

Patricia Choulakian

Flight From Van

Memories of an Armenian genocide survivor

This story was told to me in the 1970s by my mother-in-law, Varsig Pazian Cholakian. I very much regret now that I did not record it in her own words, but at the time she insisted that her English was not good enough and that I should write it down for her. Allowances should be made for the fact that these are the memories of a very young child and that many years elapsed between the events and the telling. My original purpose was to preserve her story for the family history, but I believe that it is also of interest to a wider audience, not only because it is so compelling but because it contains a description of life in eastern Anatolia before the 1915 genocide, an eye witness account of the historic Armenian resistance to the Turkish army during the siege of Van (the siege that Atom Egoyan depicts in his film "Ararat"), the Russian rescue of the city and the chaotic exodus that followed it. It is also possible that the apron Varsig remembers her grandmother wearing was similar to the one worn by Arshile Gorky's mother in his famous painting.

In September 2000 my husband Rouben and I visited eastern Turkey, which had been populated by Armenians prior to the genocide. It is now inhabited mainly by Kurds, who have also been in bitter conflict with the Turks. In Van nothing remains of the Armenian presence, for the city was completely rebuilt after the First World War. When I asked the hotel desk clerk where the neighborhood of Arakh was located, he had no idea and had never heard of it. In fact, we encountered only one Armenian during the entire trip—the ancient custodian of an Armenian church in Diyarbakir.

Patricia Francis Cholakian

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She was born on June 22, 1908, in Tiflis, Georgia, the first child of Tavit Haroutunian and Lucia Nersesian. It was a premature birth in the seventh month of pregnancy and her mother told her later that she was so frail and

ugly that when she first saw her, she turned her head away and the doctor offered his condolences. Nonetheless, Varsig had a rugged constitution and survived.

Tavit was a nomadic mechanical engineer, who could repair anything from a broken tramway to a ship's engine, but never stayed long in one place. Seven years earlier he had returned from Russia to his native Van in eastern Anatolia and settled briefly in a small house belonging to his family, which was on the same street as the large, prosperous home of the Nersesian family. To them this tall, handsome stranger who wore European clothes and had a gold watch seemed an ideal match; for a son-in-law with contacts abroad could be a real asset to the family, if the Turks should again attack the Armenians as they had in 1895.

At the time she was married, Lucia was still in school. As the pampered daughter of a well-to-do family, she had been exempted from the household tasks usually assigned to Armenian girls her age. Indeed, she was so young for her age, that she barely understood what was taking place and later recalled gazing curiously around her during the wedding ceremony. Once the marriage had taken place, Tavit left Van for Odessa, promising to send for his bride once he had established himself there and found a house for them to live in. He was gone six years.

Lucia's life went on as before. She continued to attend the Armenian school nearby and almost forgot that she was a married woman. During this period, Mooshegh Pazian a young cousin by marriage, was a frequent visitor to the family. Mooshegh's family were Protestants and he attended the missionary school. Although not so well off as the Nersesians, they were more European in their outlook and better educated. They spoke English as well as Armenian, and Mooshegh's older brother was a teacher at the mission. He too had a plan to save his family from the dangerous situation Armenians faced in Turkish Armenia. In 1904, this older brother emigrated to the United States and began saving money to send for his younger brothers and sisters.

Mooshegh was attracted to Lucia, for there were many Armenian girls who were pretty, but few who were educated. In this strict household, the two were never alone together, but in the presence of family members, they often spoke

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together of their studies and shared their love of Armenian poetry. Lucia too was drawn to Mooshegh, who was so much more intelligent and well-read than the other boys she knew. However, Mooshegh was gently reminded that Lucia was already married, and his visits stopped. Soon after, he followed his brother to America. Eventually Tavit Haroutouian sent for his bride, who had by now become a young woman, and she joined him in Odessa. From there they went on to Tiflis, where Varsig was born.

The adjustment was difficult for Lucia. Her family had spoiled her by allowing her to stay in school. As a result she had learned nothing about cooking or housekeeping. She would tell later how the first time her husband brought her a chicken and told her to cook it, she stared at him in dismay. She had no notion at all of what happened between the butcher's block and the table. In addition, she soon discovered that she and her husband had little in common, so it was not without bitterness that she resigned herself to life as his wife.

