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Displaced Once More: Armenians flee Syria to Montreal

Each Friday evening, tucked behind car dealerships that run parallel to the nearby expressway, a community of local Armenians gather on a docile suburban street. This gathering takes place at the AGBU (Armenian General Benevolent Union) building which is nestled between modest brick houses. This community in Montreal comes together at the end of each week. Since 2012, the Armenian community in Syria has sought refuge in Montreal, less than one hundred years since they left their homes to seek refuge in Syria as a result of the Armenian genocide that took place in 1915.

“It was the worst experience of my life,” Arda Yassayan said as she described the three years it took to reach Canada. Yassayan, lived in Aleppo where she taught English at the AGBU Lazar Najarian Armenian school. Her journey included a move to Yerevan- the capital of Armenia and an eight month stay in Beirut, Lebanon. Yassayan, is currently enrolled in a graduate program in Montreal to teach English as a foreign language.

Yassayan, 37, donned a thin blue scarf around her neck as she recalled the day that everything changed for her and her family. It was January 15, 2013, when multiples bombs were detonated at the nearby Aleppo University. She had left her home that morning with her son to drop him off at the same school where she taught, but soon after they had arrived, they had heard the explosions. This bombing had claimed the life of her cousin’s fiancé. The events of this day had convinced Yassayan that Aleppo was no longer safe. She waited until the end of the school year, then she and her family moved. “We decided to go to Armenia, because it was safe.”

The conflict in Syria and others around the world have ushered in the largest migration of people since the end of World War II. The UNCHR reported at the end of 2016 that 65.5 million people are now displaced, roughly one in every 113 people is now a refugee. The war in Syria has displaced nearly 4.5 million people, with many seeking refuge in Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan. As the war continued, countries such as Sweden, Germany also opened their doors along with Canada.

The war in Syria began in 2011 as an uprising against President Bashar al-Assad, an Alawite, considered a minority in Syrian society. Assad is also a member of the Ba’ath party, a party that has prided itself in creating a secular Syria. Given Assad’s background, Armenians and other minorities tend to support the President. This stance is in opposition of vast international opinion. When asked about the political situation in Syria, those I interviewed quickly wanted to change topics or had no comment.

Yassayan had moved to and lived in Yerevan - the capital of Armenia, for three years. “I might have earned fifty dollars a month, when rent is five hundred,” Yassayan said. Yassayan and her family struggled to find work in Yerevan and felt like outsiders.

Armenia began to accept refugees in 2012, since then Armenia has accepted nearly 22,000 Syrian Armenians. The influx of refugees has put a burden on the country that is struggling

economically. Presently, Armenia, a former Soviet Republic, is now considered a second-world country where 29% of the population lives below the poverty line.

The return to Armenia was bittersweet for Yassayan and her family. The Armenian genocide in 1915, an often over-looked slice of conflicted history, depending on who or which country you implore, resulted in the systematic killing of over 1 million Armenians by the Ottoman Turks. The genocide forced Armenians to leave their homes and seek refuge in neighboring countries, such as Syria and abroad. Those who are displaced are known as the Armenian diaspora, a diaspora that consists of roughly 7 million people. Many of those who left their lands, which are now a part of present-day Turkey, fled to Aleppo and had no home to return to.

The Canadian government did not recognize the atrocities committed during the Armenian genocide until 2004 and the United States has yet to recognize the genocide perpetrated against the Armenian people and nation.

“We thought, it was Armenia, we won’t have a problem,” Yassayan explained. But decades of Soviet influence had morphed the Armenian culture - unrecognizable to the Armenians coming from Syria. “We couldn’t understand them, nor did they understand us,” Yassayan further explained. This is because in Armenia, they speak the Eastern dialect whereas the diaspora speaks the Western dialect. In addition, Armenians from Armenia intertwine Russian words in their everyday conversations. “I started to understand them, by listening,” Yassayan said. “But they still didn’t understand our dialect.”

Before entering Canada, many had to wait in the bordering country of Lebanon – Beirut specifically.

Yassayan left Armenia in 2016 and waited eight months in Beirut, an experience she said was worse than the one she had left in Armenia. In Beirut, she and her husband couldn’t find work and her children couldn’t attend school. This is due to the fact that at any point they could receive a call from the consulate to begin the process to relocate to Canada.

In Beirut, many who fled the civil war in Syria sought sponsorship to relocate to Montreal. The standard cost of living in Beirut is much higher than in Aleppo and according to those who lived there temporarily, the Lebanese society, who have had an influx of refugees cross its’ border, did not treat Syrians fairly. Waiting times to be relocated varied from weeks to years but each passing day was a reminder of the life they left behind.

Yassayan smiled radiantly as she recalled the day that the consulate called. Her husband had received the call, so that day he acted coy as he presented her and the family with a cake. “I looked and said ‘we don’t have a birthday, what is this cake for?’” Her husband explained that the consulate called and that they were to leave in 15 days. “That was the best news,” Yassayan said. “We were dancing around the house with my kids.”

