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On the Other Side of Mount Ararat: A story of a Vanished City

Mariam Manoukian, Elize Manoukian,

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173 pp, with maps and illustration

The story of the Kosparian and Beglarian families of Van unfolds against the historical background provided by the “Prologue.” It begins with the years immediately before the Genocide of the Armenian population in the Ottoman Empire, depicts the tumultuous year of 1915, as the Kosparian family and all the people of Van suffered through the weeks-long siege of the city by the Turkish army, briefly describes the resistance put up by the people, and ends with the rushed exodus toward Eastern Armenia. The “Epilogue” and the “Historical Notes” serve to contextualize the story within the recent history of Armenia and to follow up with the real-life characters who appear in the story with changed names.

The story is related in the first person. Lianoush (real life Heranoush), the narrator and actually Mariam Manoukian’s maternal grandmother, is the 13-year-old daughter of Pailun and Theos Beglarian. She has an older sister of 16, a younger sister of 10 and twin baby brothers. The family lives with Pailun’s parents in their house. Naturally, Lianoush’s maternal grandfather Panos Agha is the patriarch, and Grandma Marina is the head of the family. There are also an aunt and a cousin living in that quite opulent household.

The narrative is based on Lianoush’s diary and is constructed in the form of dated entries. There is humor, lightness, and a youthful carelessness, even in the gloomiest scenes Lianoush records. With a 13-year-old as the narrator, it is perhaps not surprising to see the first chapter titled “Tavi and Tagi,” after Lianoush’s two cats. Toward the end of the story, we learn that these cats, aside from being of the famous breed of Van, special pets of the family, and Lianoush’s most beloved friends, actually fell victim to the tragedy of 1915. They were the first painful loss Lianoush suffered. One then realizes that the reason they are introduced at the very outset and occupy the center-stage makes perfect sense.

As Lianoush’s character develops through the narrative, we come to know a precious individual, a playful, joyous, sensitive and artistic teenager, whose careless teen years were cut short by the Catastrophe. But Lianoush’s story and the story of this vanishing city did not come to life just on the scarce records in her old diary. Mariam and Elise meticulously researched and authenticated the events Lianoush had described and embellished them with the scenes of everyday life of a Vanetsi family with local traditions, rituals, customs and mores, superstitions, festivities, special ceremonies, weddings, and funerals. Their vivid descriptions bring the schools, the teachers, the churches, the clergy, and even the bookstores carrying exotic books of European literature to life. You can close your eyes and take a virtual tour of the city, passing the offices of the foreign governments, the missionary centers, the historical sites around Van, like Toprak Kale and the Gate of Mher. You can visualize the legendary Lake Van, the Island of Akhtamar, and the foot of the Varag mountains, where Lianoush and Markos, Pailun’s live-in cousin, used to collect the most exotic species of butterflies in

the world. And intertwined with all this enfolds the natural beauty of Van and Aigestan, particularly in their colorful autumn:

*All leaves turn yellow falling on the ground
Combined with magic colors, they form an elusive rug.
I wish the wind would never come and blow the ornament away
I wish the winter never come and freeze it all away. (p.16)*

This verse and many others included throughout the narrative bring the text closer to the style of Lianoush's original Armenian diary. She had been a poet in her own right, and, according to Mariam Manoukian, some of the entries in her diary were in verse. A few of the pieces in verse are provided by Irene Gyulnazarian, a close relative of the family, and the rest are by Elize Manoukian, Mariam Manoukian's thirteen-year-old daughter and the co-author of this volume.

Van was beautiful and Vanetsies were proud of it. Lianoush's Grandpa often said, "Van in this life, Paradise in the next." Indeed, Van is presented here as a city thriving economically and culturally, with an ancient history, with the glories of the days of yore. But the shadow of repressions, persecutions, the discriminatory and oppressive Ottoman rule, random massacres wiping entire villages around Van and leaving ruins and wandering orphans behind are ever present. These horrible stories of torture and murder are told casually, as if they are a part of Armenian life in Van and in the Ottoman Empire, like undying memories, collective memories shaping the collective psyche of Vanetsies.

This story has a feminist character. It is a fruit of the collaboration of a mother and daughter; it is based on a woman's, Lianoush's, perception of life and events of the time; it is dedicated to "Three extraordinary Armenian women, Hranoush Beglarian, Elize Kardzair Manoukian, and Irene Gyulnazarian"; and most importantly, it is feminist because of the chosen perspective in the characterization of men and women in the narrative and the importance given to women. Grandpa Panos is an opinionated and typically grumpy man, Lianoush asserts, but her "[f]ather is different. He is not like a Vanetsi Armenian man. He is very self-sufficient, able to make coffee, tea. Or even breakfast for himself and anyone else." (p.13) On the other hand, Lianoush is proud of her maternal great-grandmother, Mariam, whom Vanetsis called Mariam Pasha, for her manly behavior and bravery, and for the way she rode a horse. (p. 22) In fact, Lianoush's character shows similarities to Mariam Pasha, whom she tries to emulate. She is outspoken and outgoing. She is even entrusted with the part of Mesrob Mashtots's male student in a school play. She ceremoniously pronounces her one and only line, "Master, our people love the letters and are grateful to you," and wishes Mariam Pasha were there to see her in the role of a grown-up man. (p. 59)

We learn a lot about the Vanetsi traditions and superstitions from Grandmother Maria, the Vanetsi *supas* (yogurt soup) which according to Grandma "makes the sick run and the dead rise." (p. 95) *Supas* is her prescription for anyone sick in the house, and characteristically, sickness, according to her, is caused by either the evil eye or sorrow. She has her own unique way of warding off the evil eye. She sits by the bed of the sick person and says her lengthy prayer, and the more she yawns while praying the weaker the evil eye becomes (p. 94). Interestingly, as I was reading the unfinished manuscript, I read this passage to my Vanetsi husband. With a nostalgic flare in his eyes, he recalled his

own grandmother sitting by his bed in Tehran, praying and yawning. He had never understood why she was yawning so much and assumed that she was tired and sleepy from staying by his bed late at night.

