COPING WITH ANCESTRAL GRIEF: EMMA TATIK AND ZHENGYALOV HATS

Posted on April 13, 2021 by Keghart

Category: Opinions

By Nuard Tadevosyan Ancestral Hub 28 March 2021

The loss of my ancestral lands this year led me through a grieving process I was unexpectedly, intimately familiar with. The waves of this grieving process are not clear-cut. They do not exist in the careful outlines that Western psychoanalysis dictates. Shock, denial, fury, sorrow, acceptance. They eke and ebb like the tides; sometimes a whisper that is easy to ignore, sometimes a roaring that shakes my very bones. Sometimes, the pitfalls of lamentation bleed unconsciously into nostalgic joy. A week or so ago, I dug out some photographs, mostly blurry and badly lit, of a day in Armenia from 2012. These photographs chronicle a time I have long kept as a prayer in my thoughts, as the autumn weeks blurred into winter. News of invasion, death, and loss greeted me in the morning, just as they plagued my dreams at night. I kept this day with me as a talisman since the first rumbles of war in July, and I feel it is at long last ready to be shared — as all things are shared within our culture.

Eight years ago in blisteringly hot July, my mother Karine, my sister Amalia, my cousin Tatevik, and my great-aunt Emma gathered together in Yerevan to make ժենգյալով հաց.

This trip of ours to Armenia took place six years after our last one. I had been 11 then, traveling to my grandmother's lands for a baptism that awakened me culturally more than it did in the name of any Christian tenet. We came to Armenia in 2012 because my father had suddenly died in January of that year. Diagnosed with cancer in late November, he slipped away some short weeks after. It came as a colossal shock. We were an extremely tightly knit family, and my father's physical and mental strength was at the core of it. This was the man who inspired my love of history, magic, literature and philosophy. This was the man I saw fearlessly climb waterfalls. This was a father whose laugh was generous, his temperament bright and mild. We left Canada that summer to be at home, with our family, in our lands, as a foundational part of our identity, my father, Ashot — had just been ripped away from us.

Since my father's sudden diagnosis and passing, I associate the temporal change in late November

with death. I imagine Persephone dropping her flowers and sinking to chthonic depths. Plants wither, die, rot. Snow muffles everything. We see things fade away in autumn and winter is a mourning period: hibernation. I am not exaggerating when I say that what I experienced this year in cultural loss feels very similar to my father's death eight years ago. It is a sudden, unexplained absence that feels so much larger than the things it left behind.

So here we are in 2012, the summer after the worst tragedy of my life, making *zhengyalov hats* with my great-aunt. She was the youngest sister of the four Gabrielyan siblings whom my closest family members descend from. Tamar, Nvard, Nikolai, and Emma. All were born and raised in the Artsakhtsi village of Hadrut, like their ancestors before them, but Emma was the last surviving. To my mother, I imagine she was a living reminder of childhoods spent in Hadrut. I grew up hearing stories about Mama roving wild in Artsakh, climbing walnut trees and cracking the nuts so her fingers, clothes, and faces stained with walnut dye — impossibly tricky to remove. She told us how she came back to school in Yerevan every September with fear muffling her voice, afraid to speak for weeks because her Artsakhtsi accent would emerge to single her out among her peers.

Towards the later years of her life, Emma Tatik developed severe arthritis. Her limbs were worn down with age and disease, her brown eyes clouded with cataracts, but her mind was sharp like a knife edge. She remembered everything from phone numbers to family history to birthdays. Every time we visited her she was seated on the same soft brown couch, and every time we left her eyes would well up with tears. We gathered together one day that summer to make a much-beloved Artsakhtsi specialty: *zhengyalov hats*. Emma could barely move her hands, but she would mutter instructions at us, directing us like a queen from that permanent place on the couch.

We washed a wide variety of greens. Not all of the traditional forty-something herbs, most of which go out of season when springtime ends, all of which are endemic to Artsakh and Armenia. Violet flowers, dill weed, nettle leaves, vine leaves, and others which held strange, local names, with no equivalent that I could properly describe in English. Emma Tatik pronounced them for us and the words hung like a melody or a spell: **թրթնջուկ, կնձմնձուկ, ճռճռուկ, ծտապաշար, գառնականջ, պառավապորտը.** *Trtnjuk, knchmnchuk, dzrdzruk, chtapashar, garnakanj, paravaport.*

Under Emma's watchful eye we mixed the dough carefully, formed balls of it into neat rows, rolled it out into thin sheets, stuffed them with lightly oiled greens, and delicately stitched seams onto every almond-shaped piece. Five women of three generations together, Emma Tatik's words flowing into our hands as we worked the dough. My mother heated the gas stove and put baking sheets on top, rotating every piece just until the bread was gridded with gold.

The smell of it was heaven and earth rolling together, filling the apartment with home.

For dinner, we sat down with our mound of *zhengyalov hats*, with homemade Armenian wine that glinted ruby-red from our glasses. My uncle Artem, Emma Tatik's son, cut fragile slices of Lori cheese and slipped them into layers of green, brown eyes shining like Emma's once did.

Zhengyalov hats. Bread with greens. It's such a simple recipe. Nothing to the dough but flour and water, nothing to the filling but various greens, a dash of salt, and some oil. But God, the flavour. How satisfying it feels to hold, the crunch of barely-steamed mountain herbs between your teeth. Me at age seventeen, burning my tongue and my fingers on the flavours of my roots.

Emma Tatik passed away five years later, in 2017. The arthritis had gotten so bad she couldn't speak when we saw her that year. We got the news the moment we touched ground in Canada. Before we came, she was refusing food and drink. Family members said she was holding out her strength to see my mother one last time. When my mother let out a cry of grief at the airport after finding out, I thought of the tears that rolled from Emma Tatik's eyes every time we left her for the year. We are summer visitors to home, arriving with the Armenian apricots that ripen in mid-June.

I am selfishly glad she never lived to see what became of her homeland, the village where she grew up, where her forebears are buried. I wept, but I am glad she found her peace.

I think that now, she is walking along the Artsakh of her childhood as her round-cheeked, bright-eyed, lovely self, joints free from arthritic pain, limbs plump. With her fingers young again, I wonder if she sifts through mountain weeds for the right greens, mixing the dough with the wisdom only experience brings, turning almond-shaped pieces over an eternal flame. I wonder if she brings *zhengyalov hats* to her parents, her husband, her son, her brother and her sisters, all her ancestors before her. I wonder if they sit together every night, these spirits of Hadrut. I wonder if they make

toasts with ruby-red wine to *azat, ankakh* Artsakh.

I wonder if this is the version of Hadrut that waits for me: the only version that I will ever see.

There are no comments yet.