In 2016, Canada resettled 46,700 refugees, the largest number of refugees the country has taken in a single year in nearly four decades; 33,266 came from Syria. Justin Trudeau, the Prime Minister of Canada, set and met a goal to resettle 25,000 refugees from Iraq and Syria by the end of 2016.

Laval, a suburb of Montreal, which is located across the Prairies river, is the most populated suburb of Montreal with 420,000 inhabitants. This neighborhood is home to most of the 50,000 Armenians in Montreal.

Beginning in the late 1950's, Armenian culture began to take root as churches and community centers were erected. As a result, the Armenian community of Montreal began to centralize near these establishments.

In order to be sponsored to relocate to Montreal, a family or individual must have two sponsors. Usually, one sponsor is an organization and the other is a resident of the country who knows the family or person. The organization that has been instrumental in the sponsorship, relocation and transition to Montreal is Hay Doun – a charitable non-profit organization.

Hay Doun is located on the second floor of the same building as the St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Cathedral of Montreal, a stone church, that resembles an English abbey, and looks out of place in its modern surroundings. Hay Doun, which in Armenian translates to Armenian house, began its operation in 2007. It wasn't long before the focus of the organization shifted toward more humanitarian efforts.

In 2008, the Iraqi Armenian community had looked for refuge from their country which had been ravaged by war since the 2003 American led invasion. It was then that the organization decided to sponsor families and individuals, and in five years it had sponsored 49 families.

In 2013, the organization shifted its attention towards the crisis in Syria. "We decided we could no longer be indifferent," Narod Odabasiyan, Director at Hay Doun, said. Since it began its Syrian sponsorship program, 2,300 Syrians have arrived and over 1,000 are due to arrive. "We don't take deposits, application or processing fees," explained Odabsayian. "We only ask that they know someone here [Montreal] that can help them."

The process of sponsorship is different from individual to individual. A family member who had moved to Montreal can sponsor a person or family. But unexpected sponsors can also enter the fray. "We didn't have a sponsor, but then a friend of my husband, reached out to him through Facebook," explained Hourig Jerekhian. This friend hadn't spoken to her husband in decades but offered to sponsor them. Jerekhian has lived in Montreal for nearly two years.

"I kept thinking Syria is going to get better and I will go back," said Talin Basmajian, who has lived in Montreal for over one year. "So when Hay Doun first opened its door I was unsure."

According to Odabasayiyan, the director at Hay Doun, this uncertainty can continue even after a person is relocated. "Some people are still wondering 'what if Syria gets better?' if they do that, then they can't fully transition."

The AGBU has been instrumental in the transition of the newly arrived. It provides a variety of services to those who are in need of employment, stability and a sense of community. Each Friday evening, the organization puts on an event where food is provided, usually a plastic plate filled to the brim with kebabs, rice, peppers and salad. These events are an opportunity to engage with members of the Armenian community to find jobs, and to assist those who may be having a difficult time adjusting to life in Montreal.

"It was hard for the parents," explained Rashida Shenouf, a teacher at the AGBU Alex Manoogian School. "They didn't speak English or French, they only spoke Armenian and Arabic." An IRCC (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada) report found that 4.5 percent of Syrian refugees in Canada spoke Armenian or Western Armenian as their first language, the secondary language often being Arabic. This was another obstacle for them to assimilate in a city whose first language is French, and the secondary being English.

Shenouf grew up in Algeria and is familiar with conflict. According to Shenouf, speaking Arabic to the children, allowed them to feel more at home. Her familiarity with a bonding language was one of the reasons that she was assigned to be their teacher. She was the third teacher to be assigned to this role, since the class started in 2015.

"On the first day, they did not accept me," Shenouf explained. Her first week was marked with children who she saw as disorganized, refused to sit in their seats, demanded to go outside and would draw incessantly instead of paying attention to her lessons. But after a week, the students became comfortable with Shenouf. She would begin to ask the students what they wanted to do, and would fit in what they wanted into her lesson plan, this included yoga. "After our yoga session, they would want to talk about the war," said Shenouf. Before this, the only glimpse Shenouf could get into their experience was their drawings. "Sometimes I would look at their papers, and there would be pictures of helicopters, the army, ISIS and guns, lots of guns."

"We had one student who was shot and walked with a limp," explained Chahè Tanachian, the principal at the AGBU Alex Manoogian School. "For the students to hear one of your classmates was shot, it was like a movie to them."

Tanachian, who had fled Lebanon during the civil war, which lasted from 1975-1990, felt a certain obligation to help these students. "I know what it's like to go to school, then there is a bombardment and you have to live in a shelter underground," said Tanachian.

He further explained that when he arrived to Montreal, there were no structures in place to assist him and his family. It's apparent by the way Tanachian speaks that he is proud of the program he has created to assist the new students.

As he sat in the library of the school, the students bustling outside the glass windows as they move from class to class, he sighed as he said, “unfortunately wars happen in the Middle East and Armenians once again move to another part of the world.”