Evoking Genocide

Scholars and Activists Describe the Works That Shaped Their Lives

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My Grandfather's Testimony

Sara Cohan

My engagement with human rights, and specifically with the issue of genocide, began in an intensely personal way at a young age. My father is Jewish and my mother Armenian: enough said. My family's history on both sides is marred, slashed, pulverized by the genocides of the twentieth century. I joke with friends that I should marry a Cambodian, Rwandan, or maybe a Ukrainian, to ensure that my child, like me, will be raised with a morbid subtext of genocide permeating an otherwise healthy and privileged childhood.

My father's family history with regard to the Holocaust was vague to me at best. A branch of our family tree was lost forever in the Shoah. But the specific experiences of those who died were subsumed by the intense desire of my paternal grandparents to assimilate in the United States. They died many years ago, and took all the clues to the fate of my great-aunts and great-uncles with them.

My mother's side was a little different. My maternal grandfather, Garo Aivazian, was a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. I spent a great deal of time with him until his death in 2005. It was not his intention to make me an activist by sharing his testimony about genocide with me. In fact, he very much wanted me to be an "American," and not to be bothered with past events. He was a psychiatrist, and was always trying to broach sensitive subjects with me in a way he felt would help me to lead a happy and well-adjusted life.

I do live as my grandfather wanted me to, but at the same time, I cannot quite be an "all-American girl" as he desired. As a child, I learned that much of the maternal side of my family had been killed in the Armenian Genocide; my grandfather had survived against the odds. What I did not know were the details of his life in the Ottoman Empire: the names of the villages our family had resided in for hundreds of years; the personal anecdotes about those who had not escaped—people we would have known as aunties and uncles, held reunions with, celebrated marriages and births with, mourned deaths with.

The bare bones of my family history in tow, I seized every opportunity to write school papers and create projects on the Armenian genocide. I regularly asked my grandfather about his own experiences, and received

Garabed Aivazian (courtesy Sara Cohan).

the same succinct answers I had become accustomed to over the years. I peppered my research papers with odd facts about famous Armenian-Americans, but my understanding of the genocide was basic at best. I remember excitedly coming across Peter Balakian's poetry at the local library. Sitting in the book

stacks, I read again and again Balakian's poem "History of Armenia," which juxtaposed life in East Orange, New Jersey, with the intimate experiences of his grandmother's experience during the Armenian genocide. I tried to connect with his well-crafted words, but I could not. The history felt distant and foreign. I lacked the strong grasp of my own family's experiences that would allow me truly to connect with Balakian's verses.

About ten years ago, my grandfather sat me down and told me he had five years to live. He cited the results of a test he had taken in a health magazine to prove his point. He knew I would not take his passing well, and felt it was in my best interest to prepare me for it. Shortly after his declaration, I attended a seminar for educators sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities on Islam in Europe, and held at New York University. The lead professor at the month-long seminar openly denied the Armenian Genocide. During the last week of the seminar, she lectured on aspects of Ottoman history. Suddenly, she raised her head and voice, and announced that "so-called survivors" of the Armenian genocide were liars. I challenged her, but she did not back down.

A rage consumed me. It was the year 2000. I had learned of Rwanda's genocide; I knew the fate of the Bosnians, and had read about the crimes against humanity committed by Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. I had studied the Holocaust, taught it in my classes, and knew it was a part of my own story. On a personal level, my maternal grandfather had suffered more than anyone should have to in a thousand lifetimes. To have someone use his or her power as a professor to deny my family's tragedy, and the fate of 1.5 million martyrs, was the single most humiliating and hurtful moment of my life.

Soon after I returned from New York, I bought a cassette recorder and four blank tapes. Then I traveled to visit my grandfather in Memphis, Tennessee, where he had lived since the 1950s. I asked him to provide me with his testimony — a detailed testimony this time. He agreed, and set about filling the tapes with his memories of a childhood perverted by genocide. I expected to receive the tapes, transcribe them, and finally have his complete life history. But when I sat down to listen, I realized he was not parting with many of the details that I needed to know. We began a dialogue about his experiences that lasted until his death. Through the tapes and our long chats, the blank spaces began to disappear.

I listened to my grandfather's voice as he recounted his father's murder, his extended family's demise, and his struggle for survival in an empire that hated him for being Armenian. He was very young in 1915 — just four

years old. He and one of his sisters found themselves moved from orphanage to orphanage over the next four years. In one orphanage run by Turks, he was renamed "Mehmet," a traditional Turkish name. But his mother had written his Armenian name in his shirt before she was deported, to remind him who he was, wherever he might be sent. He described being so hungry at the same orphanage that he buried a "little red tomato" in the fields he was forced to work in, and snuck out in the evening to retrieve it. He was caught, and the tomato was confiscated. He was then six years old.

When I visited my grandfather in Memphis, he would cook for me. Our first course was always a simple salad with little red tomatoes. I never asked him if his orphanage experience had spurred him to eat cherry tomatoes with his meals. I *couldn't* ask him: it just seemed too sad, too personal. But every time I ate his salads, I couldn't help but think how hungry he must have been for that tiny tomato to hold such a powerful place in his memory. Now Balakian's poem was beginning to sink in. I realized that when one is a survivor of genocide, or a descendant of a survivor, the genocide experience is everywhere. It is on the dinner table in Memphis, Tennessee; or, as in the poem, on a parkway in East Orange, New Jersey.

Genocide is a plague that infects everything, and even when denied, seeps into each new generation. I decided I would not allow my grandfather's suffering to be denied any longer; I never wanted another child to suffer as he had. A professor with a fine Ivy League degree should not announce from her podium—with confidence, authority, and government funding—that genocide survivors were liars. I had to do something.

The classroom was the only tool available in my small community to assert my newfound activism. I developed lessons on human rights issues and genocide. As a history teacher, I needed to make sure my students knew the historical facts surrounding human rights atrocities. Next, they had to be equipped with an understanding of how to address such violations today. Later, I left the classroom environment for the Southern Poverty Law Center, where I wrote an article about the Armenian genocide for educators. From there, I moved to Washington D.C. and worked for Armenian organizations, assisting in historical research and educational outreach. I also used my time in Washington to volunteer at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum and with the "Save Darfur Coalition." Currently, I teach world history, and serve as Education Director of the Genocide Education Project. The mission of the organization is also my own: to ensure that the history of genocide is remembered, analyzed, and discussed, and to use that history to find ways to

thwart future genocides. Through education, I am contributing to the fight against genocide, and paying homage to my family's history at the same time.

A few years ago, I read the poem "After the Survivors are Gone," by Peter Balakian. It explores how we remember survivors — or rather why, once we hear their words, we cannot forget their pain. The last stanza of the poem reads:

> *We shall not forget the earth,*
> *the artifact, the particular song,*
> *the dirt of an idiom —*
> *things that stick in the ear.*

My grandfather knew his testimony was not just his own, but was mine as well. He felt a moral responsibility to leave his words with us after he was gone. For my part, I have a duty to ensure that his story is not forgotten — for the sake of the particular history he endured, and for those suffering from genocide today. Maybe, if I yell loud enough and long enough, his words will stick in others' ears as well.