

Hagop Barish:
A Genocide Survivor's Life Story

by

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Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Tales of the good old days, the stories of parents and grandparents when they were young and naive, or the history from where they came are things that have always excited me. So when I heard the tales of my great-grandfather's antics and what he'd done to his family because of his childhood trauma during the Armenian genocide, it left me wanting to know more about him and made me question how much of the young genocide survivors' behaviors were affected by this trauma in their adult stage. To better depict the narrative told by my family, I used my illustrations and put together a graphic novel to allow the viewer to enable the story of a genocide survivor to be seen and understood.

Keywords: Mardin, Aleppo, genocide, graphic novel, survivor, trauma, and parenthood.

Hagop Barish: A Genocide Survivor's Life Story

More than a hundred years have passed since the genocide against the Armenians by the Ottoman colonialists. More than one and a half million Armenians were victims of heinous racist crimes and mass killings between 1915 and 1923, which were accompanied by arrests, executions, displacement, confiscation of property, and burning of Armenian cities and villages. The Ottomans' brutality against the Armenians was not confined to a single massacre but rather a genocide that is considered one of the worst crimes against humanity in history. The Ottomans took advantage of the world's preoccupation with the First World War to start campaigns of forcible displacement of the Armenians to Aleppo in Syria, and during that journey, the most horrific human crimes were committed.

All cities of Western Armenia witnessed brutal massacres at the hands of the Ottomans during World War I. However, my interest in what happened in Mardin, the mountainous city located in southeastern Anatolia and close to the Syrian border, is due to two reasons. The first is that my capstone deals with the life of my great-grandfather, Hagop Barish, who witnessed the slaughter of seven members of his family in his hometown of Mardin and his escape from imminent death with his sister and brother to Aleppo. The other reason is that Mardin is the only place in the Ottoman Empire that provides us with a relatively complete day-by-day account of the persecution of Armenians and the rest of the other Christian sects. In addition, due to the geographical location of the city, the citizens of Mardin managed to see for many miles along the main road leading to Diyarbakir and even further into the Syrian border, allowing them to see the caravans of deportees coming from the northern provinces who walked their way to the death camps of Der Zor. This is a good starting point for me to imagine the events that took place in that period.

The capstone addresses a very important and underreported issue: life after the ordeal for genocide survivors. There are many accounts and testimonies about the atrocities committed in that period, what they saw, how they managed to escape, and what they did to survive, but very few stories deal with their lives in the new land or the new home. This is simply because talking about the nature and behavior of the survivors can only be accessed by their children or grandchildren after a long time has passed since they settled down, or even after their death.

This creative work aims to commemorate the Armenian massacres in 1915 by telling the life story of a survivor of the genocide, Hagop Barish, in a graphic style appropriate to the tragic events. The graphic novel is divided into two sections. The first half sheds light on the cruelty witnessed by the survivors, specifically in the city of Mardin, and the suffering of Hagop and all his family members, neighbors, and residents of that geographical spot during that ordeal. The second half highlights his life after the deportations and the long-term psychological impact he suffered until his passing.

Literature Review

Through the graphic novel, the capstone addresses the life of a survivor of the Armenian genocide during the ordeal and his life after the deportations in his new homeland, Aleppo. In order to arrive at an ideally suited graphic novel, meaning must be created through the interaction of image and text; therefore, the literature review is divided into two separate sections: the first deals with the graphic novel as a medium for genocide stories, and the other deals with the genocide and the massacre that took place in Mardin, the birthplace of the survivor.

Graphic novels as a medium for genocide stories

Genocide is a sensitive and complex subject, and its representation through graphic novels raises questions as to whether these novels can be valuable artwork. Therefore, borrowing a group of narratives related to humanitarian issues, especially international graphic novels that focus on genocide, helps to identify the different drawing styles and production strategies used in these works that facilitate emotional interaction in the narrative. That is what Laurike in't Veld did in her book, *The Representation of Genocide in Graphic Novels* (2018), where she analyzed a group of graphic novels that focus on the holocaust and genocide in Armenia, Rwanda, and Bosnia driven by the conviction that analyzing a group of these narratives will lead to important knowledge about the ways in which they deal cultural texts with historical cases of mass violence (Veld, 2018).

