

SURVIVING THE FAMINE OF WORLD WAR I: A CASE STUDY FROM LEBANON

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During World War I, the area known as modern Lebanon was a part of the Ottoman Empire. The deadly famine in the Mount Lebanon region caused by the war was one of the overarching reasons for the demands by the local population for the creation of a separate Lebanese nation-state with a Christian majority, instead of having Lebanon incorporated into Muslim-majority Syria. One-third of the population of Mount Lebanon died during the war, one-third emigrated to the West, and the remaining one-third survived and witnessed the formation of the new state. Whether the Ottomans intentionally imposed starvation against their Christian subjects is highly debated; there is also some evidence that the British and French maintained the famine via food blockades as a weapon of war against the Ottomans. How can historians of the Middle East and Arab world recover the marginalized voices of the common people who suffered the most from the famine of Mount Lebanon? This paper relies heavily on an audio recording left behind by a survivor of the famine, who was orphaned at the age of seven when both of his parents succumbed to starvation. His testimony serves as a case study from which to explore several issues related to the effects of the famine of World War I in Lebanon, in addition to how the war is remembered publicly. This rare and unique source additionally underscores the urgent need for Middle Eastern historians to be trained in oral history methods, as primarily utilizing written historical records excludes the point of view of the illiterate and focuses on the experiences of elites.

Overview

This paper deals with memory of the First World War in Lebanon. I will broadly discuss collective memory of the war and then engage with a rare historical artifact that I have been given access to, which is a voice recording of a survivor (Philip Abū Ḥamad) talking about his experiences during the war. This man, who happens to be my great-grandfather¹, was born in 1907

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¹ For information on oral history research, see: D.A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2003; L. Barnickel, *Oral History for the Family Historian: A Basic Guide*, Oral History Association, Murfreesboro 2006.

and died in 1996. The recording was made in the early 1990s, towards the end of his life. I had grown up hearing stories from various relatives about how he survived the war as an orphan and I have been seriously looking into writing a biography of his life. However, this is a daunting task given that he is not around to tell me about his life, particularly the parts about World War I. This methodological limitation led me to wonder how scholars can actually retrieve the memories of those who lived 100 years ago; I decided to experiment with collecting memories of second and third postwar generations. I had believed that asking such people what memories were conveyed to them by their parents or grandparents would be just as productive.

My argument is twofold. Firstly, I argue that collective memory, though not entirely factual, can be studied to comprehend the war's legacy in the region, and the role that this legacy plays in national and sectarian discourses. Collective memory should not be utilized to ascertain historical facts. Secondly, I will argue that second generation memories can be a source of untapped historical records if evaluated carefully, but that third generation memories are practically useless for reconstructing individual experiences.

Lebanon and the Memory of World War I

Much of the historical literature on World War I in Lebanon and the Middle East has focused on the creation of new post-Ottoman states at the whims of the British and French. Meanwhile, personal memories remain difficult to uncover. One reason is the numerous conflicting perspectives on the war, most of which revolve around accounts of the famine that devastated the Lebanese population and narratives of the brutality of the Ottomans. Depending on one's religious background, the famine could be blamed on some sect that was allegedly conspiring to obliterate another sect. Embedded in this popular discourse are the politics of victimization that play a fundamental role in Lebanese Christian identity. Scholars of the war have convincingly demonstrated that the famine had multiple causes and was *not* a diabolical plot to eradicate the Christians of Mount Lebanon². The famine had social

² Louis Farshee underscores: «That most of the victims in Mount Lebanon were Christians is no proof of a mass-murder plot, because Christians constituted seventy-eight percent of the Mountain's population. And Mount Lebanon was not the only area of Greater Syria affected». L. Farshee, *Safer Barlik: Famine in Mount Lebanon during World War I*, Inkwater Press, Portland 2015, p. 33.

and economic causes, and was also a result of wartime conditions³. Yet, the vast majority of Lebanese does not remember it in this way.

Furthermore, there is no official commemoration in Lebanon to publicly remember those who perished in the First World War. A statue commemorating the civilian experience did exist once in the center of downtown Beirut; it was inaugurated in 1930 and replaced in 1953. The original memorial featured two mothers crying over their dead children, one Christian mother and one Muslim mother, united through their indescribable pain and grief. Eighteen feet tall, it was initially called the “Beirut Martyr’s Memorial”, but after Lebanon gained its independence from the French, it was referred to as «the statue of two crying women»⁴. Public opposition to the statue maintained that it did not accurately depict martyrdom, but that it was actually a consecration of the frailty and humiliation of the nation. Women were remembered for their sadness and suffering while men were remembered for heroic actions. This statue was removed in 1953 and replaced by one deemed nobler, that depicted the sacrifices of male nationalism against the Ottomans.

