

The Story of Haygouhi Nalbandian

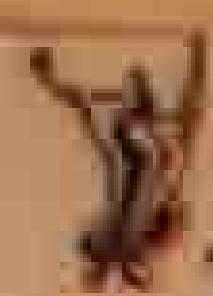
My dear cousin Vartouhi,

In your letter you asked me to write about my memoirs of the Armenian massacre of 1914-1915. I have forgotten many things but I remember every detail of those days and what we went through.

The Turks had drafted all men of military age and arrested all the other men. They went from home to home dragging them out ... the prisons were full of them. They were being tortured and killed to make room for the others. None were ever seen again. There were only the old, the women and children left.

The Turkish government gave notice to a few hundred Armenian families that we had to leave our homes and be transferred somewhere else. No reasons were given .. why, ~~or~~ where or what to expect. The following day early in the morning, the Turkish gendarmes knocked on our doors and told us to leave. Some of us were lucky enough to buy a wagon we were one of them. We packed all we could in the wagon and left our homes crying in fear and in a daze. I was 9 years old.

We were the first group to leave the city of Mezere. We walked all day and at night/ they let us camp by the lake. Everything was quiet, no incidents. In the morning at breakfast they ordered all the men to come forward, the old men did. Then the gendarmes came and picked all the teenage boys, telling us everything would be okay. It was for our safety that they were doing this. Then the families were told to get ready to leave. We were all crying. My uncle and grandfather were amongst those taken. Yes, Vartouhi, if you did not guess it, I will tell you and the world. All those kids and old men were killed, tortured and thrown into the lake. A few hours after we left, we heard about it. We kept on going, rain or shine and at night, we camped outside, hot or cold. One morning, the gendarmes ordered us to leave our wagons behind. The children, the sick and the old, all had to walk. Our guards were getting bored. They wanted to have some fun, so they started whipping us and made us run like herds. Things were getting worse.. every day. The cries of the young women at night kept us awake and shivering. We were getting short of money and food. I remember there was a young woman in pain. She was going to have a baby and we were getting ready to leave. My grandmother got a few women together and they went to beg the person in charge not to leave her alone but he whipped them and sent them away. She was left under a tree, in pain and alone. We were tired, hungry, thirsty and sick. Some old women were left behind..they refused to move, some children died. Our group was getting smaller and smaller. At last we arrived at the outskirts of Merdin. The first thing we saw was a nice big fountain. We all ran to it. They let us stay there 2 or 3 days. We rested and had lots of water to drink. Natives came along and sold us some food and asked if they could take our children into their homes and care for them. I think the gendarmes were awaiting orders about what to do next. There were quite a few of us left yet .. a few hundred. They couldn't get rid of us all. One morning, we were told we had to move on. We were getting ready. My mother and grandmother went to buy bread from the natives. All of a sudden from directions, some men came and started dragging away some young girls and children. Two men came where we were sitting and grabbed my aunt and sister. My grandmother grabbed them both and lay down on them. They kicked and beat her with their guns but she would not move. Then, they saw me standing by myself, so ~~ix~~ they grabbed me and put me in a barn and locked the door and left. I started crying and yelling for my mother, "I want my mother". And up to this day, Vartouhi, I cannot bear to see children crying for their mothers. It gives me the shivers. It reminds me of that day in the barn. My cries and yells for my mother. Well Vartouhi your mother knows what happened to the rest of the family hereon. After a while the man came back, put me on his horse and took me to his tent. He had a big family, a few wives and lots of children. I was still crying and asking to be taken to my mother. He used to tell me they are gone, they are killed. I did not believe him. One day, he put me on a horse and rode away. We came to a ditch. There were several dead bodies. Three old women and two children. I recognized one of the old women. She was a neighbor.



I started crying. I wanted to die too and asked him to kill me too. He put me on the horse and brought me back to the tent. One day, early in the morning, he woke me up and told me he was going to take me to Merdin. He said there is a nice woman who will take care of me. I did not care what happened to me any more. On the way to Merdin there were lots of dead bodies all over the road but it was too dark to recognize them. A few hours later, we arrived at the woman's home. She was the widow of a former Mayor. She had two boys and a girl. One boy was older and one younger than I was. She paid this Kurd and sent him away. A few weeks later she got another younger Armenian girl and later an older one. We were treated pretty good at the beginning. She even sent me to school with her daughter.

There were more and more Armenian families driven out of their homes. The streets were full of hungry, sick, naked Armenian children. They got tired of killing, so they left them on their own to perish.

There was a food shortage all over as the war dragged on. The little Armenian girl was the first to go to another family, but I had a job to do. I was the water carrier for the family. They had no water ~~in~~ in their homes, it had to be taken from the fountains.

