

Memory: The Soul of History
In Commemoration of the Genocide of the Pontic Greeks
by Thea Halo

What is memory? Why do people remember for eighty years and more, things that seem no more than everyday occurrences, rather unremarkable in themselves, like my mother remembering her mother crossing herself and then bending to touch the ground with the tripod her first three fingers made, then repeating the crossing and touching of the ground three times. She was no more than nine when she last saw her mother and other villagers make this Christian gesture typical of the Pontic Greeks. She remembers a young couple in her village who were in love, who tricked the girl's obstinate parents into consenting to their marriage by running away and hiding overnight. Though a charming story, it's difficult to imagine what such an incident could have added to her life that she would remember it and their subsequent wedding with such clarity. Difficult that is until one puts all these memories together and finds a mosaic rich in historical reference, and a gold mine of tradition that might have faded into oblivion if not for these everyday historians, such as my mother. It's easier to understand why and how she would remember the long death march to exile; the dying one by one of her family and villagers in that Spring of 1920, although so many of those survivors chose to forget... or at least chose to bury those memories deep inside and refused to resurrect them.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once said:

“Every historical period produces its share of otherwise inconspicuous individuals who have the gift of preserving the past, though not by setting down their memoirs for posterity. Instead, they evoke it in conversation with their contemporaries; their recollections can be borne across decades even to the very youngest listeners and when the narrator's own life is drawing to a close. As long as the head holding these memories remains steady, as long as we stay receptive to its kindly silver-haired glow, we can continue to draw on it for the past it has preserved. But the use we make of these insights is then entirely up to us.”

When I wrote *Not Even My Name* I decided to include anything and everything my mother remembered of her life. I decided early on that if she remembered something for eighty years, no matter how insignificant it might seem at the moment, it must have profound significance in the totality of her life. The result I'm told is a record of how the Pontic Greeks lived tucked away in the Pontic Mountains along the Black Sea in the early part of the Twentieth Century... how the Assyrians in rural areas of the south of Turkey lived, and Armenians lived as town dwellers in Diyarbekir. And of course it is a record of the long death march to exile. She was just nine years old when Turkish soldiers came to her village to

shout Mustafa Kemal (Ataturk's) decree. "You are to leave this place. You are to take only what you can carry. Be ready to leave in three days time."

Why are these "inconspicuous" historians so important? Because they were there. Because they were on the ground witnessing, hearing, smelling, and experiencing what academicians can only piece together from second- and third-hand information.

In today's atmosphere, history is too often written by those with a political agenda in a winner take all approach to history. As if picking up where the perpetrators of the Genocide that killed more than three million Pontic Greeks, Armenians, Assyrians, and Asia Minor Greeks, the media and historians in service of the Turkish government continue to Dehumanize, Demonize, and Destroy, by putting the "right spin" on the story. Michael Parenti, author of *To Kill a Nation*, asserts, "Their job is not to inform but disinform, not to advance democratic discourse but to dilute and mute it."

As a personal example of this "right spin" to "disinform and dilute" I offer a New York Times story published about my mother and me after the release of *Not Even My Name*. Reporting on an event held in the Pontic Greek community of Astoria N.Y., the morning edition headline read: "Greek Exile from Turkey Tells of Homeland Lost." Although completely accurate, apparently that headline was too powerful for someone at the N.Y. Times, or perhaps for its advertisers or political allies. By the afternoon edition, the headline read: "A few Words in Greek Tell of a Homeland Lost." Since neither I nor my mother speak Greek, as the article itself points out, that title was far from accurate, but it did serve to obscure and dilute.

In the body of the story, an even more odious revision was made which appeared in both the morning and afternoon editions, a change I was assured was not in the original copy. The article stated:

"The Pontic Greeks had lived in Turkey for three millennia. During the Greco-Turkish war from 1919 to 1923, the Turks singled out the Pontic community, along with the Armenians and Assyrians, when invading Greek forces tried to seize the coastline."

