COMMENTARY: FROM THE 'WORK BATTALION' TO 'NEJMEH' BRAND CEMENT MIXERS ON THE OCCASION OF MY UNCLE'S 75TH BIRTHDAY

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Category: Opinions

By Zarmine Kalayjian-Boghosian, Brooklyn, New York, The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, Aug 28, 2009

At Fordham University, on the occasion of the observance of the Armenian Genocide, the following were among the speakers: Dennis Papazian, Roger Smith and Ann Sortsman coordinated by psychologist Dr. Ani Kalayjian. Each is well known in their respective fields of studies.
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The absence of the Armenian youth and students in the audience was noticeable; instead, the chairs were filled by the Turkish and Azeri Turk students from the nearby universities of New York who had, it seemed, spread themselves in the audience. After an exhausting presentation with historical data and explanation by Prof. Papazian, these students kept parroting their leaders by demanding proofs of the Genocide.
Patiently, the lecturers provided the necessary explanations providing appropriate sources and references with the listing of names and authors. At the end I approached one of the questioning students who had volunteered that he attended Columbia University. I asked in a friendly fashion:

"Would you allow me to ask you one of my own questions?"

"Why not?," he said.

"Where is your grandfather now?" I asked.

"He lives in Istanbul," he said.

"And his father, if he is alive, where does he live?"

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And his father?…

He answered all the questions one after the other a bit uncomfortable, not knowing where would these questions lead to. Finally, I added:

Do you know why I have a pain in my heart even now? Because I am totally ignorant beyond my

grandfather. My own grandfather was separated from the rest of the family: women, children, the old and the young. He had entered the military service and soon after was disarmed with the other Armenian youth and placed in the "Amele Taboori" (work battalion) under the pretense of building the railroad and roads. He somehow survived and reached Aleppo, starving, thirsty, lice-infested and skeleton of a man. My husband's father was from Nidyeh, Konya. He too, having lost all his loved ones and orphaned at the age of 7 or 8, found himself in the streets of Aleppo. His maternal grandmother also died in Aleppo, with the Ottoman documents of family real estate clenched in her hand. Beyond these, we have no k knowledge about the family tree. Where did they go? Where did they disappear? We all are waiting for an answer to our own questions too!

Fast forward. With such tormenting thoughts in the background, my eyes are fixated upon a huge publication whose title reads: The First One Hundred in Aleppo (Miet Avual Meen Halab), authored by the historian Amer Rashed Moobayyad and published by Dar-el-Ghalam publishing house. In three huge and illustrated volumes we have the description of 100 names from 1900-2000. Among them two familiar names with a particular tenderness stare at me; one is my maternal grandfather, Oosda Jirji (Master George) and the other is my maternal uncle, my grandpa's only son who had caused a great joy to the Genocide surviving grandpa and grandma. They, like many in their generation, had felt on their shoulders the burden of obligation not only to survive, but also to replace the lost generation of Mardikians through their son. He is our one and only uncle, Keri Hovhannes George Jirji Mardikian. We have not had another one on the maternal side. Grandpa Jirji and Jemile grandma went through a lot after the exile and deportations; displaced life, tin roofed huts that leaked under heavy rains, 6-7 daughters and finally a son, the heir, the uncle, Keri who was barely 3-4 years older than his nieces and nephews. That did not deter grandma Jemile to assert the authority of the young Keri. Throughout our childish games or juvenile conflicts there was always Jemile-Ana's authoritative admonition: "Don't answer back to your uncle, do as he says." Who would have dared to argue with that command! He was the only one. A heaven-sent heir granted after 7-8 painful labors. Through this only son they, the survivors of Genocide, would be able to say to the murderous Turks that the Mardikian family was not ready for the museum, that it lives with all the cell and fiber of their bodies. And, live they did with a vengeance by multiplying. Their names entered the annals of history by being registered prominently in the centennial book of Syrian history.

Having escaped from the "work battalion" in rags and infested with lice, Jirji arrives Aleppo, Syria with a barely beating heart in a skeleton in 1918. About a decade later, in 1928, he was already known as Najjar (carpenter) Jirji. A few years later he was an acknowledged master builder of mini-vans and buses. He had figured out to construct the shell of these buses to provide cheaper transportation. In early 1950s, my grandpa's idea was further developed by other masters of the craft and thus contributed greatly to the Syrian industry. The buyers preferred the cheaper, more durable and locally produced buses instead of the more expensive imports. Grandpa passed away in 1964. Alzheimer's had already taken its toll a few year back. He forgot almost everything except for a few

military tunes and marches. I don't remember beyond that. He never got around to tell his grandfatherly tales and I regret that there is nothing left in our family archives. I was not even aware of the significance and seriousness of the work he did. I only knew that he was a respected master carpenter. In a dim recollection I can visualize when the apprentices and the junior masters paid the profound respects as they walked the entire length from "Boostan Kuleb" to grandpa's home in Nor Kiugh (new town) and back to carry his lunch.

