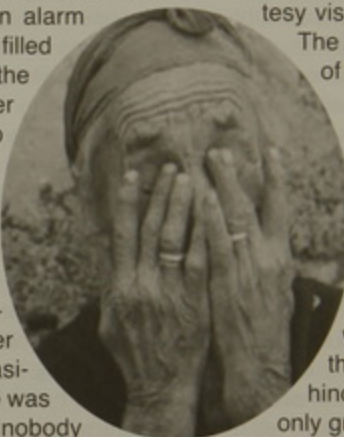


800 FACES

Kevork Hintlian

Instead of presenting a dry paper riddled with politically correct language, I decided to talk about my voyage which started half a century ago.

My earliest childhood memory is my grandmother, a widow having lost her husband in 1915, who, like many others, never remarried and wore all her life a single colour, black. As I grew up, I noticed dozens in our courtyard, widows always silent, associating only with their peers and whispering to each other. I never grasped the symbolism and thought that older women prefer to dress in dark colours. I had never heard of an alarm clock. The church bell very much filled the same function. At five, when the church bell rang, my grandmother and all these widows would go to church, each had her corner. They knew the hymns and the liturgy by heart. During the rest of the day, the only book she would read was the Bible and would murmur hymns from the hymnbook. Besides, she would teach my mother the cuisine of the old country, basically *mante* and *sou-boereck*. She was treated as the matriarch and nobody would challenge her expertise as a master cook. Punctually, she would get me toys for Christmas and St George's day. Every Sunday, my uncle would drop in and a lively but nostalgic conversation would develop between my father, uncle and grandmother. The topic was recollections, about dispossession from the land, the severe winters, the accumulation of snow, pilgrimages, and how pilgrims from the South of the country came on their horses to spend a week at the monastery of Sourp Karapet (John the Baptist) in Kayseri (Cappadocia). My uncle and father were choir boys and they would remember every detail of the liturgy in different feasts. They would break into hymns with the intonation of hundred years ago. The choir sang from their lodge in the gallery which was situated in the dome, they mentioned this with particular pride. Then they would enumerate the tombstones of the notables who were buried in the courtyard of the church. Of course, all of them donors, church builders, and they would engage in discussions charting where each one lay. This way I learnt about the prominent



families, Gulbenkians, Khoubesserians, Baleozians. But the most they enjoyed was to talk about how the family gathered around the hearth. All in a circle under a woolen blanket and engaged in story telling. One of the major events in town was the reception reserved for people returning from pilgrimage to Jerusalem with the title *mahdesi* which they carried to the grave. And they talked often about the American missionaries and their schools and hospitals and about Christmas day when the missionaries distributed gifts to the children from America. The lost paradise was the odyssey of every family. Those who came from villages would talk about harvest and the excellence and uniqueness of the fruits. I remember everybody from Diarbekir would talk about the huge size of the watermelon and the people of Van about the friendly bear who would pay a courtesy visit every day and pick up his pear.

The famous cat of Van which each eye of different color.

My family came from Talas, the birth place of Mar Sabas, in Cappadocia, but I had never seen any picture of Talas, there was neither any picture of my grandfather and the family. I have never seen a picture of my uncle of four who died on the death march, neither of the house which they left behind. What hovered in my mind was only graphic and vivid descriptions.

In 1964, I was at the American University of Beirut to continue my studies. In 1965, it occurred to the Armenians that fifty years had elapsed. So they marked it worldwide. And in Beirut, 100 000 Armenians assembled in the sports stadium to remember it. I was there, orators spoke one after the other, but nobody noticed the rally outside the stadium. All these commemorations never hit the headlines except locally. But memorial books flooded the market. My first encounter with the genocide was in Beirut dropping by Armenian bookshops.

During my summer break in Jerusalem, Prof. Vahakn Dadrian came for research to Jerusalem. He had just come back from Germany going through the consular archives of the war years, he was to return there 28 times.

It was the first time that somebody was looking at the deportations as a systematic discipline. He gave two lectures to packed audiences and called

on the youth to explore their recent history. These lectures were the catalyst for me and I set on my voyage. For the study of the archives, he stayed six weeks. Everyday he would engage in long discussions with my father about topics relating to day-to-day life in genocide years. I discovered for the first time that my father was an officer in the British army during the allied occupation of Constantinople and was employed as interpreter in the trials of the perpetrators of the Armenian genocide.