But if the first sight of her baby daughter depressed her, she soon found herself peeping at the wrinkled little face under the blankets and came to love her. Varsig grew into a toddler, clinging to her mother's skirts. A brother, born a year later died of scarlet fever in Tiflis; and Tavit decided to move his family to Alexandria. After the death of their son, the couple grew closer and they welcomed the birth of another daughter there, naming her Ishkhanuhi, which means Princess.

The family lived on the verge of poverty, due to Tavit's irregular work habits. They could afford only a tiny, third-floor apartment, and Lucia had to take in sewing to make ends meet. She also began to write short pieces, stories and poems, for the Armenian newspapers. Through these, she made friends in the Armenian community, and they encouraged her to work with them as a volunteer for the Red Cross. For the first time, since she had left Van, she began to enjoy life. Tavit, however, suddenly decided that they should move on to Istanbul, and then back to Odessa. There they lived in one room with a tiny kitchen and a window that looked out on a courtyard with a fountain in the middle.

One day, while Tavit was repairing a boat, he slipped and fell into the water. That evening he went to bed with chills and fever. It soon became apparent that he was seriously ill. In time he grew better, but he never fully regained his health. Ever a man to believe that a change was the best possible medicine, he decided to return to Van where the beneficial climate was legendary. Or perhaps he sensed that he would not get well again, and wanted to see his birthplace before he died.

The journey from Odessa to Van was arduous. There were no railroads once they reached Turkey. They had to buy space in covered wagons that were journeying east. They were on the road for several months, and Tavit's strength was overtaxed by the task of arranging for transportation and obtaining necessities for the family. They arrived in Van in the summer of 1914, and Varsig saw for the first time the legendary city of which Armenians said, "Van in this world, paradise in the next." The town near a lake about twice the size of Lake Geneva, whose water is so high in alkaline content that those who bathe in it emerge wholly clean, as if they have been washed with soap. The walls of the old citadel date back to biblical times, when the Urartians covered them with cuneiform inscriptions that tell of the ancient Vannic empire. In 1914, this part of the city was inhabited mainly by Turks. Its medieval streets teemed with all the hustle and bustle of an oriental bazaar.

On the hills lay the suburb of Ikestan, the garden city where Lucia's parents and most of the other prosperous merchants had their homes. Here intensive cultivation by artificial irrigation had created plants and trees so perfect that they looked as if they had been grown under glass. Varsig now entered the world of fruit and flowers in which her mother had grown up. The Nersesian property lay in the precinct of Arakh, one of the outermost sections of the city. The house was hidden from the road by high walls, which made it seem a little world in itself. To its right were planted, in an order that tradition had made invariable, first walnut trees, then hazelnuts, then pistachios, and finally fruit trees—apples, pears, peaches, and apricots. Even the poorest house in Van had such an orchard, but this was a rich man's house, and it had many trees of each kind. Behind the trees lay the *saku*, a round enclosure in which the family took tea in the afternoon. And beyond it were the grape arbors and flowering trees. To the left, between the garden and the house lay an area in which many of the menial tasks of the household were performed. It included a sort of covered

porch, in which fruits and vegetables were hung to dry, a storeroom containing jars of honey, huge crocks, in which meat was salted down in mutton fat for the winter and pickles were set to age in vinegar. In a second storeroom were rows of wooden bins, in which the staples of the household were kept—rice for pilaf, bulghur, dried fruits, raisins, beans, peas, and many others. With its colors and smells, this was a fascinating place for a little girl, and there was always the hope of receiving a few dried apricots or raisins, the local equivalent of candy. Beyond the storerooms were the earthenware ovens where the family's bread was baked and the *geraghooxs*, or stews, simmered. And finally, there was the bathhouse, in which tubs of water were heated on wood fires.

In a climate where the sun shines most of the year and it almost never rains, it was possible to do a great deal of working and living outdoors. The interior of the house consisted of a parlor or *mangal*, where the family ate and received guests in wintertime. A pit in the center of the room contained a charcoal heater with benches surrounding it. At mealtimes the family sat here and the food was brought to them on trays. Benches and walls as well as the floor were covered with rugs. The only other room on the ground floor was a small pantry that served to store the supplies kept on hand for guests and some small kerosene stoves on which the sweet, black coffee demanded by the rules of hospitality could be brewed. Hospitality played a cherished role in the Armenian household, and no caller could escape without tasting the strong brew served in tiny cups with straight sides to which the grounds could cling and enable the adept to take a quick glance at the future.

