



*“Do you think of yourself as an Armenian?
Or an American? Or hyphenated American?”*

—D.M. Thomas

Chapter 1

IDENTITY AND HISTORY

WE BEGIN TO LEARN OUR CULTURE—THE WAYS OF OUR SOCIETY—JUST AFTER BIRTH. THIS PROCESS IS CALLED socialization, and it involves far more than schooling. It influences our values—what we consider right and wrong. Our religious beliefs are an integral part of our culture, as is our racial and ethnic heritage. Our culture shapes the way we work and play, and it makes a difference in the way we view ourselves and others. Psychologist Deborah Tannen warns of our tendency to generalize about the things we observe and the people we encounter. “Generalizations, while capturing similarities, obscure differences. Everyone is shaped by innumerable influences such as ethnicity, religion, race, age, profession, the geographical regions they and their relatives have lived in, and many other group identities—all mingled with personality and predilection.”¹

The readings in this chapter address questions about how people come to understand their place in the world. The questions are raised through the stories of individual Armenians. As you read their stories and hear their questions, you will come to see that many of their challenges are familiar to all of us. These readings ask: What factors influence how we see ourselves? How can we keep our individuality and still be part of a group? What role does group and family history play in shaping the way we see ourselves and the way others see us? And, finally, how do all of these facets of identity influence the choices that people make.

Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc., Courtesy of Jack Chiffian, boy on right.



An Armenian family, Ordu, Ottoman Empire, c. 1905.

history. Psychologist Ervin Staub, author of *The Roots of Evil*, observes that we can all learn about ourselves from the way Armenians have responded. He writes:

*The intense need of the Armenians as individuals and as a community to have the genocide be acknowledged and known by the world teaches us something about ourselves as human beings. First, our identities are rooted not only in our group, but in the history of our group. For a complete identity, we must be integrated not only with our individual past, but also with our groups' past. Perhaps, this becomes especially important when our group is partly destroyed and dispersed; our families and ourselves have been deeply affected; and in a physical sense we have at best fragments of our group. Second, we have a profound need for our pain and suffering, especially when it is born of injustice, to be acknowledged, known and respected.”*²

Today most Armenians do not live in the Republic of Armenia. Indeed, most Armenians have deep ties to the countries where they live. Like a lot of us, many Armenians find themselves balancing their role in their new country with their historical and cultural roots. How far should they assimilate into their new countries? Does Armenian history and culture have something to offer Armenians as they live their lives now? When do historical and cultural memories create self-imposed limits on individuals?

This chapter also explores the way identity passes down from one generation to another. These issues are especially important for a group that lives with the memory of a genocide in which over a million and a half Armenians were systematically murdered between 1915 and 1923 in what is now Turkey. The deliberate historical revision, denial of the genocide, and the politicization of traumatic memory have consequences for the generations that live in the shadow of that

Reading 1 — WHAT'S IN A NAME?

Individuals begin to understand their own identity—who they are—from their families, peers, traditions, values, history, and society in which they live. One of the first markers of that identity is a name. Names are often chosen very carefully to send a message to the child and the larger society about who a person is. For many national and ethnic groups, names convey an even deeper meaning, especially when members of those groups find themselves living outside their traditional homeland. Names can be a statement of identity, marker of membership, a sign of difference, or all of these.

Writers from Sandra Cisneros to Ralph Ellison have discussed the relationship between names and individual identity. It is a theme that has been picked up by many prominent Armenian writers as well, including Michael Arlen, Peter Balakian, Diana Der-Hovanessian, and William Saroyan.

In his memoir *Black Dog of Fate*, Peter Balakian uses the stories behind family names as a metaphor for the way history, family experiences, and individual identity become intertwined.

*My grandmother's big brown eyes keep watching me intensely. I am Peter; Bedros in Armenian, named after her second husband, who went into a coma from a cerebral hemorrhage about the week I was conceived and who died without regaining consciousness about three months before I was born. I am the eldest grandchild east of Fresno, California, the first male [in] the next generation, a filial position that in our Near Eastern culture comes with patriarchal status. . . . I did not understand then what the presence of a new generation meant for a culture that had been nearly expunged from the planet only forty-five years earlier. . . .*³

Balakian's grandmother was a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Balakian writes that "when I was with my grandmother I had access to some other world, some evocative place of dark and light, some kind of energy that ran like an invisible force from this old country called Armenia to my world in New Jersey."⁴ After the death of Peter's grandmother the other world intruded into Peter's suburban American childhood through the rituals and stories of his family.



