THE SAVED: ARMENIAN REFUGEE WOMEN

Isabel Kaprielian

En 1915, le gouvernement Ottoman turc, voulant homogénéiser sa population, tenta de détruire une minorité raciale, linguistique et religieuse en Turquie: entre 1915 et 1922, un million et demi d'Arménien(ne)s moururent. Bien que beaucoup des survivant(e)s voulaient immigrer au Canada, le gouvernment canadien, loin d'être sympathique, a admis seulement 1 300 Armenien(ne)s au cours des années entre les deux guerres mondiales.

En se servant d'une variété de sources documentaires – surtout des témoignages enregistrés avec des survivantes réfugiées – Isabel Kaprelian rapièce leurs expériences après leur arrivée au Canada.

The following is an abbreviated version of a study about Armenian refugee women in Canada during the inter-war years. In this paper I endeavour to draw out some universal issues about refugeeism on the one hand and about women's experiences on the other. In addition to League of Nations' and Canadian government documents, I have made use of Armenian organizational records, school texts, guide books, diaries, autobiographical accounts, memorabilia, and correspondence. More important are the taped interviews of surviving refugee women in Hamilton, St. Catharines, Brantford, and Detroit. This work reflects their lives as seen through their own eyes – not only as immigrant and ethnic women but, more significantly, as refugee women.

In 1915 the Ottoman Turkish government tried to destroy one of its racial, linguistic, and religious minorities in an effort to homogenize its population. From 1915 to 1922 one and a half million Armenians succumbed to disease, starvation, thirst, exposure, and murder. Others were lost to the Armenian nation because they had been taken captive by Turks and Kurds or because they had been forced to renounce their Christian faith. In the initial stages of the genocide, the Turkish authorities drove the Armenians to the outskirts of their town or village, segregated the men and boys over twelve or thirteen from the rest of the group, and systematically massacred them. The women, children, and elderly were then forced to march to the deserts of Syria. Those who survived this tortuous ordeal were known in the West as the "starving Armenians."

Every survivor experienced a double-edged agony. S/he witnessed the death of loved ones and the destruction of the Armenian nation and everything that such a devastation implied – the decimation of a culture, the abrupt end of traditions and customs, and the suppression of a people's creative spirit. In addition, the survivors themselves were uprooted from their homes, cast upon foreign shores, reduced to wretched conditions, and made dependent upon the kindness and goodwill of strangers.

After World War I many survivors wanted to emigrate to Canada; but refugees, as "the dregs of the earth," were not welcome. Civil servants discouraged "any special privileges for the refugee." Mr. Blair, Superintendent of Immigration, wrote:

> *I am quite sure that the Armenian is in a bad way in Turkey. There is no doubt that he has suffered perhaps as no other race has suffered within the present generation. One cannot but sympathise with him on humanitarian grounds . . . We recognize that there are humanitarian reasons which call loudly for help but it is sincerely regretted that even in the face of these difficulties, Canada is not in a position to offer a home to the distressed of the Near East.*[1]

Not only was Canada unwilling to provide a refuge for these destitute and homeless people, but a determined effort was made to thwart their admission. Classified as Asiatics, the Armenians were ranked as "undesirable" settlers, and as such were virtually prohibited from entering the country by Canadian authorities. Unless they were wives or children of Canadian residents, Armenians, as Asiatics, had to possess $250.00 at the time of entry – a great sum in those days, enough to buy a house. In addition, they had to have a *bona fide* passport and were obliged to come to Canada by continuous journey from their land of birth or citizenship. Clearly refugees were unable to comply with these stringent requirements. So difficult was entry for Armenians during this period that William Elliott, a Member of Parliament, complained that "the Department is doing everything in its power to hunt up excuses to keep these people out of Canada." As a consequence of Canadian government policy, only 1,300 Armenians were admitted from 1919 to 1939.

The newcomers joined a small contingent of Armenians who had migrated to Canada before World War I. This group was composed largely of male agriculturalists from a region in the interior of Armenia-in-Turkey known as Keghi. Forced to leave their homes after the 1894-96 pogroms against Christian Armenians, they had travelled to foreign countries as guest workers to earn enough funds to stabilize their family finances, repay debts, rebuild burned houses, and replenish seed, livestock, and equipment. During the genocide many of these men lost the families they had left behind.

