

Never forget, never tell: An Armenian Americans dilemma of memory

by [Rachel M. Srubas](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue



Armenians being deported from Turkey. [Some rights reserved](#) by [narek781](#)

“I want to go home,” declared the tattoo on the German shopkeeper’s forearm, “but I haven’t found it yet.” I had spent the week in Berlin with my husband, and now we were scheduled to fly on to Istanbul. I had never been to Turkey, yet that message of longing and search on a stranger’s arm could have been written on my own.

My maternal grandfather, Puzant Tarpinian, was an Armenian who grew up in the Karataş neighborhood of Smyrna (now called Izmir), an Aegean seaport city on the western shore of Anatolia, Turkey. After immigrating to the United States in 1912 with his older brother Caspar, Puzant settled in Chicago. For years he worked as a comptroller for Blum’s Vogue, a fashionable women’s clothier on Michigan Avenue. He died at age 68 in 1958. I was born six years later. At age 49, never having met my granddad, I found myself missing him, missing all the dead Tarpinians so deeply that I set off on a pilgrimage to Turkey.

In Berlin I had visited Holocaust memorials and other monumental symbols of national repentance. I knew I would find no atoning monuments to ethnic and religious minorities exterminated in Turkey. In 1915, zealous nationalism and militarism—embraced by the so-called Young Turks, or Committee of Union and Progress—led to the systematic deportation and slaughter of 1 million or more Christian Armenians of Turkey, as well as other ethnic and non-Muslim minorities, including Greeks and Kurds. Secular and religious American newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *Missionary Review of the World* reported the war crimes. In the United States, Puzant and Caspar Tarpinian, college-educated émigrés fluent in

English, surely learned of the grave threats to their home community, although Smyrna's Armenian population remained remarkably intact as late as 1921. That was that year that Caspar left Puzant in Chicago and went back to rejoin his family in Smyrna.

The Greek army had landed on Smyrna's shores in 1919. In September of 1922, Turkish military forces invaded and regained control of the city. Soon a massive fire, reportedly set by Turkish soldiers, swept through Smyrna's Armenian and Greek neighborhoods, destroying buildings, killing thousands, and forcing survivors to flee. Armenian and Greek men were arrested and deported to Turkey's interior. Those women and children who escaped sought refuge in neighboring nations. Among my mother's belongings, I recently discovered a postcard that her aunt, Takouhy Tarpinian, sent from Athens, Greece, to a Chicago address. It's dated November 4, 1922. Her father had tucked the card, message side down, into an album of mementos that remained unopened in a dresser drawer. My mother Alice never read it.

*My Dear Puzant,*

*What has happened to you dear and you do not write. Are you sick? We are anxiously waiting every day. Write often to mother. We have heard nothing from C. since he was taken what he must be suffering poor Caspar what luck.*

*Sometimes I have no hope at all & other times I feel different. With love from all and myself, yours, Takouhy*

While descendants of the murdered Jews of Europe have learned the imperative, "Never forget," diaspora Armenians seem to have internalized a dilemma: "Never forget, never tell." In *Redeeming Memories*, Armenian-American theologian Flora Keshgegian observes, "The Armenian-American community can best be characterized by preoccupation with the memory of the reality of the genocide, but silence regarding personal narratives and the impact of it on people's lives."

Puzant Tarpinian coped with the impact of the genocide by forging a new American family. He married Lone Wyse, an educated former Mississippian of Scots-Irish, Presbyterian lineage, who had taught music and managed a tearoom in Chicago's Hyde Park. In 1934, when their only daughter Alice was born, Lone devoted herself to raising the child in a hushed, protective environment. Though Puzant spoke rarely of Caspar to his wife and daughter, Alice grew up knowing that her father had written to the U.S. State Department pleading for help in finding his brother and that he had

received no reply.

Alice's limited contact with Armenian culture came by way of food and friendship. Puzant would take his daughter to dinner in Chicago's Greektown, where the roast lamb, rice pilaf, and baklava resembled Armenian cuisine. "Uncle Steve" and "Aunt Kate" Turabian (Kate is the author of the University of Chicago *Manual for Writers*, now in its 8th edition) were family friends. Stephen Turabian, a formerly Ottoman Armenian like Puzant, had emigrated to the U.S. from Turkey in 1908. Puzant and Steve must have found a sense of brotherhood in their similar backgrounds and losses, and perhaps in their ethnic resemblance as well. As the joke has it, *ian* at the end of Armenian surnames stands for "I'm all nose."