Photo courtesy of Peter Balakian

Peter Balakian with his grandmothers, June 1953. Nafina Aroosian, a survivor of the Armenian Genocide, is on the right.

As Balakian grew, exploration of his mother's name became an opening for him to learn about the collective history of the Armenian people.

Arax Aroosian. My mother's name. Unplaceable sounds to the American ear. A name that must have baffled teachers in Paterson in the 1930s when they stared at it on the top of the class list. Arax: a name of eastern Anatolia and the southern Caucasus, where the Araxes River flows from the Ararat plateau eastward and makes a border uniting Armenia, Turkey, and Iran. A name that means turbulence, synonymous with the river.

Aroosian, a name part Arabic and part Armenian, meaning "son of the bride," or more idiomatically, "son of beautiful ones." A name of southeastern Anatolia, north of Nineveh, where the Tigris hooks around the ancient stone-walled city of Diarbekir, a city the Hurrians, Urartians, Assyrians, Armenians, Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Turks all controlled at one time or another. Diarbekir: a linguistic estuary where Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic, and French mingled, forming a creole language that Armenians spoke. Dikranagerdsi Armenian, they called it, because they called their city by its Armenian name, Dikranagerd, the city of King Dikran, who was the most powerful king of the Armenian Empire at its height, circa 50 B.C. Diarbekir: a killing city where the Turkish government killed more than a hundred thousand Armenians in 1915...⁵

In Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat*, names create discomfort. Early in the book Arlen reflects on his father's name.

At the age of twenty-one he had changed his name from Dikran Kouyoumjian to Michael Arlen.

My mother (who was American and Greek) sometimes called my father Dikran in private, and this was the only way I knew as a child that he was something other than—or in addition to—English. "It's an Armenian name," she explained to me one long-ago afternoon. For a while, I thought this referred to the kind of name—a private name. I understood that some of my far-off my uncles were called Kouyoumjian—an odd and difficult name for a child to scrawl on a thank-you letter. But my father, while he was well disposed toward the uncles, evidently detached himself from the name.⁶

CONNECTIONS

- A journal is a way of documenting the process of one's thinking. For author Joan Didion and others, it is also a way of examining ideas. She explains: "I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see, and what it means." You may find it helpful to use a journal to explore the ideas raised in this resource book. Begin by writing about your own name. How did you get it? What does it connect you to?

☛ You may choose to write on the subject of your name—first name, last name, whole name, or nickname—for five minutes. This exercise may serve as an icebreaker in a class. Share your reflections in pairs before reporting back to the larger group. You may have partners share some of what they have learned about each other.

☛ What do names connect people with? Can those ties be severed when the name is changed?

☛ What are the connections between Peter Balakian and his family name?

☛ What might have influenced Michael Arlen's father to change his name?

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[Redacted]

Reading 2 — MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Often people have many identities that are important to who they are as individuals. Many times those identities exist in the same person without creating conflict. For example a person may be an African-American woman, with one grandparent from Ecuador and another from Russia, and the daughter of parents who are both Christian—one Episcopalian and the other Catholic. For her, all these identities may live harmoniously, while in others they could provide a source of conflict.

Diana Der-Hovanesian is an Armenian-American writer born in the United States. Her grandparents came to the United States from Ottoman Armenia. In her poem “Two Voices,” Diana Der-Hovanesian reflects on how her family history influences who she is as a person. The poem begins with a question from the British writer D.M. Thomas.



Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc.,
courtesy of George and Wiltram Kochadorian Markarian.

Armenian immigrants celebrating Easter in Worcester, MA, U.S.A., 1925.

Two Voices

by Diana Der-Hovanessian

*“Do you think of yourself as an Armenian?
Or an American? Or hyphenated American?”*

—D.M. Thomas

In what language do I pray?

Do I meditate in language?

*In what language am I trying
to speak when I wake from dreams?*

*Do I think of myself as an American,
or simply as a woman when I wake?*

*Or do I think of the date and geography
I wake into, as a woman?*

Do I think velvet, or do I think skin?

*Am I always conscious of genes and
heredity or merely how to cross my legs
at the ankle like a New England lady?*

*In a storm do I think of lightning
striking? Or white knives dipped
into my great aunt's sisters'
sisters' blood?*

*Do I think of my grandfather telling
about the election at the time
of Teddy Roosevelt's third party,
and riding with Woodrow Wilson
in a Main Street parade
in Worcester?*

*Or do I think of my grandmother
At Ellis Island,*

or as an orphan in an Armenian village?

