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100 Years On: Remembering My Armenians

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Sheremetyevo International Airport, morning, wide awake, the waiting area is packed.

I sit in the corner and kill time by picking out my people from among the passengers. Here's how the game works: I guess that someone is an Armenian, then patiently wait until they start speaking. In Russian, English, French or German — it doesn't matter. By some animal instinct I can spot my own in a second. By gestures, facial expressions, how they adjust a coat collar or speak on the phone. I have never been wrong yet.

They are wonderful, my Armenians. The French ones speak in whispers, but gesticulate wildly, the American ones effortlessly fall to pieces in their chairs, the German ones are cool, collected and terse.

The older generation handles itself with incredible dignity — they don't need to prove anything to anyone, they've seen it all and know everything.

The young ones are open and talkative, they discuss the benefits of advertising on huge billboards that, although more expensive than ordinary magazine ads, are far more effective and that when their "business" finally gets going, they will have to drop the magazine ads and shell out for the huge boards that are, of course, very expensive, but what is a million dollars to someone running a business?

I listen to this idle polyphony, waiting to hear the code word.

It happens without fail — right in the whirl of children running about, the unceremoniously restless rummaging through a purse (where did I put that boarding pass?), after yet another aimless glance at the electronic screen with its flashing flight numbers.

Someone in the midst of that turmoil will unfailingly utter "genocide."

Hearing that word, a 7-year-old girl, hopping breezily on one foot, freezes and turns, searching for her parents' gaze.

All around, ordinary airport life continues — recorded voices politely announce arrivals and departures, conveyors laden with suitcases and coats tirelessly wind toward customs inspections, passengers hurry to departure gates, and the green and red lights on vending machines holding coffee and tea blink on, blink off. But someone utters the code word — and time, for Armenians, stops.

I was exactly the same age as that wide-eyed girl hopping on one foot when I first learned about the genocide. Papa told me about it.

Grandfather, who had lived through all of that horror, never spoke a word to me about the genocide.

That is why I will retell that story using Papa's words.

And you listen.

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There was great-grandmother Sharakan. Sharo.

She was given in marriage at 14 to the groom of her older sister. Her sister fell ill and died just before her wedding, and, so that the cost of the wedding was not wasted, Sharakan was given to your great-grandfather, Minas.

From time immemorial, we have baked large round loaves of bread in our house using sourdough smelling of sorrel. We cut large pieces, toasted them on a wood stove. From stale crusts we cooked traditional konchol bread soup with herbs and eggs.

From childhood, Sharo was accustomed to the different kind of bread, lavash, thin unleavened cakes. She cooked loads of them, stocking up.

She had once been garrulous and giggly, but I knew her as insular and aloof. Hug her — she stiffens, ask a question — she is silent, or shows voiceless irritation. I tried what I could

to cheer her up: asked her to sit on a small floor rug, placed my palms against her back, pushed her around the room — the carpet gliding over the polished floorboards like a sled. Stopped, looked into her eyes.

— It's fun, Nani (Grandma)!

— I'm dizzy, she sighed.

I babbled nonsense to her — you know yourself what gibberish 6-year-olds delight in. I asked her to tell me a story. She agreed, but quickly tired, complaining of a headache. The attacks were agonizing, lasting days. It was easier, perhaps, to die than to live with such pain. She lived.

I helped her to wash her hair. I poured carefully from a small dipper, not breathing, making sure that the stream of water did not fall on the closely shaved back of her head. I should probably have looked away, but I couldn't.

I could not tear my eyes away from her splintered bones that moved under fingers, rising up under the scalp first here, then there. Those unnatural stirrings frightened and fascinated me — inside my grandmother there breathed and tossed a living creature, cramped and unendurably trapped.

She groaned in pain whenever the water touched the back of her head, angrily calling out "May the devil possess you, Masha'Allah." I knew to whom those words were addressed.

— Why do you say Masha'Allah, I once asked her.

— So that their God would hear my words!

The hair on the back of her head grew back quickly, and so every two or three months father had to trim it very short.

I remember how she sat, her head slightly bowed, thin hands on her knees. Father bit his lip as he worked. The silence in the room was interrupted only by the cold clinking of the scissors. I know of nothing worse than that clinking sound.

She could only sleep on her left side. She bravely endured horrendous pain, but feared death terribly. She asked to sleep on the ground floor, always near the window so that she could escape if they came to break the door down.

A son, who was hacked to death with scimitars before her eyes, she had almost forgotten — the blow of a gun butt deprived her of memory. But the great love she felt for him lived in her heart.

One day, I finally managed to make her laugh. Her laughter was strained. She pressed me to her breast, kissed the top of my head. But then immediately pulled away, apparently fearing that God would consider such an outpouring of emotion as excessive.

Thirty-five years she lived with a broken skull. She died at 80.

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I never met Sharakan — we missed each other by 20 years. I was very fond of my grandfather — he was an intelligent man, a loving father and husband, the best grandfather in the world. He had a very difficult character — but then, who could be easygoing after the trials that fate had made him endure?

The fourth generation of Armenians born after the genocide has grown to adulthood. In those 100 years we have seen a lot — the rise and collapse of empires, wars and prosperity, subordination and freedom. We learned to live with a heart split in two, with a past filled in equal measure by bitterness and happiness.

We have been scattered to different countries, we speak different languages, believe in different ideals, but we shared a common pain and we did not let that pain conquer us.

We were, and remain, a creative people.

We have much to do in the years ahead. And one major task stands before us — to live our lives so as to be worthy of the memory of those we lost 100 years ago.

Today marks one century since the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire.

Remember and live.

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The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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