Antaram's Journey

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My great-grandmother, Antaram Abrahamian (later Boghossian), was the strongest woman I have ever known (Fig. 5.1). She was without doubt the head of the household; she worked incessantly all day, slept very little, lovingly provided for her two daughters, their children (her grandchildren), and even her great-grandchildren, yet she never complained about her responsibilities nor did she ever leave something unfinished, and she always had the best sense of humour. Like my father, I used to call her *medzmama* (literally 'grandmother' in Armenian). Yet it was not only our prerogative as her descendants to call her this. Neighbours, friends, and acquaintances who were not kin also called her *medz*: 'big' or 'great'. As a child I wondered why. Later, I thought it was maybe because they noticed and respected her authority, her endurance, but most of all her stamina. In the end, she was the one who resisted wilting in a cruel world that orphaned her and the one who had the courage and strength to start life anew…

Antaram was from Çengiler, then a large and prosperous village close to the town of Pazarköy, in the vicinity of the city of Bursa, in western Anatolia. Çengiler was a large village of 5,000 inhabitants, with a clear Armenian majority.[1] The main agricultural product was olives. But a variety of skilled crafts, such as blacksmithing, leatherwork, coppersmithing, tinsmithing, and goldsmithing, were also practised. In fact, Çengiler was an important centre of sericulture and silk weaving, the most important industry in Bursa and its surroundings. The village was known for its silk workshops, which employed several hundred workers, and its steam-driven wheels, which numbered 500 to 600 across all the workshops in the village.

In 1913, the members of several community organizations, the Intellectual Society, the Students' Union, the Theatre Society, the Athletes' Society, and General Construction founded a cooperative in order to fund small businesses and artisans. It was meant to act as a neighbourly bank. In addition to fund-raising, the

1 For detailed information on the economic, social, and cultural life of Çengiler, see Derebeyian, S. *Houshamadian Chengileri Hayots'*, *1528-1923* [Memorial volume of the Armenians of Chengiler, 1528-1923], Paris, P. Elekian, 1973.

Figure 5.1. Antaram at her home in İcadiye, with her beloved cigarette in hand, 1970s.

Source: The author's family archive.

cooperative constructed a building, in which a great number of commodities were sold. The cooperative changed the village to a great extent. Trade flourished and customers poured into Çengiler to shop. Around 1914, the village exported more than 2,000 kilograms of raw silk annually to Marseille, Lyons, Milan, and London by way of this cooperative, which local craftsmen had founded to secure supplies and encourage sales. These were glorious days for the villagers. They invited notable

members of the Armenian community, including intellectuals. Nazaret Daghavarian,[2] Siamanto,[3] and Gomidas Vartabed[4] all visited Çengiler before 1915.

Antaram was born there in 1901, her parents' first and only daughter, who followed three elder brothers. She would soon have a younger brother as well, who she would later wish had been a sister instead.

In August 1914 the military's general mobilization very quickly drained the village households of their young men. But there is no record of any particular problems occurring until late May 1915, at which point, house searches and arrests began. The official objective behind these was to induce the population to hand over its weapons to the authorities.

Starting in July 1915, news of deportations began circulating in the village, especially thanks to the presence of American missionaries in the village, who had operated educational institutions in the area since the 1860s. These rumours did not prompt the general population to take any action. But one of Antaram's elder brothers, Hagop, had already migrated to Bulgaria shortly after the 1908 Revolution. His in-laws had been wary of the situation since the Hamidian massacres of 1895-96. When they decided to move their business from Edirne to Plovdiv, Hagop moved along.

The deportations reached Çengiler on 4 August 1915. The village was surrounded by 2,000 soldiers and gendarmes under the leadership of Haci Alaeddin, the Committee of Union and Progress's temporary delegate and a member of Pazarköy's Ittihadist club, and Abdülhamid Bey, the military commander in Bursa, who had been charged with carrying out the deportation in Çengiler.[5] According to missionary accounts, some families succeeded in refusing to submit or leave for some time.

In these unfortunate days, Antaram was a young girl of about fourteen. If it had not been for the war, she might even have been married. American women

2 Nazaret Daghavarian (b. 1862 in Sebastia, d. 1915 in Ayaş) was an Armenian doctor, agronomist, and public activist, and one of the founders of the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU). He was one of the victims killed on 24 April 1915.

3 Atom Yarjanian (Ատոմ Եարճանեան), better known by his pen name Siamanto (Սիամանթօ) (1878–1915), was an influential Armenian writer, poet, and national figure from the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. He was killed by the Ottoman authorities during the Armenian Genocide.

4 Soghomon Soghomonian, commonly known as Gomidas (Կոմիտաս) (26 September or 8 October 1869–22 October 1935), was an Armenian priest, composer, choir leader, singer, ethnomusicologist, music pedagogue, and musicologist. Many consider him to be the founder of modern Armenian classical music. He experienced a mental breakdown after witnessing the horrors of the Armenian Genocide.