There are a lot of graphic novels related to mass violence, and the style of each novel differs from the other. For example, the novel *Muzungu* (1997) touches upon the genocidal events in Rwanda. The novelist Jeroen Janssen used large, exaggerated lines and numbers to express feelings and movement, and many of his paintings cannot be captured at one glance

because they contain a lot of information. Janssen's style is rich, expressive, colorful, and detailed and requires decoding on the reader's part. He also uses figurative runes because he feels the traditional way is too narrow to deal with life themes (Veld, 2016) (see figures 1 & 2).



Figure 1 (Muzungu, 1997)



Figure 2 (Muzungu, 1997)

As for Paolo Cossi's graphic novel *Medz Yeghern* (2009), which deals with the Armenian genocide, the style is different. Cossi chose black and white for his novel and used light and strong lines, avoiding shadows (see figures 3 & 4). In order to enhance the dramatic aspect, he

distorted the human anatomy to exacerbate their character, and this is what we see in the rape scene (see figure 5), which is also a kind of tribute to the painting *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso.



Figure 3 & Figure 4 (Medz Yeghern, 2009)



Figure 5 (Medz Yeghern, 2009)

Veld explains Cossi's style in *Medz Yeghern*: "One of his strategies to highlight the appearance of the perpetrator is by showing them in profile" (Veld, 2018, p. 97). For example, the sadistic expression on the Turkish offender's face, their squinted eyes, hooked nose, and the corners of the mouth slanted downward are all signs of malice and evil (see figure 4). Also, the language Cossi used in the same panel demonstrates malicious intent when the soldiers asked the

perpetrator why he brought them to the desert; the perpetrator's boldly captioned response is that they will soon become part of it. Veld points to the fact that there is always tension between different characters in comics working with or against each other, and the theme of genocide greatly heightens that tension due to the sensitivity of the content.

Veld's research helps study visual stimulus-based cognition, particularly in the field of genocide, and how narrative information is presented through graphical images and languages, and the interaction between them. According to Veld, graphic novels align with "the modernist strategy of highlighting the complexities of witnessing and comprehending atrocities" (Veld, 2018, p. 187). So, given the place of the Armenian genocide in global memory and the Armenian psyche, it can be considered a model through which we can approach and deal with human atrocities, and the graphic novel, as a medium, can provide meaningful interaction in the narrative of the genocide.

The genocide and massacre of Mardin

Many witnessed the brutal monstrosities the Turks committed against the Armenians during the First World War, and many survivors spoke about it; their testimonies were taken and documented in many books. The first seven years, in particular, of Barish's life were in Mardin, so it was crucial to find testimonies of some of the city's residents.

Ibrahim Kaspo was one of the survivors of the Mardin massacre. He wrote in his manuscript *"Mardin as I Knew It"* about the massacres that took place in his hometown and about the arrest of his father and his two older brothers, taking them in death caravans and slaughtering them in the middle of the road (Melki, n.d.). What Kaspo saw was cruel as they tortured men with hot irons, pulled out their nails, plucked their beards, and beat them with *falaqa*, a method of torture where the feet are bound by two wooden rods and whipping the feet

soles. After killing the men, it was the turn of the women and children. No soul was spared from the torture and death, and killing was not limited to just the Turks but everyone of a non-Christian religion participated in these crimes. Kaspo wrote how they found themselves surrounded by Bedouins and Kurds, and like wild beasts, they beat them, took their clothes, left them completely naked, and then rushed to rape the women. "She who resisted rape while alive was raped dead" (Melki, n.d.).

Abdo Hana Bizer was another survivor; he was twenty years old when the massacres began in Mardin. He was a member of an Armenian political party, so he was arrested four times and released on four occasions, as he said in his testimony (Melki, n.d.). Abdo Bezer recounts what he personally witnessed from the massacres in Mardin and other neighboring cities and what the deportations and killings supervisors told him. He was keen to name those who gave their testimony by name and date. Bezer also wrote about the arrest of Archbishop Maloyan and the priests as they came out of St. George's Church, tortured and murdered in the cruelest manner. Bezer wrote the dialogue that took place in the prison between the perpetrators and Maloyan and the events that followed everything in detail.

