

# Armen D. Bacon: An inheritance of humanity

By Armen D.  
Bacon

As I handed the gift to her, I saw eyes bulging, seething with anger. My grandmother — tall, statuesque, quiet, face made of porcelain, was outraged by my gesture.

Throwing it to the ground, she looked away at first, and then, untwisting her neck, made fierce eye contact before spitting onto the floor where the brass handle had crash-landed, leaving a visible scar on both heart and her prized hardwood floors. Collapsing into her rocker, she retreated into a world of permanent midnight.

The road to adulthood is often times paved with acts of sheer ignorance and maybe even stupidity. On a warm April morning, exactly 42 years ago this month, a young college girl, undeniably curious and traveling solo through Europe, decided to test life outside the margins of her small hometown and overly protective Armenian family.

Ignoring the past and with little if any presence of mind for the sorrows of her people, she met a young Greek who possessed a car and willingness to drive her and a friend on the 12-hour journey from Athens, Greece, to Istanbul, Turkey.

Naive and defiant, blind to the heartache of those who came before her, she yearned only to walk the soil once declared off-limits to her ancestors.

During her weeklong stay, she befriended young Turks, dined with the locals, bartered with merchants, and filled a flimsy backpack with cheap souvenirs purchased from the booths of Istanbul's Grand Bazaar.

At night she slept on the ground in a \$3-a-day youth hostel, footnoted in Fodor's to be avoided at all costs.

But it was all she could afford and situated not far from the main road. Very late at night, she could hear music played on old-world instruments that strangely reminded her of home. Tossing and turning, her mind occasionally drifted to thoughts of her grandparents. Was this the same Turkey they had fled, she wondered?

Before returning home, she bought mementos of her travels, including a brass coffee maker embellished with carved etchings. It resembled an old tarnished one she had watched her grandmother use time and again on her tiny stove — carefully spooning in coffee, bringing it to a boil, then pouring it slowly into demitasse cups brought from Armenia.

"The perfect gift," she thought to herself.

I am, of course, the "she" described in this story. A few mornings ago, while perusing a scrapbook for old black and whites, I stumbled across the photos taken in Turkey. My jaw dropped.

Here we are, commemorating the Genocide, mourning for those who could not make it out early enough, fortunate to be the seeds of those who did.

Am I too late to apologize and acknowledge? To tell my grandmother I finally understand?

My name, Armen, was derived from the place that held her heart.

The memory of seeing terror in her eyes still haunts me — especially this month as I join countless others in our community in remembrance of the Genocide that killed 1.5 million Armenians, including members of her family. With each lecture and event, with each social media post and tweet, as choirs sing and scholars speak, my private guilt and denial stand with me.

In the years that followed, long after her passing, my grandmother's incredible narrative of tragedy and triumph was discovered in scribbled notes reluctantly shared by one of her sons. Most of her stories, however, were sadly silenced and buried with her.

What do I know? That on the evening of Nov. 20, 1915, a band of Turkish soldiers broke into her family's home, taking her father and brother. Both were executed. She and her mother escaped on foot through the streets of Erzurum, Turkey, but her mother became ill and died of starvation and pneumonia.

She met my grandfather shortly thereafter and they married in 1916, in the Georgian province of Tiflis.

He was well educated and a writer, fluent in six languages. In 1919, they fled on horseback to Constantinople where they stayed until 1921, eventually boarding a Greek vessel and setting sail for America.

They arrived at Ellis Island in October 1921, later settling in Boston and ultimately finding their way to Fresno.

Zarouhi Sobajian Derian, my grandmother, was a survivor.

And so here we are, 100 years later. Struggling in my own mind how best to pay tribute, still seeking forgiveness for my heartless and insensitive gestures, I scribble my own hardships and stories with promise to pass them down to my children and grandchildren.

We heal our wounds by preserving the past, living fully in the present, and leaving an inheritance of humanity for those who follow.

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