Most of those who came to Canada after the genocide were women and children. Some entered as relatives of Armenians who had settled in Canada before 1914. Government officials also permitted the admission of girls as domestic servants. It is estimated that fewer than forty girls were brought in as domestics at a time when Canadians were clamouring for such labour.

Most entered as picture brides for the widowed men who had come to Canada as migrant workers before 1914. The usual practice was that someone would act as an intemediary passing on names and addresses. Letters and photos would be exchanged between the man and the woman and, if they liked each other, the man would propose and pay her passage. Committing her future to the hands of fate, she travelled a long distance to marry a man she knew only on paper:

> *Well, I took a chance. I decided to come. When you are alone and when you have no choice and there is someone who will look after you, what can you do? You say, "this*

is my destiny and you throw yourself in." One thing I was afraid of – that there might be cheating. It happened that the man would send a picture of himself taken years before. I left myself in the hands of God. When I came, I saw the house; it was old but clean. The store was clean and all the fruit were set out in a neat and clean fashion. I saw him and his family and I said, "Thank God."[3]

The newcomers came to the tight little neighbourhoods established by the pre-1914 male guest workers who had settled primarily in Hamilton, Brantford, and St. Catharines. A small number had also settled in Galt, Guelph, Toronto, and Montreal.

It was said that those who came to Canada and the United States were saved. Yet life in the New World could be difficult for them. They were immigrant women from a conservative and backward society who were attempting to adjust to a modern, urban, industrial, and foreign environment. They were not fluent in English; they were ignorant of Canadian food and cooking methods; they did not know how to handle Canadian machines and technology; and they were unfamiliar with Canadian customs and habits. In facing the strangeness of the New World they were like other immigrant women. Unlike other immigrants, however, they were refugees. They had not planned, saved, and prepared for living in North America. Unwillingly uprooted from their homes, torn from their loved ones, they were tragic vagabonds:

I never knew home life. As much as I have taught my children, I did not receive from my parents. I was seven years old when we were driven out. From this village to another; from this city to another; from this country to another.[4]

For many, the warmth and love of family life was a vague dream overshadowed by pain and anguish. Their only knowledge of patterns of behavior, customs, and relationships were not from their homes and communities but from refugee orphanages. Their role models were not mothers, fathers, aunts, and uncles, but teachers, missionaries, and clergymen.

Because of what they had seen and experienced, many suffered deep emotional wounds:

When we were kids, we all used to make fun of Mrs. ——. She was a bit 'light.' When I got older my mother told me that unfortunate woman's story. They shot her husband and he died in her arms. Then during the deportations she had hidden her two little children under her skirts. They grabbed those kids and stabbed them right before her eyes. Then raped her. That sad woman lived a life of torment.[5]

* * *

We were walking in a group when these three soldiers came along and took a young girl. She might have been fourteen or fifteen. Her brother ran after them and started kicking and punching them. Those grown men killed that little boy, then dismembered his body. I still remember how his poor mother picked up the pieces and buried him.[6]

Obsessed with such nightmares, they nevertheless had to learn to cope with grief and bereavement. Suppression, remorse, revenge, anger, or guilt – whatever their reaction – they all bore indelible psychological scars.

They also had to adjust to peculiar marriage patterns. Most of the women were in their late teens or early twenties when they came to marry men nearing middle age. Not only were their husbands much older but they also came from different geographic and socio-economic backgrounds. While the majority of the men were agriculturalists from the interior, the women came from all parts of the Ottoman Empire, from rural and urban centres, from interior and coastal areas, and from humble and wealthy families. Differences in age and background, and initial unfamiliarity with each other, meant that for many women the early years of marriage were not filled with joy and anticipation. Already bruised by life's traumas by the age of seventeen, an interviewee recalled:

I was not happy. Married to a strange man. I hadn't spoken two words to him. [Before marriage] we had no idea of each other's opinions. What was love? There was no love in those days. No. The man needed the woman and the woman needed the man. That's why they married.[7]

What did these women expect from the strangers they had married? With slight variation, informants indicated they wanted their husbands to be good providers, faithful husbands who did not drink or gamble. "The men," commented one informant, "were older than us but they weren't lazy. They worked hard . . . We weren't rich but our homes were abundant." "It is the mother," she continued, "who makes the home; it is the mother who destroys it. Of course there are unbearable things. For instance if the husband is lazy and doesn't bring money home. Or if he is a drinker. Or runs after women."[8]

As for themselves, they considered it their duty to be efficient homemakers, obedient and chaste wives and good mothers. They had been taught always to act in such a way as to bring credit, not dishonour, on their husband's name. The women knew their role and their place:

He is my husband. I am his wife. I must be obedient. Cook, clean and look after the children. He must work outside and bring money home. That's the tradition.