Mardin is an ancient and beautiful city, as described by the historian Gaunt in his article *"The View from the Roofs of Mardin: What Everyone Saw in the 'Year of the Sword'"* (2015). The city is built on a steep slope, the castle at the top. The houses were built on top of each other, with the roof of one family becoming a terrace for another (see figure 6). People who live in Mardin can see for many miles along the main road to Diyarbakir and even further into the Syrian border. Therefore, its residents could see the convoys of deportees coming from the northern governorates, who marched on their way to Der Zor, the ultimate death camp. "What is that I see over at Ömer Agha's water spring? A great caravan advances like a herd of sheep or cows. I must take up my telescope and look!" (Gaunt, 2015). Gaunt has collected many

eyewitness accounts available, most of which he obtained from the residents of Mardin, eyewitnesses such as Armele and Rhétoré. They saw huge numbers of women, children, and the elderly, accompanied by soldiers, beating, kicking, and pushing them brutally. Some of them tried to escape but to no avail. (Gaunt, 2015)



Figure. 6 *Mardin*, Michel Paboudjian collection, Paris

Often the victim is unable to speak, and the criminal seeks to deceive in order to exonerate themselves, but thanks to some priests who exercised the function of historians at that time, the events were traced day after day from family to family and from person to person to a criminal process that wiped out an entire community (Ternon, 2002, second part, p. 80).

In his book, *Mardin 1915* (2002), Ternon dealt in detail with all the events that occurred during that period. He mentioned the massacre of Mardin's men, the arrest of its notables and their deportation in convoys and then their slaughter, the evacuation of Armenian families, and the seizure of their property. He also spoke about the Mardin slave market and the fate of the kidnapped. "During the period of the massacres, the prices were low... The sellers are trying to

get rid of their goods as quickly as possible and you can buy a child of five to seven years old for five to twenty piastres, the price of a lamb” (Ternon, 2002, chpt. III, p. 204).

Conclusion

All of these stories, in addition to the interview with the granddaughter of survivor Hagop Barish, helped me tell the story and present it in a graphic style appropriate to the tragic events. Taking into account the strategies that Veld talked about and the events and facts that I gathered from these sources, I tried to relive the memory of the Armenian genocide in 1915 through graphic panels that shed light on the cruelty witnessed by the survivors, their suffering during that ordeal, their life after the deportation, and the psychological impact they suffered throughout their lives.

Research Questions

The world has witnessed and still is witnessing many great human tragedies. Many graphic novels ask about or cover anecdotes of ordeals and survival; however, the primary question we should be answering is: To what extent do the crimes of humanity, specifically the Armenian genocide, affect the survivors in moving forward in life? In order to reach a comprehensive view of the repercussions of these atrocities, we must answer two secondary questions: Did the survivors pick up any unusual behaviors from the ordeal that affected their personality and their dealings with their families, especially with their children? And if so, what kind of behaviors?

Methodology

Writing process

In order to depict the massacre in Mardin as well as Barish's life story in a graphic novel for the capstone, which is mainly text and illustration based, the first initiative was to hold an oral history interview with his granddaughter, Tania Khachadour, about Hagop Barish. This was the most crucial step of all, as the entire novel is based on the main protagonist, that would be told in the interview in a series of anecdotes passed down from Khachadour's mother and aunts, the children of Barish, who are all deceased, except for Khachadour's mother who, at the time was unwell, leaving Khachadour the only reliable source to tell the tale of Barish.

