TWO EARTHQUAKES AND THREE BABIES

Posted on October 23, 2011 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Seta Haig, Glendale, Sunday morning, October 23, 2011

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The big news early today is a 7.2 magnitude devastating earthquake in the region of Van, Eastern Turkey. The TV broadcasts the tragic news. The screen exhibits heartbreaking images of large residential areas with huge piles of debris from hundreds of collapsed, crumbled houses and apartment buildings.

My first reaction is: "*But that's our land! That land belongs to us Armenians, many of whom still live, scattered through almost every country in the world that constitute what we call the Diaspora!"*

But wherever and whoever the victims, human tragedy of people all over the world has a way of touching fellow human beings. As I watch the rescue and relief efforts deployed and the gradual rise of the casualty count, a wave of mixed emotions ripple through my memories. My thoughts fly back to the days of the Northridge Earthquake.

I remember waking up that early Monday morning just after 04:31 Pacific Standard Time on January 17, 1994 in my home in Tarzana, California.

Our house was rumbling, pieces from it were breaking apart and tumbling down, and everything loose was falling and littering the floor. In my first few moments of anguish and desperation, all I could do was yell: "My baby! O my baby!" In my shock and trauma I could not recall the name of my first-born daughter Arlene, barely five months old at that time. Soon afterward, as I was told later, I fainted altogether. My husband had to shake me back to consciousness. He then took our daughter in his arms, and the three of us somehow made it to the exit. During all this time there was not a sound from our baby girl Arlene. I could not expel my gut feeling that most probably she was injured, or…wait a minute…Oh my God, please don't make it worse!

When we had already reached the main gateway and the deafening tremors had at last subsided, I resumed my frantic questions on Arlene's safety. My husband had to literally wake her up. Only at that moment did I finally understand what had really happened to Arlene: she had slept like an angel through the whole earthquake!

Two days have passed since this latest earthquake hit the Van region in Turkey. Right now I am watching the astounding survival story of a two-week old Turk baby girl called Azra that was miraculously rescued from under the rubbles. I am almost in tears. My joy is compounded at learning that Azra's mother and grandmother have survived as well! And I feel a strange bond of fate with Azra's mother, since I know how it feels to fear the loss of a child in the blind chaos of a natural disaster that is an earthquake.

And my thoughts make a painful flashback to another baby, the eldest brother of my father, who perished in another chaos of a – this one man-made – disaster (real name: Genocide) almost a century ago. My grandmother gave birth to him on the burning sands of the Syrian Desert during the "deportation" of Armenians from their homeland by the Ottoman Turkish authorities. Under the glassy stare of Turk gendarmes prodding and compelling her with their bayonets to move along, my grandmother was forced to abandon her baby the same day he was born. She sprinkled some sand on his quivering tiny body to "protect" it from the scorching sun, and moved on. I will not attempt here the impossible by trying to give expression to her inner tragedy then and there – and thereafter throughout her long life. My father confides his grief to me, however, that he cannot remember his mother ever laughing like any normal human being. With all the good will she harbored toward her fellowmen, she could not even smile to her last day.

Despite our painful history and the inhuman crimes perpetrated by the Turkish Ottomans against Armenians, my bond of empathy with baby Azra's mother remains overwhelming. I only hope – and I am inclined to be almost sure – that the feelings are mutual by the mothers of all Turkish Azras toward thousands and thousands of Armenian babies like my late uncle of one day who had to close their eyes forever the same day they were born.