One night when we were having supper, Araxe, the other Armenian girl, heard a knock and a boy started to sing and beg for food. Araxe jumped up and said, "that sounds like my brother." I opened the door and asked the boy to come in. Before I knew it, they were in each others arms. The boy said that their little sister was alive too. Everyday we saved some bread and food from our rations and gave it to Araxe's brother. Araxe was in her late teens and very pretty and nice. I liked her very much and we got along ~~with~~ fine. Now she was worried and sad about her brother and sister.

We had a neighbor who had asked Araxe to marry her brother but she refused. Now Araxe asked her if she married her brother, would he take care of her sister and brother. He agreed and they got married. He was an elderly person but he was well off. He was in the export-import business and took good care of ~~them~~ them all.

Araxe's sister-in-law had an Armenian maid whom I met. Her name was Sara. She was also from Mezere. She was in the last group driven from their homes. Before they left, they heard all about us. She had two young children she left with her neighbor because she ~~thought~~ thought it might be safer and now she was worried and wanted to return.

I was still in Merdin when America entered World War I. Things were getting worse all the time. Most of the Armenian children were just dumped out in the streets without a roof over their heads to protect them from the cold and rain. I knew some day soon I would join them in the streets. I saw Sara one day and she told me Araxe's husband's caravan was here from Harput. We asked Araxe if she could help us go back to Harput with the Caravan. She promised to help us. She spoke to her husband and he warned us that others had tried, were caught and never heard from again. We insisted we had nothing to lose; we would be out in the streets like the others. I had my own dreams. I always dreamt that other members of my family must have survived. When I return, they would be waiting for me. Especially my mother. I was afraid to tell the woman whose house I was living that I wanted to return home. She used to tell me that if I ever ran away like the other Armenian girls, she would kill me. But when I told her, she was glad I was leaving on my own for she, too, was short of bread. Araxe said the caravan would be leaving shortly so we should go to her home and wait there. She was a mother now, she had a little boy. Before we left she gave us bread money and clothing and she said her husband made the caravan master promise to take care of us. We left in the middle of the night.

Two or three days later, we arrived at Deyarbecker, which is surrounded by walls. We had to enter through one of the guarded doors. Our caravan master told us we could not enter with them. We had to be on our own and if the guards questioned us, we should say we are from one of the villages visiting relatives and he would come right behind us and maybe the guards would not even notice us. But they did notice us and asked all kinds of questions. Then someone came along and told the guards, leave the



poor women alone, it is getting dark, let them go home. Whoever he was, the guards listened to him respectfully. As we walked away, we saw our caravan master waiting for us. He told us to follow him. He took us to an Armenian home where there were 7 or 8 women getting over a sickness. They looked like skeletons. He gave us some money and left and we never saw him again. He was scared to take us all the way to Harput.

We took out all the bread we had and ~~we~~ gave it to our hungry hostesses and they gave us a place to sleep. One of the old women kept on saying "wait until my son comes home, he will help you." I thought she was dreaming. We spent all the money we had on food.

One night when we were all sleeping, I heard footsteps, and raised my head. Someone put her hand on my ~~hand~~ mouth and told me to keep quiet. There was a ~~man~~ man there. Everyone sat up in their beds and started talking at the same time. He was the old woman's ~~son~~son. Somehow or other he had escaped the massacre and every time he had a chance he came home at night to help his wife, mother and the rest. They all started telling him how we had helped them and he promised to help us, we should ~~not~~ not worry.

This ancient city of the Armenians was the Capital of King Dikran, the Great, and was called Dikranegerd and was ruled by Armenian kings for a long time. It was surrounded by walls built on the shores of the Tigris River with a bridge extending across the river. This was the first time I had ever seen a bridge. I was surprised for I thought it was a miracle. Although I later lived for 20 years under the shadows of the great and graceful George Washington Bridge, I still think that this simple and humble bridge crossing the Tigris River was a miracle.

Here in this big City, the Armenians were also driven out of their homes. Here and there somehow or other, women and children were left behind.

After a while, our midnight friend came home again and told us he had good news for us. A Turkish officer was going to be transferred to Harput and he had a big family and they needed help. It had been arranged for us to go back with them. His wife would take us to her home the next day. So, we said good-bye and left the following morning.

When we arrived at his home, we were expected. There was an Armenian girl here, ~~x~~ too, who took us to the lady of the house. Then she took us to the kitchen where we had a nice hot lunch for a change. We washed, cleaned, packed and took care of the children from morning to midnight. They had a beautiful home and furniture. I looked like a palace. It had belonged to an Armenian merchant. After he had been driven out, this Turkish family moved in and now they owned the home and everything in it. My lady was sorry to leave this beautiful home. I wonder how the Armenian family felt when they were driven out.

