

the diaspora, but from those in an alternative homeland, one that most of the Armenians in the world have never visited.

Yerevan

My trip began in Tbilisi, Georgia, because diplomatic relations are so bad between Turkey and Armenia that at the time of my visit it was impossible to fly directly between them. As the trip progressed and I began to realize just how fresh and painful the genocide commemorations were, whenever anyone asked me: ‘Where are you from?’ I answered quickly: ‘England’ – though part of me was curious to see what reaction I’d get if I told the whole truth.

I set off for the Georgian-Armenian border with a young Armenian man called Gregor. As we left Tbilisi, we passed an explosive fight in the Meidani – real punches, men being kicked on the ground, not just macho shouting as I have often witnessed in Turkey. As we drove away, Gregor said with satisfied certainty: ‘That would never happen in Armenia’ – my first taste of the often jokey but ever-present rivalry between the two countries.

The drive into Armenia cuts through beautiful swathes of green mountains and forest dotted by medieval monasteries on distant hills. Just before the border we drove through a village in Georgia where most of the residents are Azeris, a Turkic ethnic group concentrated in neighbouring Azerbaijan. On the gates of some of the houses, red ribbons had been tied to denote the presence of unmarried girls, an advert for prospective grooms. The ancient custom of bride-knapping still happens within both Christian and Muslim

communities, as well as in central Asian states like Kyrgyzstan; in short, a young man chooses a girl he wants, kidnaps her with the help of his friends (before the advent of cars, this was done on horseback) and takes her to his parents' house. If she is not rescued by her own family before the next day, she is considered sullied, and belongs to the groom's family. These days, thankfully, bride-knappings take place mostly 'for show', after the agreement of both families, so that a marginally more consensual form of arranged marriage has replaced brute force – hence the coy presence of red ribbon-flags.

Over the border into Armenia, the ever-greener landscape becomes dotted with copper mines constructed under Soviet administration, most of them long abandoned along with their attendant worker villages. The rolling hills were, however, largely untouched, and we often stopped to allow herds of fat-bottomed sheep to cross the road in front of us.

Armenia is extremely poor; in November 2017, its average monthly wage was £30, and when Syrian refugees of Armenian origin started arriving in the country in 2011, fleeing the war, they were envied by locals for their cars and cash. The government depends on Russia for subsidized electricity, supplying a population of around 3.5 million, most of whom live in Yerevan. Signs of the abrupt departure of the Russians in 1991 are dramatically obvious, for example in the skyscraper apartments half built on the outskirts of Yerevan in the shape of the Cyrillic letters spelling out the equivalent of 'USSR' – only the U, S and half the second S were finished, and still stand. At one point on our way to the city, we passed a village affected by the 1988 earthquake that had devastated the region: it was the ancestral home of Charles Aznavour, according to Gregor,

who also told me with great emotion in his voice that the French-Armenian *chanteur* had donated generously to rebuilding it (in fact, Aznavour's mother's family was from Izmir and his father's from Georgia). Another village we passed through was inhabited primarily by Yazidis, a Kurdish speaking minority historically persecuted as "devil worshippers" because of their reverence for Melek Taus, the Peacock Angel. 'I don't know if they go to school,' Gregor said. 'I know the girls are married by fifteen. There is no discrimination against Yazidis in this country.' They were certainly safer here than in northern Iraq, where in 2014 Islamic State forced thousands of them to take refuge on Mount Sinjar and killed many of those who stayed behind. In January 2018, the Armenian parliament debated a draft bill to recognize the massacres of Yazidis by IS as a genocide – a political act of solidarity.