They considered themselves the backbone of the family and of the household. In keeping with this mentality, a woman commented, "The woman sees, but she does not see. She hears but she does not hear." Perhaps more realistic was the remark that:

. . . when he interfered too much in my household management, I'd tell him he needed some relaxation and suggest that he go to the club to play cards or backgammon with his buddies. Or I'd tell him to go to the club and find out what the latest gossip was.[9]

They learned how to handle their elderly and authoritarian husbands. "The man was king, for sure. But the wife was the crown."[10] Such attitudes, coupled with the struggle to make ends meet, resulted in relatively few marital separations and divorces. To keep the community together and to prevent family break-up, community and religious leaders intervened during inevitable periods of stress and conflict.

Partly to take the place of lost loved ones and partly to resurrect the Armenian nation, each couple considered creating a family vitally important. But many of these young women were naive and ignorant about birth control, pregnancy, abortion, and child birth. Those who "left the number of children to God" nevertheless tried to control family size, primarily for economic reasons, by lengthy periods of nursing, abstention, and hysterectomy. During the Depression in particular, there were cases of abortion, a few of which resulted in death. Abortion was usually self-inflicted by means of quinine.

Without the knowledge of English, lacking that degree of sophistication needed to thrive in an industrial and urban environment, ignorant of the city

Armenian Relief Society women knitting for the Canadian war effort (W.W.II)

beyond the few blocks of the Armenian neighbourhood, and limited by the cultural constraints of Armenian social custom, the women looked inward to their families and the Armenian community as the framework for continuity and stability. An informant recalled that: "Women belonged at home. We never thought of going out to work. It was the old country way for women to stay home. Cook, wash, sew, and rear the children."[11]

Indeed her labour was as necessary to the survival of the family as her husband's. The work of both husband and wife was the main source of the family's support and their activities complemented one another and were interdependent. Since Armenian men did not initially allow women, neither wives nor daughters, to go out to work in offices, factories, or stores, the women were relegated to work in and near the home. By doing so, the wife made it possible for her husband to earn a wage outside the home. Thus while the husband worked in a factory, operated a farm, carried on a small business, or engaged in a trade, the woman ran the household. She kept it clean, procured and prepared nutritious food, made and maintained much of the family's clothing, reared the children, and nursed ill relatives and friends. Even without earning a wage, she contributed to her family's economic stability by her work, talents, resourcefulness, and frugality. "If they earned $10.00 we managed on $10.00," commented an interviewee. "If they brought home $5.00, we ran the house on $5.00." The greatest compliment for an Armenian woman was "she's capable."

Of course they were not adverse to making money if they could do so without venturing beyond the confines of their homes and community. Accordingly some engaged in simple forms of cottage industry, like crocheting handkerchieves and knitting socks and sweaters for sale. Such income was not pin money or stocking money for the woman, but a real contribution to the family's finances – especially during times of her husband's unemployment, an event which occurred frequently among non-unionized unskilled factory labourers during the interwar years.

Those who worked in family businesses (like coffee shops and grocery stores) also added to the family's resources. Probably the most lucrative business activity for Armenian women during this period was operating boarding houses, a job which gave women the opportunity to make money within an acceptable framework and allowed them to reconcile their earnings with their traditional role of wife and mother. (More research is necessary to determine the extent and nature of women's roles in family businesses and boarding houses; the paucity of sources hampers serious research in these areas).

While their families and work were important in their lives, the newcomers also found strength and comfort in the Armenian community. Partly because of necessity and partly from choice, community activities were the major,if not the only, avenues of self-expression for many of them. Some women participated in church work and sought to perpetuate the Armenian Apostolic Church in Canada; others threw themselves into secular community work such as charitable, patriotic, and educational endeavours; some found artistic expression in theatrical and choral groups; still others became heavily involved in administering and teaching in Armenian supplementary schools.

