

HELEN'S STORY

As recounted in Cambridge, Ontario, Canada, on April 30, 2000

[At Helen's request, all identifiable names have been removed.]

This anecdote is set in Teheran, Iran, in the 1940s, after the end of World War II. A young Armenian girl, Helen, had one particular friend, among all of her school friends, with whom she shared a special affection. One day, this friend invited Helen to her home for a birthday party. When Helen cheerfully mentioned this news to her mother, the latter was not pleased.

Helen's mother advised her that her friend was Turkish, and that Turks had murdered Helen's grandfather, her father's father. They had shot him in the back while he was out riding on horseback, and while holding his sister's hand. The horse returned home with him slumped over in the saddle. Therefore, she did not think it would be respectful of her grandfather's memory to be such good friends with this Turkish girl. Helen's mother told her that she could have her friends over to the house, but that she should not go to her friend's house.

Helen made an excuse to miss the party, but her friend wanted her there so much, she postponed it. This happened again, and again. After her friend offered to postpone the birthday party for the third time, Helen felt compelled to explain to her friend the real reason she kept cancelling.

The next day, the friend's mother knocked on the door of Helen's house. Helen's mother was very surprised to see her, and very uncomfortable, but when the woman asked to come in, she could hardly refuse.

The woman's calm demeanour was obviously hiding a lot of pent up emotion. She began to speak directly to the point. "Yes, I am Turkish," she said, "but my father was also killed by Turks. During those dark days in Turkey, when the life of every Armenian was in danger, my father smuggled Armenians to freedom eleven times. The twelfth time, he was caught by the authorities and executed. They brought him to the centre of the city and shot him. So how can you not allow your daughter to come to my house?"

As they talked, they cried together, this Turkish mother and this Armenian mother. And after that, Helen was free to visit her Turkish friend's house any time she wanted to.

Helen grew up in Iran, got married, and eventually moved to Canada, where she now lives. But she has never forgotten this story and always keeps it close to her heart.