As we approached Yerevan, the playful and slightly self-mocking references to the rivalry between Armenia and Georgia continued, reminding me of Turkey's relationship with Greece. I recognize that combative pride because it is born of a feeling of persecution, of being badly treated by history but surviving against the odds – Turks feel it too. The resulting pride jealously guards all national achievements. When narrating the legend of the king who created the Armenian alphabet, and showing me a church slab on which both Georgian and Armenian was written, Gregor said: 'We say that he created not thirty-four but sixty-eight letters, but he gave the ugly letters to the Georgians.' Or: 'Some Georgians claim that this church was built by Georgians, Azeris also claim this but it is not true – Armenians built it.' Charles de Gaulle became the President of France 'because he was Armenian'. Armenia was the first country to get state Christianity

(true – in AD 301, thirty-six years before Georgia). Its Orthodox Church is superior to both the Russian and Georgian Orthodox Church, Armenian *dolma* is better than Georgian, and of course there is only ‘Armenian coffee’ not ‘Turkish coffee’.

During the Soviet occupation of Armenia, churchgoing was banned, but people still tried to find ways to pray. Outside the 12th-century monasteries in the startlingly green mountains there are black marks on the stone of the outer walls where people held candles, huddled outside the church in secret services. Although congregations can now gather inside again, some habits from Soviet times have remained, like the photographs of faces of the deceased painted on gravestones, a practice that started because crosses were not allowed under the Soviets. Despite, or perhaps because of the Soviet repression of religion, I was struck by how religious people are in both Georgia and Armenia today. It is perhaps more evident in the former, where everyone crosses themselves three times when passing churches, which is all the time in the city centre (and quite scary when being driven in a taxi). Pedestrians also stop to touch and kiss the icons of Jesus Christ outside the church.

One Sunday morning in Yerevan I found a huge congregation spilling out of the doors of the central Saint Sergei Church – old and young, all dressed in Sunday best. A thin man with dark stubble wore a bright pink 1970s-style paisley shirt; it was touchingly garish, clearly reserved for Sundays. Women covered their heads, however cursorily (one frail middle-aged woman had a gossamer-thin handkerchief perched on the top of her wispy bun with no attempt to tuck it in at all). A man went around with a box of spare scarves for women who had come without, a service also offered outside mosques in Turkey.

The service and the overwhelming sense of community reminded me of the St Panteleimon chapel in Istanbul: long, thin yellow candles were on sale by the door, and worshippers went into an antechamber to secure them in the water-filled trays before they prayed, almost in automaton fashion. Old women went around putting out the older ones with their fingers to make room for more, their hands covered in water and ash. One of them sold sachets of a light yellow, crystalline substance (perhaps a cheaper resin substitute for myrrh) – seeing that I did not have any, an old man gave me some of his. At some unannounced point in time, everyone turned towards the altar, which morphed into a stage when a young, good-looking priest with a short, dark beard appeared from behind the red curtain in his white cassock, intoning in a rich bass, accompanied by attendants with beautiful voices, arrayed in red. All the congregation knew when to cross themselves; sometimes they reached down to touch the floor in what seemed like a synchronized performance.

Long before the priest prepared to come down from his stage to parade around the church, everyone had formed into parallel lines, lining the route for his procession. A hushed struggle ensued as he approached, everyone surging forwards to touch or preferably kiss the banners held aloft by his team. Attendants had a bag ready for the mysterious crystallized substance to be dropped into, and the priest himself held an ornate metal cross, holding it out to people's lips at random. I hoped fervently that he didn't offer it to me, but, inadvertently, or perhaps perversely, I met his eye as he approached and before I knew it the metal was pressed against my mouth. As the banner emblazoned with Christ's head passed overhead, I felt churlish, motionless as everyone else's arms reached over me to

brush against it. At the last moment, I gave it a cursory stroke. One man, taller than his neighbours, held it possessively, reaching up and kissing the edge before reluctantly letting go. As it moved on he kept his gaze fixed on it like a parent at the school gates, clearly wanting one last touch but restraining himself.