The main part of the cooking was done outdoors, however, with the aide of servants or *mahaghs*. These lived in tiny cells distributed around the kitchen, but in hot weather, they would go up on the roof to play and sing by the light of the stars. There was always one of them who had an *oud* or a mandolin and Varsig loved to listen to their music as it floated out over the garden. They received only a little spending money, but all their physical needs were supplied and their masters were kind. To Varsig, already wearied by years of rootlessness and one-room apartments, this well-ordered household seemed a harmonious haven, overflowing with bounty. She loved to spend her days at her grandmother's heels, following her from kitchen to storeroom. She was always ready to receive one of the dried sweets that her grandmother kept tucked in the pocket-pouch Armenian women wore beneath their aprons.

In the upper story of the house there were several small bed-sitting rooms, which were occupied by her grandparents, her uncles, and their wives. It was surrounded on all sides by a glass gallery that led out onto a flat roof, which was used for drying fruit at harvest time. The daughters-in-law, known as *hars*, were expected to be subservient in all things to their mother-in-law. They assisted her in the household duties and spent the rest of their time upstairs sewing or crocheting, since they were not allowed to be seen by any male guests who might arrive on the scene.

The peace and prosperity of Arakh was only surface deep, however, for there were persistent rumors of a war that promised to involve Turkey and thus bring up once more the question of Armenian allegiance to the Turkish government. In addition, within the family itself, a tragedy was approaching. Tavit had not grown better since his return to Van. He was now bedridden, his ankles swollen to twice their size. In addition, Lucia had given birth to twins, who also proved to be unhealthy and whose constant wailing irritated the sick man.

Despite these troubles, the family did not neglect the annual pilgrimage of thanksgiving to the famous monastery of Varakh, situated in the mountains above Van. The entire population participated in this ancient festival, arising at six A.M. and trudging on foot up to the shrine at which they were to make a thank offering for the plenty of the harvest. Varsig never forgot the sounds, sights, and smells of that wonderful morning, as she followed her grandparents up the mountain on which autumn flowers were still in bloom, and heard the waterfalls cascading down to the streams below.

The monastery, located about seven miles above the site on which Van then stood was in a mountain pass. It was of great antiquity, built in the Armenian style with a conical dome. It had come to be especially venerated in these latter days as the seat of the great Abbot Khrimean, who had left it to become the Katholokos of all the Armenians. Khrimean, a man of great personal holiness, had been among the first to inspire the persecuted Armenians to a love of learning and a sense of pride in their heritage. He had founded a school for boys at the monastery and encouraged the opening of Armenian schools in

Van. He had even procured a printing press and installed it in the monastery to aid in the dissemination of knowledge.

Unfortunately, the saintly Khramean had long since departed and the monastery had fallen on hard times. The school and brotherhood had dwindled in numbers, and the Turks had appropriated the printing press. But to the people of Van, Varakh was still a place hallowed not only by centuries of Christian worship, but by the recent presence of a great spiritual leader. Now as they made their way along the mountain paths, snatches of song could be heard from various groups, and neighbors exchanged shouts of recognition. Progress was not swift. It was a social occasion and the Armenians are a gregarious people. In addition, they were burdened with the animals and provisions they had brought with them, for they were about to perform a rite so venerable that it went back to biblical times.

Once at Varakh, each family slaughtered an animal in the cloister enclosure, and the priest cut off a symbolic ear as token of the sacrifice. Then the animals were roasted in pits specially constructed for the purpose, and the feast was offered to the poor. Only when these had eaten their fill did the offerer and his family partake of what remained. The solemnity of the sacrifice soon gave way to joyous merry-making, however. There was, in fact, roast lamb and pilaf for all, with plenty to spare, as well as great quantities of the plump fruits of Van; and when no one could eat or drink any more, there was singing and dancing in long chains, the dancers linking their little fingers and the leaders waving kerchiefs in the air. Finally, when the sun had sunk low, the long procession made its way back down the mountain, the people now subdued, the children bumping sleepily against their parents' knees and finally drifting off to sleep over their shoulders. They did not know that never again would the people of Van make the pilgrimage to the cloister of Varakh, or that soon there would be other processions in which those too tired to walk would drop by the roadside and not rise again.

