

Introduction

In 1974, when our first child, Shont, was a year old, his Armenian grandfather lay ill in the hospital. We feared that our son might never hear the stories of “Medz Hairig,” especially about his childhood in Turkey and how he and a sister had survived a genocide that claimed the lives of seven family members and over one million fellow Armenians. So when Medz Hairig returned from the hospital, we invited both grandparents to our home for coffee and dessert, and once a week, for a period of seven weeks, he told his story while our tape recorder sat unobtrusively on the table. Many of the humorous incidents he recounted had already been shared during the “Sunday feast,” a weekly ritual that Medz Mama presided over during the early years of our marriage. But neither of us had ever heard a sequential rendering of his life story.

Before meeting Lorna as an undergraduate in college, I, like many Americans, had little knowledge of Armenians. From my childhood I remembered references to the “starving Armenians,” but I knew nothing of the genocide of 1915, nor could I have located Armenia at the crossroads between Turkey and what, until recently, was the Soviet Union. Hence, although it was disconcerting at the time, in retrospect I cannot blame Medz Hairig for raising serious objections to his daughter’s marrying this blond “odar” (non-Armenian).

However, once Lorna and I were engaged, the real “seduction” began; namely, Medz Hairig started his educational campaign. He was not going to have a son-in-law who did not know his daughter’s heritage. And Medz Mama joined the effort by introducing me to eggplant cooked

in olive oil, sarma, dolma, pilaf, keufté, and a host of other Armenian delicacies. Perhaps it is unfair to say that my father-in-law engaged in an *intentional* program of education. Actually, I think he could not help talking about his childhood. The genocide had left an irrepressible memory on him as a young boy of seven or eight in 1915 (like many survivors who had lost their parents, he did not know his exact birth date). And so we spent Sunday afternoons listening to fragments of his story, learning the names of great Armenian political figures, and hearing his outrage against the Turks for denying that a genocide had occurred.

Medz Mama was always in the background during these Sunday luncheon feasts. Her role appeared to be one of keeping the table overflowing with food. Hence, it had never occurred to me that she, too, might have a story to tell. But when we got out the tape recorder again one day in 1977, Adelina told us about the deaths of several of her family members and how she had survived by living in the home of a Turkish family, where her mother had placed her for safekeeping while the rest of the family was deported. When she finished talking, I wondered how she had kept all of these memories hidden from view. My father-in-law obviously dealt with his childhood by talking about his sufferings, but how did Medz Mama cope with a childhood that had left equally deep scars?

A few months after our interview with Medz Mama, we interviewed a family friend who told a deeply moving story of the genocide. That was the turning point, and we launched a project that eventually led to interviewing more than one hundred people, mostly survivors living in the greater Los Angeles area. At the time, we did not realize the immensity of the task. Although I am a sociologist of religion by professional training, I had never been involved in an oral history project. All I knew of oral history was gained from reading Studs Terkel's popular books. I was unaware that there were professional journals and societies, such as the Oral History Association. I was also unprepared for the amount of work that would be involved in translating and transcribing tapes—a task that Lorna heroically undertook while raising our two small children.

Indeed, I think that in the early years, Lorna's commitment to the project was stronger than mine. Later, she would talk about it as the "blood call": an irresistible force demanding that she confront the history of her people. Documenting the experience of survivors was her way of coping with the injustice of the genocide. But there were also more subtle motives, largely unarticulated at the time. It was a way of understanding her father: a man of deep moral commitment and a man whose tears flowed very easily.

Only in retrospect have I begun to understand my own commitment to the project. At the most fundamental level, I think it helped me to break through the superficiality of much in contemporary American life. Every one of our interviews has jolted my moral and spiritual sensitivities. The struggle of survivors with death—and the meaning of life in the face of death—provided a model for pondering the meaning of my own life. Also, in ways that I am still attempting to articulate, this research project has started to realign my thinking about many of the crucial questions that lie at the heart of the humanities.

And I also had a purely personal motive: just as Lorna was trying to understand her father through this project, I was trying to understand my Armenian wife. She is a second-generation survivor, bearing in many subtle ways the burden of her parents' tragic childhoods. Except for the genocide, she would not have been born in Haifa, Israel, nor would she have spent a childhood in Beirut, nor would her family have gone through a wrenching cultural shift by moving to the United States when she was eleven.

But at the time of our initial interviews, neither of us had really examined our interest in this project, beyond the realization that the survivors were growing old and that it was urgent to preserve their stories before they died. In 1978 we began interviewing in earnest, as well as familiarizing ourselves with oral history methodology and other oral history projects on Armenian survivors. I did some of the original interviews, but it soon became clear that survivors felt more comfortable talking about their experiences in their mother tongue. Thus, Lorna conducted the majority of the one hundred interviews, most of which were in Armenian. In preparing for this task, she took two courses at UCLA under Professor Richard Hovannisian: one in oral history methodology and one in Armenian history. Locating survivors to interview proved to be a relatively easy task. Using a "snowball" sampling technique, we started with people in our own neighborhood, and these survivors in turn told us about friends who had survived the genocide, and so the referrals developed.