This was paganism in thin disguise, and I found it slightly unsettling, particularly as I had got swept up in it despite myself – I did feel vaguely privileged when the metal cross loomed towards me. I was also genuinely touched by one event: an old woman, back bent, white hair, all in black, came in and found an old man, obviously her friend. Perhaps they only meet on Sundays. He greeted her warmly, kissing her on both cheeks. I was struck by how impossible this scenario would be in a mosque – not only can men and women not touch, they cannot even look at each other, separated out of shame into separate sections in the house of God. Yet what could be more natural than what I just witnessed – a simple expression of affection between two human beings.

Something I could not fail to notice in Armenia was the ubiquitous purple forget-me-not, symbol of the genocide, that appeared on car windows, on the walls of shops and offices, formed out of public floral arrangements, and vast on banners on the highway, often accompanied by the words ‘We Remember, We Respect, We Condemn’ in both Armenian and English.

I had decided to visit Yerevan’s Genocide Museum but some unconscious reluctance meant I left it until my last day. I arrived, finally, at the same time as a huge crowd of children, pouring out of a bus that had brought them from a school in the countryside. I walked with them to the Tsitsernakaberd memorial, a high, pointed

stele made of twelve shards of metal representing the districts taken from Armenians in modern-day Eastern Turkey. Below it is a circular indent fringed with carnations laid by visitors who stay to watch the ever-burning flame in the centre of the ring, dedicated to the victims of the genocide. The walk from the memorial to the museum is through a park lined with fir trees, each with a plaque from a nation state announcing its commemoration of the genocide. Having lived in Turkey for years (and before that in the UK, a country which still does not officially recognize the genocide) I was struck by the sheer range of Armenia's supporters. The museum is underground, room after room of precise documentation of atrocities committed against Armenians in the Ottoman Empire from the mid-19th century to 1918 and beyond. There are around fifty exhibits in all – photos, text, film footage, posters and newspaper front pages from the early 20th century.

Just before I went into the museum, I finally started to turn over in my mind what I thought about the genocide, with a sense of having felt obscurely vilified over the last few days, as a Turk in a country where, historically, Turks have been the enemy. I realized with shame that I had never looked properly into this period of history. Growing up with a Turkish mother, and living for years in Istanbul, I had absorbed a certain suspicion that the West had used the genocide unfairly as a stick with which to beat Turkey for the crimes of their Ottoman predecessors, a theory that has always been popular among Turks hypersensitive to the idea that Western powers blindly support Christians over Muslims. Now, at the door of the museum, I faced up to my doubts, asking myself rhetorical questions that, as I write them now, seem absurd and ugly in equal measure:

‘There must not be conclusive proof that a genocide was ordered, otherwise how could there be any debate? How could Turkey deny it? And what about the fact that some Armenians did remain in Turkey, like the community in Istanbul?’

The museum visit was harrowing and transformative; I was emotionally exhausted when I emerged. There was so much proof, too much proof, that a genocide had taken place, and there was one exhibit in particular that stood out for me amid the horrible photographs and accounts of murders, rapes and torture: a telegram from Talat Pasha, one of the three infamous Pashas who led Turkey into the disastrous war on Germany’s side, after the Young Turk revolution of 1908. It was addressed to the governor of Aleppo and described the intention of the Young Turks to eliminate ‘all Armenians’. Later, when I described it to a Turkish friend, he claimed it was a forgery, also the view of historians such as Bernard Lewis. One of the saddest legacies of the Armenian Genocide is the air of scandal it attracts. Finally, I began to understand the Armenians’ frustration with Turkey’s century-long denial, but also the gulf between the two nations’ understanding of events, and the ugly battleground between historians and nationalists.

I wondered what would happen if all Turks were forced to see these exhibits, to visit this museum. I am sure they would not accept it at first, such is the weight of denial in Turkey, particularly in Turkish schools on impressionable young minds. The glorious sacrifice of Turkish soldiers at Gallipoli and in the 1922 War of Independence dominates the curriculum in Turkish schools, so that the popular conception of military force is overrepresented as the idea of martyrdom. Turks feel they owe their very existence to

the soldiers of the First World War, and indeed those stationed on Turkey's borders today; it would be impossible for them to accept that their forefathers had committed acts of genocide. It is the one thing that almost all Turks, regardless of religion, background or political alliance, agree on: the genocide is a myth. Because of their education, which is dictated by the ongoing attitude of the government, Turks do not have the same tools as the rest of the world to discuss what happened.

