, the other for the camps. The convoys were conducted by a leader and an escort of auxiliaries whom the deportees call "gendarmes." As for the camps, they were run by a director (*Sevkiyat-ı müdürü*), backed up by coworkers dispatched from Aleppo or a locally recruited staff. The director, moreover, chose a supervisor and guards from the ranks of the Armenian deportees, offering, in exchange for their services, to provide them with food and guarantees that they would not be killed. These Armenians were responsible, notably, for watching over the camps at night. The logic informing the selection of supervisors seems to have been to recruit them from the most modest social strata, so as to exacerbate the already existing antagonism between the affluent deportees – that is, those who could still buy themselves something to eat, and the others, who were literally starving to death. By all accounts, these Armenian auxiliaries were just as brutal as their "Ottoman" colleagues and particularly aggressive toward their compatriots. One hardly need say that special circumstances of this kind favored the emergence of the basest instincts and promoted boundless aggressiveness among the deportees. This aggressiveness came on top of the traditional social antagonisms



and ran through all social groups, as if the victims blamed each other for the fate to which their executioners were subjecting them.

There were, finally, recruits of whom the deportees were less critical: these were the gravediggers, whose task it was to go from tent to tent every morning and collect the bodies – on average, 200 per day and per camp – of the people who had died the previous night, in order to bury them in the mass graves that were dug in the immediate vicinity of each camp. In exchange for their work, the gravediggers were given food and were temporarily exempted from further deportation. Obviously, the information provided by these recruits constitutes one of our most reliable sources when it comes to evaluating the number of victims in their respective camps. When priests were to be found in a camp, they took on the task of celebrating simplified funeral services.

## The Organization of the Camps and Social Life

Except for the two transit centers in the immediate vicinity of Aleppo, the concentration camps were all located in desert areas and always outside towns and villages, access to which was strictly controlled. To enter a city was to have a chance to vanish into the crowd and, especially, to bribe someone living there into hiding one. In fact, the camps usually consisted of nothing more than a bare stretch of land without facilities of any kind. They were generally located a quarter or half hour's march from a small village or town and covered with a multitude of "tents" made of different pieces of cloth sewn together that were pressed one up against the next for reasons of security. We have already observed that the camps were often attacked at night by local tribes and that it was not at all common for the director of a camp to see effectively to the security of those under his "administration."

As for food and supplies, no provisions had been made to provide the deportees with them, rare exceptions aside. The exiles themselves had to obtain the bare necessities from the local population. In exchange for a generous payment to the director of the camp, newly minted merchants sold flour, bread, or even water at exorbitant prices to the deportees, who had no choice but to buy what they were offered at any price simply in order to survive. Thus, a sort of hierarchy of misery was established. Only the most "well-to-do" could eat as much as they liked; the others were reduced to begging, with small success.

As for lodging, the least needy could also buy themselves a decent tent – that is, a form of shelter capable of protecting them somewhat from storms or the heat of the sun in these harsh regions characterized by sharp climactic variations. We also know that some managed to hide in the Arab villages if they had paid their "hosts" a substantial rent.

Money was also the reason for big differences in the treatment meted out to the deportees. By paying the director of their camp a kind of fee ensuring the right to stay put, the most affluent could avoid being put immediately in one of the convoys that were regularly sent south toward death in order to make room for new arrivals, especially when the "natural mortality rate" was not high enough to lighten the camp population sufficiently. Every time a convoy was scheduled to set out, the director had an opportunity to make money. On this basis, a relation of shared interest was established between the director and some of those he "administered": the director had an obvious interest in keeping these families in his camp as long as he could, or at least as long as they could find the means to satisfy his appetites. That is why directors rather frequently failed to comply with the orders they received from Aleppo, keeping the deportees in a camp even though they had been told to evacuate it. The situation is comparable to the problems that the Sub-Directorate for Deportees encountered when it tried to dislodge the tens of thousands of Armenians who had managed to "take refuge" in the Arab villages north of Aleppo and whom the local peasants refused to hand over because they represented a non-negligible source of revenue. Andonian, too, escaped

the common fate because he was, as he readily confesses, protected by an affluent family that had succeeded in negotiating its survival, taking refuge in Aleppo. Alongside these exceptions, however, among whom many of the survivors were to be found, how many poor people ended up in mass graves in Islahiye, Meskene, or Ras ul-Ayn, after enduring, in the case of the youngest and most resilient, months of hell spent looking daily for something, anything, to eat? How many cases of cannibalism were there? How many mothers ate their children or sold them to some nomad for a crust of bread? Famine, malnutrition, and unspeakable hygienic conditions seem to have been among the panoply of measures that the Sub-Directorate for Deportees took to eliminate these “new migrants,” to whom the authorities had officially assigned the task of making the deserts of Syria and Mesopotamia bloom, although only a few thousand Bedouins actually managed to survive there. By itself, the image of orphaned or abandoned children digging through animal excrements in search a few grains of barley with which to ensure their survival sums up the situation of those interned in the desert.

Alongside the dramas of daily life, of death stalking its victims day and night and haunting people’s minds, of the petty ignominies that were the price of survival, we must also point to certain aspects revelatory of a rather impressive desire to survive and a sense of organization and talent for adaptation that seems to have been second nature for a number of deportees. The information that Andonian provides about the system of communication set up by a few intellectuals – the “living newspapers,” children of ages 10 or 12 who went back and forth between the camps to ensure an exchange of information – offers an excellent illustration of the kind of organization established by the deportees, despite the appalling conditions reigning in the camps, in an attempt to avoid the moral traps set for them. In the same register, we might also point to the admirable work accomplished in Der Zor by the young Istanbul intellectual Levon Shashian, who directed a kind of humanitarian organization that sought to ensure the deportees’ survival.

Finally, how can one fail to be impressed, as was Cevdet when he traveled through the area in late February 1916, by the handful of Armenians in Ras ul-Ayn who, turning the *kaymakam*’s benevolence (or sense of his own interests to advantage), succeeded in the few months accorded them in settling down and even instilling life and activity into a poverty-stricken little village? Even if political contingencies had an impact on their fate, “Cemal Pasha’s Armenians,” whose story we shall examine later, were probably spared in part because they represented a non-negligible potential for development in these zones which the Turkish general dreamed of ruling. Deported in convoys comprising people from the same town or village, subject to incessant attacks from *çetes* or the tribes living in the regions through which they passed, the survivors of the Syrian or Mesopotamian deserts always maintained, despite circumstances at the limits of the human, a strong sense of solidarity with those of their compatriots who came from the same region. Geographical origins constituted, in these years of suffering, a sort of major reference point in the social organization of the Armenian deportees.