OUR HOUSE IN CANADA

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Rev. Hovhannes Sarmazian
Translated and abridged by **Vahe H. Apelian,** February 2016

> *Rev. Hovhannes Sarmazian is the Pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Cambridge, Canada, since 1990. Formerly he was a teacher and a pastor of the Armenian Evangelical Church in Anjar. The attached piece is from his book "Can The Land Be Sold?" (Հողը կը ծախուի՞) published in 2006.*

After long family discussions and arguments, last October finally we also got a house in Canada. Our house now has its owner, its own address and its unique telephone number. Our children are very happy as if they achieved a victory. They also seem to be a bit proud of their new house. Enthused they call friends a little bit everywhere and herald to them the news of their new house and invite them to come and see their new residence.

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Buying a house lately had become an issue of contention in our family and cause for frequent arguments. My elder son who has an aptitude for mathematics had always tried to convince me of the benefits of buying a house citing figures and letting me know how beneficial purchasing a house can be over renting one.

- "Instead of wasting your money paying rent, you can allocate the same amount towards a mortgage and years later the house will be yours." My son used to tell me confidently. His sister and brother would join to confirm his saying. I, on the other hand, with my Middle-Eastern mentality, used to ask myself,

- "Am I going to go in hundred of thousands debt? That is not possible. In a situation like that I would

lose my sleep during the nights. No, that's impossible. It is not possible to buy a house when there is no available money for it", would be my conclusion.

After all this commotion, I would look forward sitting in front of our television during the weekends and enjoy the Armenian program, "New Horizon". During airing of the program, a spokesperson from an agency that deals with buying and selling properties would invariably appear announcing in support of my children.

- "Are you tired of paying rent? Do you know how easy it is to become the owner of you own house? To know how we can be of help to you, call us".

And then their business address and their telephone number would appear on the screen.

- "Let us take Dad to the office of the real estate agency, and ask him to stay there until evening so that he will come to realize how beneficial is buying a house instead of renting one", used to say my daughter to her two brothers.

It is fair that I confess that as a student I also have been pretty good in the subject of mathematics. However, I have not been "open-eyed" when it came to matters of buying and selling. That is why I have always felt that people can easily take advantage of me and thus be able to sell me something they have set at a higher price than it is actually worth.

Finally, being left on my own in my viewpoint, I accepted my defeat and gave in enabling us to get a house for our own. Admittedly our new house is a pretty house with an appealing front yard laden with flowers and a fenced backyard filled with newly planted fruit bearing trees. With its garage and neatly arranged rooms, it is a very livable house. Everything pertaining to the house has been thoughtfully planned.

The previous owner was a former villager from Portugal who is now engaged in construction. What struck me odd is the following: after living in the house for the previous five years and with his own efforts planting the flowers and fruit bearing trees, with total ease and a little bit happy and without showing the slightest sentiments, handed us the keys of the house and walked down the streets during the sunset hours. For a brief moment I wondered if I was deceived this time around too. Why would the man look so happy for having sold his house?

Why should I lie lest I sin? For some time my old car remained idle on the street as it was not operational any more. Three months ago, abiding to the order of the municipality, I called a special agency to tow it away. When they came and tied our old car to their special truck and started hauling it away like the carcass of a dead domestic animal, for a brief moment I followed them and then suddenly an overwhelming sadness overtook me. That iron thing without a soul had been my companion for many years and had served me well. How was it that the Portuguese villager could let go of the house he had tended with his own hands and without slightest emotion hand us the keys and walk away without even taking one last glance?

We are already in our new house. My children are happy and negotiate among themselves as who would occupy which room. Household utensils, furniture, personal items are being placed in their proper spots.

