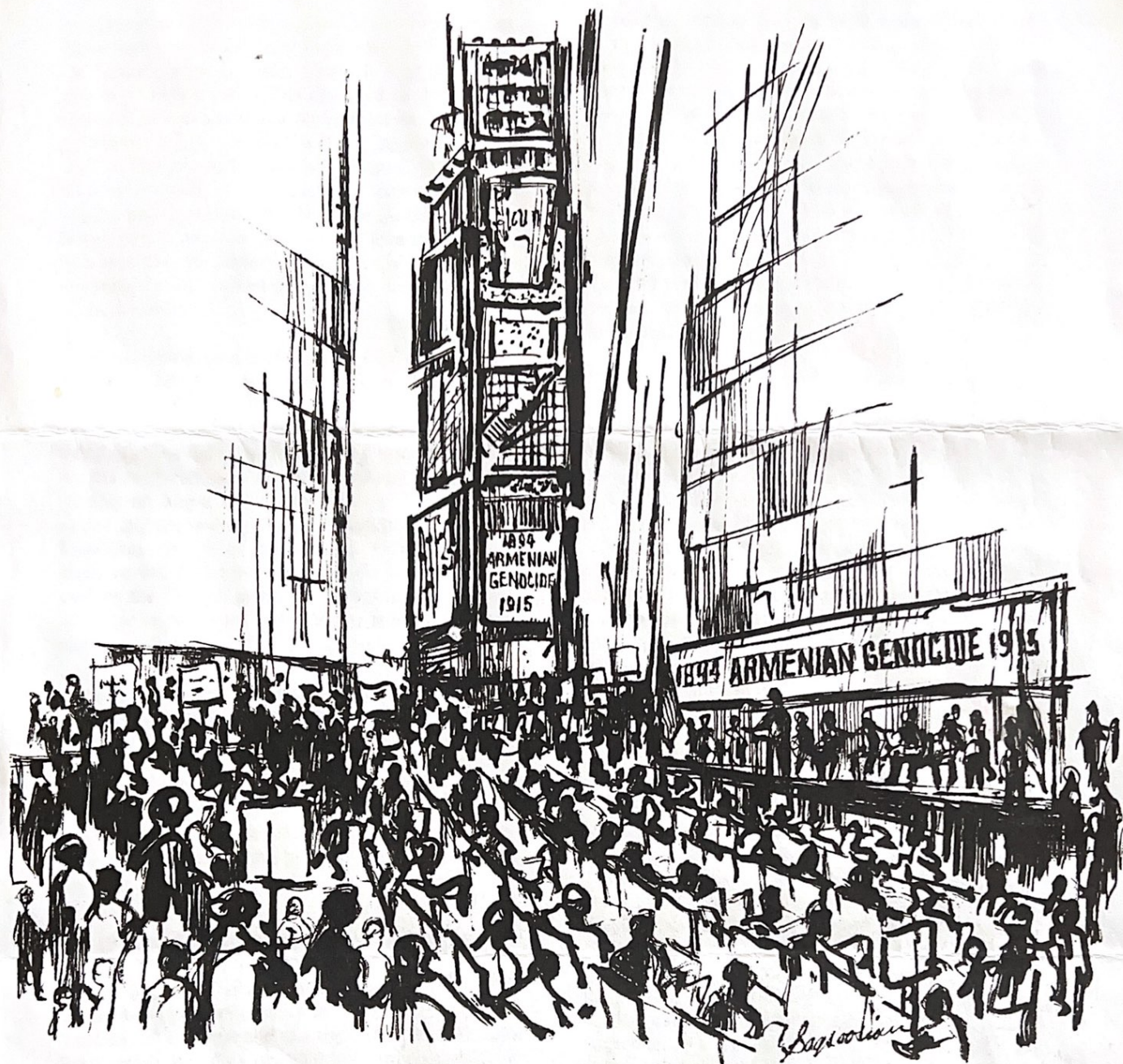


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FRONT COVER: GIRL IN A RED DRESS (photo by Kurkjian)

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## FORGIVENESS AND TRANSCENDENCE

by Anie Kalayjian

As a child of a survivor of the Ottoman-Turkish Genocide of Armenians, I am familiar with the atrocities planned and carried out from 1894 to 1915. During World War I, the Turkish authorities declared

the Armenians to be enemies of the Ottoman Empire. Adult males, and especially those identified as potential leaders, were arrested, taken to a desolate area, and shot. This process was designed to deprive Armenians of leadership and representation, so that deportations might proceed without resistance. Ultimately, famine, thirst, torture, epidemic, pillage, and plunder resulted in the deaths of one-and-one-half million people, or two-thirds of the Armenian population. My father was one of the fortunate survivors who was able to settle with his family in Syria. My mother's family walked through the deserts to Syria, where I was born.