Freckled, fair, and beset by ailments, lone Wyse Tarpinian required years of physical care from her husband, and died of cancer when Alice was only 14. Ten years later, weakened by ulcers and heart disease, Puzant died on Thanksgiving Day. To this day my mother prefers serving roast leg of lamb to turkey. She cherishes her father's American Civil Liberties Union membership card. She has his dark, roundish eyes and an Armenoid nose that I see on my own face in the mirror. I see this same nose on Puzant's face in the photo taken on his daughter's wedding day, a year before his death. His bodily organs gave out, but I believe it was unanswerable questions and unspeakable grief that did him in. He had done his best not to bequeath sorrow to his daughter, but even the most cautious, secretive parents cannot protect their offspring from the truths that bloodlines tell.



**HISTORIC MASS: Armenian women pray outside the 1,000-year-old church of Surp Khach, or Holy Cross, on Akdamar Island in Turkey. The church is one of the most precious remnants of Armenian culture. In 2012 several hundred Armenian Christians celebrated a mass there for the first time since the expulsion of the Armenian people in the World War I era. AP photo/Burhan Ozbilici.**

To be Armenian today is to bear in your being the molecular memories of the suffering, resurrected Christ in whom the Armenians placed their faith as early as the year 301. These memories converge with memories of ethnic and religious persecution that is all too recent and scandalously prototypical. “Who after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” Adolf Hitler asked German military commanders on August 22, 1939, one week before Nazi forces invaded Poland. Hitler’s followers were persuaded to target various European communities of “subhumans,” replicating and elaborating on the genocidal tactics employed two decades earlier in Turkey.

Today Turkey continues to officially deny the Armenian Genocide despite pressure to acknowledge it from international leaders and agencies, including the United Nations and the World Council of Churches. Just one month before our visit to Berlin, Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met with German chancellor Angela Merkel. Referring to the Armenian Genocide, she reportedly told Erdoğan, “Turkey must come to terms with its history.” Erdoğan countered, “You are forcing us to accept something we have not done.”

In 2005, Turkish author Orhan Pamuk was arrested for “insulting Turkishness” after the Swiss publication *Das Magazin* quoted him as saying, “One million Armenians and 30,000 Kurds were killed in these lands and nobody but me dares talk about it.” International literary and human rights communities vehemently protested Pamuk’s arrest. Turkish authorities eventually dropped the charges, and Pamuk went on to

win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

That same year, Armenian-Turkish newspaper editor Hrant Dink wrote that “people who lived on this territory for 3,000 years, people who produced culture and civilization on this territory, were torn from the land they had lived on and those who survived were dispersed all over the world . . . The experience is already internalized, recorded on its people’s memory, its genetic code.” Dink’s journalistic activism eventually led to the arrest of the editors of *Agos*, the Turkish-Armenian bilingual weekly that Dink published. In 2007 in Istanbul, as Dink left *Agos* offices, 17-year-old ultranationalist Ogün Samast assassinated him. “I shot the infidel,” Samast reportedly shouted as he ran from Dink’s fallen body.

Dink’s funeral inspired nearly 100,000 people to protest ethnically and religiously motivated violence. Many marched carrying placards that read, “We are all Hrant. We are all Armenian.”

Public protests are common in Turkish cities, especially since the massive 2013 antigovernment uprisings in Istanbul’s Taksim Square and Gezi Park, which resulted in thousands of injuries and an estimated 11 deaths. During our time in Istanbul, my husband and I witnessed thunderously chanting International Women’s Day marchers surrounded by police in riot gear. Days later, thousands of people took to the streets to mourn 15-year-old Istanbul resident Berkin Elvan, who was hit in the head by a police officer’s tear gas canister during a 2013 protest. The boy died after spending 269 days in a coma. His furious, grief-stricken mother told reporters, “It’s not God who took my son away but Prime Minister Erdoğan.”

A 3,000-year-old city of over 13 million inhabitants, Istanbul is palpably tense. Often aided by the kindness of locals, we made our way through its ancient but thriving dynamic neighborhoods. Once we had passed the metal detector and armed guard at the door of the Dutch consulate, we were warmly welcomed by worshipers at the ecumenical worship service. The vast majority of Turkey’s citizens, however, are registered Muslims. Five times a day the *adhān*, the call to prayer broadcast from the minarets of mosques, urges the faithful to hurry to worship.

These loud, lyrical Islamic recitations reminded me, a Christian in Turkey, that mine is only one path that people walk in seeking God. While many Muslims of Turkey continue about their secular business as *muezzins* call them to prayer, some drop everything to enact their submission to Allah. In a rank gas station restroom I

encountered a devout woman performing her ritual ablutions at a sink. Minutes later she was kneeling in prayer on the sidewalk behind the building, her forehead pressed to the pavement. I was reminded of the prophet Joel's words read on Ash Wednesday—that God had beckoned us to “return to me.”

