

Dear Lebanon, where is my father?

April 01, 2014 12:23 AM

Armenian-Lebanese family that has faced hardship and dispersion for at least four generations. Orphans, widowers and widows abound.

My maternal great-grandmother, a native of Gurun in the Armenian highlands, lost her husband and three sons in the 1915 genocide. She was buried in Damascus. One of her daughters became my maternal grandmother. She, too, was buried in Damascus.

My paternal grandfather, a native of Hadjin, in Cilician Armenia, survived the genocide and found safe haven in Lebanon. He married another survivor, only to lose her to a disease rampant among Armenians in Lebanon's refugee camps. She bore him two sons in the 1920s, one of them my father. I never found out where my paternal grandmother was buried in Beirut. My paternal grandfather, however, repatriated to Soviet Armenia and remarried. All five of his children from both marriages were named after siblings lost in the genocide.

Finally, I lost my father when I was 14. Thirty years ago this year, he was kidnapped during the Lebanese Civil War. Lebanon and much of the Arab world played an important role in saving thousands of Armenians from annihilation. However, the Lebanese Civil War, particularly the disappearance of my father, began a new phase in the dispersion of my family. For 30 years we have been mostly silent.

I have been silent, first and foremost, because I didn't know how to talk about my father. How does one talk about a kidnap victim who was almost certainly killed in the first days after his abduction? Yet because no body was found, we never knew whether to speak of him as someone dead or alive. Since I never knew with certainty, I chose to remain silent.

The search for certainty and clarity drives my personality in almost all aspects of my life. Usually, uncertainty brings me to a grinding halt until I have a full grasp on a given situation. This trait made it exponentially harder for me to find closure and to come to terms with my father's kidnapping and murder. Does one ever come to terms with such an event?

Family stories about my maternal great-grandmother reveal that, after the genocide, she would jump whenever someone knocked at the door of her dwelling in Damascus. She still held out hope that her husband and three sons might one day return.

Because I could never confirm that my father was dead, despite the near certitude of such an end, should I take a path similar to hers and continue waiting for my father, who would have been 87 years old this year? Or should I take the story of my father's untimely and unexplained death and its impact on my family and share it with the Lebanese and other Arabs?

But why would I do that? Am I not an Armenian, whose voice can be easily silenced in Lebanese and Arab society? When I lived in Texas, working for my graduate degree, I walked into a Middle Eastern store one day and talked to its Lebanese owner. "Oh," she said to me, "You're Armenian. You've been immune from any adverse impact of the war," even as I had just finished telling her about my father's kidnapping. "What about the loss of my father? Is that nothing?" I responded, before walking out, deeply hurt and feeling dehumanized.

To add an extra level to my invisibility as an Armenian-Lebanese, the nature of the crime to which my family was subjected is equally hard to define. The consequences of the kidnapping and murder of an innocent bystander in the chaos and violence that engulfed Lebanon were sidelined due to their complexity and the political ramifications for the country.

There are groups in Lebanon engaged in nonconfrontational efforts to push for laws that would help bring closure to the families of thousands of kidnapping victims. Full justice may never be attained in these cases. But from my point of view, even incomplete measures are better than nothing, particularly if the remains of my father can one day be located and identified.

It's a simple, perhaps naive, dream. My family and I have suffered enough. And all that I'm hoping for is a helping hand and an opportunity to bring closure, so I can focus on the task of rebuilding and reassembling my family. My hope is that after several generations, my son, his children and his grandchildren can live again in the warmth of a close-knit family.

I don't understand why Lebanon today, after having done such a charitable act of embracing Armenian orphans, widows and widowers nearly a century ago, has taken the path to self-destruction and continues to shower misery and pain on its citizens. The Armenian-Lebanese have seen enough destruction for generations and do not wish it on anyone, least of all on the Lebanese who were so giving.

I have memories from the early '80s of my maternal grandmother, who moved to Beirut from Damascus, sitting on her veranda in Dikwaneh each evening and gazing at the mountains in the distance. "Im Beirutes lav chi ga," she would say in Armenian: "There is no place better than my Beirut."

For me, too, that's how Beirut started. It was my home, my childhood home. But I've come to develop two extreme views of Lebanon, as both the savior and punisher of my family.

Dear Lebanon, until a few days ago I sometimes dreamed that you might truly embrace me one day and, hearing my family's and my story and pain, feel yourself repulsed and disgusted by your own ways so that you would undergo a transformation. That's how I had hoped to help, because you too must be in great pain for causing agony to your own people.

Transformation? But the accepted, simplistic view is that people don't change and that history repeats itself, especially in the Middle East. And with the recent destruction of Kasab, one of the last remaining corners of historic Armenia that had ended up in Syria, it's tempting to accept this view.

It's tempting to just turn my back in disgust on my birthplace and to finalize my departure from Lebanon and the region – leave both physically and emotionally – even if that means abandoning my father. But I can't. And I've tried. Rather, I hope to pursue my original dream and attempt to bring you to your senses, Lebanon, for the sake of our children.

Rather than gruesomely engaging in sorting out the bloodied winners and losers of the latest conflicts, I appeal to you to find a moment for me, for my father and for the likes of us who have nothing to do with the conflicts in the region, yet are bloodied all the same. In my case, kindly let me know where my father's remains are. Thank you.

Taline Satamian, an elementary school teacher at an American school in Kuwait, has visited Lebanon on several occasions in an attempt to find closure to the case of her father's disappearance in 1984. She wrote this commentary for THE DAILY STAR.