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Tears of Trauma

A descendant of Armenian Genocide survivors reflects on conflict in Artsakh

BY MARISSA ROBERGE

When I woke up on November 13, 2020, I opened my phone and clicked on Emile Ghessen's Instagram story, as I had done almost every day for the last month. Ghessen is a documentary filmmaker from the United Kingdom, who has been documenting the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict centered around the disputed territory of Artsakh.

On this particular morning, I found Ghessen driving through the mountains of

northern Artsakh. He joined a procession of thousands of cars carrying Armenian families and all of their worldly possessions, as they evacuated territory now in Azeri control (@emileghessen. 2020). The air was thick with smoke, as people burned their homes to prevent Azeris from moving in.

Artsakh, also referred to as Nagorno–Karabakh, is a 1,700-square-foot mountainous enclave in Azerbaijan, populated by majority

ethnic Armenians (Blakemore 2020). The dispute can be traced back to the end of the First World War and the Bolshevik Revolution when, instead of making Nagorno–Karabakh part of Armenia, the Nagorno–Karabakh Autonomous Region was established in Soviet Azerbaijan (BBC News 2020). Soviet policies in the Caucasus, designed to weaken ethnic ties and create a unified socialist state, actually achieved the opposite, resulting in ethnic conflict (Coalson 2013).



Family portrait taken in the late 1930s, prior to the family's departure from Aleppo to America. *From left to right:* Victoria Azarian and her children Anahid, Stephen (*top center*), Nazareth (*bottom center*), Mardiros, and Victoria's aunt. Photo courtesy of the author.

War first broke out in 1991, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and Artsakh's declaration of independence. A Russian-brokered cease-fire was reached in 1994, by which time Armenians controlled Artsakh and occupied 20 percent of the surrounding Azerbaijani territory (Council on Foreign Relations 2020), displacing 600,000 Azeris (Kramer 2021). Artsakh's independence is not recognized by the international community, and it has existed as a de facto state with tensions flaring up over the years.

On September 27, in the midst of a global pandemic and the US presidential election, Azerbaijan launched its latest attack—this time with military support from Turkey. After a six-week war and three failed cease-fires, a Russian-brokered peace agreement was signed on November 10 (DW 2020). The agreement stated that Armenia would withdraw its army from Nagorno-Karabakh and be replaced by Russian peacekeepers. Azerbaijan would keep all territory gains (BBC News 2020).

The agreement angered Armenians all over the world.



As I watch Emile's Instagram story, the footage jumps from images of evacuation to Dadivank Monastery. Men and women are stopping at this 12th-century church to say their goodbyes and take pictures of the heritage site before relinquishing it to Azerbaijan. They fear the church will be destroyed along with countless other sacred sights (@emileghessen. 2020).

As Ghessen walks around the property, a familiar hymn breaks out inside the building. He enters the church, lit by dim candlelight, where men and women encircle a priest. "*Der Voghormia*," meaning "Lord Have Mercy," echoes off of the centuries-old stone walls—a hymn that is normally performed while the priest prepares the Eucharist behind closed curtains (@emileghessen. 2020).

The scene is a shock to my system, and tears start pouring out of me. This music is the same in Armenian churches around the world, connecting diaspora Armenians to the homeland and our shared history. It's a melody that immediately makes me feel at home

and helps me recognize strangers as my Armenian brothers and sisters.

I am reminded of a passage from Grigoris Balakian's book, *Armenian Golgotha*, documenting scenes from the 1915 Armenian Genocide. On April 24, 1915, Grigoris, along with 270 Armenian intellectuals, was rounded up by the Turkish Government for deportation, marking the start of the Genocide that would take the lives of 1.5 million Armenians—a genocide that to this day is denied by Turkey (Balakian 2009).