*Or at a black stove in Worcester
baking blueberry pie for my grandfather
who preferred food he had grown
to like in lonely mill town
cafeterias while he studied
for night school?*

*Do I think of them as Armenian
or as tellers of the thousand and
one wonderful tales in two languages?*

Do I think of myself as hyphenated?

*No. Most of the time, even as you,
I forget labels.*

Unless you cut me.

*Then I look at the blood.
It speaks in Armenian.⁸*

~



Courtesy of Richard Hovannisian

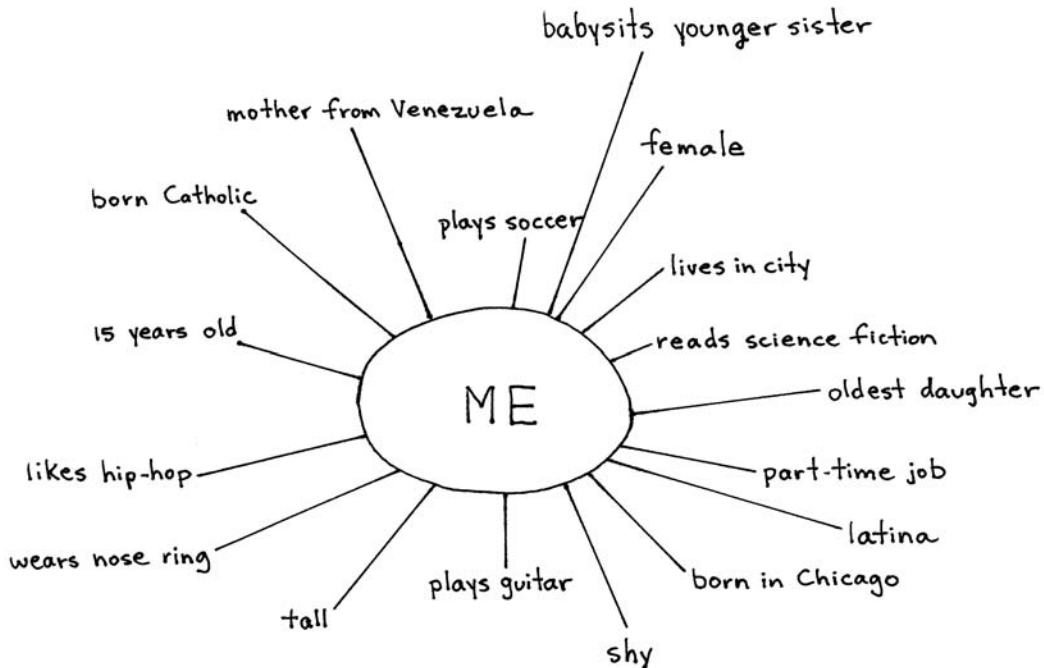
Richard Hovannisian on his family's farm.

Richard Hovannisian, Professor of Armenian and Near Eastern History at the University of California Los Angeles, grew up in a small Armenian community in the San Joaquin Valley of California. A dozen or so Armenian families lived in his rural town: “almost all farmers of small vineyards and nearly all from the same village in historic Armenia.” Hovannisian recalls hearing Armenian women, survivors of the genocide, sharing stories of the horrors that they had witnessed. During his childhood, he was not aware of the impact these stories would have on his life. He tried to distance himself from the older generation. He remembers:

I was sure I was not a hyphenated American. In fact, like most of my generation, even though we were the children of survivors or of first generation immigrants, the tribulations of the older generation seemed to have little bearing on our lives. [The Armenian Genocide] was something that had occurred far away and a long time ago—all of ten or fifteen years.⁹

CONNECTIONS

Below is an identity chart for a high school student from the United States.



