

THE MAKING OF

“Who She Left Behind”

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While most mothers can effortlessly recite the precise date, time, weight, height and other details of their babies' births, my family would attest that while I hold those first moments with my own children dear, I am not good at remembering dates. Yet, I know the exact date, time and location of the birth of Who She Left Behind. It was on Saturday, May 23, 2015, at 11:48 a.m. when I had the epiphany: it's a girl, and her story needs to be told.

On this particular Memorial Day weekend, the sky was clear with vast visibility to take in the miles of gravesites at North Burial Ground in Providence, RI, where many Armenians have been laid to eternal rest. My husband Jim and I followed our customary route, navigating the winding roads until we reached the corner leading to Aunt Vicky's gravesite. There, we were met with a mysterious surprise—carefully planted tattered white silk flowers placed in front of her grave. Aunt Vicky and her husband had not been blessed with children, and Jim and I carried on my late mother's legacy as caretakers of family graves. We were stunned.

Who had left those flowers?

The question hung in the air like the gentle breeze. The journey of creating Who She Left Behind thus began, a labor of love that would take eight years to nurture and be named.

As an enthusiastic reader and proud Armenian, the idea of writing a historical fiction novel inspired by my family's tales was always a dream. I hadn't anticipated taking on this project until post-retirement. However, it seems destiny, guided by God and the spirits of my ancestors, had a different path in mind. I hope you too will be as moved as I am, believing that they left behind a trail of breadcrumbs for me to follow, revealing answers and nourishment along the way.

My initial and naive belief in knowledge of our family history was quickly shattered. Growing up in a multi-generational Armenian home, I had the privilege of firsthand accounts from our grandparents and their loud and opinionated siblings and spouses. Wow, was I mistaken! That false sense of confidence was my first shocking awakening. The more questions I asked, the more I recognized the voids in timeframes and experi-



Aunt Vicky and Pesa wedding photo, 1922



Grandmother Lucy and grandfather Ardash wedding photo, 1936

ences they never discussed.

This predicament is universal among all Armenian families. Enter the magic of Facebook, where I connected with individuals and a wealth of knowledge. Suddenly, I found myself in the company of kindred spirits from all corners of the world. We would eventually provide each other with hints of missing information.

My journey began with a collection of needlelace and tools that had been brought from Aleppo by my grandmother. To my surprise, an Armenian art critic from Ukraine informed me that my grandmother's technique was exceptionally rare, and she expressed a desire to study the entire collection. Some items were adorned with labels, which proved instrumental when a retired librarian friend helped identify the likely location of an exhibition that had taken place during Providence's 300th anniversary in 1936. Fortunately, my mother had the foresight to preserve a collection of treasures from my grandmother and great aunts, including handcrafted items, photos from Aleppo, and a full wedding trousseau of a wedding gown, invitation, original engraved wedding rings and photos. These remarkable items had been tucked away in boxes in my mother's basement, unbeknownst to me.

As in many Armenian families, my cousins and I were urged by our grandparents to return to our ancestral home in Gurin and dig up our family's buried gold. Our grandmothers also spoke of their buried dolls that they naively believed they would play with upon returning from the temporary relocation ordered by the gendarmes. Little did I know that the countless hours spent as children planning this expedition to our ancestral home would be re-imagined and come to life on the pages of a book I would author.

I set out to honor this cherished memory in a meaningful way in the novel and became a student and collector of Armenian dolls and their associated traditions. I sought the guidance of Marina Khachimanukyan, an expert doll curator at the Museum of History in Yerevan. During fascinating lessons and conversations with Gary and Susan Lind-Sinanian of the Armenian Museum of America in Watertown, MA, I learned that Armenian girls would lovingly name their dolls "Nuri," much in the same way that Americans might name their dogs "Spot."

hate. While the documented history is undoubtedly valuable, it is incomplete. I was reminded that women, too, have shaped history, and their significant contributions often remain untold. Women endured, suffered, saved lives and succeeded while playing both key roles and critical support roles.

A study inspired by the Vida Count Project of recent popular history books in America reveals a genre dominated by generals, presidents and male authors. In an article published by Slate titled "Is History Written About Men, by Men?", staggering numbers are reported by journalists Andrew Kahn and Rebecca Onion: 75-percent of history books are written by men and 71-percent are written about men; 31-percent of women biographers have written about men, while only six-percent of male biographers have written about a woman's life.

This shocking revelation fueled my determination and led me to become a student of Karen Jeppe and the Rescue Home of Aleppo,

was the house my grandfather had spoken of so fondly. Not only did the house still stand, but it was situated just off Douglas Avenue in Providence—a place I had driven past countless times on my way to the Armenian church that also was built in the predominantly Armenian neighborhood.

Another stroke of fortune occurred as I pored into my search for information about Armenian weddings in Worcester during the 1920s. While there was no shortage of exquisite portraits of brides and grooms, there was a conspicuous absence of images depicting the entirety of a wedding day. Questions swirled in my mind: Were there festive dinners? Where would they have taken place? Which traditions were observed from their homeland? Most importantly, who might remember these memories today?

Once again, the breadcrumbs of this miraculous journey led me to another remarkable encounter. Imagine my delight meeting the daughter of the caretakers who had lived next door to the first Armenian church in the United States, located in Worcester, Massachusetts. I was introduced to Pauline (Pailoon) Agazarian just before she celebrated her 100th birthday, and her recollections flowed with memories upon memories. Her childhood home had doubled as the church office, hosting meetings, gatherings for celebrations, henna parties and more. To preserve and immortalize her vivid memories, I gave her family a special place as characters in the book, reenacting the Armenian traditions of that era.

Truth or Fable?

