

Excerpts from
Goodbye Antoura
by Karnig Panian

Forward excerpt by Vartan Gregorian

The history of World War I is steeped in tragedy so fathomless as to sometimes seem impossible to comprehend. Millions died, both soldiers and civilians. Nation-states emerged; others were carved up, absorbed into neighboring regions, or simply—forcibly—had their name and borders erased from the world map. But if one looks back at this world conflict, a single word among all others asserts its right to define the underlying tragedy of this era, and that is *genocide*.

One of the tales arising from the seemingly unspeakable atrocities of genocide is given an extraordinarily strong voice in this memoir by Karnig Panian (1910-1989). Panian was a young child when he was caught up in the Armenian Genocide. With heartbreaking and yet affectingly poetic language, he brings the reader into his life as an orphan subjected to the daily abuse that inculcated a devil's bargain: *Forget who you are and we will let you live. You will always remain the "Other" but at least you will be alive, and for that you should be grateful*. This combination of outright slaughter and brute-force brainwashing was the first modern example of a kind of historical lobotomy meant to erase an entire people from the record of human existence. Thankfully, it did not work.

... Bodies may be slaughtered, human beings bludgeoned and burned, but if even a single child survives, then memory survives as well. Memory cannot be assassinated. Truth cannot be denied. Karnig Panian survived along with the revelatory truth of his story, and all of humanity is enriched by what he remembers and what he relates.

This is a remarkable and unforgettable book. It is an indispensable tool for awakening our consciences, restoring our collective sense of decency, and forging our solidarity with all those who have suffered the horrors of genocide. And it bears a message that must be heard: We can never let our guard down. We can never forgive or forget the suffering of all Karnig Panians, all over the world. That is the responsibility of humanity. It is the responsibility of each and every individual, as well.

Chapter 2 excerpt: Deportation

It was a hot, dry day in the summer of 1915 when the terrible news broke, causing communal outbursts of grief: the Ottoman government had declared a general mobilization, and all able-bodied men above a certain age were to be drafted into the army.

A few evenings later, my father came home, looking very upset. An edict had been issued that all men of a military age had to present themselves to the town's recruitment center within a week. Over the next few days, my father emptied his store. He sold all of his merchandise to local Turks and handed over the keys to his apprentice. He had to go.

For my mother, it seemed like the sky had fallen. My grandmother was in a catatonic state, barely able to speak. The other young and middle-aged men of our extended family were also preparing to leave. The entire clan was thrown into chaos. Men spoke in hushed whispers in the corners. Dark rumors spread with lightning speed and panic overwhelmed all our hearts.

Men of all creeds and religions had been called up for the armed forces. Most of them, especially those from the countryside, had never seen a weapon before. Within weeks, they were supposed to be transformed into soldiers and sent to the front.

My father was the only one who somehow maintained his composure. He stated that we were citizens of the country and had the duty to defend it whenever the necessity arose. Seated at the dinner table, he expressed his hope that the war wouldn't last long and that he would be back soon, with God's help.

On the last night, my mother packed his clothing and prepared a package of food. When dawn finally came, our house was full of people—my grandfather, his wife and her daughter, Manug Emmi's wife and children, my other grandparents' families, cousins and nephews. All had come to see my father off, and they bade him farewell with tearful embraces and mournful goodbyes. The other men from the other branches of our family eventually joined him at our house, and they all headed toward the recruitment office in the town square.

Every half-dozen or so steps, my father turned back and gazed longingly at us. My mother and other relatives cried hysterically and weakly waved their handkerchiefs in the air.

My father left that day, and we never saw him again.

We shared this fate with many households in town. We were not even told where our men had been taken. Nothing was ever heard of them.

The departure of our men began a chain of terrible events. It was as if our town had been struck by a curse. One evening, my grandfather returned home in a despondent state. He had heard the rumors circulating in the marketplace: supposedly, our town was

now deemed an unsafe war zone, and the government was considering the evacuation of the population.

This policy was presented as an example of the government's magnanimity toward the Christian Armenian minority. We were to be moved south, for a few months at the most, to protect us from any military operations. This policy did not extend to Turks or Kurds, only to Armenians.

Some praised the Turks for their kind treatment of the Armenians during a time of war. They had not learned the lessons of the massacres and the persecution we had experienced over centuries of Ottoman rule. In the past though, Armenians had never been exiled from their own lands. They had simply been targeted in their own homes and villages.

Chapter 3 excerpt: The Desert

My grandmother took my hand and squeezed a piece of bread into it. "Eat it, my dear," she said. "Before you go to sleep, eat some bread." She didn't know when we would be able to eat again.

We were all facing the prospect of starvation in the desert. Death was a common feature in everybody's conversations, as if we collectively felt the angel of death looming above us.

The train made a few stops during the night, but each time it only halted for a few minutes before continuing its mad gallop through the darkness. There were no lights in the countryside along the tracks. Through the small window all I could see was a patch of sky and stars flitting across it.