In the first stage, apart from the interview, a script was written based on the research information and the testimonies of some Mardin massacre survivors collected from the sources. The testimonies were sorted according to dates and locations, and the dialogues contained in their stories were transferred into a file that was used in the text of the graphic novel, in addition to the names of the people mentioned in their testimonies of the victims and perpetrators, to add credibility to the story. All this was vital for the first half of the graphic novel that deals with what happened during the Armenian genocide and the Mardin massacre. In turn this highlights the repercussions of the tragic events more clearly in the second half of the novel, focusing heavily on Barish's life, his survival, his deportation to settle in Aleppo, to illustrate the result of witnessing those tragic events and the impact of trauma on fatherhood. All information in this instance was based on the interview with Khachadour.

Drawing process

The drawing process was the most time-consuming part of the capstone. Before any work could be done, a suitable art style was required. Some styles, for example, *Muzungu*, were rich

with shapes, colors, and angles; the style most suited for this particular novel had to be simple yet effective, similar to *Medz Yeghern*. It was more focused on delivering expressions on a simple and clear panel with shades of grey for coloring rather than using it to focus more on shadows. For the capstone, the character's expressions were just as vital as the structural backgrounds, as they represented the location of real places taken before, during, and after the genocide and were used as a reference for the novel. (See figures 7 & 8)

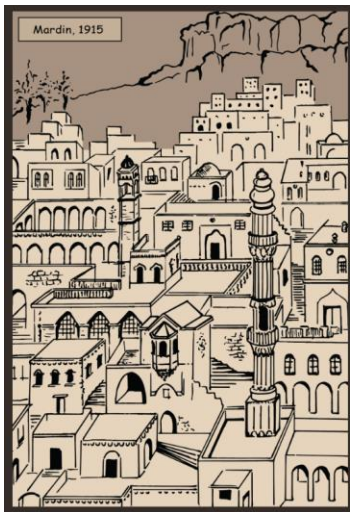


Figure 7 (Mardin City)

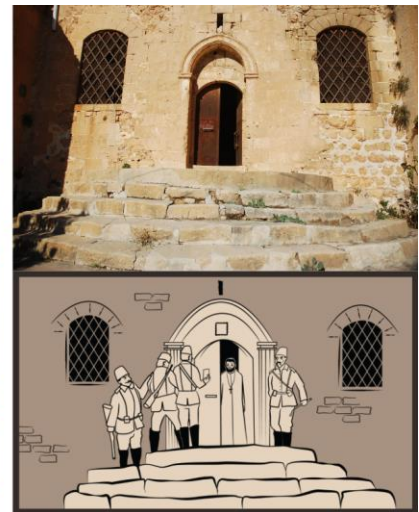


Figure 8 (St. George Armenian Church)

The color scheme for the novel was inspired by vintage photographs of soft brown and cream tints as opposed to the classic black and white colors (see figure 9).



Figure 9

The choice of the Old West color scheme serves two purposes. The first being that the events of the massacre took place when Hagop was young; when looking back on his past from his perspective, it's all desaturated in color, like a flashback. The second purpose was that Barish had a huge passion when it came to art, especially photography. He had taken countless photos

of himself and his family over the decades. Sadly, according to Khachadour, all albums and photographs of Barish's family were lost at some point during the 2011 war in Syria; their location was unknown, and very few family members had little to no copies of the pictures. Fortunately, Jeanette Khachadour, Tania Khachadour's mother and Hagop Barish's daughter, managed to get a hold of some of the photos from a distant relative in late March 2023. So, when viewing Barish in the present as an adult in the novel, everything is still desaturated because the era of producing colored photographs hadn't yet been invented.

Each of the five colors above (see figure 9) was assigned for a particular use to fit the graphic novel best. The Baked Scone was the primary hue highlighting the importance of the people, objects, or structures deemed significant for each respective panel. Rodeo Dust was only applied as the background color for every text box, bubble, and speech. Donkey Brown was the main background color that helped the brighter colors stand out, though sometimes, English Walnut, used as the border frame and divider for every image, was also used as a background on a couple of occasions for some panels as well as silhouettes. Finally, pure Black was used to illustrate the outlines and has been used to fill in dark hair, shoes, hats, and shadows of sleeves or fabric. For the line art, there was a desire to give a comic-like feel. To achieve that, thick, smooth outlines were in order. A custom set of brushes was created from scratch for smoother brush strokes for the characters. Once the story was all laid out and the art style selected and modified, it was then the time to sit down and draw toward completing the graphic novel.

