WAS IT STOCKHOLM SYNDROME?

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By Vahe H. Apelian, Ohio, January 2014

Stockholm Syndrome is a term I came across for the first time in my freshman Psychology 101 course. It was an elective course. The term gave me a whole new perspective about my maternal grandmother's unusual recount of her ordeal during the Genocide.

Vahe Apelian's grandmother with her children and their spouses

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Wikipedia defines it as follows: "Stockholm syndrome, or capture–bonding, is a psychological phenomenon in which hostages express empathy and sympathy and have positive feelings toward their captors, sometimes to the point of defending them….The FBI's Hostage Barricade Database System shows that roughly 27% of victims show evidence of Stockholm syndrome." Psychologists offer varying explanations to this seemingly contradictory behavior. It may be that it is the last resort to safeguard one's sanity.

My paternal and maternal grandparents were orphaned survivors of the Armenian Genocide. They were driven to their extermination along with the rest of their parental families and Kessabtsis in July 1915. The popular account in Kessab is that their ordeal lasted three years and three months, placing their return to their villages sometime in the fall of 1918 to weather the winter ahead without necessary provisions. Somehow they made it, so to speak.

I was their firstborn grandchild. Their other grandchildren would trail me by some six years and longer. It may be because of that I seemed to have enjoyed their special attention, although I did not have the pleasure of knowing my maternal gradfather, Khacher. He had passed away at the age of 38 due to 'pneumonia' leaving his young wife, my maternal grandmother Karoun (Apelian) Chelebian, a young widow raising their 2 sons and their 2 daughters. Their eldest child, my later maternal uncle, Dr. Antranig Chalabian, was a 10 years old lad when his father passed away.

My paternal grandfather, Stepan, was a quiet man. His whole life outside his family and work in the fields, revolved and involved the Armenian Evangelical church of Keurkune, which he served his whole life as its life-long treasurer and trustee until almost the last few years of his life. He was very evasive when it came to my youthful curiosity about his life during the Genocide. He had a brother

named Garabed, who passed away presumably during the catastrophe. My brother was named after him. He also seemed to have a sister who survived the Genocide. We never found out where she lived.

My paternal grandmother, Sarah, was a gregarious woman. She had become *de facto* medical custodian of the village. There was no birth, dislocated joints or broken bones she was not called to attend. Our grandparents' house was the only one in the village that was known after her instead of her husband, when households in greater Kessab were referred to by the patriarch of the family. She was very young when she also embarked on the perilous journey. That may be the reason why she did not have much recollection to share.

My maternal grandmother's case was altogether different. I associate the Armenian Genocide with her more than with anyone else. She was fifteen years old when she was driven from her home with the rest of her parental family. She was a refined woman in manners, in conversation, in her choice of words. She stood apart. Almost every evening I would find her kneeling on her bed and praying with a barely audible but intense murmur. My mother has told me that she read the Bible once a year, every year. She had her family's milestones inscribed in a beautiful handwriting in a Bible that I now treasure.

When the family talk came to Genocide she would tell us that the Turkish gendarmes that accompanied their caravan displayed empathy. They would encourage them, she would tell us, to endure a bit longer for their ordeal would soon be over. They showed care and concern to their plight, she would say. I was a high school student and I would often wander how that could be for often at night she exhibited a scary scene. Every now and then, far into the night, when everyone in the family would be sleeping suddenly she would scream in a terrifying agony and fear. We would immediately rush to her bedside and wake her up. I do not recall seeing her sweating or showing any outward sign of distress. She would then go back sleeping peacefully completely oblivious of the experience a moment ago.

It was in that Psychology 101 class when the day's lecture dealt with Stockholm syndrome that it occurred to me that my maternal grandmother demonstrated the symptoms of that affliction.

I took leave of her in July 1977 in the midst of the Lebanese Civil War. I was to embark on my own immigrant's journey to the United States. My maternal uncle and aunt told me that she had agonized over my departure and passed away that very night after an apparent stroke. We heard the news of her demise the next day through a radio station. I had crossed West Beirut and could no longer return. My uncle accompanied her body to Kessab and had her buried next to her husband and daughter in the Keurkune' ancient cemetery. My mother decided not to wear black. She did not want to bid me farewell in sober attire.

Those were hectic days. After all these years, and whenever I think of those days I see my mother waving a white handkerchief as the boat sailed into the sea and she disappeared from view. I also

cannot do away with the association of Stockholm syndrome and my maternal grandmother's unusual depiction of her ordeal during the Genocide even though many of my family members have told me that it was her deep-seated Christian faith of forgiveness that drove her and not such a syndrome.