These discussions fascinated me and this was my first encounter with the essence of the topic. The more I knew about it, the more it grew mysterious. Prof. Dadrian was to return to Jerusalem in 1971 for an extended stay. In the preceding five years, he had been to almost every important archive and disappointed with some, as he did not find them thorough, or they did not fulfill his expectations, as in such subjects crucial information is not readily available. It is decades of tireless work and needs skilful patchwork techniques. Like Dadrian, other scholars had come to the conclusion that, to build up a scientific narrative besides archives and consular reports, you need to document the survivors. Myself, I chose as priority to interview the survivors.

The last three nights, I had troubled sleep, as I felt that I had to formulate and convey the feelings and the experiences of hundreds of survivors I had interviewed for at least 40 years. In my mind, I made a quick survey and, above all, it was a painful parade. One other reason for my interviews was to know about the old land most about their life in the human hell. These stories are not to be found in the official archives. Like other researchers, if I did not have chance to meet them, they would have been lost for good.

Hearing all these stories I often wondered what motivated these individual torturers who subjected people to so much suffering, people they had never met. To that big why, I've never been able to answer till now.

Thinking back about the 800 survivors whom I've interviewed, other survivors I have lived with, receptacles of bitter memories, sometimes waiting for months and years to capture their moods, re-live with them the vividness of their traumas, sinking with them into the abyss of perdition, I was a companion of their loneliness, of their misery. Each time, I had to revisit mentally their chamber of detention. Each time you talk to a survivor, the

story has a different pulse, a different respirational rhythm.

How different the history of the genocide would have been without their torment stories, it would have been impossible to meet the tormentor without them. Through them, we know the killing fields, the land soaked with blood, the rivers with the floating corpses, the canyons, the cemetery of thousands, the mountain passes, which served as traps or ambush sites. All this landscape becomes alive.

Through them, we know the mass graves, the ditches, the resting places of their restless souls. Their stories of life and death defeat the Turkish military logic, these simple folk with their memories dripping with blood defy the evil and through their survival and their graphic stories undermine the plans of their executioners whose only wish was to annihilate them.

There is a brotherhood of destiny and even in torment there is a creativity. The tormentors have their hierarchy, their heroes, their exploits, their legends, their endless stories and their sagas of heroic exploits on defenseless victims. The survivors are the only humans in this dehumanized world. The tormentors are proud of their inhumanity and as if killing more grants them more energy and eternity.

I return again to the courtyard of my childhood. Stories about the old country were told with deep gratification and pride. Talking about their birthplace everybody claimed to be rich and that they owned many orchards. It was not accepted to ask about what happened during the death marches. Everything was said in whispers as it was unspeakable. So you would overhear about what happened to a family from a third person. That domain was discrete, taboo, sacred and nobody dared to violate that unwritten rule. There were two stories which everybody knew and treated with veneration.

One was a bent short woman of 80 who went to church twice a day with her inseparable cane. Even her cane could not slow her trembling constitution. They called her *meshetsi* Mayrig, Mayrig from Mush. Her five children were slaughtered on her lap. Once I asked her about her husband and if ever she had children. She said all happened on this lap and broke out into endless sob. Her room was full of incense and with holy objects hanging from the ceiling, like a chapel. She was like a

woman hermit and was treated like a walking saint on earth, murmuring prayers as she walked. She and the other widows never travelled in their life, did not need passports and some never left the Armenian quarter. They lived a virtual life and were almost part of the building of St James. They had reinvented their cosmos.

The other story everybody knew was that of police Vartouk (Rose). She was a customs officer, a short woman, never smiled and never associated with neighbours. Her story was as it was the case in many couples. In her orphanage, matchmakers arranged her to marry with another orphan. On the night of her honeymoon, she noticed a brown patch on the hip of her husband. Then she said, my brother had the same spot. As they discussed further, it became clear that her partner was actually her brother. She never married again and looked traumatized. The dazed look never left her. With time, with the growing number of interviews, I acquired a vast knowledge of geographical spots, place names, towns, villages, names of notorious canyons. All these place names became a necessary tool for an effective communication with the interviewed person. Through there was an overall plan of destruction but each individual was a story of its own and a category of its own. Besides Jerusalem, I included interviews in my travels wherever such a possibility presented itself. I travelled 4 hours beyond Richmond to meet a person above 100 who knew two words in Armenian. He told me how the relatives of those left behind in diaspora gathered every Sunday in church hoping to hear if their relatives were alive and that they raised money for the orphans.

Each story sheds new light on one aspect of human suffering and each story could not be more graphic.