Lacking a strong pre-1914 female contingent, deprived of close relatives who had been lost during the genocide, and disadvantaged by the abrupt disruption of their old way of life, most of the women clung to each other for sustenance and support. They were bound to each other by their common sorrow, their mutual need, their ethnic identity, and their humanity. Because the genocide had levelled them all, those from different socioeconomic backgrounds lived next door to each other and shared their suffering, their knowledge, their experiences, and their skills. From the beginning of their Canadian settlement, the women depended almost entirely on each other for advice and assistance:

> *When I was pregnant, I knew nothing. I spoke to Mrs. ——. I said, "Something is happening to me." She told me I was pregnant. I was so innocent. I was only seventeen. She explained to me how I was going to have that baby. She looked after me like a mother. She was the midwife.*[12]

Thus they created a female collectivism, an extensive network that permeated their daily lives. They rallied to each other in times of distress and trouble, and shared with each other moments of joy; they helped in household chores; took care of children; and interpreted with doctors and school teachers. In the long run, their interdependence created a true sisterhood, which in its fashion strengthened their families and the Armenian community, and gave them the resources to cope with discrimination and prejudice.

In Canada after World War I loyalty to the British Crown and to the Union Jack were particularly intense. Those who did not speak English or who had different values and customs were distrusted and feared. During the 1920s and 30s the prevailing Canadian image of loyalty implied one language and one culture. For Armenians, embracing two cultures was not a mark of disloyalty or resistance. For centuries they had been a minority in a pluralist society: they were ready and able to transfer their experiences to new places.

Sensing the pain of rejection on the one

hand and the danger of national extinction on the other, the Armenians tried to become part of Canadian society while retaining their Armenian ethnocultural heritage. They tried to strike a balance between the two cultures. They established clean, peaceful, and law-abiding communities and were unobtrusive and low-profile workers in Canadian society. Their real world, their caring world was their political, social, and cultural involvement in the Armenian community and in passing on their heritage to their children. They encouraged them to become familiar with Canadian ways; at the same time they encouraged them to appreciate their ancient and rich culture. They expected their children to speak English at school and on the streets; at the same time they expected them to speak Armenian at home and in the Armenian community. They wanted their children to attend Canadian public schools; they also insisted on their having only Armenian friends. They urged their children to achieve in Canadian society; they urged them to choose an Armenian spouse.

As their children grew older and less dependent and brought the culture of the Canadian society into the home; as the men mellowed with age; and as the women themselves matured and gained self-confidence, they had more time, more opportunity and motivation to step out into the mainstream society. They began to go to American movies which taught them a great deal about North American behavioural patterns; to take English language classes with the I.O.D.E.[13]; to attend English speaking church groups like the Altar Guild at St. Philip's Anglican Church in Hamilton; and even to work outside the home and community in canneries and textile mills during the Depression and World War II.

These refugee women came to Canada as a haven from the horrors of the century's first genocide. They sought and found safety and freedom in the New World. They and their husbands planted new roots in Canada and established a strong tradition of community life in this country. They were the first substantial contingent of Armenian women in Canada, and as such they were true pioneers, unsung heroines, magnificent women who faced pain, frustration, poverty, and prejudice with honesty, hard work, intelligence, and nobility.

Armenian picture bride, Hamilton, Ontario (1924)

[1]Public Archives of Canada, Record Group 76, Vol. 300, File 279907.

[2]Ibid.

[3]Taped interview with Mrs. Iskouhi Hazarian, Montreal, Quebec.

[4]Taped interview with Mrs. Armenouhi Simigian, Hamilton, Ontario.

[5]Name withheld.

[6]Name withheld.

[7]Mrs. Simigian.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Taped interview with Mrs. Takouhi Evarian and Mrs. Zarouhi Yakmalian, Hamilton.

[11]Mrs. Armenouhi Simigian.

[12]Ibid.

[13]The I.O.D.E. gave English language classes in St. Catharines. From a taped interview with Mrs. Alice Torosian, St. Catharines.

Isabel Kaprielian holds a SSHRCC post-doctoral fellowship at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. She is acting director of the National Heritage Language Resource Unit in the Modern Language Centre at OISE.