Elizabeth Thompson has demonstrated that the First World War was remembered privately at home⁵. This is the crux of the problem. We are now operating in a time period that is 100 years after the conclusion of the war – historians face methodological limitations in recovering the voices and experiences of those who suffered most. Relying on popular memory merely enforces the historical narratives of certain sects. In reality, the war had multiple causes: bad harvests, unfortunate weather conditions, locusts, disease epidemics, mandatory conscription, unpaid labor, the Entente blockade, hoarding, profiteering, currency devaluation, and corruption. All of these factors were dependent on each other.

³ See L. Schilcher, *Famine in Syria, 1915-1918*, in *Problems of the Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in Honour of Albert Hourani*, edited by J. P. Spagnolo; A. Hourani, Ithaca Press, Reading 1996, pp. 229-258; A.T. Brand, *Lives Darkened by Calamity: Enduring the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria*, Ph.D. Diss., American University of Beirut, Beirut 2014; Najwa al-Qattan, *When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon*, in “International Journal of Middle East Studies”, 46, 4 (November 2014), pp. 719-736; Leila Tarazi Fawaz, *A Land of Aching Hearts: The Middle East in the Great War*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2014; Z.J. Foster, *The 1915 Locust Attack in Syria and Palestine and its Role in the Famine During the First World War*, in “Middle Eastern Studies”, 51, 3 (2015), pp. 370-394.

⁴ L. Volk, *Memorials and Martyrs in Modern Lebanon*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana 2010, p. 65.

⁵ E. Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon*, Columbia University Press, New York 2000, pp. 19-38.

Methodology

The remainder of this paper relies heavily on an audio recording left behind by Philip Abū Ḥamad, a survivor of the war who was orphaned at the age of seven when both of his parents succumbed to disease in 1914. His testimony serves as a case study from which to explore several issues related to World War I in Lebanon and how the war is remembered publicly and privately. I compare his memories with those of his children and grandchildren. I demonstrate that second generation memories and conceptions of the First World War serve as a source of untapped historical records that shed light on the war's legacy in Lebanon and the region but only to a limited extent, and that these memories are still pertinent to the national discourse of Lebanon.

Philip Abū Ḥamad, a Maronite Christian, was born in 1907 in the village of Brummana (Brummānā), about ten miles east of Beirut in the heart of Mount Lebanon. In a recorded conversation with one of his grandchildren in 1995, he recalled that the war erupted when he was only seven years old⁶. He explained that the “Turks” (i.e., Ottoman soldiers) came to Brummana in 1914 and occupied it as well as the surrounding villages. According to Philip, they occupied schools, monasteries, and convents, and walked around the villages and towns in a threatening manner that terrified the inhabitants. Some time in 1914, he recalled that smallpox began to spread in Joura (Ġūrah) and Ghabeḥ (Ġābah), two villages in the vicinity of Brummana. As a result, the municipalities of Joura and Ghabeḥ quarantined their residents and banned them from going to Brummana. Likewise, the municipality of Brummana forbade its people from visiting those areas. No one dared come to Brummana after that, Philip explained⁷. Hunger and starvation would eventually follow shortly after this quarantine was implemented.

Philip recounted that he was in his father's store one day in 1914 when a man named Maṣṣūr was on his way to Brummana from Joura⁸. Maṣṣūr used to supply Philip's father's grocery store with milk and vegetables. When people from Joura were banned from coming to Brummana, Maṣṣūr avoided the usual roads and came walking through the pine forests. Carrying yogurt and tomatoes, he reached the store. As Philip's father began placing these products inside, a man named Ġubrān Sālīm appeared next to Maṣṣūr. Ġubrān was from Brummana, but he had joined the Ottoman Army and was working as a soldier, patrolling his own hometown. Philip described Ġubrān as a disgusting man, who was evil to such an extent that he did not know God. Ġubrān had his hand hidden behind his back, which he used to smack poor Maṣṣūr, who fell over and then tumbled all the way down the long

⁶ Philip Abū Ḥamad, *Interview with J. Abū Ḥamad*, Brummana 1996. Abū Ḥamad Family Archives.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

staircase with the tomatoes he was carrying until he landed at the bottom. He got up, dusted himself off, and ran off into the pine forest. After that, Maṣṣūr never showed his face in Brummana again, and he never brought tomatoes or dairy products to Philip's father's store⁹.