Once I met a short lady of 80 called Margot from Marseille. She was from a village of Sebastia (Sivas). I asked her: "Do you remember the day you left your village?" In a very innocent way, she said: "I was pained at a sight of our small dog who was crying after us from our roof." Then she talked about the pregnant women in the convoy. As a new bride, she was one of them. When they delivered, they wrapped the newborns and placed them on the roadside and she did the same and put her baby under a tree. Then after few days, they arrived to a village and were lodged in a khan. "Out of the blue, several Turks came in with tied sacks, we thought they were watermelons. They gathered all the women, untied the sacks

and spread the contents on the floor. They were newborn babies clinging to each other. They said, come here and identify your babies. The women rushed and screamed, this looks like mine... Then they added 'now you have seen them', collected them, tied the sacks and took them away."

Zarouhy Odabashian was a neighbour, the mother of Mardick minimarket. She was a silent, polite and laconic lady. I didn't have much dealings with her but we greeted each other warmly. One day, as she visited my father in his office, I made her talk. She was from a village Shoushankan from Van. As a group of 30 women were escaping, they were surrounded by Turks. They were all sexually assaulted and left naked. Then they decided to finish them off and took them to a dilapidated building and attacked them with knives and axes. Then had the roof collapse on them. Zarouhy who was a girl of nine was wounded and fainted. When she woke after several days, in total darkness, she found herself under her mother who was agonizing. With a faint voice, her mother asked for water. There was no water. Zarouhy said that until today her voice begging for water still rings in her ears. She crept out of the ruined building and she walked few meters. Two Turks saw her and knew immediately that she was Armenian as she was totally naked. They whipped her until every part of her was blue. Then they discussed among themselves whether to kill her or not. One of them said leave her alone. As she told the story, Zarouhy was perspiring and breathing heavily, profusely.

Serpouhy Hekimian, a resident of the Armenian quarter and grandmother of ceramic artist Garo Sandrouny, told me the following: "I am from Adiyaman. In 1915, I was a young girl. One night, they arrested all the men. It was impossible to visit them in prison, then the authorities called us saying 'come and see your husbands in front of the city hall'. We went and saw them, they looked exhausted and every five were tied by ropes. We greeted them from a distance and they were marched a way by gendarmes. This was the last time we saw them. We, the women, children and old people, were deported a week later and, one day, as we were sitting on the banks of the Euphrates, it was midday, we saw almost a hundred headless swollen bodies tied to each other flowing downstream. Women wondered if these were their husbands judging from the colour of their clothing. They were followed by more corpses. Women were screaming, pointing to one corpse and the other." Now the fate of their hus-

bands was certain.

To my question : "Was it true that the waters of river Euphrates became turbid or red with blood ?" She said : "As we did not have fresh water, we dug canals and cesspools near the banks of the river. Always, at the bottom of the cesspool, there was heavy sediment of blood."

I talked several times to Sarkis Khatchikian who worked for more than 50 years as type-setter at the printing press of the Patriarchate. He was from Ordu, on the Black sea, his parents who were deported hid Sarkis and his brother Diran by a Greek family. When searches by Turkish police intensified, looking for Armenians in hiding, they were both placed in a Greek orphanage. Turks were to learn later that there were few dozen of them in the Greek orphanage, they resorted to a new method. Every few nights, boatmen would come and propose to the boys a night sea ride. The boys were excited and competed with each other to get on this boat ride. Sarkis noticed that no one of these boys came back and, one day, he saw several corpses of his friends of the orphanage washed ashore. Sarkis informed his brother and, with a rope made up of shreds of cloth, escaped from the orphanage into the woods. Then, he found a Greek family in a village, who were family friends. He went around dressed in Greek village costume till the end of the war.



We had a kawas, a gatekeeper, called Haig Mekertchian, but he was popularly known by his Turkish name, Hassan agha. That was the name given to him when he was forcibly converted to Islam. With time, he had become a valuable apprentice to a Turkish baker. As he was preparing the dough, he would hear Turkish clients come and boast how many Armenians they managed to kill. Almost like a competition. According to Hassan agha, there were several older Armenian converts to Islam and they were given special jobs like muezzin, calling Moslems to prayer, or assistant to the Imam. These appointments were made in order to accelerate their integration into Islam.

Today, the famous Kalbian family exists because of a hip fracture, according to Dr. Vicken Kalbian, a prominent doctor in Winchester. He told me the following about his father. "My father, Dr. Vahan Kalbian, graduated as a doctor from the American

University of Beirut in 1915. He went back to his birthplace, Diarbekir, to celebrate the occasion with his family. The celebration, like a wedding, lasted a week. The mother, while dancing, broke her hip. Dr. Vahan insisted that he would take her for surgery to Beirut. Along with her came five other relatives, including the grandfather of Dr. Harry Hagopian. Because of the hip incident, the five survived while the entire family perished in Diarbekir.