- Using this model, create an identity chart for Diana Der-Hovanessian. What labels does she use for herself? How do you decide which labels should be most prominent?
- Create an identity chart for yourself. Begin with words or phrases that describe the way you see yourself. Add those words and phrases to your chart. Compare your chart with those of your classmates. Which categories appeared on every chart? Which of them appeared on only a few charts? As you look at other charts, your perspective may change. You may wish to revise your chart and add new categories to those you have already included.
- This activity allows you to see the world through multiple perspectives. What labels would others attach to you? Do they see you as a leader or a follower? A conformist or a rebel? Are you a peace-maker or a bully. Are you an active participant or a bystander? How do society's labels influence the way you see yourself? The kinds of choices you make each day? Note the many identities that make up who you are. Consider which of them are most prominent in shaping your identity. Which identities might someone who does not know you recognize? Which would they fail to see?
- Diana Der-Hovanessian wrote "Two Voices" in response to a question: "Do you think of yourself as an Armenian? Or an American? Or hyphenated American?" How does she answer that question? Are there times when one aspect of your identity seems more important than others?
- How do children of immigrants negotiate their identity in a new culture? What pressures do they face that are unique? Which pressures are shared by their peers?
- Richard Hovannisian says that as a boy he was sure that he "was not a hyphenated American." What does he mean? What are the ways that people can honor their multiple identities? Why are some people threatened by the recognition of dual identities and multiple loyalties?
- In "Two Voices," Diana Der-Hovanessian writes that her blood speaks Armenian. She is not describing literal truth. She is using a metaphor to make a point. Scientists know identity and nationality are not literally carried in the blood, but the expression that "it's in my blood" remains part of everyday speech. If identity isn't literally carried in the blood, how is it passed from generation to generation?

Similar issues to those raised in "Two Voices" can be found in the Facing History and Ourselves study guide for the documentary *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*. The guide is available at www.facinghistory.org, and the film is available from the Facing History and Ourselves resource library and www.pbs.org.

To extend a study of the relationship between the Individual and Society, see Chapter 1 of *Facing History and Ourselves: Holocaust and Human Behavior* as well as opening readings from all of the Facing History and Ourselves resource materials.

Reading 3 — AM I ARMENIAN?

What makes us part of a group? Biology? Language? Religion? Experience? Geography? And what holds those groups together over time? Most Armenians live in diaspora—scattered across the globe from the country of Armenia throughout the Middle East and the United States. Diana Der-Hovanesian's poem "Diaspora" captures the complex relationship between an Armenian-American and her "father's land."

Diaspora

by Diana Der-Hovanesian

*I am the tourist
who looks just like
the native girl
who greets me, salt
and bread on her tray.*

*We have the same eyes,
the same smile and stride
but different tongues with which to say.*

*I am the stranger
in my father's land,
the traveler to the country
I can neither leave
nor stay,
a foreigner in the place,
where millenniums ago
my kind was bred.*

*I am no one
without these trees, these stones
and streets. But their shadows
have grown short and tall without my weight.*

*I am the tourist
from far away
where I left tables of plenty
thirsty and unfed.¹⁰*

—



Armenian Refugee, photograph by John Elder, c. 1917-1919.

Courtesy of the Armenian National Institute

Sara Cohan, a teacher, also struggled with her relationship to Armenia and Armenian identity. She writes: “I do not practice the religion, speak the language, I am not directly from Armenia, and I only take part in a few of the traditions.”

While visiting an Armenian school in California, those issues came to a head when a student at the school asked: “How is it again that you are Armenian?” Cohan shared her reflections on the student’s question:

She had not meant for her question to hurt or challenge me, but it did. To know and love Armenian foods like choereg, boreg, and dolma does not make me Armenian. Knowing simple catch phrases like “gameer maz” (red hair) or “Sode gus-ez?” (Would you like a soda?) does not make me Armenian. My family’s experiences during the Armenian Genocide makes me Armenian.

Born and raised in the United States, I am an American, but I have always considered myself to be Armenian too. Being American is who I am and Armenian is who my family was. When I talk to friends about being Armenian I inevitably start with the Armenian Genocide, because that is where my family always begins the discussion of who we are. In another way, the Armenian Genocide is where my family’s story ended since only a handful survived the genocide.

As an Armenian, I feel compelled to teach the history of the Genocide to whoever will listen because the story is not over. Without an apology and without reparations from the Turkish government, my ancestors died in vain.

I am proud of my grandfather because he survived a genocide and was successful in his life. He started a family and was a psychiatrist trained at the American University of Beirut. He eventually helped establish the school of psychiatry at the University of Tennessee. At the same time, I mourn the loss of a lineage—sixty-nine members of my family perished in the genocide and only seven lived. There are approximately 6.1 billion people in the world and approximately 8 million Armenians. Most are in Diaspora and disappearing quickly. What my ancestors have accomplished and endured is worthy of remembrance and respect. With so few Armenians left in the world each one needs to do as much as s/he can to teach others about Armenians and the Genocide.