I was full of dreams of returning home. I used to reason with myself that I had survived hunger, fear, sickness and ~~even~~ even cholera. When I was in Merdin, I was very sick one day and I was thrown into a wooden shack to die but a few days later, I crawled out of the shack, climbed the steps and went in. I scared them all, they thought that I was a ghost until I spoke up and said I am hungry and fell on the floor. After living through all this, I was sure my mother and other members of my family would be there to greet me.

We were all set to leave. Three wagons came, one for furniture and 2 for the family. Now I would be returning in style. I was riding with the children.

At last we arrived at Mezere and we started unpacking, washing and cleaning. Our lady started crying the day we arrived. She missed her beautiful home she left behind. There weren't any nice Armenian homes left. They had all been taken.

After we settled down and the hard work done, I told Sara I was anxious to go back home. She told me not to say anything to anyone. I should leave in the morning in case none of the family was here, then I could come back. At least I would have a roof over my head. She was older and wiser, she did not share my dreams. The next morning I said good-bye to Sara and left. On my way, I stopped at the church which



was near by. I was stunned for it was in ruins. They had used it as a barn. It was full of filth. There had been a boys and girls school on each side of the church/ and a kindergarten. They were all in ruins. I was losing courage, I started running. It was a long way to my home. I did not want to see anything else.

I hesitated before I turned the corner to my home. Would I see my home in ruins like the others. At last I turned the corner, the house was there but a Turkish woman was at the door. I don't know how long I stood there not knowing what to do. My mother had a cousin living across the street from us. I knocked on the door and when she opened it, she recognized me but she was stunned. She took me in her arms and we both started crying. She kept asking me "Where is your mother, where is the rest of the family". I had no answers.....Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the world...I did. I was the first one to return from so far away. It was nice to be in the arms of a relative. To be hugged and kissed and cared for.

Her name is Yesther Ajemian Torossian. My mother and her were ~~xxxxxx~~ close. Her husband, 2 brother-in-laws and her oldest brother were gone. Her father-in-law, a tailor was left alone because they needed him. Her 2 sisters, brother and 3 of her children and a blind mother-in-law were living together in the same ~~xxxxxx~~ home. Her father-in-law had a tailor shop and her brother was helping him. The girls did some knitting for an organization. One day I wanted to see the inside of my house. My aunt Yester took me and the owner let us in. On the top of the steps I saw my cat. She recognized me and started yelling and crying and all of a sudden she jumped on me. They thought the cat went crazy so they took her off me. Well, Vartouhi, there was someone waiting for me. I started crying, I couldn't control myself as I promised. So my Aunt took me home.

My aunt and her family were nice to me but the times were bad and the food was getting scarcer. I did not want to impose on them, so I went to see an old friend of my mother and ask her advice. She told me to try the orphanage although there is no hope. She gave me the name of 2 sisters whom we knew. Their parent gave all their money and put the sisters in the orphanage/ before they were driven from their homes. The following morning I went to the Orphanage and asked to see the 2 sisters. They were surprised to see me. We had a long talk and they told me there was no food or clothing and lots of sickness in the orphanages. Miss Jacobson might be forced to close the orphanages, but I could come back on a certain day when she would be there and speak to her. I was there on the designed day and one of the ~~ix~~ sisters took me to Miss Jacobson's office. I told her I came back from Merdin and was unable to find any members of my family. She gave me a long look and took me in. I was relieved... it was another miracle.

After America entered W.W.I, all American schools were closed and American missionaries and teachers left Harput. Miss Jacobson, a Norwegian citizen stayed. She took over and ~~id~~ did the impossible. Everyone was surprised how she was able to manage. She turned the schools into orphanages and there were lots of us to be fed. After the Armistice, the American Missionaries, Mr. & Mrs. Rigs and his staff came back. Now we had food, clothing, medicine and doctors. The Armenian children who were in Turkish homes ran away and came to the orphanage. Older Armenian children told the missionaries about children who were too young to know they were Armenians. The missionaries went to those houses and brought the children to the orphanage.

The older boys were put in farming, and we, the older girls, did sewing. The missionaries had brought material and sewing machines with them. We started making our own clothing. We also had part-time schooling.

We were told that those who had relatives in America should go to Mr. Rig's office. I went and told him my father was in America, in New York. Our names were sent to an Armenian Newspaper in Boston, the Hairenik. My father found my name in the paper and sent a letter with money to me.

Our uncle, now Rev. Khoren Adjemian in Beirut was then in the foreign legion. My father wrote him about me. Aunt Sara, uncle's wife and your mother had met ~~me~~ each other in Aleppo already. So, Vartouhi, I'll leave it to your mother to tell



how she found out about me.