Everyone in the family appears to be happy and enthusiastic. I also am happy to a certain extent. But the source of my happiness is not the house but the result of my children's happiness. I have to confess that our new house in Canada does not lift my spirits. I do not know why I do not feel at home in the beautiful and comfortable house. It is not because I have accumulated debt that will take years to pay. Some inexplicable, mysterious and mystifying feeling keeps me from embracing without reservation our new house. I liken myself to the young village migrant in the big city who after leaving his first love back in the village, marries maybe a more beautiful but nonetheless a strange city girl.

Why is it that everything appears to be artificial and illusory to me in this remote land? These thoughts take me to a distant place, at the northwestern corner of Syria, to Kessab where, at the foot of the Seldran mountain, there is a small Armenian village called Baghjaghaz and to a small house in that village. That small house is our ancestral house. It is modest but entirely and really ours. My grandfather had built it with his hands.

In 1909, during the Adana Massacres, marauding Turkish mobs sacked and torched also Kessab and its surrounding villages. My grandfather returned to his demolished ancestral home once more, and with a renewed faith and with an Armenian stubbornness, had cut the huge pine tree in its yard and from whose trunk and thick branches he had fashioned logs and wood panels to build our house anew.

My father tended the house every fall and did the repairs so that its earth-covered roof and its thick stone-walls would stand the fury of winter rain and snow. I remember the blue stone quarry not far from our village. We called the blue stones Kuyruk. Every autumn the able-bodied men of the village would go to the quarry and bring the blue stones and lay them over the roofs and then go over them with large stone-rollers to crush and pack them on the rooftop against the rain.

Our Bagjaghaz house had history as to who was the carpenter who made the wooden windows and its shutters and who was the master mason who had laid down its thick wall and layered it with *kirej* - a special cementing material the villagers prepared. My father would tell us such things about the house with supreme patience.

The wooden logs supporting the roof extended approximately a foot or so beyond the walls. Over

the extension stones were placed to contain the blue crushed stones on the rooftops. At times the stones from the perimeter of our roof would fall casting the image of an old person some of whose front teeth are missing. Below these stones, along one of the walls, three chicken coops were placed for the hens to lay their eggs. It was so pleasant to hear the hens vocalizing after laying their eggs and expecting my mother to offer them extra feed.

It is not possible not to remember the mulberry tree in our courtyard. In the evenings Uncle Elesha would come and lean against the trunk of the tree while holding his pipe and waiting for my father to step out of the house to chat under the moonlight of bygone days.

Our house consisted of two rooms. One was at ground level and was used as the stable. The other room was over the stable. On a June day I was born in a corner of its wooden floor without the assistance of a nurse or a medical doctor. Our unschooled but expert midwife Hannoush Nanar (grandma) had helped my mother give birth.

My mother would tell of the episode as if it was a fairly tale. “It was in late June; the fruits of the apricot tree in our yard had barely started ripening. It was harvest time and all of us had gone to the fields. I started feeling not well. I came home early and had people summon Hannoush Nanar. That evening, before sunset, you were born.”

Our ancestral home in the village, where I have first opened my eyes and uttered my first cry has anchored an unbreakable bond in me. I maintain a spiritual connection with its stones, wooden logs, and its cozy hearth however inanimate objects they are. I realize that the residence that resonates the most sentiments in the person is one’s ancestral home where the person is born and raised.

I liken myself to the restless lad in the poem who ventured out of their modest home at the foot of the hill, next to a creek in search of better accommodation. He went onto the world and saw many large and beautiful houses but in each one of them he found something amiss and longingly returned to his modest home at the foot of the hill, next to the creek.

And now in our new and beautiful house in Canada, I do not know why, I feel a stranger. I wonder why my joy is not genuine and unbound. Why is that, things on these Western shores appear alien to me? When? Why? And how is that I lost my ability to acculturate anew?

I direct my thoughts to our ancestral home in the village and wonder; what is that it is so magnetic and so profound that continues to attract me to it even half a century later? Small memories from my ancestral home continue to stir emotions in me and I revert to that little child I was who recited the poem proclaiming the sweetness of his home.