This was not the last time Philip would see Ğubrān Sālim. There was a man in Brummana named Elie Khoury (Ḥūrī), who was starving and who had a family that he needed to feed, but he had run out of food and money. One day, Elie was attempting to steal food from a house, but the people who lived in that house caught him and brought him over to Ğubrān Sālim: «Ğubrān said to Elie: “You dare steal in *my* village?”. Elie said: “Ğubrān, I have three boys and two girls, they are dying of hunger. They are swollen! I want to feed them, please”. Ğubrān beat him and returned Elie back to his house. Two days later, Elie died. The war continued. From that day on, nobody knew each other any more»¹⁰.

Philip would wander the streets of Brummana, and wherever he looked, he would see people lying on the sides of the roads, famished and completely swollen. He described their stomachs being swollen and puffed up, and that they were dying of hunger in the streets¹¹. As for Philip's family, both of his parents would eventually die from typhus. His mother fell ill first. Typhus was highly contagious and his father caught it exactly two days later. The family hired a maid to take care of his parents and his father sold his store.

Ten days later, Philip's mother passed away and the family ended up burying her in the garden of their home as the cemeteries in Brummana were overflowing and there was no room left for any more bodies or coffins. And yet, despite this tragedy, Philip described himself running and jumping around the garden, playing and having fun: «I was a child, I didn't know what was going on»¹². Meanwhile, his father was laying on a mattress in the living room, hardly able to move. The maid continued to take care of him. Shortly afterwards, Philip's brother, Na'im, also died from typhus.

One morning, the maid was preparing goat for lunch on the stove. When the early afternoon fell, Philip was hungry but the goat had not finished cooking yet. Philip grabbed a piece of bread, snatched a small chunk goat from the pot, and put it in his bread. The maid saw him and ran towards him to hit him. Philip ran away from her and hid next to his father in his bed in the living room: «I started shouting: “Father, father, she's coming towards me to hit me, why does she want to hit me? I took food out of the pot without asking”. I grabbed him. His skin felt frozen and cold. When I spoke to him

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

and shook him... I felt something was wrong. I told the maid something was wrong with my father and that he was cold as ice»¹³.

The recording ends here, and the rest of Philip's experience in the war was recently narrated to me by his children. It is here where discrepancies between first generation and second generation memories become apparent. For instance, in Philip's recording he clearly states that he had two brothers and one sister. Philip's children insisted that he only had one sister and no brothers¹⁴. They also described the day that Philip's dad died differently than Philip had described it. They claimed that Philip was sleeping next to his father, because in those days people did not understand that diseases were contagious and dangerous¹⁵. In their version of the story, Philip wakes up next to his father to find his body very cold and stiff, and then calls to the maid to come take a look at him. These details are perhaps not as important as others, but the fact that they are not recounted in the same manner begs the following question: What other memories have been distorted as time has passed?

Philip's children recalled that he told them countless times that after his father died, he and his sister were placed in separate orphanages – one for boys and one for girls. Philip used to tell his children that the orphanage staff transferred him and other children to an orphanage in Beirut, and later to an orphanage to Damascus. I asked why children were being transferred back and forth between orphanages and was told: «There was no food in the orphanages, they'd send them to Syria to get food. The blockade was mainly on Mount Lebanon. There was wheat and pulses in the Bekaa. But they forbid them from going there to get food»¹⁶.

When Philip was transferred back to the orphanage in Beirut, he escaped one night while everyone was still asleep. He hated sleeping in the orphanage; he felt cramped in a room with dozens of other children, who all had to sleep in close proximity to one another on cushions on the floor. When he felt an insect crawl up his leg while he was sleeping, he knew he had to escape. He walked out the front door of the orphanage in the early hours of the morning and made his way back to Brummana on foot. According to his children, Philip figured out at the tender age of seven how to walk back to his home village. He went to his uncle's house but his uncle would not let him sleep there because social standards had been transformed during the war; extended families no longer took care of each other as people were concerned with the survival of their nuclear family. Philip was forced to sleep outside in his uncle's garden with the sheep. In colder months he would sleep on top of a wooden oven in one of Brummana's bakeries in order to

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ This source is a personal interview carried out by me with folks who do not wish to be named. The interview was done in person on May 25, 2018.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

feel warmth. I believe most of this story to be accurate, as Philip's children insisted that they were retold over and over again throughout his life, but the part about Philip walking back to Brummana from Beirut is difficult to believe.

