MY PASSAGE TO ARARAT

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By Keith Garebian, Toronto, 12 August 2013

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Our mutual antipathies aside (described at length in my memoir from 2000, *Pain: Journeys Around My Parents*), I always empathized with him secretly, and with his persecuted and often callously forgotten tribe. I also admired him (just as secretly) because of his strength, courage, and ability to carve out an impressive career in Bombay, where he emigrated as a mature youth in order to be reunited with his surviving sister, and where I was born to him and my Anglo-Indian mother in 1943. I always thought of myself as my mother's son, and sometimes had wished for a different father. He was a good provider and loved his wife and three children (I was the eldest, with two younger sisters), but he had been a hard man to know and live with—just as I probably am—but we did draw microscopically closer as time shrank my bitterness and caused each of us to understand that we were both, in a radical sense, resident aliens—to each other, as well as to our adopted countries.

There is an inveterate irony in our family name, for it derives from an Arabic word for "stranger," though there is also a Turkish equivalent for it: *garip*. My father was obviously a stranger in India (linguistically and culturally), while I also felt alien to it. India was like a second skin that I had wanted

to slough off, and he had had a dwindling connection with Armenia. He did speak Armenian, and read Armenian pamphlets, but it was evident that his mother tongue was not deeply practised except when he met with fellow Armenians in Bombay. The result was that his Armenian wore away gradually, and as he began to lose much of his native dialect, he became a cultural urchin or orphan again. When he died in 1995, I found a copy of Franz Werfel's *The Last Days of Musa Dagh* in one of his closets, along with old jackets and shoes. He was always offering me his shoes, once his feet became too swollen to fit them—a semiotic irony I now can recognize. Given the incredible odyssey of his childhood, I could never know what it was to walk in his shoes in any sense.

As I wrote near the end of *Pain*: "He died without ever telling me if he had retained any faith in man, but I knew instinctively that he willed for me a survival against despair. He never said aloud whether he thought a writer disappeared so much into imagination as to be absent from the real world, but I know in my bones that he wished for me to find a place in whatever world where I could bear witness to a devastation of grace." When Frontenac House in Calgary published my poetry collection *Children of Ararat* (2010), I was grateful for the opportunity of paying homage to him and his murdered tribe. The book was in a radical sense my argument with the world that had turned a deaf ear to the cries of millions of Armenians and their descendants. But it was more than this: a palpable struggle on my part to understand something crucial about Armenians—not just the ordinary folk, but the creative geniuses as well. Perhaps, too, it was my way of identifying myself as Armenian, at least as far as my instincts and obsessions were concerned. Perhaps I inherited some of my father's passion, and I proclaim that a writer without true, inveterate passion is nothing more than a clever exhibitionist.

I had immersed myself in reading Armenian history (in English), Armenian writers (in English), watching great films in Armenian (with English subtitles), appreciating Armenian painters, musicians, and dancers, expanding my acquaintanceship with Armenian Canadians, and signing petitions that advanced Armenian causes nationally and internationally. But I had never studied Armenian, never spoken, read, or written it. I was *odar*—though far less so than my mother and sisters had been. Armenia and Armenians existed and cast their shadows across me, and I never felt for even an instant that they were second-rate or unworthy of my attention or devotion. I never felt it shameful that my father had come from a race of merchants and traders, jewellers and soldiers. What I had been resisting was not Armenians, *per se*, but my father's shadow, and once I realized this, I also sensed that there was a mysterious blood bond between me and the Armenians. And then came a surprise invitation from the Writers' Union of Armenia last May to attend the 5th Conference of Writers of Armenian Origin Composing in Other Languages. The unifying theme was "Globalization and National Identity," and the conference was to be held in Tsaghkadzor, July 11-15. Jirair Tutunjian (whom I regard as my informal private tutor in all things Armenian) was one of those who had spread my name while he was last in Armenia, but soon other Armenians (Artsvi Bakhchinyan, Levon Ananyan, Aris Babikian, Khoren Mardoyan, David Karapetyan, and members of the Armenian National Committee) took an active role in helping me fund and organize a trip that would include

three extra nights in Yerevan after the conference.

"You can be Armenian for a week!" joked Jirair, tongue probably in cheek. I felt a little unsettled. Of course, I would feel a little less *odar*, but it was eerily disconcerting to know that the trip would mean that I would experience more of Armenia than my father was able to remember. I dreamed of Ararat. "You will see Ararat everywhere!" Jirair promised, as if the sightings were a psychic inevitability for people of the mountain or those who identified spiritually with it. But the sad fact was that the mountain was not in the Republic; it was held, alive in its natural massive shape, by Turkey. Masis or Mount Ararat was just one more thing that the unspeakable nation had captured in its pornographic attempt to be an exterminating demon.

Exposed to Peter Balakian's eloquent prose and poetry, immersed in books and articles of Armenian history, then steeping myself in Kildare Dobbs's *Anatolian Suite* and re-reading parts of Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat*, I felt prepared to face the shadows. I would not be able to visit Diyarbekir in eastern Turkey, and although I had a melancholy feeling about this, I knew that I must mask or camouflage emotion on this trip lest it devolve into a voyage of hysteria.