Before my trip to the museum, I had asked Gregor whether Armenians resent Turks. 'Some do of course,' he answered. 'They cannot forgive. Others realize that we cannot be angry with Turks themselves, they probably are not taught what happened.' At the time, I felt patronized – 'not taught your version, you mean'. After seeing the exhibits in the museum, I acknowledged the truth of his words. Amid my shock and disgust at what I had learned, however, I also noticed the skewed language of the text accompanying the exhibits, particularly those describing the Armenians outshining the 'backward' people of the Ottoman Empire, i.e. the Muslims. The members of the Armenian Assassin group that murdered Turkish diplomats after the fall of the empire are referred to as 'revengers', and their Turkish victims were 'liquidated' not 'murdered' as Armenian victims were. There is no mention of Turks who helped their Armenian neighbours, as there is of the Germans who helped Jews in the Holocaust museum in Berlin, for example. For extremely understandable reasons, the museum is black and white in its portrayal of the villains and victims of 1915 – but that makes the process of reconciliation hard.

The relationship between Armenia and Turkey has parallels with the

relationship between Israel and Palestine that criss-cross between the four countries – historical claims to land, displaced people, religious partisanship, genocide recognition and beleaguered diplomacy. There is a sense in both Turkey and Palestine that the West sides with their non-Muslim adversary (Armenia/Israel); there is fury in both Palestine and Armenia that land has been taken from them by a greater military force, and that fury is one of the uniting points of their diasporas, while, most obviously, both Israel and Armenia are consumed with the injustice of those who deny their respective genocides. Israel's claim to Jerusalem as its religious and historical capital mirrors Armenia's claim to Mount Ararat as the centre of the Armenian people.

The gulf between the story told in the museum in Yerevan and the Turkish version of the events of 1915 raised questions for me about how countries come to terms with their pasts, and the role of acknowledgement to ensure nothing similar happens again as the 21st century becomes increasingly dystopian. South Africa had its Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the country's legacy of slavery and apartheid. Germany has fully acknowledged and documented the Holocaust with museums, television programmes and school books and, crucially, has honoured the gentile Germans who took huge risks to help their Jewish friends – something that the Armenians have generally failed to do, and which is perhaps fundamental to allowing Turks to feel anything other than universally villainized by the Armenian version of events. Perhaps, like Spain and Portugal offering citizenship to Sephardic Jews to atone for the Inquisition, Turkey should offer citizenship to Armenians to atone for the genocide – a considerably less attractive offer, but a symbolically important one.

Recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey would be of monumental importance – it seems to be the ultimate goal for Armenians, yet, as the centenary has come and gone, it seems increasingly unlikely to happen. I also wonder how Armenians would feel without this constant goal needling them, like the desire of a murder victim's family for a guilty verdict. Would an apology really help? Will the Armenians ever really forgive the Turks, or feel at peace? The genocide is so engrained in the Armenian psyche that it almost defines both the country and the diaspora, although many members of the younger generations are trying to move beyond this lasting burden, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Western Armenia

Hrant Dink was a figurehead for Armenian-Turkish reconciliation and was assassinated in Istanbul in 2007; 100,000 people marched at his funeral. An inquest four years after his murder revealed that police intelligence had 'deliberately not prevented' the murder, which happened in front of the offices of Agos, a newspaper he launched in 1996 in both Turkish and Armenian as a gesture of compromise that angered some in the Armenian community. Before he launched Agos, Dink had run an Armenian children's camp in Tuzla, near Istanbul, that had been seized by a court in 1979 and partially demolished in 2015. Now, an award in his name honours human rights activists across the world.

I returned to Istanbul with a new appreciation for how hard it must be for the Armenian community in Turkey to honour their