Such wording attempts to blame the Greeks for Turkey's slaughter of its indigenous Christian populations, as if the Pontic Greeks, Armenians, and Assyrians were singled out when Greek forces allegedly "tried to seize the coastline" of Turkey. This blatant revision of history relies on the ignorance of the general public, assuming they will not know that Greece had not invaded the coastline, but rather had landed troops as a result of an allied peace treaty with Turkey... that, except for my mother's villages and some other mountain villages,

the killing, not just the dying, of the Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks, took place in 1915 –16, four years before Greece landed troops in Asia Minor. In fact, it began in 1914 before the beginning of the First World War, when the Young Turk government, using the three Ds of Genocide, labeled the indigenous Greek population as “infidels,” to Dehumanize them. Then, as George Horton, the US Consul General at Smyrna reported, to Demonize the Greeks, they spliced together images to make it appear as if Greeks were cutting open the stomachs of Turkish women and ripping out their unborn babies. As a precursor to the sophisticated media outlets used today, and the methods used by the Nazi’s against the Jews and other perceived “undesirables,” these posters were placed in schools and mosques to incite and enrage the Turkish public to perform the third “D” of Genocide; to Destroy the Greek populations along the coasts in preparation for war. In what now can be understood as the precursor to Krystallnacht twenty-four years later in Nazi Germany, Greek businesses were boycotted to drive them out and Turks went on a rampage slaughtering thousands of Pontian and Asia Minor Greek inhabitants.

Although the N.Y. Times accurately reported what was taking place at the time of the Genocide and expulsions, today the N.Y. Times demonstrates an appalling amnesia of its own historical record. Even the US government has consistently refused to recognize the Genocide of the Armenians. Equally disturbing, until *Not Even My Name* was published, the Genocide of the Pontic Greeks and Assyrians was never even addressed outside the Pontian and Assyrian communities, except in Greece... sorry to say, not even in most Armenian communities. Such avoidance of these historical facts serves Turkey in achieving its final “D” of Genocide: Denial. Denial is what keeps the Genocide current, for it continues to wound both the survivors and their descendants, and it insures the Genocide will be complete.

This is why memory is so important. Memory is the window through which we view history from those who have lived it. Perhaps we can say that memory is the soul of history, for the survivors of these historic events can also give us an insight into what they felt and dreamed and hoped for, and how they pieced together their shattered lives. Without their memory we might be completely at the mercy of the fabricators of our own history.

At this solemn Day of Remembrance held worldwide on May 19, for the 92nd Anniversary of the Genocide of the Greeks of Pontus, it is wise to remember Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s warning: “...the use we make of these insights is entirely up to us.” Peter Balakian, author of *Burning Tigris*, says: “memory is a moral act.” Perhaps we, the children and grandchildren of these historic Christians of Asia Minor are entrusted to record their memories as a moral act to make sure the world will know their tragic fate, and to keep them forever alive in our hearts and minds.

Memorial dates:

Pontic Greeks: May 19

Asia Minor Greeks: September 9

Armenians: April 24

Assyrians: August 7

Thea Halo's first career was as a painter. She attended The Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture and has shown her paintings in galleries and museums in New York City, Connecticut and Canada, including both solo and group exhibitions. Her paintings are in collections in the U.S. and abroad.

In 1992 Ms Halo began to write poetry and short stories, and soon after commenced the writing of her mother's memoir. She has won numerous awards for her poetry, and her literary and political essays, including The James Emanuel Poetry Prize and The Ester Unger Poetry Prize; The Weinberg Excellence in Writing Award; The Reyne Prize in Creative Writing; The Alice B. Sellers Fund Prize; The Bennett [Political Science] Essay Prize, and the 2002 AHEPA Homer Award.

In 1996 Ms Halo wrote her own column for a weekly newspaper. Beginning in 1997, Ms Halo worked as a news correspondent for public radio station WBAI in New York City, gathering, writing and reporting the five to seven minute news stories in the public radio tradition.

In 1990 Ms Halo worked as an announcer in Public Radio and soon began to produce her own programs for WJFF, a public station in Jeffersonville, New York. Among the programs Halo produced were a mini-historical series she created called Did You Know, which she also narrated, consisting of two to three minute segments, and a concurrent series of half hour interviews of notable people in the area. After a short stint as DJ for a commercial station, Ms Halo again turned to writing, producing, directing, and acting in a number of radio plays which she adapted from short stories for Public Radio.