

Third Place

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### Shots

Thirty-four children and their teacher gaze at the camera. Some have little smirks on their plain faces; others are wide-eyed and solemn as they huddle around each other. They all reside in the Mush Orphanage. Their days are spent playing and learning with Margarid Nalbanchian, their devoted teacher.

It is summer 1915. Over a hundred orphan children are burned alive by Turkish soldiers. Mush is ravaged. Families are murdered. The river turns a murky red as the charred bodies of priests, teachers, and children float in the water.

Bodil Biørn, a Norwegian nun, was behind the camera that day. That summer, she watched the same children burn alive in front of her. She later said, “After losing my orphans I suffered psychologically, but even the deep hopelessness could not push me to leave that place and to return to my country. I . . . was looking for a chance to return to Mush and maybe find some of my orphans alive so that I could calm my heart” (Bodil Bioern). Sadly, no children survived the massacre.

These massacres transpired in the first modern genocide, the Armenian Genocide - which occurred from 1915 to 1917 and was perpetrated by the Turkish Government. The Turkish government repeatedly denies the genocide and some of their excuses range from a lack of enough evidence to that an equal amount of Turks and Armenians died in the “chaos of war” (Arango). The dismissal of the genocide has also put other countries in an awkward position -

only 28 countries formally call or acknowledge it as a genocide - for if they officially declare it a “genocide” they might suffer backlash from a strong ally (“Countries That Recognize the Armenian Genocide”). Namely, the United States has had trouble expressing its views on the genocide. President Obama had promised to acknowledge it, but stopped short of the word “genocide” and President Trump has continued the tradition (Hairenik).

This denial is highly dangerous to the Armenian people. These survivors’ lives were ruined, their families killed, and their towns desecrated, and the government simply denies their suffering. Did the hundred orphan children in Mush die in vain? More importantly, how does the denial undermine and affect the tragic experiences of survivors?

One unique survivor, Karnig Panian, shared his story in his book *Goodbye Antoura*. Karnig was a young Armenian boy who lived with his family and enormous extended family in the town of Gurin. Karnig was only five when the ill-fated summer of 1915 came; that summer Karnig’s father and all able-bodied men in the town were called to be drafted into the Ottoman army. His father had to sell all of his merchandise and close his store; when it came time for him to leave, in his own chilling words Karnig wrote, “My father left that day, and we never saw him again . . . We were not told where our men had been taken. Nothing was ever heard of them” (Panian 23). Shortly after the draft, Turkish soldiers arrived and told the townspeople of Gurin that they had to evacuate because the area was unsafe. However, only the Armenians had to leave. Turkish officers stated that they would return in a few months, and the people had no choice but to put a false hope in their assertions of safety.

For ten days, Karnig’s family and the townspeople “marched in complete silence, dejected and downcast, but unable or unwilling to even complain, like obedient animals being

marched to the slaughterhouse” (41). Many older people grew tired and soon ten days turned to three weeks, and the townspeople were loaded onto a train and taken to the outskirts of Hama - a city near the desert. The Armenian people were essentially abandoned there and they ran out of food inciting daily fights over bread. One day, Karnig woke up to his sister screaming. Their mother was sitting on the ground, lifeless. Karnig kept quiet as his family covered her up, but it was all too much for him - he burst into tears and he and his siblings wailed for hours. No less than a week later, his sister and brother passed away. Karnig had only his grandparents left and at the same time the townspeople grew anxious, for they believed the Turkish soldiers were starving them.

In order to give Karnig a chance of surviving, his desperate grandparents decided to send Karnig to the orphanage in Hama. From there he was transferred to an orphanage in Antoura, a city in Lebanon. In Antoura, the orphans were forced to speak Turkish - which they did not know - and given Turkish names. When Karnig was barely six, the headmaster asked for his name and when Karnig responded with his Armenian name, he was slapped to the ground and “the schoolmaster then kicked [his] sides as [he] lay . . . [he] eventually passed out from the pain” (80). Every day in class, Karnig and his classmates “suffered pitiless beatings and severe verbal abuse” from the teachers because they accidentally slipped an Armenian word (89). Karnig knew no Turkish so he remained silent and would only speak Armenian to his closest friends in fear of punishment. One day, his name was called for a punishment; someone had told on him. At the second strike from the teacher, he blacked out.

