A TRUE SALT OF THE EARTH

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A Tribute to Watertown's Mayram Gulbahar Gigiyan Cinar

Ludér Tavit Sahagian, Watertown Tab, 9 October 2015

The year is 1915. The world is engulfed in warfare. In the cradle of civilization, an unprecedented genocide against the first Christian nation is festering. And Arusyak Hajinian, my maternal great-grandmother, is caught in the middle of it:

They smash open the house door and take her husband to purportedly serve in the army. Amid the pandemonium, she runs and hides a small portion of the family's gold in the wall of the garden's chicken coop. Arusyak (though pregnant), her young child, and other inhabitants of this small Western Armenian town, lying inside Ottoman Turkey, are seized and sent marching south towards the scorching heat of the Syrian desert. With little food and water, she can no longer breastfeed her child. He dies in her arms, and she has the heartbreaking task of burying him.

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During the death march through treacherous terrain, a sadistic Turkish military officer bayonets her abdomen, killing her unborn child. She loses consciousness. When she finally awakens, she finds herself in his home, stitched up and recuperating. He then chains her in his basement when she refuses to be his latest wife. Weeks later, with the chains improperly placed, she breaks free, escaping through a small window secured with metal wire.

Arusyak makes her way back to her original village on foot, but nevertheless ends up in abject poverty, working, as she later puts it, as "a slave for Turks on my own land." Her husband never returns. Neither do her brothers-in-law and raped sister-in-law. With most of her family gone and a living sister having fled to Abkhazia to safety, she is introduced to another genocide survivor,

Garabed Ayvazian, whom she soon marries and begins to build her family anew. Eventually she returns to her first home and recovers the gold she had hidden in the chicken coop years ago.

Arusyak becomes a devoted mother to her five children, by day faithfully tending the farms and fields of her home village. Though the oppressive Turkish Empire morphs into an equally oppressive republic (using essentially the identical crescent and star flag), she remains a tireless purveyor of goodwill to all ethnicities for the rest of her life, including, for example, the renowned blind Turkish minstrel and poet Asik Veysel. She perseveres to the age of 110, physically disabled the last ten years due to multiple strokes, weeping beside her sole daughter each and every night in prayer for the unspeakable losses and horrors she and her nation had endured decades earlier. This remarkable woman, "Partridge" as she was fondly called, departs at last in peace.

Arusyak's unbelievable tale of survival and tenacity in the wake of man's worst cruelty to man was recounted to me over and over by Mayram Gulbahar Gigiyan Cinar, her sole daughter and my maternal grandmother, whom the world physically lost one year ago and whose equally inspirational story I have the honor of presenting now.

Growing up in Armenia

Mayram Gulbahar ("Mary Spring-Rose" in Armenian and Turkish) first opened her eyes in the heart of Western Armenia at a time when the rivers were no longer as crimson and no independent Armenian state yet existed. Born on January 9, 1924 in the town of Gamirk (Gemerek), southwest of Sivas, in newly independent Turkey, she was the second youngest child in her family.

Growing up, she had no school to attend and was prevented from speaking her native Armenian tongue due to the dangerous community environment. She spent most of her childhood assisting her mother with family chores and frolicking with her siblings and other youngsters outdoors. Her father, Garabed or "Hayrig" (Armenian for "Father") as she had called him, was an industrious blacksmith who died prematurely when Mayram was ten-years-old.

To preserve her Armenian identity and preclude the possibility of marriage to a covetous Muslim villager, a small indigo cross was tattooed above the backside of her right wrist at the insistence of her grandmother immediately following her father's death. A year later, at the mere age of eleven, Mayram was married to fifteen-year-old Avedis Gigiyan from the adjacent all-Armenian village of Gigi, which was founded by and named after his forefathers several generations earlier as a safe haven for dozens of families that fled the Ottoman Turkish culture of emasculation, harassment, and occasional massacre targeting Armenians and other minority groups.

Relocating to Gigi with her relatives, Mayram went on to slowly build her own family. She gave birth to eight children over the span of twenty-four years: three daughters, three sons, and two infants who died from fever.

From dawn until well after dusk, the entire village toiled in the fertile hilly fields, tended the farm

animals, prepared fresh bread and meals, sewed and washed wool blankets and rugs, and tidied up their homes made of adobe-like baked bricks. Gigi had a small Christian chapel (today a mosque), a walled cemetery, and a sizeable orchard of oak and poplar trees. The city fountain delivered the daily supply of water. News arrived via word and radio. Every celebration or tragedy was an all-village and multi-day affair. Darting swallows and soaring eagles entertained them from above throughout the day, and the kaleidoscope of stars enchanted them during clear nights.

Life in Gigi was not always idyllic. Electricity was unavailable at the time. The small state-funded school was soon closed. Winters were generally harsh. The men would take turns carefully balancing relations with occasionally belligerent Muslim villagers. The young men were required to serve in the army, putting extra strain on mothers and siblings to make ends meet. In the 1930s, their Armenian surnames were all replaced with codified Turkish renditions designed especially for Christian citizens as part of then President Mustafa Kemal Ataturk's forced assimilation and tracking campaign. Gigiyan was renamed Cinar. And with tensions again rising in the early 1960s between Turkish nationalistic groups as well as Alevi and Kurdish inhabitants, thereby exposing the village to direct threats, the people of Gigi, including Mayram, Avedis, their six children, and her mother, were forced one by one to flee to the relatively safer metropolis of Constantinople (Istanbul) to live among its historic Armenian community.

Gigi thus became a ghost town and has remained so since. But its people – both in the Old Country and in the New World – have never forgotten Gigi.