On the Other Side of Mount Ararat is also a love story, the unspoken but romantic love between Lianoush's older sister, Myranoush and Hagop. Hagop's family immigrated to the United States, and that was considered a betrayal to the Armenian culture and to the city of Van. But Hagop kept his promise to Myranoush and, after a year, came back to ask for her hand in marriage. Lianoush relates how Panos Agha reluctantly accepted the proposal and details the lavish wedding that followed. She also remembers how difficult and painful it was to part from her beloved sister with no hope of seeing her again. Then there is the story of an impossible love between Araxi and her cousin, Markos. Superstition had it that their love would bring a curse on the family because they were not "seven bellybuttons apart" (p. 97), that is at least seventh cousins. Markos is wounded during the Turkish attack on the city, and Araxi, as a volunteer nurse in the makeshift hospital, cares for him. We learn in the "Epilogue" that the two were eventually married and settled in Iran. They had two children, one of whom was mute and deaf.

Love was an outlandish feeling that baffled the thirteen-year-old Lianoush. "Love is when you constantly think about someone," Myranoush explains, "having dreams about that person and want to spend your life with him" (p. 75). But Grandma Maria's view is very different: "Love is when you care for your family more than anything else," She explains. "Love is when your house is neat, food is tasty, children are clean and healthy, and you praise the Lord everyday" (Ibid.). These juxtaposed explanations, of course, serve as evidence of the difference of perception between generations and the gradual modernization of Armenian life in that part of the world.

The story reaches a drastic turning point with the news of Turks attacking the villages near Van. Grandpa makes preparations for the "Black Days." Vanetsi men are taken away, and so is Lianoush's father. Through the ordeal of the Kosparian and Beglarian families, we learn about the truly black days of Van, the battle of self-defense against the Turkish army besieging the city, the Armenian struggle to defend the population with limited resources, isolated from the outside world. Vanetsis had put up a heroic fight, as the entry dated April 22, 1915 goes. "Women were fighting along with men. And those were the Vanetsi women, who thought the only purpose for a woman is to go to school, wear clean cloths, marry, have children, raise them, and nag men." (p.124) Van is turned into a war zone. The beautiful Marketplace is set on fire. "How long can we stand against the Turkish plan to exterminate us?" (p. 128). Terrified from the noise of the bombshells falling on Aigestan, Tavi and Tagi run away never to be found, dealing an unbearable blow to Lianoush.

"The Black Days' Food" is running out in the Kosparian's house, now shared by other relatives whose houses were confiscated by the Turks. Later, the house also becomes a shelter for the refugees from surrounding villages, and Lianoush's mother has to feed all of them. As things are turning for the worst and as the hope of getting food is diminishing, Misho, the longtime Kurdish help of the family, appears at night with a bag of flour. This loyal Kurdish boy, whom the Kosparians raised as their own son, had secretly left the house the night Lianoush's father was arrested. Misho was promised, like other Kurds were, to move into Armenian homes once they were killed or deported. But he did not want to move into this house. He thought Vanetsis had the right to their houses

(p.132). It is, indeed, a relief to read about a righteous Kurd standing out among the killers and the looters.

“Suddenly, Van became quiet and peaceful. What happened?” (p.136). They were saved. “I told you . . . Van is for Vanetsi Armenians and will always be,” grandpa says. And Lianoush wonders, “Bah! Five minutes ago we were sure Van would be destroyed, and now we are bragging Vanetsis again!” (Ibid). This sensitive period of the Armenian resistance in Van is touched upon very briefly. It is not possible to draw an accurate picture of the events in this period. One can assume, however, that locked and isolated in their houses, not many families knew exactly what was going on outside, and the authors of *On the Other Side of Mount Ararat* did not delve into the historical details to expand on that important event in the life of Van.

After a short period of freedom during which Armenians governed their homeland of Vaspurakan, the Russian army received orders to retreat. The Armenians had no choice but to follow the Russian army and take the road of exodus toward Russian Armenia. However, Lianoush’s story does not end here. She first has to face the ordeal of leaving her grandpa behind. The stubborn old man would not leave Van. He had decided to stay and fight till his last breath against the Turks trying to move into their house. Brave Lianoush survived the hardship of the road to Eastern Armenia. She continued her life in Armenia, on the other side of Mount Ararat. Her story is in many ways the story of every family caught in the turmoil of the destruction of beautiful Van. However, a unique feature of Mariam and Elize Manoukians’ work is its style, appropriate to the thirteen-year-old narrator’s diction and thus, an easy reading not only for adults but also for adolescents.

Aside from historical writings, there is a plethora of literature, memoirs, eyewitness accounts, and fiction depicting the destruction of Armenian life in the Ottoman Empire. *On the Other Side of Ararat* is one of the few that can appropriately convey to young readers what they should know about these fateful years and to help them understand the horrible rupture in the history of the Armenian nation.

Rubina Perroomian