By 1980, Lorna had done thirty interviews. Meanwhile, I had passed through the tenure and promotion process at the University of Southern California, and we set off for a sabbatical year in Cambridge, England. While Lorna translated and transcribed interviews, I spent my days at the Cambridge University Library reading histories of the genocide and accounts of missionaries, and my evenings analyzing the many pages of transcripts that were emerging from Lorna's portable typewriter. Also, I discovered a major archive of original documents in London

and devoted part of my time to reading through the correspondence of British consuls and foreign officers who had been stationed in Turkey at the time of the genocide. With the added pleasures of punting on the Cam River, having dinner at “high table” at Trinity College, and walking our children to school each morning, it was a wonderful year of research and creative reflection.

At the end of this sabbatical, we submitted an article to the *Oral History Review*¹ and returned home with the goal of doing one hundred interviews. This required that we go beyond Pasadena, where we lived, and so Lorna began interviewing in an Armenian home for the elderly as well as venturing into the greater Los Angeles area. Amidst the activity of raising two energetic youngsters, Lorna persisted in the rather lonely task of interviewing. On the days she had done interviews, she spent the dinner hour recounting the survivors’ stories she had gathered.

While the accounts of survivors were, for me, the source of despairing questions about the human potential for evil, they were, for Lorna, variations on the recurring theme of the fate of her people. I noticed that she began listening to Mozart’s Requiem, over and over again. For her, this project was not an exercise in comparative genocide; it was a form of mourning for her people—her parents’ families, her nation. And the more I learned about this first genocide of the twentieth century, the more convinced I became that the story of the Armenian Genocide should be told through the experience of survivors.

This has not been an easy book to write. We continually imagined our own children in the place of the survivor-children we interviewed. And perhaps equally painful is the realization that there are currently many children in the world who are orphaned or who have been discarded by their parents or an uncaring society. They, like the survivors who told us their stories, are wandering in search of a piece of bread and a little human warmth. During this project our emotions have ranged from melancholy to anger, from feeling guilty about our own privileged status to being overwhelmed by the continuing suffering in our world. Working with these interviews over a period of years has led to a permanent loss of innocence about the human capacity for evil—and to a recognition of the need to combat such evil.

Despite this pessimistic assessment of human nature, it is important to state that the survival of many of the subjects we interviewed turned on a single act or two of human kindness. There were “good Turks”—equivalent to the “righteous Gentiles” cited in Holocaust literature—

who hid Armenian children to save them from deportation and who fed, clothed, and sheltered starving urchins they encountered on the deportation routes. There were also heroic parents who, by giving away their food and water, sacrificed their lives so that their children might live. And there were thousands of people in the United States and Europe who gave money to establish orphanages after the war—and more than a few who gave their lives in running these institutions.

We acknowledge that the discovery of something redeeming in these tales of human tragedy has been our defense against despair. We refuse, however, to allow these examples of good to turn our attention from the awful reality of the genocide itself. There is a universal tendency to avoid seeing, as well as remembering, the human capacity for evil. Adolf Hitler understood this well when, on August 22, 1939, he said to his military commanders regarding his plans for Poland: “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”²

We increasingly believe that there is considerable truth in the statement that to deny genocide is to repeat it. Indeed, we would add that to shield ourselves from suffering in this world is to perpetuate it. We need to keep our consciences soft and vulnerable; only then will we rise up to challenge the suffering that surrounds us. Denial of evil is a defense mechanism that a just world simply cannot afford.

The Armenian Genocide was the first major genocide of the twentieth century, but it was certainly not the last. It has been estimated that 60 million people have died in this century alone of state-orchestrated violence.³ In the public imagination, the Jewish Holocaust is often remembered as the only genocide of the modern age and, therefore, considered to be something of an anomaly. But since World War II, genocide has occurred repeatedly in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.⁴ The one way in which the Jewish Holocaust *is* anomalous is that it has not been denied, except by a few revisionists. The same cannot be said of the Armenian Genocide.

Given the amount of world press coverage of the massacres of Armenians at the time of the deportations, it is difficult to believe that fifty years later the same newspapers, under the pressure of lobbying by the Turkish government, would refer to the genocide of the Armenians as “alleged.”⁵ But denial seems to be the final stage of most genocides.⁶ Denial is motivated, in part, by our own fear of suffering and death, but beyond that, genocide is a moral embarrassment that the perpetrator, as well as the observing world community, often seeks to repress. It is only the victims who struggle with the problem of forgetting.

It is through the eyes of survivors that we tell the story of the Armenian Genocide in the following pages. The first chapter recounts the story of Lorna's father, Vahram. His account is prototypical of the survivors' reminiscences. The second chapter provides historical background on the Armenian people and places the genocide within the political context of the Ottoman Empire. This chapter is intended for those not familiar with Armenian history or the pattern of the genocide. The next four chapters draw directly on our interviews to tell the story of the genocide: the culture that was destroyed (chapter 3), the deportation marches (chapter 4), the experience of women and children (chapter 5), and life in the orphanages (chapter 6). Chapter 7 traces the diaspora of Armenians out of Turkey, focusing on the experience of survivors who settled in the United States. The final two chapters are interpretive rather than descriptive, examining, first, the adult responses of survivors to the trauma of their childhood experience and, ultimately, some moral issues related to the genocide.