5 For detailed information on the deportations in Çengiler, see Kévorkian, R. (2011) *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, New York, I. B. Tauris, pp. 561, 569, 589.

missionaries wrote in the 1870s that most of the girls in the area were married at twelve, and seldom was a girl still unmarried after the age of fifteen.[6]

Decades later she would still recount how the family first reacted to the news about *tehcir* (the central order for 'forced deportation'). As everyone was busy packing up the most necessary items in advance of their departure, her mother, Maryam, suddenly disappeared. A short while later, they started to hear the harsh noise of glass being smashed. When they and her father, Abraham, followed the noise down to the cellar, they saw the mother hurriedly throwing dozens of jars of marmalade, pickles, and other conserved food to the floor. Her father felt revulsion at the sight of his wife's fury and started shouting at her, calling her crazy (*khent*). Then, Maryam calmed down for a moment and said with absolute conviction: 'Do you think we will ever be able to come back to this place? Do you think we will ever see our house again? Do you think we will have another winter to eat these? We are going to leave nothing behind, nothing for the enjoyment of those responsible for our misfortune and loss.'

Sadly, she was right. After a short exchange with the local notables, the gendarmes forced around one thousand two hundred families onto the road, accompanied by an escort. All Çengiler families, including the Abrahamians, were forced to leave their homes. They were not allowed to take any moveable assets with them. They started off on a long and uncertain journey which would end, for those who managed to survive, in Syria.

About 100 men were kept behind in the village in order to transport the Armenians' belongings to the church, where they were divided up among peasants, soldiers, and gendarmes. After that, the village was methodically plundered and put to the torch. These 100 men were then led from the village under guard and slaughtered.

Çengiler was entirely emptied, it was like a ghost town. It was like a corpse with no blood in its veins. Its vibrant economy, its lively cultural life had been extinguished, stolen. Its future had been disrupted forever. And its past has been forever distorted. The village of Çengiler was literally effaced from the map of Turkey as part of the conscious policy of suppressing and silencing the Armenian presence both geographically and in the social memory of the new nation-state. Like thousands of other place names – of cities, towns, villages, squares, and streets – the name of Çengiler was changed, becoming Sugören.

At the very beginning of the journey, only one hour's march away from the village, the men were separated from the convoy and executed on the banks of a river near Barzudağ. Antaram's father and one of her older brothers were killed right away. Since her mother, like undoubtedly many of the others, quickly realized

6 Women's Board of Missions (2013 [1872]) *Life and Light for Heathen Women*, vol. 2, reprint, London, Forgotten Books, pp. 304-305.

that the lives of male family members were in danger, she decided to dress her youngest son, Antaram's little brother, as a girl in the hope of saving his life.

Finally, the three *women* of the Abrahamian family – Antaram, her mother Maryam, and her younger brother disguised as a girl – started their long journey from Çengiler towards Der Zor in the company of their fellow villagers, sharing their misery. The sources at our disposal do not provide us with an exact number of deportees who travelled by foot. A survivor reports that the 11,000 people in his convoy, including natives of Balıkesir, Bandırma, Bursa, Gemlik, Adapazarı, Yalova, and Çengiler, had to walk all the way to Konya because the trains had been requisitioned by the army. Maybe Antaram was in that convoy, as she repeatedly recounted that she had walked all the way.

Holding tightly to one another, they continually prayed their number would not diminish any further. Unfortunately, their prayers were in vain. Early in the journey, soldiers realized that there was something peculiar about Antaram's little *sister*. When they got closer and started to push and pull at his clothes, it soon became obvious that this was actually a boy dressed as a girl, with quite short hair under the scarf that had been put around his head. Despite the resistance and lamentation expressed by his mother and sister, they pulled him from the convoy and killed him before their very eyes. Not long after that, Maryam passed away, a result of the exhaustion and starvation suffered along the way, together with the unbearable agony of seeing her son slaughtered. Antaram was ultimately left on her own in the convoy that followed the route to Bursa, Eskişehir, Konya, Pozantı, Adana, Aleppo, and finally, Der Zor.

Curiously, and in keeping with the meaning of her name, 'unfading', Antaram was the only one to reach the refugee camps in Der Zor, in Syria. At the time, one of her older brothers was in Bulgaria, while another brother, the one who had settled in Istanbul a couple of years earlier, was tormented by the lack of news from his family. How my great-grandmother lived and survived in the camps as a 15-to-16-year-old orphan remains a mystery to us since she hardly spoke about it (Fig. 5.2).

There are a number of plausible scenarios, and all of them might be equally true. We know that survivors in those circumstances attempted all of these strategies. She could have stayed in an orphanage, though her age would have been a bit of an impediment. But we know that older girls were also accepted in order to help in the running of the institution. It is also probable that she stayed with her fellow villagers, who would have provided the only familiar link to the life and world that she had left behind forever. This larger community (how large, we do not know) might have acted as a saviour and protected her. They might have camped together, moved from one shelter to the other, stayed close in the refugee camps. Like the rest of the entire camp population, she must have suffered from disease, starvation, and unremitting hardship. She might have even become one of the em-

Figure 5.2 Armenian genocide orphans, place and date unknown.