Photo courtesy of Sara Cohan

Sara Cohan’s family after the genocide.

Recently, I saw The Official Story, a movie about the Disappeared in Argentina. In the beginning of the film the main character is teaching a history course in a high school. She tells the class: “No people can survive without memory. History is the memory of the people.” When I heard those lines I finally knew how I could answer the young girl who asked how I was Armenian: I was born a descendant of Armenians and I am Armenian because my love for my grandfather has inspired me to learn about Armenian history and the history of the Genocide. I am Armenian because I will never forget my family’s history and, as long as I remember, Armenians will survive.

Thousands of Armenian survivors settled in communities in the United States that had been established in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of the survivors did not speak about their history, and many of the second generation did not make a concerted effort to learn about their history. In more recent generations, people like Sara Cohan have begun to explore their Armenian heritage. For many, one of the starting points for that exploration has become Peter Balakian’s memoir *Black Dog of Fate*. Although Balakian learned about the genocide later in life, other rituals and traditions marked his Armenian identity, like baking Armenian treats with his grandmother while she shared mysterious stories from the old world. As a boy, Balakian recalls seeing his Jewish neighbors celebrating Jewish holidays and he recalls asking his mother why his family was not Jewish.

“Because we’re Christians,” she answered.

“Why are we Christians?”

“Our people decided to follow the teachings of Jesus.” She paused. “There’s a legend that Noah’s ark landed on Mt. Ararat in Armenia. That makes Jews and Armenians cousins.”

“What’s Mt. Ararat?”

My mother exhaled as if she wished I would go away. “Mt. Ararat is our national symbol.”

“The symbol of America?”

“No. Of Armenia.”

“Where’s Armenia?”

As long as I had known language the word Armenia had existed; it was synonymous with the rooms of my house. As assumption. Ar. Meen. Ya. Armenia. Like ma-ma, da-da. Like hurt and horse. Arm. You. Me. Eat. The word rolled to the back of my mouth and just as I almost swallowed it, I caught it back near the epiglottis and unrolled it, pushing it forward as my jaw dropped open to the Ya and the

word spilled into the air. Armenia. It was such an unconscious part of my life that I had never even thought to ask: Where is it? What is it? ¹¹

CONNECTIONS

- What makes us part of a group? What holds groups together? How are religious and ethnic groups different from groups of friends or from colleagues at work?
- Most Armenians live in diaspora—spread across the world. How is it possible for a group to hold on to a cohesive group identity when they are so spread out? What tools might people use to maintain their culture?
- What is Diana Der-Hovanesian’s relationship to her “father’s land”? What words does she use to describe that relationship?
- Do you feel connected to any countries beyond the one in which you live? What is your relationship to that place? What words do you use to describe your connection?
- After reading the poem “Diaspora,” you may choose to revise the identity chart you created for Diana Der-Hovanesian. Which words would you consider adding? Have the issues raised in her poem “Diaspora” influenced the ways you think about your own identity? You may choose to revise your own identity chart as you encounter new ideas from the readings or from discussions with your classmates.
- Create an identity chart for Sara Cohan. Compare her identity chart with the one you created for Diana Der-Hovanesian. How are they similar? Which differences do you find most striking?
- How can someone be part of a group without being actively involved in many of the customs that have traditionally been part of the group’s identity? How would Sara Cohan answer that question?
- Peter Balakian says that Armenia was synonymous with the rooms of his house: “It was such an unconscious part of my life that I had never even thought to ask: Where is it? What is it?” How does an identity become unconscious? What sort of experiences bring questions of identity to the surface?
- At the Armenian school she visited, Cohan noticed that many of the students would “assign degrees of Armenianness to their peers.” Why would kids do that? What does it suggest about their identity and the way they feel about themselves? To create a “we,” or an “in” group, do groups also need to create a “they”?

Reading *A* → GENERATIONS

Families pass stories down from generation to generation. Often these stories become the lore around which a family shares their identity and values. For many children, the stories of their parents and grandparents have a profound effect on the way they understand their own role in society.

