

**The Power of Remembrance:  
Reflections of a Descendant of Genocide**

***By Robert H. Tembeckjian***

Joint Event of the  
Armenian Bar Association  
Brandeis Association  
Hellenic Lawyers Association

The Horizon Building  
415 East 37<sup>th</sup> Street  
New York, New York

January 25, 2023

---

I appreciate the invitation to speak to this gathering, sponsored by the Armenian, Hellenic and Brandeis Bar Associations. I should be somewhat intimidated as well. What could I say that you haven't already heard or didn't already know?

After all, we of Armenian, Greek or Jewish ancestry all claim roots going back to Noah's Ark, if not Creation. And if our ancestors were good at creating mythologies, they also roamed the known world. They created alphabets. They defended and died for their faiths. *They* spoke to God!

And what have we mere modern mortals done? Not much in comparison, I suppose. But perhaps, in our own way, we topped them all. For if there is one thing common to Greek, Jewish and Armenian culture, it is that we all had mothers who were certain *their* sons were the center of the universe.

Mr. Tembeckjian is Administrator and Counsel to the New York State Commission on Judicial Conduct.

We know, of course, that our people also have a darker common experience. We are all too acquainted with the horrors of the genocidal 20<sup>th</sup> Century. George Santayana may well have been talking about our grandparents when he penned his immortal lines in 1905: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” For history’s victims, this is a lament: *the wider world did nothing, indifferent to our suffering*. But for history’s perpetrators, it is emboldening: *the wider world will do nothing, indifferent to our atrocities*.

Is it mere coincidence that Theobold von Bethmann-Hollweg, the Chancellor of *Germany* in 1917, said:

The Turks plan to eliminate the Greek[s] ... as enemies of the state, as they did earlier with the Armenians. The strategy[:] ... displacing people to the interior without taking measures for their survival by exposing them to death, hunger, and illness...Whatever was done to the Armenians is being repeated with the Greeks.

No, not a coincidence. No more than it was coincidence when Hitler told Goering in August 1939: “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?” What followed, so to say, was *unspeakable*.

Is any of this relevant today? Does it matter that the great Greek port city of Smyrna, on the Aegean coast of Anatolia, whose origin dates back to the Hellenic era, was set ablaze in 1922, its Greek population driven out or destroyed, and in a final, Orwellian indignity, its very name changed? You cannot find Smyrna on a modern map, because it is now known as Izmir.

Does it matter that my own grandparents were orphaned, their families driven into the Syrian desert from our ancestral home, Dikranagerd, whose name is also missing on modern maps, because it is now called Diyarbakir?

Does it matter that my dearest childhood friend never knew any of his grandparents, having lost that entire generation of his family in concentration camps, when the Nazis cleared Warsaw of its Jews?

Decades, half-centuries, even a century later, does it matter?

After all, enough of our grandparents survived to regenerate, to build new lives in their own or other lands, create democracies, compose music and recite poetry, contemptuous of the very idea that they could be completely destroyed. Does it matter?

Yes, it matters. It matters. Because here in the first quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, there are disturbing signs that humankind has not learned the 20<sup>th</sup> Century lessons and is indeed repeating the past. Today, despite overwhelming evidence and the judgment of postwar tribunals, Turkey continues to deny the Armenian and Greek (or Pontic) Genocides, the existence of the Armenian Republic is threatened, a significant portion of Cyprus remains occupied, Israel remains surrounded by avowed enemies, and here in the United States, Holocaust deniers reveal ignorance, spew hatred and spawn deadly attacks on synagogues.

To be sure, there are endangered societies everywhere. To make the point, one need not say anything more than Ukraine, Yemen, Myanmar, Syria, Nigeria, Ethiopia, Kurdistan, Afghanistan, Sudan.... It is a horrifying fact of our new millennium that at any given moment, somewhere in the world, people are being killed because of who they are: Muslim, Jewish or Christian, Asian or black, Yazidi or Rohingya, gay or transgender.

Is there anything concerned individuals can do about these crises and injustices? We command no rescuing armies and wave no magic wands. Or must we admit we are powerless to stop them, leaving them to the same fate as the Armenians of Dikranagerd, the Greeks of Smyrna and the Jews of Warsaw?

It may not seem like much, but there is one simple thing every one of us can do.

We can remember. And like the storytelling Griots of West African villages whose oral histories are as rich as libraries, we can speak of what we know.

My wife Barbara routinely assigns her journalism students a simple but unexpectedly revealing task: interview a grandparent and report back with something you never knew before.