I was told your father started to look for a way to bring me to Aintab and he found a merchant who did exporting and importing from Aleppo to Harput. This merchant promised to look me up. He told your father he is looking for a home for his family in Aintab because he wants to bring them over from ~~Amassia~~ Ammassia, because it was not safe there. Together they found a home and he arranged for his family to come over and he left for Harput. Just before Xmas he came to the orphanage and asked to see me. He spoke to me and the people in charge about bringing me to Aintab. But he warned me it was very cold and hard to travel this time of year. So he thought it best to travel in the spring, but I begged him to take me now for I would not give him any trouble. If I should get sick, or cold or fall from the mule, he should leave me there and go away. He said that I was a stubborn girl. That was nothing new for I had heard the remark many times before. The Ajemians are noted for being stubborn.

Before the merchant left, he told me to disguise myself like a man. He would give me a long coat & I had to ~~cut~~ cut my hair short. I was shocked to hear I had to cut my hair. All these years I did all I could to keep my hair long. I was always told I had my mothers nice long hair and that's all I had left of my mothers and I was going to keep it. Very few girls had long hair. Their hair was cut short to get rid of lice, ring worm and God knows what. A girl gave me a white shawl to cover my head so I would not have to cut it. The sister in charge gave me a pair of pants. They were all glad to help me. The following morning he came and I said good bye to my orphan sisters and brothers and the sister in charge. After a day and a half ride, we arrived at the city of Malatia. He took me to an Armenian store whose owner was an old tradesman dying yarns. He took me to his home and left. There was his wife, daughter-in-law and her children. Her husband was gone. A little later the old man came back with a few policemen. He took them to the parlor and ~~and~~ came back to me and said, "you have nothing to be afraid of, my child, but our lives depend on your behaviour. Be a brave girl. Tell those policemen that you are coming from a Harput orphanage and you are a sister of my daughter-in-law, and you will be staying with us. The police thought you were an Arab spy. The shawl on your head and that black rag tied around it made you look like an Arab, and I thought the same thing too. Now be a brave girl and let's go in." He told his daughter-in-law to make some coffee. In those days the Arabs and Turks were not on good terms. They often spied on each other.

The old man held my hand and took me in. The policemen started questioning me from all directions but they could not confuse me. One of them asked why I was dressed like an Arab. I said it was cold and I wore whatever I could find. The old man asked their permission and told me to go in and bring some coffee. ~~They talked~~ They started talking about those bad Americans who ~~went~~ sent a little girl ~~next~~ out in this freezing weather. Couldn't they wait until spring? (This talk must have taken place after she went and brought the coffee. Otherwise, when she was away, how could she know what they talked about. A.C.).

A couple of days later, before sunrise, we left Malatia. No more wagon rides. Now we were with the mule caravan. The roads were narrow and full of snow. We had to climb up and down the mountains and it was freezing. The Armenian merchant wrapped my feet in paper and put them in the mule's feeding bags filled with snow. It helped, but we had to get off the mule many times during the day and walk or freeze. He used to hold my hand, talk to me and encourage me saying we'll be there soon, be brave. God is with us.

We finally arrived in Aintab on Armenian Xmas, 1921. Your mother came from Church to see me and take me home. She cried a lot and talked a lot. A few days later the fighting between the Turks and Armenians started in Aintab. Vartouhi, I will leave it to your mother to describe the incidents.

I am glad I stayed there almost a year and saw my people defend themselves against the Turks with home-made grenades and guns. These young boys were the ones who came back from the deserts, mountains, sheep herding, slavery, etc. I remember one day a young fellow brought his gun to a ~~gunsmith~~ gunsmith to be fixed. He saw a woman crying so he bravely said, don't cry my sister, we won't be massacred like before. As long as we have God above us and the French Army with us, we will win.

Sorry, Vartouhi, a few months after I left Aintab, the French Army pulled out and the Armenians had to leave with the army or be killed. We had no guns of our own, so like before they had to leave everything. They had to get into wagons or walk to Aleppo.

I later heard that the Turkish government had told the missionaries to leave Harput, Messere and other cities where they had the schools & orphanages. So they left. The Turks could not stand to see another generation of Armenians growing up and taking roots all over again.

I don't need to tell you Vartouhi, our people are still wondering all over the world after all these years (I think it should be "Wandering"). They settled down in one place, built up homes, felt happy and safe for ~~an~~ awhile and then they were on the move again.

My father had sent money and affadavits for all of us but your folks were unable to make it, so your father took me to Beirut, put me on the ship and I was on my way to America and freedom. I arrived on Nov. 4, 1921. We are lucky ones, we have homes we can call our own forever and we have no fear for tomorrow.

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