As winter approached, it became apparent that Tavit Haroutunian would not recover. The handsome, wandering stranger bequeathed to his widow nothing but the small property in Van. On the night he died, Varsig dreamed she saw tiny angels singing and going up and down a ladder to heaven. After years

spent wandering from one foreign port to another, Tavit had brought his family back to the heart of Armenia on the very eve of a holocaust.

The month after his death, in the spring of 1915, the Turkish government moved to settle “the Armenian question,” and began systematically massacring the Armenian people by means of enforced death marches. Although many of the villages and communes submitted helplessly, pockets of resistance flared up, and one of these was in Van. The city was divided into military districts or *taghs* by the patriots. The Nersesian home, the largest in the neighborhood, became a fortress, the headquarters for Arakh. The entire population mobilized to resist the invading Turkish armies, certain that failure would mean death for all. It was a heroic attempt with little chance of success, but the alternative only hardened their determination to fight to the last man. “Kill them or die!” was the battlecry.

In the early days of the war, the Turks confiscated all Armenian weapons and munitions, claiming that their loyalty was suspect at a time when the country was at war. Armenian nationalists had managed to secrete a few stockpiles of arms, however, and in desperation, they begged the Russians, their potential allies and rescuers, to sell them more. The Turks were literally at the gates of the city and the sound of guns was heard day and night. Everyone was put to work, the elders making gunpowder, the women cooking and caring for the wounded, the young boys and girls carrying messages and supplies, and even the little children making sandwiches for the fighters.

For Varsig, this terrible time was in many ways a holiday, however, for there were no school lessons. To free their parents for other tasks, all the children were brought together under the supervision of a few capable women. Since the embattled city had to turn night into day, there were no schedules or regulations, and bedtimes were non-existent. Everyone, including the children, ate and slept where and when they could. Determined to protect the youngest from the horrors taking place around them, the leaders gave strict instructions that no one was to discuss the war in front of them, and that those who had lost relatives in the fighting should not be allowed to grieve in their presence. Despite these orders, it was impossible to insulate the children from what was going on, and Varsig often overheard the old women whispering among themselves that if the Turks came, they preferred to die.

She was also aware that children only a little older than she were dying in the effort to save the city. Her grandfather's house was located in the middle of the town on a hill that commanded a view of the surrounding countryside. It had been fortified and connected to the rest of the city by means of a network of trenches that were used to carry messages, and supplies. The messengers were more often than not children of about ten, for their short stature made it possible for them to run through the trenches without being seen by the enemy. They were sent out in small groups with the instructions that they were to go on no matter what, even if one of their number was killed. Beyond the walls of the improvised nursery, Varsig and the other children often heard the screams of the dying. Then the women in the room would quickly whisper, "It's nothing." But as their situation grew desperate, more and more often came the harsh command, "Sit still and be quiet!"

After forty days of what had seemed a hopeless struggle, the besieged city was miraculously rescued by the Russian army. The month that followed was a time of almost hysterical jubilation. People greeted each other in the streets with the cry, "Big Bear is here!" After the nightmare of the siege, when everyone had been sure they were doomed, the arrival of the Russians seemed heaven-sent. Meanwhile the Turkish inhabitants of Van, most of whom lived near the center of town in the old city, had fled, leaving behind their houses and possessions. Motivated by greed and revenge, the Armenians, who had for years been buying their safety and well-being from the local Turkish officials with heavy duties and bribes, joined the Russian soldiers in an orgy of looting. Varsig's grandmother went immediately to the home of a wealthy Turkish family she had known and took their jewels and diamonds from the safe.

Despite the holiday atmosphere in Van, the war continued and the Russians began to suffer reverses. They announced that they were forced to withdraw from Van, but realizing what the fate of the Armenian citizenry would be, they gallantly offered to conduct them into Russian Armenia, where facilities were being set up to receive the thousands of refugees fleeing from the Turks. The people of Van were given eight hours to ready themselves for the departure. Many became hysterical and rushed out of the city, taking nothing with them. Others, sure that one day they would return, spent the time burying their gold and jewels, much of which was later appropriated by the Turks, and much of

which may remain hidden underground to this day. The more sensible gathered up food, clothing, and personal possessions. The fortunate piled their belongings into carts or wagons or strapped them onto donkeys and mules; the rest were forced to rely on their own backs.

