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# Starve to Death

Rosalyn Impink

If you know nothing else about Armenians, know us for our love of food. I remember an early episode of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* when Mary and company are seated at an awards event with an Armenian man waiting for the next party. Someone remarks that he's a little early, to which he replies, "Listen, if you don't come early to an Armenian wedding, you can starve to death" (Rodgers). I can laugh because it's true—this is a lesson all Armenians learn by necessity at a young age. But the phrase "starve to death" has always been a painful remark for

the Armenian community. The phrase is so deeply ingrained in us—not just in Armenian history, but the darkest corners of our very sense of being.

Just about every Armenian family has their genocide story. These are impossible tales of strength, survival, and miracles to explain how their ancestors fought to escape slaughter by genocide as perpetrated by the Ottoman Empire in the early years of the 20th century. Unlike most Armenians, though, my story starts not in the old country, but in Massachusetts, 1909. My Armenian-

born great-great-grandparents brought their son Oscar back from Boston to visit their homeland, and a second son, John, was born some months after. In a few years, Oscar's father went back to America with the intent that the rest of the family would follow. The timing couldn't be worse as the Ottoman Turks locked the borders down, trapping Oscar, John, and their mother Helen in the city of Harput. At the same time, millions of Armenians were rounded up across the Caucasus to be marched to their deaths in the desert. With what can only be

described as an insane amount of luck and courage, Helen was able to talk her way out of the firing line and escape with her boys. They spent the next thirteen years fighting their way back to the states and their father.

I know all this because Oscar, my great-grandfather, sat down for an Armenian genocide oral history project with a Boston University student in 1975. In this recording, Oscar, age 66, reflects on the close calls and near-death experiences of his youth (Amirian). He witnessed atrocities and acts of heroism. He discusses being hidden in a

Layout by Jeanette Orlando.  
Photograph: Anonymous German Traveler.

barrel for days at a time to avoid being kidnapped by soldiers. His voice swells with pride when he boasts that a Turk would never take on an Armenian in a fight unless it was ten men against one. He spends a significant amount of time describing the food of the region. He saw cantaloupes grown in the mountains larger than watermelons, and watermelons that weighed 40 or 50 pounds. He tasted apricots so plump and juicy that no apricot since had been able to compare. But he also recalls long, hard winters when nothing grew, and no trade was allowed in. His



Oscar and John in Massachusetts, 1959

family shared a single loaf of bread a day if they could find it, and much of that was doled out to orphans knocking on the door of Helen, their varjabed (teacher), looking for a morsel to eat. “The main thing in our mind was to find food; that was the only thought in our mind, nothing else,” Oscar says. “All we did was plod the land for food.” The starvation went on for years in fluctuating degrees, leaving thousands dead, and the rest sickly and malnourished.

Eventually the family was finally reunited in Medford, Massachusetts. And just like that, life snapped back to normal—“it all worked out very nicely,” he said. The boys went to school, worked, married Armenian girls, had kids of their own, and were living the American dream. To look at Oscar in

photos from the 1940s and 1950s—jovial, round, a proud father and business owner—not a soul could guess that this man had spent his childhood running from certain death. But the traces of a hungry, skinny boy are still visible. He earned an honorable mention in a *Boston Traveler* contest for a short story he wrote about a young orphan who dies

of thirst amid a fast. Nothing went to waste in his home. Meals were meant to be shared with as many people as possible: Cousins, nieces, nephews, and friends beat a path to his door for weekly dinners. His children learned

to prepare the traditional Armenian dishes: kufta, losh kebab, manti, lamajun, yalanchi, and lavash. Oscar would ask, “Do you eat to live or live to eat?” For him, it seems, the answer would forever be both.

Oscar talks about his experiences almost nonchalantly 50 years after the fact, never revealing how the whiplash of transitioning from a war-torn, decimated country to a normal American existence affected him and millions of other Armenians. In 1915, there was hardly a single country in the world that intervened on behalf of the Armenians to stop the genocide and end the desolation in the homeland. As a result, millions were murdered, and many more died of hunger. This cycle has continued over and over again. The Nazis later deliberately starved prisoners in

German concentration camps. The Rwandan genocide in 1994 destroyed the nation’s crops and caused thousands to go hungry for years (Borgen Project). Even more jarring, however, is the presence of hunger in nations across the world in this day and age, regardless of war or genocide. An estimated 821 million people suffered from starvation in 2018 (United Nations). Considering the advancements society has made over the past several decades, this is a shameful statistic. We have the technology ready and at our disposal to bring water to villages, increase our crop yields tenfold through hydroponic growing, and genetically modify seeds for optimization in different climates and soils. We’re perfecting shipping and distribution management, allowing us to move supplies faster and cheaper than ever. We can digitally connect across oceans and tundra to pinpoint where the need is and how we can fill it. So why haven’t we?

The world is reckoning with a global pandemic at a time of outrageous wealth inequality. Now more than ever, food must be treated as a human right. Hunger is a bar-

rier to mobility, good health, employment, schooling, wealth, and stability, all of which hurt the larger society. Instead of addressing hunger as a moral failing or an insurmountable problem, we must look at it as the gateway to ameliorating dozens of other social ills. There are hurdles to be overcome, including government corruption, climate change, and interstate conflict. We need a collective effort and commitment of nations to build the infrastructure and policy that will allow not just their citizens, but people everywhere, to have access to sustainable, healthy diets that provide the sustenance necessary to be productive, thriving members of society. Until that moment, governments on every continent should be ashamed that one child, one parent, one senior is going to bed hungry. Not a single person should suffer like my great-grandfather did in 1915. If we come together with willful determination—not as many nations, but as one world—then someday, there will be a generation that does not know the phrase “starve to death.”

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Oscar (left) and John, ages 4 and 3, in the Armenian city of Harput

Photographs courtesy of author.