As the sun rose on the horizon and silhouettes appeared in the dark, we noticed small shacks on the side of the tracks. We spotted the city of Hama. It was squeezed between two rivers, just like our Gurin.

The train screeched to a halt, and we were ordered off the wagons. As soon as we left the train station, I realized that we were now in the desert. But I didn't see sand. The entire area outside the station was flooded with a sea of humanity. It was full of Armenians who had been deported from their own regions and had arrived before us.

All across the sand and dirt, in the open air, without even a tree to offer shade, were masses of huddled women and children. Here was our last destination. I could see the other bank of the river – green, verdant, buzzing with life. But on this side of the water, there was nothing.

I gazed around me, and I finally understood exactly what the desert was—not a single standing structure, not even a tent. Here and there, people had improvised shelter by putting together hovels made of their clothing, but those offered scant protection against the sun and the heat. Our caravan settled into an unoccupied corner. Our neighbors were Armenians from different parts of Sepastia and Cilicia. There were probably twenty or thirty thousand exiles just from those areas. Each community tended to stick together; the Armenians of Sepastia, of Zeytoun, of Malatya, each had their own “neighborhood” in the camp. Our lot was right beside those from Sepastia.

We spent the first few days in this desert outside Hama simply coming to grips with the fate that had befallen us. We were surrounded by Armenians from all parts of the Ottoman Empire, speaking dozens of different dialects. Some had different customs and

dress, too, but two things united us—we all were Armenian Christians, and we had all been deported from our homes and ancestral lands.

“There were three thousand people in our caravan,” said an older man from among the Sepastia exiles. “It was hell. We were ambushed, killed, robbed. So many couldn’t walk, couldn’t even stand on their own feet anymore. Many died along the way, and some were kidnapped. Only a few hundred of us made it here alive.”

Chapter 5 excerpt: Turkification Efforts / “Falakha” (beating)

Within a month of our arrival, more than five hundred orphans were at Antoura. During that month, much had changed. In the first place, the administration had decided to get rid of our names and replace them with Turkish ones.

One morning, after breakfast, we lined up and were taken into the headmaster’s office in groups of five. The headmaster, Fevzi Bey, was seated behind a large bureau cluttered with books and stationery. We stood before him, staring at the floor like guilty criminals waiting to hear their verdicts. He began speaking grandiloquently, though I could only understand a few of his words. The gist of his speech was that we would now have to forget our old names and receive new ones. This change signified the beginning of our transformation into proud Turks. Alongside our new names, we would also each receive a number.

I didn’t know Turkish, nor did I know any Turkish names, or even the Turkish names of numbers. All I knew was my true name, and I didn’t see the point of changing it. The boy before me was asked his name, and he replied with his Armenian name.

Without warning, Fevzi Bey smacked him right across the face. The boy fell to the ground and began crying. His nose was bleeding.

Furious, the headmaster screamed at him: “Forget your old name! Forget it! From now on, your name will be Ahmet, and your number will be 549!” The other boys in the room were shaking like leaves. It was my turn next. I said my name was Karnig. Now it was my turn to be slapped across the face and fall to the floor, crying. The schoolmaster then kicked my sides as I lay prostrate on the floor. I eventually passed out from the pain.

When I came to, I was lying in a bed. I had never been in this room. I saw more orphans, each lying in a bed of his own. I couldn’t see very well, and I shut my eyes again and fell back asleep. Two days later, I found out that I was in the clinic, and that I had been the first orphan brought there.

...Every evening, right before sunset, we gathered in the middle of the courtyard. There, we would have to salute the Turkish flag as it was lowered and call out Yasasin! Yasasin, Jemal Pasha! At the top of our lungs. This was another way of Turkifying us, of course.

Now, after the flag ceremony, Fevzi Bey mounted the improvised stage with a piece of paper. Behind him were all the tools of falakha torture—canes, staffs, ropes, and buckets of water. Calmly, as if reading a shopping list, he called out the names of the boys who would receive corporal punishment.

He had general guidelines for the punishments we received, according to the severity of our transgressions. Those who were found guilty of theft, who ought teachers or guards, or who caused disorder in the courtyard would receive between twenty-five

and one hundred strokes of the falakha, depending on their age. Those who disrespected Islam, the Turkish language, or the Turkish nation, as well as those who spoke Armenian, prayed in Armenian, or made the sign of the cross, could receive up to two hundred strokes of the falakha, or even three hundred in particularly egregious cases, provided that halfway through the guards would pause and douse the victim's feet with cold water.

He started with the youngest ones. One child was found guilty of speaking Armenian and was condemned to twenty-five strokes. Two guards tied his feet together, lifted him up into the air upside down, and presented the soles of his bare feet to Fevzi Bey, who picked up the falakha cane and hit the boy with sadistic pleasure. The boy screamed in pain and cried for his mother. Eventually the pain was too much, and he fainted. He was carried off to the clinic.