I had returned to a land both strange to me and known in my bones. We traveled to Izmir, once called “Infidel Smyrna” by Ottomans hostile to its Greek and Armenian Christian populations. We had decided to stay in local homes. When the transmission in our flimsy rental car gave out just as we arrived at our Izmir guest apartment, our host swiftly phoned the rental agency and arranged for a new vehicle to be delivered. Then she served us tea, offered us house slippers, and introduced us to her boyfriend Kemal. “He hates the Kurds,” she mentioned at one point. “Don’t ask him why.”

We didn’t ask. We were acquainted with bigotry’s virulent logic. My Ash Wednesday visit to Berlin’s Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe—its undulating concrete acreage, corridors of sarcophagal pillars, and “emergency exit” stairwells leading to dead ends—had a solemn, nauseating impact on me. Now I was at the social mercy of people native to the city from which the Armenians had been driven a century earlier. I knew I could not stomach Kemal’s reasons for hating an entire, comparably persecuted ethnic minority. I kept the acquiescent silence that well-meaning Christians have been known to keep in the face of racism.

I also kept silent about the former Armenians of Karataş. I knew that no one would remember where the Armenian Church Cemetery was; it had been next to the Tarpinians’ house, but the neighborhood had burned and its residents had perished or fled. Our photocopied antique Ottoman land deed took us to a sloping, seaward street that may have been the right one. The vacancy I sensed despite the street’s modern, overbuilt excess seemed to confirm that we had homed in on a paradox that only a seer in exile could express. “I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich,” John the Revelator once wrote to the church in Smyrna. His words were also true here on the street of my people, near their incinerated house of worship and paved-over graves.

We left Izmir for ruined, excavated Ephesus, and Ephesus for Cappadocia’s frescoed cave churches, where Christians had found refuge and fellowship centuries earlier. We sang “Amazing Grace” in one of these hallowed places, just the two of us lost-and-found wretches. We bought cups of fresh-squeezed pomegranate juice from a

sunburnt vendor who pointed the way back to town, and we walked for miles followed by a desert dog hungry for the salty, braided cheese in our packs. We rented a furnished cave to sleep in.

Home, it turned out, was not a place in Turkey. Home was not some surviving ethnic remnant of the “infidel” city from which Puzant and Caspar Tarpinian had set sail in 1912. Nor was it the postcard-picturesque scenes of Smyrna that had carried Takouhy’s messages to her brother in faraway America. Home, the home of God, was and is among mortals, as the book of Revelation could have told me. This meant that God was with us no matter where we traveled, where we lived or died. We were home. We are home.

Late in Lent my husband and I were back in Tucson, Arizona, and I attended Palm Sunday worship at a friend’s church. Following the service she introduced me to a woman named Esther, who was about my mother’s age and petite, with an elegantly prominent nose. She told me her maiden name, which ended with the familiar Armenian *ian*, which means “issued from.” She explained that in 1915 her Armenian mother had been rescued from “the death march road” and housed with a Kurdish family until a Greek orphanage took her in.

“Come to my home for lunch,” she said. I arrived at her doorstep with two apricot roses in a vase and the postcard that Takouhy Tarpinian had mailed to her brother Puzant a century earlier. Esther showed me an heirloom rug and recounted her father’s childhood memories of picking silkworm cocoons from the mulberry trees in his village near Istanbul. Her father and mother had refused to share other, bloodier memories with their children. All that Esther knew of the deportations and slaughters, the escapes and sanctuaries, she had learned from a cousin whose mother had been willing and able to speak of them.

The day after my visit with Esther was April 23, the eve of Armenian Martyrs’ Day. Turkish prime minister Erdoğan made international news with a carefully crafted statement that stopped short of acknowledging the Armenian Genocide while calling for the creation of a Turkish-Armenian commission to study the events of 1915. Erdoğan expressed respect for “all Ottoman citizens who lost their lives in the same period” and offered condolences to the grandchildren of “Armenians who lost their lives in the context of the early 20th century.”

As the grandniece of Caspar Tarpinian, whose family never heard from him again after he was taken from their home, I find little comfort in Erdoğan’s remarks and

am skeptical about his motives for saying as much as he said. I am cautious and ambivalent like Takouhy, who said in her postcard to Puzant, "Sometimes I have no hope at all and other times I feel different." My faith in the crucified, risen Redeemer dares me to imagine that some day Turkish officials will call the Armenian Genocide by its true name and help set my people free from the cycle of futile remembrance and rage.