Lucia found herself abandoned and alone with her two little daughters and only one donkey. For reasons Varsig didn't understand, Lucia's father had packed his belongings into a wagon and set off with his sons without waiting for her. Perhaps he was impatient to be off and thought she would catch up with them on the road. Probably no one had a very realistic notion of the confusion and chaos that would attend the enforced exodus of thousands of fear-crazed people. Lucia strapped a blanket on the donkey, collected enough food to last a couple of days, and set out. As they walked down the street, Varsig suddenly remembered the baby chicks that had just hatched in the dooryard. She broke away and ran back to fetch them, but her mother commanded her firmly to come back, and protesting vehemently, Varsig rejoined the ever-growing throng, laden with bundles. At the edge of town they found themselves in the middle of a stampede. People knocked each other down and stepped on each other in their hurry to escape the Turks, whom they believed to be just behind them. The air was filled with the sounds of animals bellowing and women screaming. Riders beat savagely at their horses, as they reacted to cries exhorting them to make haste. Within a few hours, the city of Van was deserted, except for the old and infirm who had been left behind or chosen to stay and die.

Varsig was numb with shock and fatigue. She walked in a daze broken only by her mother's arm pushing her to walk faster, comforted by the monotonous sound of the cart wheels ahead of her on the road. Hypnotized, she imagined that she was once more on the road to Varakh, going to celebrate the festival. "Why don't we have a wagon?" she asked her mother, but Lucia, preoccupied by the struggle to propel herself and the two girls forward, did not answer. More than once, she had to snatch them up to keep them from being stepped on; and as the Russian soldiers rushed up and down the line shouting that the Turks were nearer and that they must make haste, the danger of being crushed to death by the panic-stricken crowd increased. Ishkhanuhi, who was not quite three was allowed to ride on the donkey, but Varsig had to keep up as best she could. When she saw a Russian cannon rolling by, she demanded, "Let me sit

on that!" At times it seemed to her that she would surely drop to the ground, but each time her body sagged, her mother jerked her up again and dragged her forward.

Finally night fell and they were allowed to stop. The air was stifling, and there was no water. Desperate, the adults gave the wailing children their own urine to drink. The road had been carved out by the Russians through a desolate region and at night the ground was alive with snakes and scorpions which terrified the little girls and made it impossible to lie down. They were forced to sleep standing, leaning against something. The halt was only a brief one. Soon they were awakened and urged to move on, for the dreaded Turkish army was still at their backs. Armenian soldiers brought up the rear guard, and according to rumor the half-savage Kurds were only an hour behind them. Many of the youngest children were soon dead of starvation. Varsaig felt she had become nothing but a tired lump. She could think only of her desire to lie down and sleep for five minutes, but she did not dare to stop, for she had seen others who had fallen and been trampled to death. Eventually the group passed by a rushing river, and the half-crazed refugees began to loosen their heavy bundles and to hurl them into the current. The urge to lighten their load spread through the crowd and some of the women in their eagerness to follow suit threw in their own babies, which they were carrying on their back, and then realizing what they had done, hurled themselves into the river and drowned. In the confusion resulting from thousands of people moving forward with no organization, family groups had become separated, and all around one heard the frantic cries of mothers searching for their children. All night, they would go from group to group, peering into the faces of the sleeping children and calling the names of their lost ones, "Haro!" "Maro!" "Sako!" so that there was never a moment when the air was not filled with their cries.

The little Ishkhanuhi was a winning child, plump and affectionate, with huge dark eyes and fair skin. She soon caught the attention of the Russian soldiers, who found a horse for them and put both the sisters on its broad back, allowing Lucia to follow on the donkey. This turned out to be less than a blessing, however. The horse was nervous and high-spirited. Lucia had her hands full already and could not keep it in check. Suddenly it started violently at a noise in the rear and galloped off with the two terrified children on its

back, leaving their helpless mother behind. They were soon out of her sight and could do nothing but hang on for dear life. At last, a man managed to catch the horse and lift them down, but he turned out to be nothing but an opportunist, for he led the horse away and left a shabby little donkey in its place. Varsig now became obsessed with one idea: never to let go of her sister's hand. She was frightened of the braying, stubborn donkey and refused to mount him. With one hand, therefore she held tightly to his rope, and with the other she clung to her sister. It did not occur to her to look for her mother. Her only thought was to keep her sister beside her. At last when they could stumble on no further, they sat down on the ground and fell asleep, Varsig being sure to keep a tight hold on the donkey's lead. When she awoke, she found it still in her hand, but the donkey had disappeared while they slept.

