

Disinterring the past

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In the Tate Modern [1] in London hangs *Waterfall*, a fresh and potent depiction of a lyrical childhood landscape. It was painted in 1943, a year of epic horror on the eastern front and in the camps of death. It continues to arrest and intrigue the public.

This is the story of how I discovered and wrote about the author of this painting, an artist who crafted images of beauty out of a half-century of horrors; a man whose life was long hidden behind a façade of concealment, who emerged from the tragedy of a broken country to become an artist of depth and universal resonance. Through the encounter with him, I discovered my own lost history. Arshile Gorky, forty years dead, taught me anew what it means to be Armenian.

A friend once said to me: “You write your first book to change the world and the second to change yourself.” A tad new age, I thought then. I was writing in a highly disciplined way on the life and work of the Greek composer, Iannis Xenakis - analysing each composition stretched across the skeleton of his mathematical and philosophical ideas. Simultaneously, I tried to prise his early years out of him like a bad tooth. More willingly, he discussed his architectural work with Le Corbusier, which seemed to be the key to his later musical conceptions. He sympathised with me as an Armenian, as a fellow exile unable to return to her rightful ancestral home. These ties between us must have been far stronger than I realised at the time. They represented a core of shared values most clearly symbolised by our outbursts in Greek at emotional moments.

As a writer I had resisted the obvious choice, a book about an Armenian. Well, why should I write about an Armenian just because I was Armenian? Escaping from a tiny island like Cyprus it was enticing to venture into uncharted areas. The new world unfolded before me, like the first glorious image as I watched the astronauts step on the moon, an overall view from outer space where you could identify each feature if you zoomed in but where the totality was captivating because it showed the curvature of space.

In the mother tongue

It was not until years later when I had a child of my own that my mother’s voice began speaking to the baby through me, and, naturally, in Armenian. Suddenly my dead grandmother (*Hadjigul*) began to accompany me, but as a young woman of my own age, as I had never known her looking over my shoulder when I moved through my comfortable house in Holland Park, London. As I performed each action through pregnancy, labour and caring for my son, I couldn't help picturing how it must have been for her, a young woman who had been deported from her comfortable house in Kayseri, trekking with hundreds, thousands of Armenian women, children and old people across the country, not knowing if they would live or die that very day.

She had lost her husband. But by God-knows-what stroke of luck, he, a soldier in the Ottoman army, had been summarily released during torture – *bastinado* – by a friendly officer who gave

him the chance to escape and saved his life. Miles from home, my grandmother had found him, become pregnant and given birth to my mother (the story went) *en route* to Tarsus. *Hadjigul* arrived in Cyprus with two boys and a baby daughter. In the deportation she had lost one daughter (named Satenig after a beautiful queen, so beautiful that she had constantly smudged her child's face with soot). The girl had died of terror at being accosted by a Turkish soldier. My mother, who was named after her, was exquisite, too, with blonde hair and pale green-blue eyes.

This grandmother would not leave me alone, nor would the other women who had trekked across the Armenian provinces in the Ottoman empire (some doggedly kept part of their families alive and arrived to make new homes all over the world, mourning the ones they had lost each day). They filled my days and prevented me from sleeping. Thousands of others had lost their lives in horrors which I heard about as a little girl. I begged them to stop but they went on clicking their crochet hooks in the sun and telling each other these blood-curdling stories. Now I realise that it was their way of keeping madness at bay. They all wore black, every last one of them, to remember the relatives they had lost.

A hidden history

I tried to be everything my grandmother was not, rejecting her crochet hook, nimble needle, thin rolling-pin, for a piano, books, politics, typewriter. After the birth of two boys of my own, I was now ready to embark on a book about Arshile Gorky, an Armenian who was known to foreigners as a Russian or Georgian, and to most Armenians as a compatriot who had shamelessly abandoned his name and people. William Saroyan, for one, never forgave him.

For my part, I wondered what traumas had detonated this decision. Why would anyone struggle to survive against impossible odds, create such exhilarating art, to achieve fame and success with his adopted persona and then take his own life? Could he not bear the burden of his posturing?

Gorky's paintings were a transliteration of his Armenian childhood, of dreams and terrors into the phonemes of a new medium. The boy had refused to speak until the age of six, had bottled up his words and preferred to draw instead. Through the medium of art he created a safe zone, an ambiguous world where he was safe to express his wildest ideas without censure. As an artist, he built up a code of forms or motifs which he transformed as he moved from figurative to more abstract, cubist, surrealist, non-objective, the motifs were there, like words, but they had been translated.

