

the land beneath our feet

Introduction by Paula Sayer

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This is my story about what I had not experienced and about what I had not witnessed...

I was born in to it. I am of Armenian decent, born in Latvia, living in Britain, but from an early age I knew that something bad had happened some time ago between the Turkish and Armenian people. That we cannot be friends anymore for what they had done towards our people, that there is no trust, and never would be. (Tigran Asatrjan)

Tigran Asatrjan, like many other ethnic Armenians of his generation, grew up with a simmering hatred of Turkish people perpetuated by a community in exile where memories of the past are both a burden and responsibility. To be affected by genocide, even generations later, means you must store your homeland, heritage and history in a collective memory when all else tangible is gone.

The Armenian Genocide, also known as the Great Calamity or “meds yeghern” refers to the annihilation of approximately 1.5 million of the Christian Ottoman Armenian minority by Muslim Turks during and just after WWI. Preceded by a series of massacres in 1894-96 and in 1909, the Armenian Genocide is widely acknowledged as one of the first modern genocides - the deliberate, systematic and coordinated destruction of a national group.

The Genocide was led by a group of nationalist reformists known as the Young Turks who wished to stop the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire by both expanding eastwards and assimilating the various minorities. When this was met with resistance the Young Turks saw WWI as an opportunity to rid the country of its Armenian population.

The Young Turks implemented the Armenian Genocide with state support – ruthlessly, swiftly and with precision – on April 24, 1915, the day that Ottoman authorities arrested some 250 Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople. Thousands of Armenian men conscripted into the Ottoman army were eliminated first and then the Ottoman military removed the Armenians – indiscriminate of age or gender – from their homes in Eastern Anatolia and historic Armenia, confiscating homes and property.

Most able-bodied men were slaughtered immediately while the remaining population was then packed on cattle trains and made to endure forced caravan marches over hundreds of miles, deprived of food and water and left vulnerable to raiding groups of bandits, suffering unspeakable abuse. Although most died on the way those that did not were disposed of in the killing centres in the Syrian Desert.

The Genocide was followed by another series of massacres beginning in 1920 and by 1922 Armenians had been almost eradicated from their historic homeland and scattered. Although the Young Turks were eventually tried in absentia by the new Ottoman government and found guilty, the sentencing was never carried out and eventually annulled.

In a single swoop, 3000 years of Armenian heritage was destroyed – churches desecrated, villages emptied, libraries burnt – any remnants were, quite literally, erased by the Ottoman government. The weight of Armenian history was left to the survivors’ collective memory while the rest of the world looked the other way.

Today the Republic of Turkey still disputes that genocide took place, despite the fact that twenty-one countries have officially recognised it as such. Scholars on both sides of the

debate have researched and presented documents to support their point-of-view. According to the Turkish side what happened to the Armenians was not genocide, but a tragedy, and they see no need to apologise. Their position is that Ottoman Turkey was in the middle of a war of survival and the Armenians were merely relocated as a security measure. They also argue that the number of Armenians that died was no more than 300,000.

By contrast, the Armenian position is that Ottoman Turkey planned the extinction of all Armenians from Anatolia, their inherited homeland, with the extermination of approximately 1,500,000 Armenians. To most Armenians today it is crucial that Turkey officially recognises what happened as genocide and faces up to all that the word implies. For them, the horrors of the past coupled with the present denial, a refusal to use the word 'genocide', is seen by many as a desecration of both those that lost their lives and the memories of those that survived.

And so we have a stalemate; Tigran, like many other second or third generation Armenians, had come to a point in his own life where he needed to make up his own mind. Fed up with the friction of living both in the present and the past, weighed down with the burden of history, this body of work reflects Tigran's own journey of understanding and – ultimately – reconciliation.

These images have been selected from three visits to Turkey where his travels took him to Eastern Anatolia and the ancient capital of the Armenian kingdom, Ani; Vakifli – the last Armenian village to fall and now the only rural Armenian community in Turkey; and the villages where his Grandmother and Great-grandfather were born. Although on his journey he crossed routes with the marches and passed through deportation centres the idea for this book was not to archive history or photograph the exact spot that atrocities happened. Tigran went looking for his Armenian heritage and found just hints and whispers from the past – scratched crosses, tumbling ruins, landscapes covered in the purest white.

One of the distinguishing features of the Genocide was the secrecy surrounding the killing, made possible by the distraction of war and the remote killing spots, out of sight of the general population. The early landscapes – lonely, barren – reflect the isolation and vulnerability of the Armenian victims.

And, somehow, in his travels, the grip of history has shifted a little. Just as man's imprint on nature seems so futile and temporary, the hated Turks metamorphosed into friendly young people with little or no knowledge of the Armenian past – so fresh in his own memory. Like the landscapes themselves, opening out with light and colour, so too are the first tendrils of understanding and reconciliation possible.

Ultimately these landscapes are witnesses to both the horrors of the past and a reflection of the movement from dullness to light, winter to spring, hate to reconciliation and are a celebration of the immutability of nature in the face of man's inhumanity to man.

Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future. (Paul Boese)