Source: The author's family archive.

ployees of the Ottoman state factories established in the Syrian cities of Homs and Hama, ironically taking part in the war effort in support of those who caused her misery. She might have spent some time with Muslim families, which she may have experienced as a form of shelter or, just as likely, a prison. Oral histories and memoirs from the time are full of accounts of the 'adoption' of child survivors. Still, most faced precarious circumstances marked by exploitation, unpaid hard labour, forced conversion, and relentless physical and sexual abuse.

Whatever the case, she was definitely one of the tens of thousands of Armenian survivors in Der Zor, and she was forced to stay there until the end of the war.

When their de facto imprisonment in the middle of the desert came to an end with the armistice in 1918, she, like many other survivors who were stuck in either Der Zor or Mosul, continued to follow the road to Basra. In one of the few fortunate instances in this heartbreaking story, Antaram's loneliness came to an end in this city: she married my great-grandfather, Hmayak Boghossian. How he ended up in Basra likewise remains an untold history. Hmayak was always silent on the subject.

In 1915, my great-grandfather Hmayak was around 18 years old, as the year of his birth was registered as 1313 (1897). He was from Shadakh (Çatak), in the south of the city of Van, one of the biggest of the ancient Armenian urban centres at the farthest edge of eastern Anatolia. As a young man, he most likely took part in the resistance in the city against Ottoman military forces in charge of deportation and massacres. The city was able to successfully defend itself for some time, nevertheless almost the entire population was killed. But Hmayak was among the Armenians from the villages surrounding Van who managed to escape and take refuge in Iraq, which was under British occupation. Many of these escapees from Van took shelter in a large refugee camp in Bakuba, near Baghdad. Hmayak spent

the war years in the camp until leaving for the port town of Basra in 1919 as part of a large wave of exiles looking to be repatriated.

The result was that both of my paternal great-grandparents found themselves in Basra in 1919. They were around 20 years of age, or perhaps a little older. They had spent the last four years separated from their 'homes', on the road, in the desert, in various shelters or refugee camps, and they had no family or relatives. How did these two strangers who both found themselves in an unknown place meet and end up getting married? Was it love? Did they feel close to one another because of their shared experiences? Was it arranged by the Armenian clergy in the city as a form of creating means of support and promoting the survival of destitute, rootless, needy survivors? All of these played a part, and the newly married couple were among those who were repatriated by the British from Basra.

With gratitude in her voice, my great-grandmother used to say, 'The British put us on a boat and brought us to Istanbul'. She was both fortunate and strong. She survived the deportations and the genocide; she endured years of homelessness and poor conditions in refugee camps; she suffered maltreatment, malnutrition, and possibly molestations, harassment, even worse. Yet it was only the prospect of re-establishing contact with a sense of 'home' that made her believe that she was alive, that she had a life to live. Apart from the intellectuals that were sent to their deaths on 24 April 1915, the Armenians of Istanbul had been exempted from the massacres and/or deportations. Antaram thought she would be able to reunite with at least one living member of her family: her brother, Sahak.

In late 1919, the young couple reached Istanbul, which was then under British occupation (Fig. 5.3). Sahak welcomed his now grown-up sister and her husband. He took them into his house in İcadiye, a large Armenian neighbourhood in Üsküdar, on the Asian coast of the city. He also made them partners and associates in his butcher shop. Thanks to Sahak, they settled down, earned a living, and built a family. Antaram lived in the same spot for the rest of her entire life. She gave birth, saw her daughters married, rejoiced at the arrival of her grandchildren, and then her great-grandchildren. Her entire family lived in the same neighbourhood, within walking distance from her house. It must be an inherited trait that has led my parents to live in the same house into which they first moved after getting married in 1977 – only one block away from my great-grandparents' old butcher shop (Figs. 5.4, 5.5, 5.6).

Figure 5.3. The young couple, Antaram and Hmayak, managed to build a new life for themselves in the 1920s in Istanbul.

Source: The author's family archive.

Figure 5.4. Antaram with her daughters Sona and Maryam at their house door, 1940s.

Source: The author's family archive.

As someone who had undertaken a journey of so many kilometres all alone – though she may have been physically accompanied by many who shared her fate – Antaram chose not to move an inch from her house in Istanbul for the rest of her eighty-odd years of life. She never saw, nor showed any desire to see, her hometown, Çengiler, again, though it was only two hours away. She never went to visit her brother and his family in any of the cities in which they lived: Plovdiv (Bulgaria), Beirut, and Los Angeles. She did not join her husband when he visited Soviet Armenia to see part of his family after decades of longing for a reunion. She even resisted going to the European side of the city, since she did not want to set foot on a boat crossing the Bosporus. Who can blame her? She had ample legitimate reasons for avoiding even the thought of a new journey.

After all, what made her happiest was growing strongly rooted fruit trees in her garden so that she could make jars and jars of marmalade for the coming winter.

Figure 5.5. Antaram holding the hand of the author's father, Vartan, on his first school day, 1958.

Source: The author's family archive.

Figure 5.6. Antaram and the author, 1980.

Source: The author's family archive.