Artist Statement

The central purpose of my graphic novel is not just to depict the tragedies that had befallen Armenia during the genocide but the lasting impact it had on the people that were directly involved. We hear the tales of survival and hardships that the survivors had to endure, the struggles they had to encounter. Yet why is it that we never question what became of their lives? Not in the sense of establishing a brand-new start or life, but how much of the massacre influenced them on a traumatic scale that ultimately affected their behavior moving forward?

My great-grandfather, Hagop Barish, had survived the genocide at an incredibly young age but had unfortunately witnessed the deaths of loved ones and the brutal carnage that took place before he fled to safety with his three remaining family members. What follows decades later, as he becomes an adult and parent, is the display of harsh punishments to his own flesh and blood children as a result of the behaviors he was influenced by during the time of the massacre.

There are countless stories about him and his antics that were passed down from my grandmother to my mother and eventually to me. As such, I want to convey these narratives, his life story, to the viewers. To accomplish this, I wanted to use my illustrations to bring the story to life. Storytelling is a powerful tool as it is; however, I wanted the viewer to connect to Barish on a deeper level as the events of the genocide and the life he went on living are better depicted through visual imagery, and so the concept of creating a graphic novel came to mind.

The novel is split into two sections. The first half focuses on when he was younger during the genocide slaughter of the citizens of Mardin City, Hagop Barish's birthplace. The second half depicts him as a full-grown adult, living his day-to-day life as a father to seven children.

Graphic Novel: file:///C:/Users/vanou/Downloads/Hagop%20Barish_Vana%20Anbarson.pdf

Reflection on Process

This graphic novel has been one of the most complex, mentally challenging projects I have ever done. Going in, I thought it would be at least somewhat enjoyable to do since most of my time would be spent drawing each panel, not to say that it wasn't; however, I found myself on multiple occasions pulling all-nighters, almost daily at some point during April and May, attempting to make as much progress within a specific timeframe to finish the work.

Near the end, I debated whether it would have been far more optimal if I had gone about this project using a different method rather than a graphic novel. But no matter how I perceived Barish's story, I could not envision a better alternative. I liked the concept and was proud of the work I was putting into each individual page. It brought me so much joy for every blank page I filled with illustrations.

I was truly grateful I didn't experience any technical difficulties that would have resulted in the loss of my progress, nor did I experience a serious case of art block besides minor ones. If anything, I had more of an issue tackling some panels I deemed time-consuming or intimidating and therefore put them off. Instead, I drew what excited me most or had a clear motive to complete first. Of course, I had sketched out a storyboard of the entire novel, start to finish, before I dove into the actual drawing process and used it as a map to stay on track with what pages were in progress or incomplete.

I did need to pull out quite a few reference photos, not just of Mardin and photographs of the genocide itself but other miscellaneous items such as the old view camera, the easel, the ironing board, and sometimes photos of people in large groups to use as a guide for making silhouettes of an entire classroom or a running crowd. I even used references from comics on how artists utilized lines to create simple motion and movement or how the text bubbles were

displayed when the characters interacted. I must say, adding the texts was when I felt like the novel was coming together beautifully, as it was the last thing I did after finishing up all the drawings. I could not express the relief I felt after the countless time and energy I put into this novel.

In all the time I spent drawing, there was a period where I had forgotten whom I was making this novel for, and I lost sight of what I was working toward. In that brief period, was when I had the thought. "What if I had taken a different creative approach? Like writing a script or making a film. Would that have been any different from making a graphic novel?" It wasn't until I went back and reviewed all of the materials I had gathered, the interview, the research, and revisited the story I had written and drawn down was when I recalled the purpose of this project. It was like I was rediscovering the anecdotes all over again. I could easily recount the tales I was told, but to revisit the project, in its completed state, was when I felt rejuvenated and embraced every part of this capstone with the same energy as when I started.

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