A jigsaw with extra pieces

Everything about him was a mystery. No one had been to his village by Lake Van and come back with photographs or accurate information. His American wife, Agnes Magruder, had not known his real name until after his death. His nephew, Karlen Mooradian, would not allow me to meet his mother, Vartoosh, Gorky's sister. Under the cloud of his suicide, Gorky's life had become distorted and misrepresented by writers who had not done the proper groundwork. His daughters, Maro and Natasha, had no real relationship with their aunts or their father's Armenian culture. The nephew faked twenty-nine letters and published them; these were then reprinted without being checked. Everywhere I stumbled against fragmentation and errors. Writing the book was like a vast jigsaw puzzle where many of the pieces did not belong to the same puzzle.

Systematic interviews with people who had known him at different ages revealed an evolving character: dashing, fantastic, fun-loving in his youth, confident and resolute in his middle age,

then sombre and tragic after a series of calamities which would have brought any man to his knees.

Yet this poor immigrant with his deeply Armenian culture had wrenched American art away from drab regionalism and social realism to a more vibrant abstract expressionism, liberated by the influx of unconscious memories through surrealism.

The call of the earth

The emotional impact of my trip to historic Armenia was to reverberate through the book in an unexpected way. I had been discouraged from going to the Kurdish dominated Lake Van area by the Turkish government. The book was almost finished when I suddenly knew I had to go – no matter what. I had to stand on that shore, plant my feet on Gorky's soil and see his sky. I had to watch the sun rise over the Armenian mountains which led to Mount Ararat.

Curious and sceptical, I joined a group of elderly Americans on a pilgrimage, each hoping to visit their parents' birthplace. Their first instinct on arriving at their destination, a remote village or town, was to bend down and grasp a handful of soil. It was about earth and needing to make contact with it once more. I visited my father's birthplace then my mother's and grandmother's, and lastly I found Gorky's village under another name.

I seemed to be standing in a painting by Gorky, still wet with fresh paint. I was surrounded by the iridescent light, the prismatic colours of the lake and snow-clad mountains, mists and green washes of fresh leaves. It was the key to his soul, to his art and his hidden identity. He had left behind this magical landscape with no hope of returning and naturally taken a name which meant "bitter".

Another Armenia

Travelling in modern-day Armenia, Yerevan and Etchmiadzin (which was not my ancestral home), I did not feel the same bond with the land but more with the language. The difficulties imposed by the embargo on oil from neighbouring Azerbaijan, the economic troubles of the country, make daily life a trial for these highly intelligent and cultivated people whose dignity and genius I grew to admire and love.

I have often wondered what it means for a diasporan to feel homesick – that powerful need which makes us want to discover our "roots", as we call them, no matter where we come from. Perhaps mine were more clearly identified in Gorky's paintings than in the land and buildings my grandparents had left behind. Now I am as old as they when they left home with their children, and I feel their terror and anguish at losing everything – yes, and I understand Gorky's insatiable need to repossess his dead mother, his homeland through his colours and symbols.

A rite of life

The book was finished, but not my catharsis. I had to restore to the women who had given me Gorky's story the form and integrity of their life; a narrative which would bring back their voices and through them those of my grandmothers and mother. In a performance I have now done over forty times. I tell Gorky's story in the first person, as his mother – whose eyes, prised open to make her watch her husband's murder, still gaze back at us through the artist's paintings – then as his sister, his lost Armenian sweetheart and his American wife. His landscape, paintings and family look down at us from the screen, his music echoes as they speak of him. The life-cycle of one of the bravest and most tragic 20th-century artists is enacted in an hour. Gorky

lived only into his 40s; he took his own life as though to join those others who were cut down in their prime.

Without planning it, I have performed this piece in places linked closely with him, and an artistic mosaic is beginning to emerge: in downtown New York where he lived on Union Square, in Los Angeles in front of his niece, in Armenia where I had to speak in both Armenian and English, and in Beirut, the war-scarred city which responded so passionately to his childhood as though welcoming him back to his own people.

In the genocide of 1915, Armenians lost almost 2 million people. We lost towns, churches, homes, lands and memories. The violation of history continues to unhinge the present.

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