Moving to Watertown

The Gigiyans' peaceful pastoral village setting was thus instantly replaced by a bustling urban one. From 1964 on, Avedis worked as a clerk at a local hotel for a few years before establishing his own grocery near Taksim Square.

Mayram helped him run the store, walked their younger children to and from local Armenian schools, attended weekly mass at a nearby Armenian church, and celebrated the marriages and baptisms of their younger children and grandchildren. In 1974, she began round-the-clock care of her now disabled mother Arusyak.

Political tension as well as anti-Armenian hostility and attacks in Turkey continued unabated. Starting in the late 1970s, in pursuit of a freer and more secure life, Mayram and Avedis witnessed the slow emigration of their younger children, grandchildren, and other families from Gigi and elsewhere to the United States, specifically to the major Armenian diasporan center of Watertown, Massachusetts.

Following the passing of Mayram's mother Arusyak in 1986 and the sale of the family grocery, she and Avedis emigrated and joined the rest of their flock and friends in Watertown, first residing in a cozy apartment on Putnam Street before moving to a larger home on Dartmouth Street in 1996.

Life with Yaya

1988 is when I and other U.S.-born cousins first met the ever-smiling, petite Grandmother Mayram with gemstone eyes and a reserved angelic presence whom we called "Yaya" (Greek for "Grandma"). She would always be occupied with cleaning up the house, cooking scrumptious meals, slicing and peeling fruits for us to enjoy, getting us ready for Armenian Saturday school, and attending every church service and family festivity with grandfather.

Yaya was always there for everyone and made those around her feel utterly loved and important. The way she would zero in on you during one-on-one conversations at her kitchen table was exceptional.

And her dexterity was evident in the many hobbies she pursued. She dedicated many hours to crocheting elaborate white floral laces wearing her thick glasses, continuing her agrarian routines from Gigi in her home garden, stacking pots of dolma from handpicked grape leaves, and filling bags of manti dumplings made from spiced meat and thinly rolled-out dough pieces. She was a master at preparing and gifting fresh yogurt, dried mint leaves, tomato sauce, rose and apricot jam, and trays upon trays of assorted sweet breads and traditional filled pastries, such as baklava, burek, choreg, and kete, during Easter and Christmas holidays. Easter afternoon is when dozens of relatives and friends from Gigi would light up her home, arriving with small gifts in their hands in deference to their senior elders, and be treated in turn with large dishes of homemade sweets.

Yaya also enjoyed walking along the banks of the Charles River, picnicking on Gloucester's rocky beaches, swimming on Cape Cod, and apple-picking in Merrimack Valley with all of us.

She always appreciated the freedoms and opportunities provided to her and her kin in the United States, despite successive White House administrations' unwillingness to formally recognize and address the still-ongoing Genocide. After all, it was in her newly adopted country that she and grandfather began to receive first-rate medical services to ameliorate their various ailments, attended their first Armenian Genocide commemorations and marches, and saw their grandchildren attain academic degrees, purchase their first homes, and contribute in their capacities to the well-being of their local communities and the nascent Republic of Armenia (1991) – little of which would have been possible had they remained in Turkey.

Yaya's magic extended well after her debilitating stroke in mid-February 2013 that completely paralyzed one side of her body, but fortunately kept her mind intact. For nineteen months she bravely fought on, experiencing several memory triggers that would occasionally lift her spirits and bring her family to laughter. She passed away in Dennis Port, Cape Cod on September 14, 2014 under the care of my devoted parents and was laid to eternal rest in Watertown's Ridgelawn Cemetery five days later, following a moving funeral service at Saint James Armenian Apostolic Church. She is survived by her husband of nearly eighty years, Avedis, three daughters, three sons, three daughters-in-law, three sons-in-law, seventeen grandchildren, twenty-four great-

grandchildren, one great-great-grandchild, and seventeen nieces and nephews.

Remembering the Armenian Genocide

2015 marks the centennial anniversary of the beginning of the systematic genocide of two-thirds of the global Armenian population, the worldwide dispersion of the surviving one-third, and the continued occupation by Turkey of the bulk of this ancient civilization's indigenous homeland.

For 100 years, most of the international community has been outraged at the ongoing persecution and killing of so many minority members in Turkey just for being themselves. For 100 years, progressive and righteous governments, groups, and individuals have been denouncing Turkish plunder, confiscation, conversion, and destruction of most vestiges of Armenians' millennia-old presence across Western Armenia – de jure part of the Republic of Armenia under President Woodrow Wilson's binding Arbitral Award of 1920.

For the men, women, and children of this longest running and most complete genocide in modern human history, it has also been 100 years of assembling shattered pieces, building ever tight-knit families and communities, passing rich traditions to newer generations, and awakening assimilated, converted, or hidden persons. It has also been 100 years of advocating their collective rights and giving back to the individuals, societies, and nations near and far that granted them all a new chance at life.

Mayram Gulbahar, my maternal grandmother, was among the first offspring of survivors of the Armenian Genocide who applied great strength and courage to help raise a devastated nation up on its feet and create countless success stories out of its people. She had no formal education, professional titles, or particular wealth, but possessed the most incredible of souls. And like her mother, grandmother, and progenitors prior to the beginning of the Genocide – whose names are all missing on my genealogy tree and whose fates were similar to their contemporaries, she was a living testament to the earth, water, air, and fire of Western Armenia and beyond wherever she was.

There is no finer way to celebrate her existence than to continue imparting our unique cultural heritage to future generations, supporting global genocide prevention and restorative justice initiatives, and kindling the best in those around us to help make this world a richer and kinder place for all. Nothing surpasses bringing family and friends together at each special occasion to memorialize all those who endured the impossible to make everything possible for us.

The author, a resident of Needham, Massachusetts, specializes in international relations and diplomacy.