Grigoris found himself exiled and imprisoned with Komidas Vartabed, a celebrated Armenian priest and composer. Grigoris recalls holding evening services with the other prisoners:

And now we, the more than 150 intellectuals and comrades exiled from Constantinople, assembled—irrespective of political party or class, of piety or skepticism—to hold evening service at dusk, by dim candlelight... When Archimandrite Komitas began his melancholy and heart-wrenching "Lord Have Mercy" [*Der Voghormia*], the sobbing was impossible to contain. We all cried like boys, cried over loved ones left behind, cried over our black fate, our nation's misfortune; we cried over the bloody days we had just passed, even without knowing that we were on the brink of unprecedented storms of blood (Balakian 2009, 73).

It is this history of persecution and the continual loss of life and sacred lands that makes the November peace deal a hard pill to swallow for many Armenians. Burned homes, destroyed churches, the images of mass exodus—while different this time—are reminiscent of scenes from the 1915 Genocide.

The 1915 Genocide is a genocide that may have taken place over 100 years ago, but the trauma is still viscerally felt by generations of Armenians. It is trauma that can be seen in my tears and compulsion to write this piece.



I have known about the genocide of my ancestors for as long as I can remember. I first knew the story in relation to the gold bracelets that my grandmother, aunt, and mother wore.

I remember sitting in their laps, twisting and counting the thin bangles that held the story of my family's survival.

My great-grandmother, Victoria, was just eight years old when she witnessed the murder of her parents, sisters, and brother. She lived in Urfa, Turkey, where on August 19, 1915, at the instigation of the Young Turks, the Christian Armenian population were massacred by their Muslim Turkish neighbors (Avetisyan 2019; Armenian National Institute 2021a).

Inexplicably, Victoria was spared and sent to live with a Turkish family as a maid. She ended up in an orphanage where an aunt discovered her. The two decided to flee to Syria. On their journey, they came across a man with a wagon, and in exchange for a ride, Victoria agreed to marry him. She was wed at 12 years old. The couple settled in Aleppo, where she gave birth to my Uncle Stephen. After her first husband died of pneumonia, she remarried my great grandfather, Azar Azarian.

Azar had come to Syria from the United States in search of a wife, after the death of his first wife and son. This was not uncommon for Armenian men in the diaspora. If word spread that a young man in America was looking for a wife, families would send their daughters, from Syria, Iran, or Lebanon, to be married. Alternatively, men looking for wives might travel back to the region to find a bride, as my great-grandfather did. The practice kept the community alive and growing, after years of attempted annihilation.

My Uncle Stephen was about the same age as Azar's son would have been. According to my family, Azar was drawn to Stephen before he even saw my great-grandmother. The couple were married in the late 1920s and went on to have three children together, my Uncle Mardiros, Grandmother Anna (Anahid in Armenian), and my Uncle Nazareth.

After the birth of Nazareth, the family decided to move to America. Azar went ahead of the family to secure a job and a place to live. He traveled from Syria to France and on to New York, arriving in New York Harbor aboard the *Hamburg* in February 1933. He secured a job working at the Pacific Mill Company in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

Victoria stayed behind with the children. For four years, she tried to sell their house. Finally, a man offered a small sum of money and ten gold bracelets for the home. In 1937, Victoria and her four children made the voyage to America, arriving in New York Harbor on the *Conte Di Savoia* on January 21.

Although she could have used the money, my great-grandmother never sold the gold bracelets. Instead, she was compelled to pass them on to my grandmother with the story of her survival, who then passed them to her daughters, and then to me.

We wear the bracelets every day in remembrance of my great-grandmother, Victoria, of our journey, and of all the others who suffered through the Genocide. We wear them to ensure that we never forget.

There are countless stories like my family's that are passed down and eagerly shared with friends and strangers. Scholars may call this act of storytelling an example of transgenerational trauma. But it is also a political act in the face of Turkish denialism and nonrecognition around the world.

As Natasha Azarian-Ceccato notes in her article, "Reverberations of the Armenian Genocide: Narrative Intergenerational Transmission and the Task of Not Forgetting": "Fewer and fewer genocide survivors are alive, let alone those that would have actual memories of the events thus the transmission of narratives in families and commemorations are of decisive importance for the longevity of the story and the pursuit of recognition" (Azarian-Ceccato 2010, 121).