Then there was Hovsep Der Vartanian, a teacher at the Araratian orphanage. He had witnessed the massacre of 10 000 Armenians from the labour battalion working on the Bagdad line tunnels in the Taurus mountains. By order of Enver, the defense minister, they were massacred in a place called Baghtche. He authored a book called "The massacre of Intilly." At a relatively young age, he had a stroke and walked with a cane as he was paralyzed on one side. I have never seen him talking to anybody.

Then there was Mihran Krikorian, a rug mender working at my uncle's shop. He had a deep scar on his head after the Turks axed the rest of the family. He was extremely moody and had sudden bursts of anger. After the killing, the Turks had dumped everybody in a well including him. During the day, he would wonder to find food while at night he would hide in the well despite the decomposed bodies and the terrible stench.

Beatrice Kaplanian was a pious and quiet woman who lived till the age of 102. She was from Nevsehir in Cappadocia. Notices for deportation were served. According to the town-crier who was also announcing in the Armenian Quarter, they were to leave in two groups with a two-week interval. They took the family donkey and three or four of them took turns along the way. Their mother would beg them so that she could rest but the children rode most of the time. Beatrice remembers this with great pain. After walking a month, their feet were swollen. Then they reached Katma and Meskene (open air concentration camps), one of ten camps, where tens of thousands were gathered before being sent to new destinations.

These were tent-towns with no sanitary conditions, infested with epidemics. Hundreds died

daily. In front of the tent, one would find corpses wrapped in shrouds. Special people came to dispose of the corpses. They would pick them up and throw them into a valley or a pit at the edge of the camp. Sometimes, the family or relatives were so exhausted and depressed that they did not bother to attend the funeral of the loved ones. One night, her father passed away, they wrapped him and placed him in front of the tent and in the morning they carried him away and dropped him in the valley. None of the family attended the funeral. And, one day, when her mother was away, a Turkish couple entered the tent and convinced her to accompany them to their home. In this way, she was adopted. The mother of Beatrice had never to know where she disappeared. She stayed two years with the Turkish family, they treated her well. After the armistice, the Americans picked her up and put her in the Near East Relief orphanage, and there she was given the name Beatrice. She was an avid reader of the Bible and this was the only book at home. Despite the fact that she had lost all her family, her name and her identity, she would insist that she harbours no hostile feelings towards the Turks.

Once, I had a group of visitors from Canada. I learnt that one of the ladies was originally from Malatya where the massacres were one of the most horrible. I asked her about memories of her parents, she told me the following story. At the time, her father was 8 years old. The authorities conducted mass arrests. As a child, he was wandering about town. One afternoon, he overheard from a group of henchmen mentioning names of some Armenian notables whom they will drag to their death and the place of their execution. They happened to mention his father's name. So, three in the morning, he was there. In moonlight he found two heaps. One of the naked headless bodies and the other severed heads piled on each other. He went through the heads one by one, hoping to find his father's head. While doing it, he fainted and, later on, somebody adopted him. In real life, at home, every night he would scream and sob in his dream. The scene would repeat itself and the whole family would wake up with him.

In 1980, I met in the Armenian Museum a survivor from Mush who told me his chimney story. He had witnessed how the Turks used a very effective method. In Mush, they went from village to village and herded the residents in barns and set them on fire. He was the only survivor from his village as he hid himself for hours in the chimney. He lost

seven brothers, in compensation he had seven children.

Mrs. Bekian, a tiny woman living in a Greek Convent near Casa Nova, told me the story of his brother. When she felt that the Turks were taking away men to be butchered, she paid two golden coins to a Turk to use a bullet. After an hour, the Turk came back and handed over the blood-soaked clothing of the brother indicating that they had cut his throat. In my interviews, this recurred a lot of times. Upon asking somebody who knew about tribes, he indicated that this was a code of war, a concrete sign of victory on the enemy.

In my interviews, when the husband felt that he will be taken away, he would give to his wife the wedding ring and the family Bible to be kept for posterity. The family Bible had great significance among some families. In a camp fire, to which I was a witness in Beirut, when I and others rushed to help, I saw an old man running up the stairs of his burning wooden house. He emerged with a wrapped package. I said: "How do you feel?", he said "I am OK, as long as I managed to salvage the family Bible."

My maternal uncle passed away in 1985, in our house, due to a massive heart attack. The night before, as if by some presentiment, graphically, he described how he and the parish priest had buried the church treasure in Talas in the church wall. After less than 24 hours, he passed away.

I wish to include briefly few more interviews which have provided me leads for deeper research or furnished new dimensions or simply contributed for a better grasp of the situation and its emotional repercussions on the survivor.

