

The Armenians – Scout Tufankjian

“There is a small area of land in Asia Minor that is called Armenia, but it is not so. It is not Armenia. It is a place. There are plains and mountains and rivers and lakes and cities in this place, and it is all fine, it is all no less fine than all the other places in the world, but it is not Armenia. There are only Armenians, and these inhabit the earth, not Armenia, since there is no Armenia, gentlemen, there is no America and there is no England, and no France, and no Italy, there is only the earth.” William Saroyan in *The Armenian and the Armenian*.

The story of the Armenians has always been one of upheaval. For the past three thousand years, waves of migrants left their ancestral homes in modern day Eastern Turkey and Northern Syria, following ancient trade and pilgrimage routes and fleeing countless revolutions, civil wars, and massacres – culminating in 1915 in the Armenian Genocide that scattered its survivors across the earth. Despite these centuries of displacement, today's Armenian diaspora is strong and vibrant – with more than eight million Armenians living in over 85 countries across the globe.

Growing up, I was fascinated by my fellow Armenians. I would pore over my grandparents' Armenian newspaper and magazines—trying to find myself and my people in the pages of books or on my television screen, searching for glimpses of Armenian school kids in Kolkata or jewelers in Lebanon; soccer players in Argentina or musicians in France. But no matter how hard I looked, the only stories I could ever find were about 1915, as if the Genocide had successfully ended the Armenian story.

And I found this infuriating. Yes. The Genocide is the defining trauma that runs through our past and reverberates throughout our present, but we are not a disappeared people. The Armenian story did not begin in 1915, and nor did it end there. And so, this story is not about victimhood. Instead, it is a portrait of survival and of the thread that ties a people together across a vast earth.

After all—what does it even mean to be Armenian? Is it our shared history? The holidays we celebrate? The church? The dances? The food? The traditions? Or is it something more ephemeral and less specific? A woman in Argentina described as membership in a secret club, invisible to non-members but instantly recognizable to other Armenians. The great Armenian-American writer William Saroyan described it as “the Armenian gestures, meaning so much. The slapping of the knee and roaring with laughter. The cursing. The subtle mockery of the world and its big ideas. The word in Armenian, the glance, the gesture, the smile.”

And we all talk about the thread that ties us together. Kevin Dubois, of Nice, France, said, “You know, when I meet an Armenian, it's like we have been friends forever. And that, I do not feel it with anyone else. The connection is there right away due to our ancestors and history.” But what is it? What is it that ties a schoolboy in blowing bubbles in Paris to children playing in a Lebanese refugee camp? What is it that binds a gay rights activist in New York to a newlywed couple in Moscow? What drives a woman to travel from Philadelphia to pre-war Aleppo so that she can give birth to her baby near her grandparents and in an Armenian-speaking hospital?

Throughout the six years that I worked on this project, I kept asking people what they did and did not like about being Armenian, and I think Danielle Tcholakian of New York City's response gets at this the best. She said “I like who it makes me...I feel like I have a century of survival in me.”

This is what ties us together 100 years after we were scattered across the globe – not the horror of the Genocide, but the strength of our survival. This is the story I have tried to tell through these images in this book—my attempt to show us as we are, not as we were; not of their deaths, but of our lives. The Armenian story is more than just the Genocide. It is a story of survival.