

*The Sounds of Silence - IV*

İZMİT'S ARMENIANS

SPEAK



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**SOUNDS OF SILENCE - IV**

EDITED BY FERDA BALANÇAR



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## FOREWORD

### FERDA BALANÇAR

This is the fourth book in the “Sounds of Silence” series brought to readers as part of the Oral History Project the Hrant Dink Foundation has conducted since 2011. It was four years ago that we published *Turkey’s Armenians Speak*, the first book in the series. The following years saw the publication of the Turkish and English editions of *Diyarbakır’s Armenians Speak* and *Ankara’s Armenians Speak*. The series continues this year with *İzmit’s Armenians Speak*.

*İzmit’s Armenians Speak* includes some of the conversations we conducted using the in-depth interview method. All of the interviews were conducted with individuals whose families were, in 1915, settled in the area defined as the “Mutasarrıflık of İzmit” in the administrative structure of the Ottoman State at the time. As explained in the section entitled “Deportations in the Mutasarifat of Işmit” we excerpted from

Raymond Kévorkian's *Armenian Genocide*, present-day settlements such as İzmit, Bahçecik, Adapazarı, Karamürsel, and Geyve fell inside the boundaries of the Mutasarrifate of İzmit in 1915. Therefore, we took care to interview people whose family roots could be traced to one of these settlements.

One of the reasons why we picked the Armenians of İzmit after the Armenians of Diyarbakır and Ankara was to unveil the memories of Armenians from the easternmost to the westernmost reaches of Turkey. The accounts you will read in this book are just as striking as those we heard from the Armenians of Diyarbakır or Ankara.

Another reason for our choice of İzmit was the official declaration of the year 2015 as the "Commemorative Year for the Battle of Gallipoli." The presence of a large Armenian contingent in the Ottoman army is a widely acknowledged historical fact. The dispatch to the Gallipoli front of some of the Armenians eligible for military service living in and around İzmit is another fact corroborated by both historical research and the oral history work done so far. Many of these people's families serving in the Ottoman army were deported from their homeland on the grounds of "security" under the Deportation Law passed by the Union and Progress Party government on May 27, 1915. Many perished in exile. By putting the Armenians of İzmit in focus this year, we tried to remember the Armenians that served in the Ottoman army during the World War I alongside their families and to shed light on their experience. The testimonies in the book underscore once again the aforementioned historical facts.

This study on the Armenians of İzmit has conclusions that distinguish it from our work on the Armenians of Diyarbakır and Ankara. The most striking difference is that we were practically unable to come across any living Armenians who were born and raised in and around İzmit. This, of course, is not conclusive evidence that the Armenians of İzmit have completely perished; however, our search in Turkey, Armenia, Europe, America, and Lebanon failed to yield any results.

Preparations for the project began in 2014. Our priority was to contact the Armenians of İzmit living in Turkey, Armenia, and the Diaspora.

We ran an announcement in the *Agos* newspaper for two months in the hope of reaching Armenians of İzmit who would volunteer to take part in our study. Concurrently, we completed training the volunteers who would work on this project. The training process included the history of İzmit and its Armenians along with oral history interviewing techniques. We interviewed 30 people from January to August 2015. One of our interviewees lived in America, two in Canada, two in Germany, six in Armenia, and nineteen in Turkey.

The interviews lasted one and a half hours, on the average. The questions we posed to the interviewees can be grouped under three main headings. The first batch included questions intended to elicit life stories. The second had to do with their parents' and relatives' past. The questions in the third batch were designed to explore their memories of the history and culture of İzmit and its environs. We gathered from the majority of the interviews that the interviewees' knowledge of their family histories was particularly limited. We concluded that their parents or grandparents were reluctant to give an account of what transpired before or after the Armenian Genocide in and around İzmit. That the interviewees were not as reluctant as their family elders about sharing what they knew was also evident. In other words, these individuals were not unwilling to share what had been passed on to them by their families. Some exceptions notwithstanding, the interviewees' knowledge of the history and culture of İzmit and its surroundings was also rather limited. This can be explained by the fact that none of them were born and raised in İzmit. Of course, all of these impressions are impacted by the limited number of the interviews conducted. We know from our preliminary research that there are a great many Armenians, of İzmit origin, living in America, Canada, and Europe; but we did not have a chance to interview them. New research based on interviews with the Armenians of İzmit especially in America and Canada would reveal more information.

Apart from the general impressions arrived at from the testimonies of the interviewees, there's a significant phenomenon common among these testimonies. Most of the İzmit Armenians we interviewed had close relatives who were conscripted during the period 1914-1915. The

words of one interviewee echo the rightful protest of many Armenians of İzmit: “They say the Armenians in the east helped the Russians during the World War I. Even if it were true, why was it that the Armenians in İzmit or Bursa in the west ended up paying for this? Why did they tear my grandfather away from his home in Bardizag where he lived peacefully, growing tobacco in his fields?”

*İzmit’s Armenians Speak* includes nine of the 30 oral history interviews conducted under the project. Five of these nine interviewees were male, four were female. Six of the interviewees lived in Turkey, two in Armenia, and one in Canada. Five of the interviews were with individuals whose family roots stretched to Bardizag. Bardizag means ‘little garden’ in Armenian and its current name in Turkish is Bahçecik which has the same meaning. The remaining four interviewees had family origins in Karamürsel, Armaş, Adapazarı, and İzmit.

The book you are holding is more than a compilation of interviews. The section entitled “Deportations in the Mutesarifat of İsmi” was borrowed from Raymond Kévorkian’s *Armenian Genocide* published in Turkish by İletişim Publications. This is a valuable edition to this volume and we are grateful to Mr. Raymond Kévorkian and İletişim Publications for allowing us to include the entire section in this book.

As you will see in the following pages, we added a collection of lyrics and tongue twisters to the book. The lyrics and tongue twisters we selected from the first volume of musicologist, compiler, choral conductor, composer, and writer Mihran Tumacan’s *Hayreni Yerk u Pan* [The Armenian Song and Word] are from in and around İzmit. Tumacan, who was born in Gürün, Sivas in 1890 and died in Yerevan in 1973, gathered songs and examples of oral literature in Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish in *Hayreni Yerk u Pan* by interviewing the Armenians who had survived the Genocide and emigrated to Europe and America. We honor the memory of this valuable author, and we thank Melissa Bilal who not only encouraged us to include this collection but also helped with the selection.

The book’s afterword was penned by Aras Ergüneş, an academic known, among other things, for his studies on Bardizag. It provides

an overall evaluation of all the interviews conducted under the project besides the testimonies included in the book. We thank Mr. Ergüneş for his contribution.

Our thanks also go to everyone whose efforts made this project possible, notably Prof. Arzu Öztürkmen who provided training support to our interviewers, researchers Zakarya Mildanoğlu and Arsen Yarman, and the volunteers who conducted the interviews.

We hope *İzmit's Armenians Speak* will be of value to everyone who wants to understand what the Armenians lived through on these lands from the past to the present and will shed light on related oral history projects. We believe that Hrant Dink's words "Every Armenian is a document" has been realized, once again, in this book.