The United States Congress did not pass a resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide until December 2019, 104 years after the Genocide (Edmondson 2019). The vote brought the number of countries that recognize the events of 1915 as genocide to 30 (Armenian National Institute 2021b). Nonetheless, the non-binding Senate and House bills were rejected by President Trump (Lee 2019). Since then, the Library of Congress corrected the subject heading "Armenian Massacres" to "Armenian Genocide" in October 2020 (*Armenian Weekly* 2020).

Now, the Armenian community is calling for another recognition. The recognition of Artsakh as an independent state. Thus far, the French Senate is the first and only international federal body to recognize Artsakh, voting 305 to 1 for recognition on November 25 (ANCA 2020).

The November 10 treaty is not an indication of peace in the Caucasus. The door is not closed on Artsakh. The tragic tales of loss from this conflict will be passed down, and the cycle of trauma will continue for Armenians as long as Artsakh goes unrecognized. At the same time, Azeris will tell their own stories of loss and inherit their own trauma, which will divide the region further along ethnic lines.

This is a cautionary tale.

The Armenian Genocide was made possible because it happened under the cover of war, more specifically the First World War.

Many of you reading this may not even be aware of the Armenian Genocide, the contested Armenian territory in Artsakh, or the violence that erupted in the fall of 2020. The lack of attention paid to Nagorno-Karabakh by the international community is concerning. In the months since the peace agreement, human rights abuses have only continued. The agreement called for the return of prisoners of war (POW), but as of March, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that Azerbaijan has returned only 69 of an alleged 240 POWs and civilian detainees. In captivity, these men and women have been subjected to "cruel and degrading treatment and torture" (HRW 2021). Still, these abuses have garnered little attention. We cannot allow a pandemic or our national elections to distract us from issues beyond our borders. We must not allow additional instances of human rights violations to take place under the cover of a global pandemic.

Author's note: I wrote this piece in the aftermath of the Nagorno-Karabakh agreement and before President Joe Biden became the first president to formally label the ethnic cleansing of Armenians a "genocide." Biden's predecessors had previously referred to events as a "mass atrocity" or "mass killings"

to avoid angering Turkey (Megeirian 2021). On April 24, 2021, the 106th anniversary of the beginning of the Armenian Genocide, President Biden said in a statement at the White House: "Each year on this day, we remember the lives of all those who died in the Ottoman-era Armenian genocide and recommit ourselves to preventing such an atrocity from ever again occurring" (White House 2021).

In response, Turkey continues to make statements of denial and claims that a "deep wound" has been opened in the bilateral relationship with the United States; Turkey has called on Biden to correct what it perceives to be a "grave mistake" by Biden in recognizing the genocide (Peters 2021). Turkey's presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin went so far as to say, "There will be reaction of different forms and kinds and degrees." He did not specify what the reaction would be, but this is no doubt a threatening remark and could point to plans to restrict US access to Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey (Evans and Coskun 2021).

Additionally, since writing this piece, Azerbaijan opened an outdoor museum, The Spoils of War Park, in its capital, Baku, which features Armenian weapons, armor, and vehicles captured during its 44-day war with Armenia over the Nagorno-Karabakh region (BBC News 2021). The park is arranged in dehumanizing scenes with mannequins depicting dead Armenians (PanARMENIA.net 2021). The state-sponsored xenophobia and propaganda is dangerous and is reminiscent of the rhetoric that preceded the Genocide. More than a century of Turkish denialism and nonrecognition around the world gives permission for this type of propaganda to persist without opposition.

The recognition of the Armenian Genocide this year is particularly powerful, given the recent violence in Artsakh. It is an important first step in putting human rights and accountability above geopolitics, for the sake of not only the Armenian Cause but other persecuted groups around the world. President Biden's move to recognize the Armenian Genocide does not mean the conversation regarding the Genocide, reparations, or justice

is over, but it does mark an important change in foreign policy and in US relations with Turkey.

I just wish my grandmother were alive to see it. ▼

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