What happens when these family stories are about being victims of injustice? What happens, not only to the survivors, but also to their children, when the larger world has not acknowledged that injustice? Journalist J.D. Lasica spoke to several Armenian families living in Sacramento, California, about the legacy of the Armenian Genocide and its impact on their family's identity. In the first of two stories in this reading Lasica writes about a relationship between a mother and her son:

“Emmy” has never before told her story to an odar, the Armenian word for foreigner. There is a reason for this: She does not speak English.

Emmy—an English transliteration of the Arabic word for “mother”—is what everyone calls Haygouhi Shahinian.

At an even 5 feet tall, she is a slight, wiry woman of 86, with white hair and a high-pitched voice. Her son, George, translates, but she forges ahead with her story before he can get the words out.

“I remember when the troubles started,” she begins. “I was in the first grade, in Tarsus. One day my grandmother came and pulled me out of school. She was crying. We rushed home, and my father and uncle were standing with a gun at the window, looking at all the commotion in the streets.

“Finally, our whole family ran off to the fields on the outskirts of town. The Allewi (a [Muslim] sect) farmers were helping Armenians to hide there. We hid in the fields for three days, but the Turkish government declared that anyone helping Armenians would be put to death. So the farmers began to turn the people in the fields over to the soldiers.

“The Turkish soldiers began rounding us up in groups for firing squads. They were getting ready to shoot the next group of us when suddenly I saw an officer on a white horse come galloping, shouting in Turkish, Do not cut (kill) the Armenians, they have been pardoned by the new government.’ We were so happy we were going to live, we showered the officer with kisses. We showered his horse with kisses.”

Emmy clasps her face, and she takes a deep breath. Her account, like the others’, meshes with the historical literature: The [new] Ottoman government was overthrown briefly in April 1909; there were massacres in the Tarsus [Cilicia] region at that time.

Emmy returns to her story: It is six years later, and her family has moved to Adana, a nearby city.

“In 1915, the Turkish government ordered all Armenians in our village to be deported into the Syrian desert,” she says. “The local mayor—he was Turk—tried to prevent [this], but he was told to follow orders. The gendarmes gathered us into a caravan, and we set off, a thousand of us. My parents bribed the officials to let us take two small mule-driven carts. Along the way, we had to bribe the guards for food and water.

“Halfway through our journey, at the town of Ghatma, we passed a death field. Bodies, death were everywhere.” An earlier caravan had passed this way.

“After 18 days, we reached Aleppo (a city in what is now Syria). They let some of us go, but we had nothing. We were forced to live like paupers on the street. My father supported us by working for the town—he used his wagon to pick up corpses, stacking them in the cart and hauling them to the city dump.”

When the massacres ended, the Armenians were not allowed to return to their homeland, so Emmy’s family remained in Aleppo. Life was better after that.

She married and raised six children. The youngest, George, came to this country in 1959 to attend college before settling with his family in Carmichael [California]. Emmy followed in 1971.

George Shahinian is quiet for a long time. This is the first time he has heard his mother’s story at length. Finally, he says quietly: “It was just a miracle that she escaped. For our whole family, there was a very thin thread between life and death.”

Shahinian, 55, is a short, soft-spoken man who wears bifocals and a kind expression. He works as a mechanical engineer with the state Air Resources Board.

Shahinian worries that his three children will not fully appreciate what the Armenians endured. “It’s important to remember who we are and where we came from,” he says.

One way the Shahinians tried to pass along a sense of ethnic identity to their children was through language.



An Armenian family before the genocide, c. 1900.

Courtesy of Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc.,
Courtesy of Mary Hadian Gellianian.

Leon, at 22 the eldest, recalls: “Up until I was 4 or 5, we spoke only Armenian in the house. Then I went to kindergarten and picked up English after only a couple of weeks. Now, when I’m home, my parents still speak to me in Armenian, but I answer in English.”

Shahinian still worries about his children’s assimilation. “It’s weakening our culture. We don’t know how to stop it, and when it comes to our kids, I’m not sure, deep inside, we want to stop it.”¹²

J.D. Lasica also interviewed two generations of Boyajians, who shared some of their stories about Armenian identity in the United States.

Joyce Poirot is the only offspring of Mesrop Boyajian, the boy who was sold into slavery for a silver coin.

Boyajian seldom talked about his experience, so it was not until adulthood that Poirot understood her father’s place in the massacres. But she knew, from her early years in Detroit, that there was something about her heritage that set her apart.

