

Ancestral Voices

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One

One historic year.
One cataclysmic event.
One unforgettable bleak memory.
One ominous political concept.
One people almost annihilated.
One blood-stained colour.

One orphan child,
and then another,
and another,...

Somehow, a nation survives.
One extended family grows.
One searing memory penetrates to the bone.
One horrific deed now a people's defining identity.
One people unable and unwilling to forget.
One terrible deed,
and endless nightmares.
We do not forget that one historic year.
One catastrophic event that defines who I am,
and who I always will be.
Now and forever.

A Visitor of Many Sorts

I am travelling to Armenia as a Canadian citizen,
political science professor, social activist,
part-time journalist, vacationer,
husband, grandson, son and father.
I am on a quest to find missing fragments
of my identity.
I need to learn from people and places that I barely know
and with far too little time.
It has been an odyssey 43 years in the making.
And yet, it is a voyage only just begun.
It is a quest to find a role,
perhaps of moral leadership
in this fractured and conflict-prone world.
I need to urgently grasp lessons about conflict and oppression.
But I am endeavouring to find a message about hope and love.
I am travelling to Armenia to discover my roots and past,
but also to discern my future.
I am travelling.
-- travelling in time and space --
in a quest for ideas and a less fragmented identity.
I pray for a safe and successful journey.
It is a long voyage from the distant diaspora.
It is a much delayed pilgrimage on behalf of my ancestors.
Some day, I may tell of this to the young.
I am a visitor with so much to discover,
but with so little time.
It is an odyssey filled with hope
There will be wonders to observe,
lessons to be learned,
and, I trust, a message to convey.
I am on a voyage
that others will surely travel.
Perhaps my path into the mountains
is one that fellow pilgrims can follow.

Echmiadzin

Echmiadzin the holiest shrine for apostolic Armenian Christians.

So old, so traditional, so revered,
yet filled with contradictions.

A Christian Church, but built on pagan ruins.

A priest walking alone in black robe,
while talking on a cell phone.

A quiet contemplative garden,
yet just beside a children's brightly coloured amusement park.

Old traditional grave stones and khachkars
next to a newly-filled earthen grave,
which is adorned with 24 red carnations
and dedicated to "Bob".

Obsidian Obsession

The quest for a special rock
to take back from my ancestral homeland
begins with an existential question.

What sort of rock should it be?

Then I ask:

Where will I find it?

What shape will it have?

I repeat my questions to several different persons,
and each time the answer is unanimous:

“Black obsidian rock
to be found on the road to Lake Sevan”.

A volcanic rock formed under enormous pressure so long ago
seems apt for a land that has witnessed so much suffering in its history.

The colour black evokes memories of the genocide.

The rock's hardness is a reminder of the toughness needed to survive in such a rugged land.

And thus at a rock cut on the road to Lake Sevan,
I cross the four lane highway and select my precious obsidian.
And I hold in my hand a piece of my ancestral homeland.

Grandfather's Sweater

They say evenings can be cool in Armenia.
So we decided to pack my grandfather's dark red cardigan.
Its style is old fashioned - definitely a throwback to an era long past.
But, it would be a reminder of family and kin on my ancestral voyage to Armenia.

In the cooler evenings in Yerevan,
I proudly wore the sweater.
It was a familial link to an earlier age and to a now deceased relative.
One evening after another,
I faithfully wore the light cardigan,
as I strode along the boulevards of Armenia's capital city.
Contemporary youthful stylishness be damned.
Family keepsakes are far too few in the scattered diaspora.

Upon my return to Canada,
I painstakingly put one picture after another into the photo album.
I smiled each time I came across an image of me in grandfather's old sweater.
As I began to tell friends and neighbours of the story of the sweater,
my wife Suzanne,
in her kindergarten teacher's voice,
gently but firmly spoke:
"That was not your Armenian grandfather's sweater.
That was my New Brunswick grandfather's cardigan."
"Really?" I asked,
in stunned shock.
"Really?" I asked again in disbelief.
My beloved wife replied:
"Yes, dear. Yes."

It has been a year since my epic voyage to the Caucasus.
And I love my grandfather-in-law's sweater.
It reminds me of family and ancestral roots.
The Hartland Bridge and so much more.

Ancestral Voices:

Our ancestral voices,
flow as streams,
into the great ocean.

Where past, present and future,
rise and fall,
ebb and flow,
with the currents and tides
and prevailing winds.

Our ancestral voices
become a sea of endless waves
in a vast ocean
that stretches as far as the eye can see
and the mind can imagine.

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