

“Im Beirutes Lav Chi Ga”

By Taline Satamian

I come from an Armenian Lebanese family that's been shredded for at least 4 generations. Orphans, widowers, and widows abound. It's nothing short of a miracle that my 14-year old son is finally enjoying an “intact” childhood, though intact must be understood quite loosely because a family that's been shredded for this many generations is bound to be hard to re-assemble.

My maternal great-grandmother, a native of Gurun in the Armenian Highlands, lost her husband and 3 sons, save one son and five daughters, due to the 1915 Genocide. She was buried in Damascus, Syria.

One of her orphaned baby daughters became my maternal grandmother. She, too, was buried in Damascus.

My paternal grandfather, a native of Hadjin, Cilician Armenia, survived the Genocide and found safe haven in Lebanon. He then got married to another Survivor, only to lose her to communicable disease that was then rampant among the surviving Armenians in Lebanon's refugee camps. She bore him two boys in the 1920's, one of them my father, before she died. I could never find out where exactly she was buried in Beirut. My paternal grandfather repatriated to and remarried in Soviet Armenia. All five of his children from both marriages were named after siblings he had lost in the Genocide.

Finally, I lost my father when I was 14, becoming yet another orphan, and hopefully the last, in my family. My loss was due to the Lebanese Civil War.

My father was kidnapped and presumably killed in 1984. Both before and after the kidnapping, the Civil War played its tragic role in re-scattering and dissipating my family. Starting in the 1920's, Lebanon had saved us from complete annihilation. But the Lebanese Civil War, particularly the kidnapping and murder of my father, began a new phase of destruction for my family. The kidnapping's heavy impact tore us apart. For thirty years, we were mostly silent.

I was silent, first and foremost, for I didn't know how to talk about my father. How does one talk about a kidnap victim who was most certainly killed in the first few days of his kidnapping? But there was, of course, no *body* to bury and to say goodbye to. So when one talks about him, does one say “May God bless his soul” or does one talk about him as though he is still alive? Since I didn't know with certainty the answers to these questions, I mostly chose to remain silent. The seeking of certainty and clarity drive my personality in almost all aspects of my life. Usually, uncertainty brings me to a grinding halt until I am able to find answers and to have a full grasp of any situation.

This trait (or reaction?) 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 a devastating event?

But now that it's the 30th anniversary of my father's death, I have decided that my father is indeed dead. He would have been 87-years old this year. There is no possibility that he could have survived for this long.

Family stories about my great-grandmother assert that, after the Genocide, she jumped up at each knock on the door of her dwelling in Damascus, among other Armenian refugee families. She was apparently holding out hope that her husband and three boys might one day return.

After four generations, should I take a path similar to hers and continue waiting for my father? Or should I take the story of my father's untimely and unexplained death and its impact on my Armenian family to all Lebanese people and law-makers? But why would I do that? Am I not, nothing but an Armenian whose voice is easily silenced within Lebanese society? Am I not near the bottom rung of the social ladder of Lebanese society, particularly when it comes to addressing the impact of years of conflict on me as an Armenian Lebanese.

When I was in Texas working on my graduate degree, I walked one day into a Middle Eastern store and fell into a conversation with its Lebanese owner. "Oh," she finally said to me, "You're Armenian. You've been immune from any adverse impact of the war," even as I was telling her about the kidnapping of my father. "What about losing my father? Is that nothing?" I retorted and walked out feeling deeply hurt, invisible, and dehumanized.

To add an extra level to my invisibility as an Armenian Lebanese, the nature of the crime that my family has been subjected to is also hard to define. The consequences of the kidnapping and murder of an innocent bystander of the political chaos and violence that has engulfed Lebanon for decades remain unlegislated, uncoordinated, and pushed back to the back-burner due to its complexity and political ramifications.

There are, however, group(s) in Lebanon, such as...., that are working on passing laws to help bring closure to the thousands of cases of kidnappings, in a non-confrontational manner. This may mean that full justice may never be attained in these cases. But from the point of view of the families of the victims, it's better than nothing, particularly if the remains of their loved ones can at least be located and identified.

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

I don't understand why Lebanon, after having done such a charitable act of embracing orphans, widows, and widowers almost 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 1980s of my maternal grandmother, who had eventually moved to Beirut from Damascus, sitting on her “veranda” in Dkwaneh each evening and gazing at the mountains in the distance. “Im Beirutes lav chi ga.” 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 the swallower of my family.

Dear Lebanon, will you truly embrace me and hear my story and allow me to help you too? Because we are all hurting and because I, in particular as an Armenian, genuinely wish to pay you back for your kindness and magnanimity. Please tell me, what can I do to help stop the madness? How can families of kidnap victims find a semblance of peace? How can bombs be stopped from continuing to claim the lives of innocent victims?

Lebanon, you acted humanely towards the Armenians 100 years ago. Find a way to do it again. Do it again for the sake of our own children.

Memorial Services for Yeprem Satamian
February 23, 2014

..... Armenian Apostolic Church, Bourj Hamoud, Beirut, Lebanon