“I knew it from the secret language we spoke at home and the way my grandmother dressed me,” she says. “I knew it when I’d open my lunch box in kindergarten. Everybody else would have bologna on Wonder Bread. I’d open mine, and a couple of koftas (meatballs) or lahmajoun (meat pies), smelling of garlic, would roll out.”

Poirot, 51, rests on a sofa in her downtown condominium. She is a top academic administrator at the University of California, Davis, overseeing a statewide continuing-education program.

“My first awareness of Armenians being discriminated against came after our family moved to Fresno when I was 11,” she says. “In Detroit, an Armenian was just another minority. But in Fresno, we were looked down upon.

“A few years later I came across a photograph of a sign in Fig Garden, an exclusive area of Fresno. It said, ‘No Negroes, No Jews, No Mexicans, No Armenians.’ And I thought, wow, this is for real.”

As a young adult she became estranged from her culture because of the way in which women have been treated in traditional Armenian households. But Poirot has now made peace with her roots.

“About 10 years ago I began realizing there was a part of me I didn’t know,” she explains.

In 1983 she traveled to Yerevan, capital of Soviet Armenia. There she came upon the monument called Dzidzernagabert, or Fortress of Sparrows. It is dedicated to the victims of the Armenian tragedy.

Poirot recalls: “The first time I came up to it, I was with my (now former) husband. I thought, ‘This is no tourist site; this is something I want to be alone with.’ Suddenly and unexpectedly I felt part of that distant experience.

“Later, when the sun was setting, I went back alone. I was just overcome, wracked with pain and grief and tears. I felt connected with it, with the martyrs, with my past. I felt there’s no escaping it—it’s in me. There’s no more denying that I carry pieces of the trauma.”

There is a long silence, and then: “I think I finally came to terms with it by accepting it.”

Poirot’s father, Mesrop Boyajian, ambles over to the television in his apartment, flicks it off, and settles into his favorite chair. “It’s not a pleasant thing to talk about, being sold as a slave,” he says, “so I very seldom talk about it.”

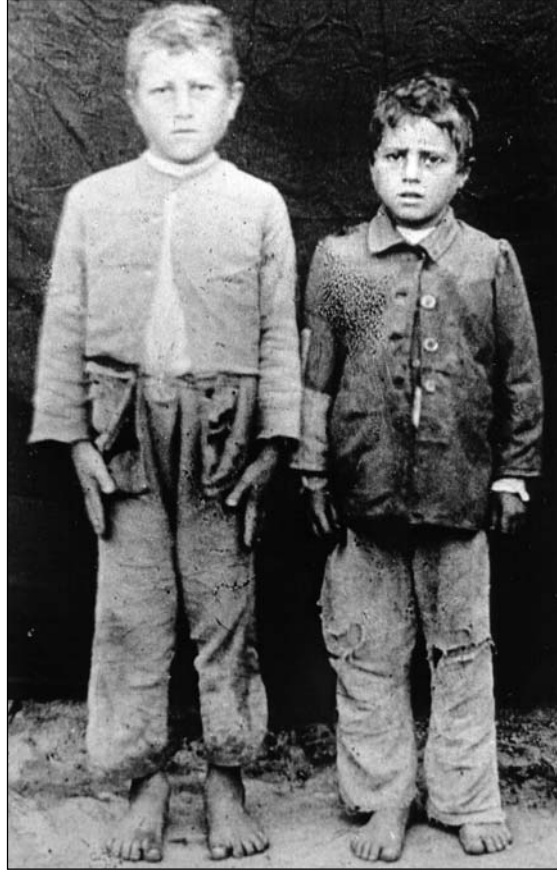
Boyajian is 80 years old. He has smooth features, good, strong hands that once worked the vineyards, and a lilting, almost boyish voice. A patch of white hair shoots up from his head.

Looking back on his stolen youth, he lets out a hollow sigh and says, “It feels like I’ve lost something. Something of myself.”

Of course, things might have been worse, he points out. “Perhaps I was lucky to have been sold. Otherwise, who knows what would have happened? I understood later that most of those kids who were not sold died in the desert.”

For Boyajian, freedom carried a \$40 price tag. When he was 16, his brothers sent him the money to join them in the United States. Mesrop had no trouble getting permission to leave from his Syrian owners, who were grateful for 10 years of good work.

He entrusted the \$40 with a Near East Relief missionary, who arranged for an Arab guide to smug-



1915–1916, two orphaned Armenian boys, Ottoman Empire, in what is now Syria. Photograph by Armin T. Wegner.