I have conducted research with orphans who have graphically described their daily routine. One such person was Mary Kevorkian who lived to be 100. A cheerful woman who until her last days used to do her daily shopping. She was full of energy and will to live. She told me, until her marriage she had no clue what it means to have relatives, she had never seen her parents, she had no idea if she had any brothers or sisters, as she was picked up from the street as an abandoned baby. Her icon was Maria Jacobson, her Director, the Danish missionary, who came all the way from Beirut to Jerusalem, to check if she had a happy marriage. Until today, she remembered her student number. Talking to orphans, one is struck at the number of institutions these people had to change, sometimes moving on from one country

to another (back and forth). Another episode I followed and wished to hear first-hand was the fate of the city of Izmir (a city of a million), very cosmopolitan, with a lot of culture and refinement. Called the infidel city by the Turks, it was targeted and liquidated by Ataturk. The event happened Sept. 12-15th 1922, Ataturk totally burnt the city. A fortnight before, a deal was reached between Western countries –England, France and Italy-, that their ships would evacuate only their nationals and reject others (meaning Greeks and Armenians) and, to the disgrace of the West, the local nationals were rejected and not allowed to get on board Western ships through the use of boiled water or boiled oil. I managed to interview 15 survivors of Izmir. The last one was about 18 years ago, spending a whole evening while in Chicago visiting my brother.

I wish to end with an incident during the deportation of our family. One of the maternal uncles of my father, Sebouh Hintlian, worked in the Bagdad line. So they had the right to save one person. The choice fell on my aunt Soultanik who was 7 then. As the train reached Adana station, gendarmes came in the train and asked for the Hintlians. My grandmother produced the choice. My smaller uncle, Hagop, aged 4, ran after the sister. The gendarmes said only girls, not boys. Even an ordinary gendarme knew about the plan of extermination and the necessity of wiping out all males. My curiosity voyage about human nature at work during execution of a genocide took me half a century. I wanted to investigate layer by layer, sometimes I also drowned in the pool of blood, but that was a luxury. I had to transcend and could not indulge in sentimentality neither could I console myself in the good progress I was making in my narrative. I strove always to float to be able to reflect about humanity and inhumanity.

I was in vain searching for a moment of humanity, for compassion. I constantly searched and wondered if humanity and inhumanity alternated in quick succession. After years of quest, I came across a gentleman called Jemal pasha, known in official history as a monster. I found humanity in him, cohabiting with the evil. Despite his notoriety, he saved tens of thousands of Armenians by virtue of his high post in Greater Syria. I discussed often the enigmatic personality of Jemal pasha with the late Archbishop Bogharian, an eminent scholar, whose clergy father buried 200-300 Armenians a day in Aleppo and Selimieh. He confirmed that he saved thousands but most succumbed to epidemics.

I did not have the patience to read Dante but in the last half a century, I walked miles on stones paving my hell.

I found compassion among my survivors, some liked the Turks and continued to listen to Turkish music (my father included).

I realized that, at the height of inhumanity, one can still feel the warmth of humanity in human forgiveness. Many of these victims were ready to forgive the Turks. And even forgive God for his absence. And me, surrounded by these 800 faces who have vanished from this world, await this year after a century for a moment of humanity from the successors of the perpetrators (Modern Turkey). Despite a fact that a month ago an organization called Genç Atsızlar flooded Turkish cities with posters praising and thanking their ancestors for the ethnic cleansing. Still I believe it is not the end of times. And, at last, I thank my respondents who related to me about hell and they went from this world with a smile and hope of humanity to reign rather than the rule of the opposite.

Yes, I grew up in a village of survivors. They decided to keep their pain to themselves. They showered us with warmth, joy and humour. The courtyards we played in were joyful ones and they wanted us to be positive and self-giving. We are thankful to our parents for their generosity and, at this moment, I'm thinking of that agonizing persons in the valley while life is ebbing away and only vultures are swooping on the corpses with their gruesome noises. History and humanity is sending a message to you, repose in peace, your story is being told, and to our Turkish brothers we have a message, rest assured that the abused victim has enormous power given to him by God, the power to forgive. It is the mission of humanity to liberate the Turk from his misery, to educate him not to draw pride in murder and blood. Our Turkish brothers, we are grateful to you, through your inhumanity, you have humanized us.

Our ghosts are still hovering on our villages and valleys daily.

A German archeologist, Prof. Hütteroth, working on a dig in Turkey, once told me a story. One evening, the land shook around the archeological site. Hütteroth asked his Turkish assistant. Was it an earthquake? He responded: "No. It is probably the ghosts of the Armenians who have come back."

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