They were now reduced to the state of beggars, living off the hand-outs of those who took pity on them. She discovered that she had a few raisins in her pocket, and these she rationed out, determined to make them last as long as possible. The days became a blur of hunger, thirst, and fatigue. No one paid much attention to the two children. There were many like them whose parents had been lost or died along the way. The Russians did what they could, but they had no facilities to care for the huge throng, which was totally unorganized and undisciplined. Eventually, despite all her efforts to keep hold of her sister's hand, they were separated and she was totally alone. Already in a state of shock, her mind became completely benumbed and she no longer reacted to anything around her.

At last she reached Igdir, a small town to the northeast of Mount Ararat. They had come about a hundred miles from Van. Varsig squatted in the street with the other refugees, dirty, ragged, emaciated, seeing nothing. Those who had lost their loved ones sat there day after day, questioning new arrivals in the hope of learning what had happened to them. The pavement burned her bare feet and legs, for the summer sun beat down mercilessly. High above her head, branches of fruit hung temptingly, but they were jealously guarded by their owners, who hated and feared the hordes of refugees who had turned their village into a nightmare land filled with sickness and death.

Suddenly, Varsig found herself being picked up and covered with kisses. She heard the sound of a voice calling her pet Armenian names—"Darling, sweet

one, little one!” She recognized the face of Ardashes Mirzoian, the husband of her mother’s cousin, who had been brought up with Lucia in the Nersesian household at Van. A few months before, he had brought his wife and their child to visit her relatives in Van, so he recognized Varsig. He covered the filthy, half-starved, little girl with kisses, laughing and crying as she clung to his neck. A month after their departure from Van, his two-year-old child and his wife had been burned to death by the Turks. He was now a second lieutenant in the newly-formed Armenian army, under its commanding general Antranik Pasha. Ardashes had discovered Lucia at the school-turned-hospital where she was helping to care for the sick. Some kind people had already brought Ishkhanuhi to her, but she had been sure that she would never see Varsig again. Ardashes had promised to search for her nonetheless, and finding her was like finding one of his own.

When he set her down, he realized that she was disgustingly dirty and covered with lice, so he took her to be washed, shaved her head, and found her some decent clothes before taking her to her mother. Still not recovered from the horrors of the past days, Varsig paid no attention to Lucia, however, but ran to her sister, threw her arms around her, and refused to let go of her. Ardashes, who had connections, had been able to find Lucia a good place to stay in a doctor’s house, and Varsig remembered how, since it was very hot, the three of them slept together on the roof under the stars.

Lucia was now destitute. She had thrown away what few possessions she had managed to save when she lost the children. Since she spoke Russian and had some experience, however, she had found a job nursing the sick, for the privations and lack of sanitary precautions during the exodus had led to outbreaks of disease, and the refugees were threatened with a full-scale cholera epidemic. But this job left her no time to look after the children, so she followed Ardashes’ advice and placed them in one of the orphanages that had been formed for Armenian refugee children. She had had word that her parents had managed to save a few belongings and some money and were determined to push on to Baku.

Meanwhile, in Igdir, a tall, handsome officer wearing the uniform of the Russian cavalry walked down the street one day and came upon a group of Armenians he recognized as his fellow-townsmen. He stopped to talk to them

and have his boots blacked, for many of the exiled Armenians were reduced to such tasks to earn their bread. He struck up a conversation with an elderly member of the group, who was obviously from Van.

“Did you by any chance know the family of Nerses who lived in Arakh?” he asked.

“Yes,” came the reply, “they’ve gone on to Baku.”

“And did their daughter Lucia go with them?”

“No, she was married to Tavit, you know, and had two little girls by him.”

“Then she must be with her husband?”

“No. Her husband died before the siege of Van. She’s here in Igdir, working at the hospital.”