The orphans at Antoura were mistreated and severely malnourished; there was such a lack of food at the orphanage that the kids would eat paper, ink, and dead flies. Karnig joined a

group of boys that would go on missions in the middle of the night to steal food. Desperate for any nutrition, they would dig up the bodies of dead orphans and grind their bones to a powder that they would later mix with water and drink. Later, the groups of boys moved from stealing food from the pantry, to going out and gathering food, to leaving the orphanage for good. Karnig and four other boys escaped and for six months, they lived in various caves and survived on the fruits and vegetables growing in the valley and forest. After the six months, they finally returned to the orphanage and came in time for the good news that the Turks were leaving the orphanage and Armenians were coming to take over instead. From that point, the boys reassumed their Armenian identities and relearned Armenian in class. It was a bittersweet ending, for Karnig finally could embrace his Armenian culture and he was free to go wherever he pleased. Sadly, he “never discovered what had happened to [his] grandmother, grandfather, aunt, and cousins” (167).

Another important story of survival comes from Yevnige Salibian. Yevnige was born in January 1914 in Aintab, Turkey. She grew up in an average middle-class Armenian family. She vividly remembered “hearing the cries of children in the streets as they passed her family’s house in their death marches into the desert. Peering through cracks in her wooden front door, she observed Armenian children being whipped by the Turkish police” (Kiledjian). She described the events saying, “There were many children outside without shoes and the Turkish gendarmes were using whips to drive them down the street. A few had parents. We were forbidden to take food to them. The police were using whips on the children and big sticks to beat them with. The sounds of the children screaming on the deportation – still I hear them as I look through the cracked door” (Fisk).

Her family was lucky because they were close friends with the mayor of Aintab; he kept her family safe in the turmoil of the war. It did not last for long. Her family fled in 1921; they “packed into two horse-drawn carts” and escaped their Armenian homeland (Fisk). Yevnige had almost died as she described, “My family was divided between the two carts. I changed places with an old lady. It was at night and over a ravine, our horses panicked, and the cart overturned and an iron bar killed the old lady and I was thrown over the edge of a bridge and only the horse’s reins saved me when they got wrapped around my leg” (Fisk). From there they moved around from Aleppo to Damascus because Muslim mobs had started attacking Armenian Christians. Then they moved from Lebanon to Ghermeze Ghazekh. The city was infested with mosquitos and Yevnige’s mother contracted malaria. Yevnige was only thirteen when her mother died and from that moment, she assumed the role of mother to her younger siblings.

Yevnige and Karnig had very different experiences during the Armenian Genocide, Karnig experienced the cruelty of the Turks firsthand in the orphanage at Antoura, while Yevnige had been lucky that her family was spared by the mayor’s kindness. However, Yevnige and Karnig also share the fact that their stories have brought the atrocities of the Turkish government during the Armenian Genocide to light. Without their stories, it would have been easier for people to forget.

Most importantly, lessons we can take from their stories are that no matter how much the Turks wanted to eliminate the Armenian Culture, they could never do it. It is an impossible feat; stories like Yevnige’s and Karnig’s live longer than humans. Their stories are a harsh reminder that people are capable of the unimaginable. Their stories inform a new generation of the old generation’s suffering. Their stories teach us that all human life must be treated with

respect. The least the stories can do is make people conscious, for if they are, they can spot similar situations occurring in the world, which can prevent genocides like the Armenian Genocide from ever happening again.

Those are hopes for the future, but for consolation now, let us look at a pair of photographs. A man is smiling with his wife and two daughters. The eldest daughter has the same eyes as her father and her small smirk echoes the smiles of the orphans at Mush. In another photo, a beaming elderly woman squeezes a baby on her lap as two toddlers rest their heads on her shoulders. The first picture is of Karnig Panian and his family. The latter is of Yevnige Salibian and her great-grandchildren. These photos show the two survivors in a different aspect; strongly juxtaposed with their survival stories. They are reminders that for every day they suffered, their lives had an outcome they never expected in their darkest of days. They were happy.

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