The container was a few layers of compartments made of glazed copper "matbakhiye" which was always ready before anybody knocked at the door with a clockwork punctuality. Just as punctual was grandma who would summon me or my cousin to rush and not to make anybody wait needlessly. "And this portion is for the courier," she would add without fail. "Tell him to hurry up and don't let the meal get cold," she would add loudly enough to be heard by the courier.

With grandpa's illness came the inevitable time for Keri to grow up and blossom. It was an accepted tradition then for the boys soon after elementary school to plunge into the world of business and the girls to become brides. My Keri, as soon as he finished the Jesuits' elementary school, entered into apprenticeship to become a mechanist, a lathe operator (tornoji) against his teachers' urging that as a bright student he should pursue his higher education. The family's needs and priorities came first.

Hovhannes had become an avid reader. Antranig Dzaroogian's weekly Nairi became a second school for him. He read the paper faithfully and gave us to read certain articles and passages out loud and in turn he translated into Turkish for the benefit of grandma and grandpa. "Look how beautifully he writes", he would add. Besides becoming a master leith operator, uncle Hovhannes began to see clearly the path to serve and to contribute to the life of the community he had immersed himself, heart and soul, in the cultural and patriotic ideals of the time.

Every one of the 20 children of his five sisters has unique and fond memories to recall. He had very seriously and solemnly assured the patronizing role of becoming an uncle to their children as well. That story alone could fill pages.

Today, as I look through the book The First Hundred of the Century, I read the name of my uncle along with my grandpa's. I cannot hold back my emotions, pride and admiration. In the 1970s Hovhannes Mardikian developed the idea and the design in Aleppo, Syria to produce and market an automated machine, a cement and sand mixer. With no diplomas of higher education, relying only on his own ingenuity and initiative and by the sweat of his labor, he placed on the forefront of Syrian industry the trademark "Jebelet mejme" (the star of mixers) with supporting mechanisms that lifted the mixer with the cement content to the desired flour height under construction. This particular innovation was awarded by the Syrian government Ministry of Agriculture and Industry many commendations and awards. Later on, having completed special courses sponsored by the Hungarian government, he was awarded special certificate with high honors. With and through this all, his most noteworthy personal virtue was and still is his generosity. With that he responded also

to the needs and expectations of the fatherland and Artsakh, as much as he met the needs of the local, national, benevolent or cultural organizations, sometimes even going beyond his means. All along, he had on his side his devoted wife, Aleppo college graduate Alis Berberian-Mardikian, my own elementary school teacher of math and English.

Why are all these events and images parading in my memory just today, specially in this month of April?

Today my grandpa and his only son and successor are part of an honored class of entrepreneurs/inventors have made the centennial history of Aleppo, Syria. It was, it seems only yesterday having miraculously arrived with a burlap bag of wheat for a cover for his naked body, having survived the Genocide are smiling victoriously.

Today I am confident that on this April day and in the Aprils to follow, the soil of Aleppo will weight a bit lighter and hospitable on my grandpa's remains. If only because the name of Mardikian lives on in the historical book of Centennial Syria and his family tree keeps on greening and growing with 26 grandchildren, 51 great grandchildren, 7 great-great grandchildren. Today I also know that both Jirji Dede and Jemil Ana are smiling in peace and joining us as they are wishing to their only son and the Keri/uncle, to us all, to Hovhannes George Mardikian a happy, healthy long life on his birthday. And as poetic/historic justice would have it, great uncle keri Mardik has finally avenged all the cruelties of all the monstrous Taleats and Envers through his creative genius and abiding faith.

As I turn back to the Turkish student, I ask him again:

Tell me now, why am I here, what are we doing here, away from our ancestral towns of Kilis, Aintab, Konya, Nidyeh, Alexandrette, Sanjuk? What are we, my loved ones, I and my generation to do, scattered in strange lands, a little bit here and a little bit there! Having built homes, new nests from the Middle East to France, from the United States to South America, my scattered Arabic speaking cousins, French speaking, Spanish and English speaking cousins, what are we to do…?

Translated from Armenian by Fr. V.K