The collective pain and suffering of my nation of Armenia and the continued Turkish denial of its Genocide left me feeling helpless and pained. I eventually concluded that the best way to deal with those negative feelings was to sublimate them. This led me to found the Armenian American Society for Studies on Stress and Genocide. The Society began systematic research on the psychosocial impact of the long-term effects of the Armenian Genocide. The study revealed that the persistent denial of the Genocide by the Turkish government evoked intense anger and rage in survivors owing to the lack of validation and reparation.

Validation of a traumatic experience is an essential step toward resolution and closure. An explicit expression of remorse by a perpetrator to a victim has enormous healing value. Against a background of losses and atrocities well beyond the realm of usual life experience, these aged survivors reflected a sense of personal and communal accomplishment, tempered with anger regarding the perpetrators' denial of how they were victimized.

In 1988 a devastating earthquake struck Armenia. This motivated me to establish a Mental Health Outreach Program to ameliorate the psychosocial needs of the surviving community in Soviet Armenia. Both my clinical outreach and research with the earthquake survivors in Armenia revealed yet further traumatization. Some of the nightmares of the Armenian earthquake survivors were not of the earthquake, but of Turkish gendarmes whipping them into the deserts during the Genocide. This created a tremendous feeling of pain and helplessness in me. How was I going to help my countrymen to work through the long-term effects of the Genocide? How would I help the Armenian elderly survivors of the Genocide integrate the trauma, find meaning in their experiences, and move to the next stage of their life—death?

About six months later, in 1989, I met Viktor Frankl at the International Forum of Logotherapy in San Jose. Frankl was a psychiatrist who survived Nazi concentration camps where he lost most of his family. He went on to write *Man's Search for Meaning* (1963). Feeling extremely fortunate to have met Frankl, I asked him, "How can I help the Armenian people heal the injury perpetrated by the Ottoman-Turkish Genocide. . . . from the insult of [being the victims of] the denial perpetrated by the successive Turkish governments ever since the first genocide of the 20th century?" I went on, "The Armenian survivors are still . . . tormented [as] the psychic genocide continues. What can I do?"

Frankl looked at me with great understanding and empathy, and said, "Ask the Armenians to be the first to forgive. You have waited close to 80 years. These survivors are dying as we speak, they can't wait any longer. Help them to forgive." I felt a moment of relief and comfort since I thought I now knew the answer. But how? That was yet another big question. What Frankl talked about is an individual, and spiritual, forgiveness, not a political one. I kept on trying to insert it in my lectures and in Armenian Genocide commemorations, but in vain. Some of my Armenian colleagues stopped talking to me for advancing these ideas. They did not realize that forgiveness does not imply the abandonment of the goal of educating the perpetrator of the crime to the need to accept responsibility.

I continued sublimating, continued conducting research on the Armenian Genocide, and continued helping around the world. In 1996, we published our first research article in the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* after four years of revisions; not because of the paper's scientific merit but its political consequences. The Introduction of the paper (where the historical perspectives were mentioned) got changed and revised about a dozen times by the Editorial Board of the journal. Some Turkish leaders even threatened the Jewish editors: "Which is more important, a dead Armenian or a live Jewish person?" A second study was published in the *Psychoanalytic Review* with the encouragement and support of Dr. Flora Hogman, a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust.

