REMEMBERING METZMAMA

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Category: Opinions

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My grandmother (*metzmama*) was an orphan of the 1915 genocide of Armenians in Eastern Turkey. Her entire family was killed, and this young homeless child was found wandering the streets, not knowing her name or age. Somehow amidst the death and destruction she survived. Those who found her named her Sirhoun (English: beautiful). The Red Cross and Church groups provided food and shelter for her and hundreds of thousands of others for a number of agonizing years.

As a child, Sirhoun spent ten long and lonely years in various refugee camps and orphanages in one country after another. Eventually, she was to be shipped with other refugees to America, but en route disembarked in Egypt. Adopted by an Armenian family in the diaspora, she worked as a young domestic. A marriage was arranged with another survivor of the genocide, a man much older than she was. Soon one child was born — Vartouie (Rose). Grandfather, however, could not cope with the horrific memory of the genocide and committed suicide while his young bride, my grandmother, was bearing her second child.

My grandmother, now a young, impoverished widow, tried to abort the fetus but failed. Her young son survived and many years later went on to win a silver medal at the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. However, long before that joyous day, she endured the difficult times of the 1930s economic Great Depression, witnessed the Second World War, and Rommel's approaching German army in the desert of Egypt. During the War, millions died, and many lives were disrupted, yet amidst the conflict, a young Englishman and Armenian woman met in Alexandria, Egypt. It was West meets East. The two fell in love and married. When the war ended, Mom and Dad went to England and post-war rationing, while *metzmama* and her two other children succumbed to Stalinist propaganda and relocated to Armenia in the totalitarian Soviet Union.

For the next twenty-five years, Sirhoun's family was separated by the diaspora and the Cold War. Happily, as a bipolar world gradually gave way to detente, we were all reunited in Canada in the late 1960s. Mother and daughter, along with siblings, had lived apart for so long, while others such as grandchildren and cousins, had never met. It was at times difficult to reintegrate the two solitudes of East and West. But time passed and loving ties were nurtured. *Metzmama* would speak to me, her oldest grandson, in her Russified French, while I would reply in my Anglicized French. It was the only language we had in common. Somehow, she began to share her untold story, along with her hopes and fears. She gave me detailed directions to a few family possessions buried in some long-lost spot. I did not have the heart to tell her that hopes of finding such keepsakes were futile.

I went off to university to study politics and to try to understand our century and its calamities. There I met my wife Suzanne and we fell in love. Three university degrees and many years later, we came to Kingston. One of the greatest joys in my life occurred in the 1970s when our daughter Kathryn Anoush (Armenian for sweetness) was born just in time for my grandmother — the orphan of the genocide — to see her first great-grandchild. It was a triumph of the human spirit to see a young

child's tiny, delicate fingers touch the old, weathered hands of a survivor of too much of the twentieth century's horrors: two world wars, genocide, depression, totalitarianism, and separation of the diaspora. In the end, love prevailed. My grandmother only lived a few months longer, but I will always remember the special moment when an old lady smiled and touched the young infant, Anoush. Somehow that vivid memory helps whenever I look at the multitude of young children in today's refugee camps. *Metzmama*, I see you amidst the tears. There is hope amidst such despair.

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Professor Whitehorn is the editor of **The Armenian Genocide: The Essential Reference Guide (ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara, 2015)** *and author of* **Just Poems: Reflections on the Armenian Genocide (Winnipeg, Hybrid Publishing, 2009).**

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