Two other boys, also around the age of seven. Were punished with twenty-five strokes for the same crime. They too were eventually carried off to the clinic.

Then a boy of about ten was called up. He received fifty strokes for having dared use his mother tongue, and he, too, was taken to the clinic.

He was followed by a twelve-year-old boy who was found guilty of having insulted the Turkish nation or language. He was struck one hundred times. He had to be doused with water, and he woke up some time later in the clinic.

Four or five older boys had been accused of disobeying Mullah Nejmeddin and insulting Islam. After receiving two hundred strokes each, they looked dead. It was hard to believe they were still breathing.

The entire spectacle was watched by over a thousand people—the entire student body and faculty of the orphanage.

Many of the punished boys couldn't walk for weeks. Some lost their teeth and broke their noses. Most fainted while crying for mercy or pathetically screaming for their mothers.

This was a daily event for two years, and all of us headed to the flag-lowering ceremony shaking with terror. Though not all were beaten, all were punished—we all were humiliated, reminded that being Armenian was a punishable crime.

Fevzi Bey always delivered the first blow. Only when he tired did the guards take over. They were just as ruthless as the headmaster. They were all convinced that the condemned students had committed serious infractions, although the boys' only fault was that they couldn't speak Turkish and had to use their native tongue to communicate. Sometimes we didn't know how our crimes had been discovered, and rumors ran rampant that there were informers among us.

...My mother had never taught me a single word in Turkish; she had never seen the need. I spent much of my time in solitude, though I was not shy, and I enjoyed interacting with others. I mostly kept myself mute out of fear that an Armenian word would slip out of my lips. I spoke only when I was among trusted friends. This way, I thought I would escape the *falakha*. I was soon proven wrong. One evening, my name was read. I had been betrayed! Two boys were alongside me. I was not yet six years old.

After the first few strikes, I cried out in pain, and then I blacked out—I don't remember a thing. I don't even remember how many times I was hit. When I opened my eyes, I realized I was lying in a bed in the clinic, alongside the two other boys who had shared my fate.

The next morning, Krikor paid me a visit. He told me how I had been beaten, how I had screamed in pain, and how he had almost attacked the Turkish guards to come to my rescue. He wanted to rub my feet, but I didn't let him. Every time he touched them, I screamed in pain. He stayed for a while, chatted with me, and tried to lift my spirits. Right before taking his leave, he slipped two extra buns of bread under my pillow and embraced me.

The two boys who had been punished with me soon limped toward my bed. We stared at each other's feet and faces in horror, knowing we presented similar spectacles. I split the two buns into three equal shares, and we ate. Then, as our moods slightly brightened, we chatted for a few minutes in Armenian.

About ten days later, a nurse came around, examined our feet, made us walk a few steps, and dismissed us from the clinic. We didn't understand a word she said, but we realized that we now had to return to our regular routine.

We came out into the courtyard. It was a pleasant, sunny day. The orphans were playing in the shade of the trees.

I saw Halide Edip Adiar, the woman who had stayed behind after Jemal Pasha's visit. She would often lean against the sundial and watch us play. She seemed carefree. Sometimes she journeyed to Beirut and returned a few days later with stacks of books under her arms. Some said that she was writing a book about the orphans; others claimed that at night, she sucked the blood out of the necks of the older boys. We didn't know what to believe. Did she think of our suffering? Did she think of our terrible pasts or our bleak futures? Did she have any motherly instincts that allowed her to sympathize with us? Whenever the bell rang to rush us into our classrooms, she would go into her quarters

and stay there until the evening, when she reappeared for the flag-lowering ceremony and the beatings that followed.

As the weeks passed, the number of the boys being punished stayed consistent, but the nature of their infractions changed. Fewer and fewer orphans were found guilty of speaking Armenian. Fevzi Bey and his cronies considered this a great victory. However, the number of boys accused of theft was on the rise. The stolen goods were always food—from the storerooms or the mess hall, as well as from the vegetable gardens. Some even stole delicacies and fruit from the teachers' lounge and from other staff offices, and others slipped beyond the orphanage's walls to scavenge for food.

The boys were pitilessly subjected to the falakha when caught stealing, but they were so hungry, and so in love with life, that even the menace of the beatings could not discourage them from taking the risk. This was a battle against death.

The pangs of hunger were so terrible that some boys resorted to desperate measure—they ate paper, drank ink, and swallowed dead flies that they found around the courtyard. We were basically becoming feral, performing acts that would have nauseated us when we were still back home with our families. For two years we lived like this. The youngest of the boys in the orphanage were about my age. We had spent two formative years in hunger, misery, fear, and pain, and we had become disillusioned, cynical, and emaciated. But we had not yielded a single inch. We had kept our faith, our language, and our identities intact.

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