Armenia came to me in rugged chunks: rough hills and mountains; expanses of dry, non-irrigable land; pockmarked stone churches; eroding *khachkars* in rural cemeteries and churchyards, and massive sculptures. Tsaghkadzor came into view only past villages and towns almost forgotten by time. Writers' House was an ornate refuge, high in green wilderness. Established in 1930, it had been the haunt of many famous Armenian writers, such as Yeghishe Charents, Nairi Zaryan, Vardges Petrosyan, etc. The literary connection was not particular just to this resort, for Yerevan itself had streets and avenues named after great Armenian writers—and, therefore, so unlike anywhere in Canada. The conference itself resolved itself into an example of cultural schizophrenia, as native Armenian writers outnumbered the Diaspora ones, not all of whom read or wrote Armenian. In fact, there was more than one instance when a Western Armenian proclaimed the imperative of one's speaking Armenian in order to qualify as Armenian—an attitude that raised my ire, given my unshakable belief that as a writer in English of Armenian themes, I was reaching a far wider readership than I would have had I performed the same function in my father's native tongue. But this problem aside, I was treated with great courtesy, dignity, and generosity, especially by Levon Ananyan (president of the Writers' Union of Armenia), David Karapetyan (deputy minister of Diaspora), and Roza Hovhanessyan of the ministry—their many acts of kindness catalyzed by the active mediation of Khoren Mardoyan, assistant to the ministry in Toronto.

And there were my colleagues, some native to Armenia, others from the United States, who served as my invaluable translators and interpreters: Hermine Navasardyan, Artem Haroutyunyan, Natella Lalabekian, Aram Arkun, and Lucine Kasbarian (whom I consider a soul-sister of utter sensitivity and consideration). It was impossible for me to be cool and detached in Armenia, first because such *sang-froid* is hardly native to my constitution, and second because I found that deep down I was possessed of a very Armenian intensity, an argumentativeness that sometimes could seem almost

pathological if not simply fiery. But there were other reasons: the extraordinary warmth of many of my colleagues, and the fact that in my senior maturity (verging on anecdotage), I was finally brought into a direct but brief confrontation with the rigour, cruelty, generosity, frustration, and celebration of Armenian life. It was not an easy subject to jump into, but it lured me into feeling something—discomfort, charm, pleasure, or pathos—something that transcended clichés of exhausted dignity or traumatic frissons. I could be a little more than a mere tourist when I visited Echmiadzin Cathedral, the ancient temple at Garni, the monastery in Geghard with its naturally icy fresh spring water flowing out of black rock, the *khachakars* of Noratus, the Opera House, salty Lake Sevan, the Paradjanov Museum, Matenadaran, or Republic Square. I felt a kinship with the rocks, the soil, the scrub, the apricot trees, the exquisite illuminated manuscripts, the dancing fountains, even the biting wind whipping around the lake. There was an awesome immensity to the sky and the rocks, and I felt a new sense of Time, a new provocation for thought. The huge space invited larger thoughts, but of what? The endemic poverty of rural Armenia? The undeniable threats from Russia and Turkey? The ever widening loss of native Armenians to the lures of more economically-profitable countries? The real or imagined threats of globalization to national identity?

The answer ultimately came on July 14 on a visit to the Dzidzernakaberd Armenian Genocide Memorial and Museum. I had, I believed, prepared myself against an overwhelming welter of feelings. I would be silent because of the "remoteness" of the Genocide, silent because my father and I had forgiven each other, silent because I had already written about feeling a nomadic kinship with him, silent because I had already given voice in poetry to empty work-sheds, ruined orchards, shrivelled shoes, abandoned flutes, and blue shadows. I had delivered elegies in print for my father and his murdered tribe, for Arshile Gorky, Sergei Paradjanov, and William Saroyan. I had commemorated tools for chopping cotton that had been used to gouge Armenian flesh, tattooed Armenian girls, and at least thirteen ways of looking at the Turk, especially of their coded innuendo: "Take care of the Armenians." I had wept in 1991 when my father tried to articulate his jumbled nightmare in his strongly accented, tainted English, so I was done with weeping. But after I had entered the memorial proper with its twelve huge vertical slabs of stone (representing districts of historical Armenia) and had joined my colleagues, each of us adding a white rose in the circle of stone surrounding the eternal flame, I felt older than my father and subject to a sudden pain that went beyond pain. I remembered in a way I had not anticipated the small particular of his tearful, terrified three-year old sister (whose name he had long forgotten) abandoned under a lonely tree as he, his older sister, and mother assured her they would return. It was, of course, a false promise because it was rooted in an impossible proposition. And the horror of it has never diminished in my mind.

As the tsunami of emotion struck me, I was quietly comforted by the embracing arms of Hermine and Lucine. "We are such a strong people," Lucine commented, "to have survived. You and I are Dikranagertsi." Indeed, and more. We are people of the Mountain. We are the Mountain.

Atrocity is often magnified by the scale of statistics, but what need of a million and a half bodies when a single anonymous child can cry out for rescue under a nameless tree in an unnamed geography of terror? That barely remembered sister of my unfortunate father reminded me why I am my father's son, a stranger to his language and some of his countrymen's customs but an Armenian with eyes that have a deep-sea sadness and a soul across which the snows of Ararat blow. I never did get to see The Mountain. There was too much July haze for that, but I thought I caught a glimpse of its far-off snow-capped peaks during a bus ride. It is one reason for me to return. Another is my refusal to forget the Armenian past, to allow it to die with him, or to keep it only to myself.