My curiosity led me to dig deeper into my family's history in the village of Gurin. The stories passed down by my grandparents painted a vivid picture of their lives before the Genocide—an illustrious past featuring a high-ranking father, a life of opulence in a palatial residence adorned with marble floors, a babbling creek meandering through the property, and the presence of magnificent horses and stables. They insisted that this grand house was spacious enough to conceal another family and was repurposed into a Turkish hospital following the Genocide.

Filled with enthusiasm, I approached the dream team of seasoned genealogists, historians and photographers Matthew, Mark, Luc and George, seeking to confirm my family's existence and the alleged Turkish hospital. However, I was ill-prepared for their response. "Who?" they asked. They said they found no mention of a Hovsep Karadelian in the census or within the book of Gurin's

a fitting example of lesser told stories of extraordinary heroism. My goal became to make Armenians, especially women, the heroes of their stories, rather than just victims as they are largely represented.

The Quest for Hidden Treasures

I was introduced to a group I privately referred to as "the disciples": Matthew, Mark, Luc and George (John has yet to appear). Each of these remarkable individuals held a vital piece of the puzzle to uncovering the hidden treasure we all sought.

Matthew Karanian's extensive research on the Armenian Highlands, Mark Arslan's wealth of data and access to historical documents, Luc Vartan Baronian's expertise in Gurin and George Aghjayan's deep knowledge of genealogy and maps all played pivotal roles. They provided copies of ship manifests, naturalization records, photographs and more, setting the stage for a thrilling scavenger hunt filled with clues and mysteries waiting to be unraveled.

My husband and I embarked on a journey that took us to every address listed on the ship manifests, each a potential link to the homes that had once welcomed my ancestors to Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Not surprisingly, all but one of these residences had been demolished. The exception



history. While the ship manifests confirm their origin in Gurin, there is no other evidence of their existence. They offered words of encouragement, reassuring me that such investigations often require time and patience.

The revelation left my brother, cousins and me dumbfounded, as we grappled with the sense of being deceived—our supposedly illustrious and esteemed family seemingly erased from history. We began to question the extent to which these stories might have been embellished over the years. I was left humbled, mortified and confused. The lines between fiction and non-fiction were even more blurred.

Several months passed, during which I diligently continued my research and writing. Then, one fateful day, I received an unexpected email from Luc that would change the course of my investigation. He had uncovered a vital clue in the form of a passage on page 274 of the Badmakirk (History of Gurin). This passage included a caption beneath a picture, which when translated, read: "Gharadelian and Chouljian buildings in Gurin built on a spacious field beyond a large stream and across from a cemetery." Luc was convinced that the reference to "Gharadelian" pointed directly to my Karadelian family's ancestral home. It was a moment of exhilarating breakthrough.

Once again, the Gurintsi Armenians Facebook page proved to be an invaluable resource. In response to my inquiry about connections to the Chouljian family, a woman reached out to me and shared that her own great-grand-



Grandmother Lucy and grandfather Ardash's wedding invitation and rings, 1936



Male needlelace, needlelace tools from Aleppo and female needlelace



mother, who was a Piranian, had married into the Chouljian family. She recalled that their home in Gurin had boasted marble floors

and a serene creek, painting a vivid picture that matched the stories passed down in my own family.

enjoy the rich traditions thoughtfully reenacted, such as Armenian coffee cup readings, evil eye beliefs, wedding rituals, lullabies,

Amman...it was true!

Yet the story didn't end there. George, who is also a mapping expert, used that brief description and his expertise to speculate the Google Earth coordinates of my ancestors' long-lost home. It showed nothing more than a grassy field surrounded by a rural street. There were no traces, no markings of the former inhabitants who had long since departed. It seemed as though messages of encouragement were arriving from the universe itself, reassuring me that with my ample research and unwavering passion, I possessed all that was necessary to see this remarkable journey through to its conclusion.

Making This "Our Story"

As much as this story is about my family, it is also about our collective story. Great care was taken to maintain the integrity of the historic events and people I fictionally placed in the novel. My hope is that it will be endeared and shared by readers who are not familiar with Armenian culture and history, as well as commended by readers whose lives and identities are connected to Armenian heritage.

My wish is for every reader to find a memorable piece to take away.

• For Locals—to recognize familiar places the novel travels through in Gurin, Aleppo, Istanbul, Massachusetts and Rhode Island.

• For Culture Enthusiasts—to



Grandmother Lucy's wedding dress and veil, 1936



Yazma, block fabric



Handkerchiefs with needlework on the edges



Karadelian men, Gurin, pre-1915



Mariam, Lucy, Victoria, Vartouhy, unknown male (Family portraits taken in Aleppo pre-1921)

games, foods, language and hand-crafted textiles.

• For Character Development Followers—to remember long after the book ends the people whose lives they have come to know, along with their faults, strengths, bonds, healing and resilience.

• For Literature Lovers—to appreciate the common themes that span several generations and how history authentically meets fiction to tell the human stories.

• For Fans of Female Literature—to be inspired by the deep stories of sisterhood, of healing one another from shame and trauma, and of sacrifice and bravery to save others.

• For Romance Readers—to find love to warm their hearts and souls.

The Making of "What's Next"

As I am writing this, I am watching the fall of Artsakh unfold with the world silently watching. "Never again" is happening again, and again, and again. I have only just begun, with more stories to tell and books to write. Proudly starting with a monthly column in The Armenian Weekly titled "Victoria's Voice," my renewed commitment is to provide a voice not only to the Armenians of the past but also to those of the present and future.

Who She Left Behind will be released on October 17. It is available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Kobo and select local bookstores and libraries. International hardcovers can be ordered through the publisher, Historium Press.