Although my personal journey of forgiveness began in 1988, the most important event occurred during the summer of 1998, when I took a taxi in New York City. I sat next to the driver, noticed his accent, and inquired, "I detect a familiar accent. Where are you from?" "Turkey," he answered, noting that he had

been studying in South Africa for about ten years. Immediately I began speaking in Turkish, and asked him if he was Turkish. His reply was a definite "Yes." Smiling, he said, "My name is Ahmed. Are you Turkish, too?" I replied, "No, I am Armenian!" My response must have been strong and definite because Ahmed quickly declared, "I have many Armenian friends here in New York. They are from Istanbul." He went on to tell me about his friend Garo, who one day had invited him to his house for dinner. When Garo's elderly mother found out that Ahmed was Turkish, she threw him out of her house, yelling at him, "Your government massacred my people and my family, I don't want you in my house." My gut reaction was "Yes! Good for her, you deserve to be thrown out." My heart was beating faster and faster, my body was feeling hot, and my hands were cold and clammy, as I felt my anger escalating. Indeed, this was a very familiar feeling.

I had felt this same anger surging in January 1997, when I first read Sami Gulgoze's Letter to the Editor in the *Observer*, the American Psychological Society's newsletter. Gulgoze's response to the research article, "Coping with Ottoman-Turkish Genocide: The Experience of Armenian Survivors," was to write, "Whether there has been a genocide or not has been a scholarly debate for years, and there is strong evidence against the existence of such an event in the Ottoman land."

In the taxi, I remembered my intensifying feelings of anger, rage, resentment, disappointment, and hopelessness as I had read the letter of a scholar, a professor of psychology, from a reputable university in Turkey. While I was submerged in those negative thoughts, I realized that Ahmed was still talking; in fact, he was trying to say something. I looked at him with anger, as he said, "I wish it [the Genocide] didn't happen. It is very sad and bad that it happened. Many innocent people died for no reason."

Ahmed sounded genuinely sad and troubled. He grew more anxious as I sat silently, processing my feelings. After all, I had thought I had resolved my anger about the Armenian Genocide. He added, "But it is not my fault; I didn't do it." To this I answered, "Of course, I know you didn't commit the Genocide. Do your other Turkish friends know about the Genocide?" He responded, "Well, you know, we don't talk about it in Turkey. It is not mentioned in our history books."

Ahmed's admission helped me to achieve a new level of understanding, forgiveness, and hope. I meet many skeptics, as I lecture around the world on hu-

man-made traumas and forgiveness in order to achieve closure. Many Armenians, especially, confuse forgiveness with forgetting, and in this process turn their anger against me as they exclaim, "How could you even think of asking fellow survivors and their children to forgive the Turks!" I think that they equate forgiveness with forgetting. Forgiveness does not mean forgetting. Forgiveness does not mean that I will stop exploring the Armenian Genocide. Forgiving does not mean concealing the truth and forgetting human rights. Forgiving means freeing oneself of the chains of anger, unlocking the sources of resentment, and taking a step toward ending the cycle of hatred. Only when freed of hatred can one achieve one's potential and succeed in life.

I wrote about my experiences with the Turkish taxi driver, and the issue of forgiveness. I received many calls and letters to the editor, brimming with hatred and stating that I didn't know what I was talking about. I was even called a "Turk lover." Many colleagues stopped talking to me.

As I continued my journey toward forgiveness and integration of the trauma of the Armenian Genocide, I submitted a paper to the Sixth European Conference on Psychotraumatology, Clinical Practice, and Human Rights, which was to take place in Istanbul, Turkey, in June, 1999. Because I was fully cognizant of the Turkish denial of the Genocide, I revised the research paper and entitled it "Mass Human Rights Violations: Resilience vs. Resignation." My paper was accepted with some revisions. (Together with a colleague from Canada, I submitted another paper on the Genocide, which was rejected.) Because they were worried about my safety, my friends and colleagues were against my going to Turkey to present a paper on the Turkish Genocide against the Armenians. Despite all the opposition, I went to Turkey.

Upon my arrival at the conference in Istanbul, I noticed how the keynote speakers talked freely regarding Turkish human rights violations currently imposed on Kurds. I was encouraged by their candid reports, and decided to distribute my original abstract on the Armenian Genocide. At that point the threats began. First, I was threatened with being murdered, to which I responded with skepticism, stating that I didn't think anyone would dare to kill me in front of the 650 scholars from over 48 countries present at the conference. The next day I was threatened with torture if I talked about the Genocide. The third day the Genocide abstracts were literally snatched from my hands. On the last day of the conference, the day when my lecture was scheduled to be presented, I was called by the Turkish organizers and the British head