

LAND OF FREEDOM. LAND OF SAFETY

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Pearl Seferian, [National Post](#), 28 June 2012

As a child, I grew up thinking that Nov. 16 was Canada Day. I knew that on this day, there would be special food to celebrate, perhaps even my favourite, the sticky-sweet baklava. But first, before eating, we children would hear again how the ship Melita had brought my father to "the safest harbour in the world." He had escaped from the horrors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1922, but 32 women and children in his family had not survived the forced caravan march over mountain roads.

My father saw a twirling whip slash the naked flesh of his grandfather before he was murdered. He saw his grandmother stoned to death. My father saw his mother, covered in blood, hysterically pleading for the life of her two-year-old son, his small neck crushed under the boot of a soldier holding a bayonet. He witnessed brutal rapes and murders, the deaths of starving women and children. Each day dawned with its own terror until he finally escaped from Turkey.



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When the Melita docked in St. John, N.B., my father wept with relief. His heart told him that he had found a new home, but this was still a land he did not know. He trembled in fear when he saw police officers approaching him. When they held out their open hands in warm welcome, he was overcome with joy.

My father never forgot this greeting. For the rest of his life, he regarded the police in Canada as protectors of freedom and safety, and instilled in his children the highest regard for them. I wish he could have known that one of his great grandsons would become a police officer.

On Nov. 16, 1928, my father was officially "naturalized as a British subject entitled to all political and other rights, powers and privileges, and subject to all obligations, duties, and liabilities to which a natural born British subject is entitled or subject, and that he has to all intents and purposes the status of a natural born British subject." The certificate has the signature and the Seal of the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada on it. My father took to wearing a small Union Jack pin in his lapel after that. He wanted everyone to know that he was now a real Canadian. This certificate entitled him to travel freely anywhere in the entire country. He could own any property he earned. He could raise a family. For the first time in his life, he had "powers and privileges." We were all safe.

But, the gift of citizenship has to be safeguarded. I have another certificate he received - dated Dec. 1, 1944, with the crest of the government of Canada at the top, the official seal at the bottom. It states that Michael Seferian was a volunteer for "Civil Defence in the War against the German Reich and the other Axis Powers, and, as such, served faithfully so long as the need continued. The Government, on behalf of the People of Canada, hereby express appreciation of such services." It is signed "W.L. Mackenzie King, Prime Minister." How proud my father would be to know that he has a great-grandson named after him, who also received a letter of thanks from the Canadian government: Michael served on two missions in Afghanistan.

On March 10, 1930, the Department of Immigration and Colonization informed us that it had been decided that my mother could enter Canada. "This however, is only on condition that the alien mentioned, being in good physical and mental health, literate, and otherwise desirable -"

My mother met those conditions. Yet she never felt safe, not even after being here for many years.

Her father had been taken away at the beginning of the genocide. Relatives knew he had been murdered when his shoes were seen for sale in the bazaar in Ankara. Whenever my mother went out of the house, she would stand on the porch and first look both ways up and down the street. Just in case. Her telephone number was always unlisted. The promise of Canada was just too good to be believed.

I once saw my father, on a long-ago November 16, pick up a handful of cold Canadian earth and watch as it slowly sifted through his fingers. I wondered if he was remembering the soil of the barley fields that were lost to him forever, the sheep that roamed the fertile valleys along the Euphrates River, his father's apricot trees, the wild honey his mother harvested, or the now empty mountain roads of his village. He gave his children such a reverence for land that we all eventually bought our own. In Canada, armed men will not drive you out and soak the land with the blood of your children.

These are the enduring scars of genocide. When the fact of that genocide is denied, as is still the case in my father's native land, the sting of the perpetrator's hatred continues to sear the generations that follow. But the opposite is equally true, in a nation such as Canada: The "powers and privileges" of citizenship in the world's safest harbour are also passed to our children, for them

Pearl Seferian is a writer and artist who lives in London, Ont.