Courtesy of the Armenian National Institute

gle him and 10 other Armenian children across the Turkish border to Aleppo, Syria. From there, he made his way to New York in 1925.

Boyajian spent 21 years in the U.S. Army, serving in World War II, when he won a Purple Heart, and in Korea. He lived for years in the Bay Area before settling in Sacramento.

“I have seen many many things in my time,” Boyajian says philosophically. “Men are capable of great evil...”¹³

CONNECTIONS

Psychologist Ervin Staub, author of *The Roots of Evil*, has written about the impact of the genocide on Armenian identity. He observed:

*The intense need of the Armenians as individuals and as a community to have the genocide be acknowledged and known by the world teaches us something about ourselves as human beings. First, our identities are rooted not only in our group, but in the history of our group. For a complete identity, we must be integrated not only with our individual past, but also with our group's past. Perhaps, this becomes especially important when our group is partly destroyed and dispersed; our families and ourselves have been deeply affected; and in a physical sense we have at best fragments of our group. Second, we have a profound need for our pain and suffering, especially when it is born of injustice, to be acknowledged, known and respected.*¹⁴

❖ What happens when that history has not been acknowledged?

In a book that explores the relationship between family and identity, Elizabeth Stone writes:

*We are shaped by our families' notions of our identities which exist as an idea beyond the reach of measurement. The image they mirror back to us exists earlier and more substantially than we ourselves do. And among the primary vehicles families use to mirror us to ourselves are the family stories we hear about ourselves. These stories ... are a record of our family's fantasies, often unconscious about who they hope we are or fear we are.*¹⁵

❖ What parts of our identity are within “the reach of measurement”? What parts exist beyond its reach? What hopes and fears for the family and cultural identity emerge from the stories of the Boyajians and the Shahinians?

❖ How do the two families' experiences of survival affect the ways they think about Armenian identi-

ty? What aspects of Armenian identity seem most important to Joyce Poirot and George Shahinian?

- ✦ Why do you think Poirot's father, Mesrop Boyajian, has been reluctant to talk about his experiences during the genocide? How do you think the experience influenced the way he saw himself?
- ✦ As a follow up to this reading, interview your relatives about their identity and values. How have they come to understand their place in the world? What experiences and ideas have shaped their values?
- ✦ Many scholars have written about the pain caused by deniers who claim the genocide never happened. Professor Henry Theriault writes that for some survivors the psychological consequences of trauma can be mitigated over time, but denial blocks this, expanding the genocide's impact over time and increasing the original trauma. He argues: "Deniers thrust the genocide back onto its victims, so they must recall the violence done to and witnessed by them."¹⁶ Several scholars note that trauma, when not responded to, can be passed down through families. What do you imagine would help to break the cycle?
- ✦ Haygouhi Shahinian and Mesrop Boyajian are not only survivors. They are refugees as well. They left their homeland and moved to the United States because of the oppression they faced in the Ottoman Empire. Are there refugee communities where you live? Who are they? What stories do they have to tell? What can you learn from their experiences?



NOTES

1. Deborah Tannen, *You Just Don't Understand* (New York: Morrow, 1990), preface.
2. Ervin Staub, "The Genocide of the Armenians: Psychological and Cultural Roots and the Impact on Survivors," *Armenian Review*, 42 (Winter 1989), p. 55.
3. Peter Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
6. Michael J. Arlen, *Passage to Ararat* (Saint Paul: Hungry Mind Press, 1996), pp. 3–4.
7. [REDACTED]
8. Diana Der-Hovanesian, "Two Voices," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994), p. 23.
9. Richard Hovannisian speaking in Providence, Rhode Island, March 26, 2000.
10. Diana Der-Hovanesian, "Diaspora," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Sheep Meadow Press, 1994), p. 11.
11. Balakian, *Black Dog of Fate*, p. 40.
12. J.D. Lasica, "Emmy Shahinian," available at <http://www.well.com/user/jd/armenia2.html>.
13. J.D. Lasica, "The Boyajians," available at <http://www.well.com/user/jd/armenia3.html>.
14. Staub, "Genocide of the Armenians," p. 55.
15. Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins* (New York: Times Books, 1988), p. 167.
16. Henry C. Theriault, "Denial and Free Speech: The Case of the Armenian Genocide," in *Looking Forward, Moving Backward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, Richard Hovannisian ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publications, 2003), pp. 231–262.