It appears as though Philip did not transmit messages to his offspring about who was to blame for the war and its devastation. His children apparently learned about this in their history courses at school. Two of his daughters explained that the Turks wanted to enclose Mount Lebanon and kill the Lebanese, because Mount Lebanon was independent and had a special status¹⁷, and also because the population was mostly Christian¹⁸. I asked them who or what is to blame for the famine, to which they replied: «The blame is on the Ottomans, the diseases, and the locusts»¹⁹. When I asked if the British and French played any role in the famine, they had no knowledge of the British and French blockade of the Lebanese coast. They answered that the French did not come to Lebanon until the 1920s and that the British did not arrive until World War II. It appears that Europeans and Americans were depicted favorably in school curricula and popular memory, as saviors who defied the cruelty of the Ottomans.

Collective memory and school curricula taught Philip's children that the savagery of the Ottomans drove the Lebanese to abandon all their morals by hoarding, raising prices, and stealing, and that the blockade of the mountains by the Turks (not the European powers) caused people to eat grass, cats, dogs, and even donkey feces. They were taught that the only people who benefited from the war were those who cooperated with the Ottomans²⁰. Not only did the Turks impose a blockade, they made sure that the locals would starve to death by selling products at very cheap prices. They would take these products from Syria or bring them in from Turkey, sell them at low prices so that Lebanese merchants would not be able to sell their goods at market prices and would starve to death as a result²¹.

What can we make of these recollections? My first observation is that it may be futile to go beyond interviewing second generations. I had attempted to interview Philip's grandchildren to see what stories they had heard either directly from their grandfather, or their parents regarding their grandfather's experience, but it was immediately apparent that these stories had become completely distorted. First of all, as I previously mentioned, Philip clearly states in the recording that he had one sister and two brothers. What actually

¹⁷ Mount Lebanon was a mostly Christian area and was technically part of the mostly Muslim Ottoman Empire; however it was allowed to practice a form of self-rule due to its religious make up. Philip's daughters believe that the Ottomans wanted to reinstate their own rule over this region.

¹⁸ *Interview*, May 25, 2018, cit.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

happened to the sister is unknown – all that Philip knew was that they became separated when she was put in a girls' orphanage and he was put in a boys' orphanage. That was the last time he ever saw her, and for the rest of his life he would wonder what happened to her. Philip's grandchildren, however, claimed that Turkish soldiers kidnapped her because she had blonde hair and blue eyes²². According to this falsified account, the sister was taken to Turkey and lived there for the rest of her life. Because she was only three years old at the time of her alleged abduction, she was too young to remember her name, her mother tongue, or where she came from, and the Ottomans successfully managed to raise her as a Turkish girl who had no knowledge of Lebanon or her family. It was at this point that I decided that going beyond collecting second generational memories would be pointless for academic research on the First World War in Lebanon. This incident confirms that many different interpretations of the war exist, and that staying as close as possible to the voices of the victims and survivors would be the most efficient route to uncovering the experiences of civilians. The muddled memories that have permeated newer generations become part of their family history and would be best kept there²³.

Conclusion

It is evident from Philip's recollections that the war was a defining and transformative experience. His account, although a microhistory, sheds much light on what it was like to live during the war. Through the innocence of a child, we see Philip playing and jumping around the garden by his mother's grave right after her death. The war did not completely rob him of his innocence. His stories about Ğubrān Sālīm, the cruel and heartless man from Brummana who joined the Ottoman Army, highlight the divergent experiences of the residents of Mount Lebanon. Contrast Ğubrān's collaboration with the Ottomans with poor Elie Ĥūrī, who died of starvation two days after being physically and verbally assaulted by Ğubrān. Philip's narrative is also the first I have heard of a child escaping from an orphanage and returning on foot to his hometown. We also see an act of resistance by Maṣṣūr, the man who secretly entered Brummana and defied the quarantine to supply food to Philip's father's store. We learn about the dead bodies scattered all over

²² *Ibid.*

²³ To understand this phenomenon of distorted or fabricated memories, Melanie Tanielian explains: «It is clear that accounts related are no longer the memory of actual survivors, but rather constitute an oral history that has traversed at least a generation as it has survived the test of time has to be considered part of family history, memory, and myth». M. Tanielian, *The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914-1918)*, Ph.D. Diss., University of California, Berkeley 2012, p. 201.

Brummana's roads, and the overflowing cemeteries. These anecdotes correspond with the historical literature on the war.

The majority of scholars conducting research on the war will not be so fortunate as to stumble across a voice recording of a survivor. Documenting second generation memories is an urgent project as the population holding these memories is aging, and collecting memories beyond this generation will not remotely recover the experiences of those who suffered most. The next step would be to document second generation memories while carefully evaluating them for truth versus fiction. The fictional parts will still prove useful, particularly for understanding the legacy of the war in shaping national discourse.