Let me give you a remembrance of my maternal grandfather.

Nishan Dinkjian was only 50 when I was born, but he already looked like an old man. He doted on me, his first grandchild. Though I was born in Brooklyn,

we spoke to each other in the Dikranagerdsi Armenian dialect that was my native language. He called me Bobby and I called him Baba. He would take me to buy fresh hot bread from a local baker – wonderful round loaves with a hole in the middle – always getting an extra one that we would start eating on the way back home. He would push me in a little blue pedal car around his little house. He would sing “happy birthday to you” whenever he lit a cigarette, which was my cue to come blow out the match.

And wherever we were, whatever we were doing, we would play a private game, our own little version of “I spy with my eye...” We were looking out for water. Whether crossing the Hudson River on the George Washington Bridge, or passing a culvert, or coming to a puddle at the corner of a street – whoever saw it first would exclaim, in Armenian dialect, “Niyeh, niyeh; chooreh, chooreh!” Look, look; water, water! And I would always burst out laughing.

I had no idea at the time how profound this silly game was, until some 60 years later. Sitting on a sandy Atlantic beach with my wife Barbara, staring at the ocean waves, I absentmindedly whispered, to myself, *niyeh, niyeh; chooreh, chooreh*. But instead of laughing, I started crying, deeply, almost gasping, startling Barbara.

I had recently started writing a family history. Unlike many genocide survivors, my relatives talked about their experiences, often at night after they

thought the kids were asleep and would not hear the grisly tales or be affected by the lamentations. But I heard and knew enough to ask questions.

*Baba, whose picture is that on the dining room wall?*

That is my brother.

*Where is he? Why don't I know him?*

He's dead.

*When did he die?*

1915.

*How did he die?*

He was shot.

*Who shot him?*

The Turks.

*Why?*

Because he was Armenian.

Wow. Did my teacher at PS 269, Miss Ruggiero, know about this, that they were killing Armenians, *because* they were Armenian? Was I safe in her kindergarten class?

In retrospect, what strikes me as much as my grandfather's revelation was his affect: it was totally matter of fact. He told me without evident feeling that his older brother had been murdered. He had actually witnessed it – 15 years old at the time – but all the emotion was drained or repressed from his experience.

Immediately after the murder, Nishan, his older sister Azniv and her newborn baby were exiled on a forced march into the Syrian desert, where they and a handful of half-dead survivors made it to a refugee camp in Aleppo run by missionaries. But the baby died *en route* of heat stroke and dehydration, in her mother's arms, at her dry breast. Azniv went into a trance and would not let go.

The 15-year-old Nishan, who would become my Baba, pried the baby from her, laid its tiny body on the desert sand, took Azniv's arm and led her forward, saying *don't look back*. He did not speak again until they finally came to an oasis, where he simply said, just as I would at the beach a hundred years later: *Niyeh, niyeh; chooreh, chooreh*. Look, look; water, water.

Remembrance is powerful beyond our imagining. Without our realizing it, it shapes and defines who we are, what we believe and often what we do, from the careers we choose to the people we love. Remembrance may sometimes be an affirmation of the seemingly miraculous – *we survived* – at other times a defense against the unimaginable cruelty people inflict on one another. Sometimes, it is both, as it was for Baba.

From a desert oasis, arrived at too late to save a baby in 1915, to a child's playful search for puddles of water in which to splash in 1955 – *niyeh, niyeh, chooreh, chooreh* – my grandfather had turned the most desperate moment of his and his sister's life into an innocent game with his grandson. And it took 60 years after *that* – on a beach, watching the waves, suddenly so overcome by a memory that I could barely breathe – for me to understand where it came from and what it meant. Proust had his Madeleines; I had my *chooreh* – my water.

If it is possible to love Baba more now than I did as an adoring child, it is due to the power of remembrance. Whether we know it or not, remembrance

resides in more than our minds, more even than in our hearts. It is in the very marrow of our bones. Every one of us here has Baba stories. And every one of us is obliged to keep them alive.

So... today...

Who remembers the Armenians of Dikranagerd?

Who remembers the Greeks of Smyrna?

Who remembers the Jews of Warsaw?

*We* do. *We must*. For the sake not only of their memories, but of our own souls. The next generation's atrocity will be abetted by the last generation's amnesia. If there is any hope that we human beings may finally stop repeating the genocidal past, we must *remember* and retell the history, so we may ultimately rise above it.