The cavalry officer stared at the old man as if he had caught him in a lie, until the old man asked grumpily, “And what makes you ask so many questions about Lucia?”

“I am the nephew of her brother’s wife,” was his answer. “I am Mooshegh.”

Then the old man held out his arms. “Mooshegh!” he exclaimed. “Of course you are. I am Lucia’s uncle. Come, I’ll take you to her.”

Mooshegh Pazian had heeded the call to all the diaspora Armenians to serve their country, and had returned from America to serve as captain with a Russian cavalry unit under General Yegarian. When the two reached the hospital, someone was sent to tell Lucia she had a visitor. She came into the room and saw her uncle with a stranger.

“Do you know me?” he asked.

Many years had passed since Lucia and Mooshegh had read together under the fruit trees in her father’s garden. She had journeyed back and forth across the eastern Mediterranean world, borne six children, buried a husband, and been driven out of her homeland into exile. Nonetheless his name rose without hesitation to her lips.

“Mooshegh! You are Mooshegh!” she cried. In her heart, she had never stopped thinking about him and he had never stopped thinking about her. Both

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believed to the end of their lives that theirs was a true love made in heaven. On November 20, 1917, Mooshegh married Lucia with General Yegarian's permission. The groom, who had been educated by American Protestants in Van, converted to the Armenian Apostolic faith the same day, and Yegarian served as his best man.

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For Lucia this was the happiest time of her life. The Turks had once more abandoned Van and a group of its former residents decided to return to the city and rebuild. When she and Mooshegh arrived, they had a bitter shock, however. They found nothing but ruins. The fruit trees were broken and burned, the wells polluted, the fertile gardens were flooded by the sophisticated irrigation system that had nurtured them. The house of Nerses, once the proudest of Arakh, was only a shell. Even the stairs had disappeared. Determined to salvage something, Lucia borrowed a ladder and climbed to the second story. There she found a few pictures of her children, including one of Varsig dressed in a Cossack costume, sitting on her father's knee. Sick at heart, she gathered together these momentos and turned away. Nothing else was left.

Lucia and Mooshegh remained in Van about two months, but it became increasingly evident that the destruction of the city had been so complete that it could no longer sustain life; and the optimistic citizens who had wanted to rebuild were soon on the verge of starvation. What is more, the dream of Armenian sovereignty was quickly fading as the big powers once again forgot their lofty promises and betrayed the helpless people of Armenia. Mooshegh became convinced that they must return together to America. Within a few months his visa would expire and he would then no longer be free to leave. Lucia agreed. If they must take up residence on foreign soil, she preferred the freedom and opportunities of America to those offered by the Bolsheviks, who now controlled Russian Armenia. Accordingly, she wrote to the authorities and asked that her children be released from the orphanage and returned to her at once. To her horror, the reply came that the officials in Nakhitchevan, where the girls had been sent some months before, had no information as to their whereabouts. In the chaos following the Bolshevik Revolution, the Russian bureaucracy had lost track of Varsig and Ishkhanuhi. Lucia was frantic. If she and Mooshegh did not leave immediately, they would be interned in Russian Armenia. There was no time to search the hundreds of orphanages housing Armenian children. Reluctantly, she agreed to leave for America while there was still time and put the case into the hands of the Red Cross. Once Mooshegh who was an American citizen had legally adopted her daughters, the Soviet government would be obliged to let them join her. Accordingly, she emigrated with him to the United States.

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When she arrived, she did not give up her determination to find the children, but the situation seemed hopeless. The Russian Revolution had thrown all of what is now Soviet Armenia into confusion. Varsig and Ishkhanuhi, along with thousands of other orphans, had been shipped from town to town, often without enough to eat, sometimes separated from each other, always struggling to stay together. At last, when they had all but forgotten their mother and their homeland, they were located by the Red Cross. Lucia wrote eagerly to tell them about the new country where they would all live together. There was little money, however. She and Mooshegh were both forced to work hard just to support themselves, but they managed to scrape together enough to purchase two boat tickets. Thus began the last and longest journey for Varsig and Ishkhanuhi, first to Constantinople, and then to the New World.

There, like so many victims of the genocide, Varsig and Ishkhanuhi lived to see their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren thrive, living proof of the survival of the Armenian people.