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## **NAGORNO-KARABAKH REFUGEES: STORIES OF LOSS, SURVIVAL & HOPE**

- 25.11.2019

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AZERTAC (23 November 2019)

The US-based News Blaze newspaper has published an article headlined Nagorno-Karabakh Refugees: Stories of Loss, Survival & Hope by American journalist Nurit Greenger.

The article reads:

It is most difficult to put into writing a story told by people who have suffered tremendously. That's what happened when I recently met with three men and one woman at a lovely café in Beverly Hills, California. Sitting in the company of Mr. Tural Ganjaliyev, the Chairman of the Azerbaijani Community of the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan; Mr. Gulmammad Mammadov, Professor at ADA University in Azerbaijan and a refugee from Karabakh; Mrs. Durdane Agayeva, a survivor of the Khojaly Massacre; and Mr. Jeyhun Alakbarov, a survivor of the Khojaly Massacre and a board member of the Community, makes you realize what life is all about.

The four are on a speaking and interview tour in Los Angeles. The purpose of the tour is to tell their stories; stories they have passionately told me, with one ending message: we hope for peace, we hope to be able to return to our homes and land. We pray life can be normalized and coexistence between all people in the Nagorno-Karabakh region becomes reality again, just as it was for centuries before Armenia invaded the region, performed atrocities and remained to illegally occupy 20% of Azerbaijan's sovereign land.

### History Reminder

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict erupted in 1988 when Armenia raised territorial claims against Azerbaijan over its Nagorno-Karabakh region. The subsequent undeclared war that broke out led to the invasion, occupation and ethnic cleansing of Azerbaijan's Nagorno-Karabakh region and seven surrounding districts by Armenia. Altogether around 1/5 of Azerbaijan's internationally recognized territory is currently under Armenian occupation. And over 800,000 Azerbaijani civilians were expelled from the occupied areas: 50,000 from the Nagorno-Karabakh region and 750,000 from seven surrounding districts. These forced displaced people are still internally displaced refugees scattered around the rest of The Republic of Azerbaijan.

Shusha is a city in the Nagorno-Karabakh region that has been under the occupation of the Armenian army since it was captured on May 8, 1992, during the Nagorno-Karabakh War.

The city was populated by Azerbaijanis till its occupation. After the invasion, Armenia has changed

the towns name into Shushi, a more Armenian-sounding name and has tried to erase all traces of Azerbaijanis once presence there, performing overall cultural cleansing against Azerbaijani heritage in Karabakh. Mosques were demolished and some of them desecrated. The still standing ones have gone through architectural character alteration and are presented as Persian mosques.

The Khojaly Massacre, was the killing of ethnic Azerbaijani civilians from the town of Khojaly, on February 26, 1992. According to Azerbaijan, as well as the Memorial Human Rights Center, Human Rights Watch and other international observers, the massacre was committed by the Armenian armed forces, reportedly, with the help of some Russian military personnel. The death toll of the civilian population massacre amounted to 613 Azerbaijanis, including 250 infants, children, women and elderly. The Human Rights Watch called it the largest massacre in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which was the most horrendous act of violence.

### Their Stories

I began penning their stories with Gulmammad Mammadov, a very impressive and educated man, who was 8 years old, attending primary school, at the time of the Armenian invasion, living in the mountainous Sheylanli village, in the now occupied district of Lachin. All the residents of the village, located near Azerbaijan's border with Armenia, with its economy based on agriculture and cattle, were Azerbaijanis. The Armenians used to cross the border, work in the village and then return home. And if the snow was heavy the Armenians would remain in the village for the harsh winter months, warmly hosted by Azerbaijani families. In the cold winter, seeking warmer weather, the farmers used to move their cattle to the mountains lower terrain, passing through Nagorno-Karabakh region where Armenians and Azerbaijanis lived together peacefully.

In the winter of 1992, all changed. The Azerbaijani villagers were sensing aggression when they were moving their cattle downhill. After the Khojaly Massacre, in the Spring of 1992, they started to sense the danger to come. They could not return to their village from the lower terrain through the one available corridor.

People who tried to escape the Lachin district, were either trapped and thus died in the cold weather or were attacked and were captured or killed.

Gulmammad immediate family survived, ending up in a refugee tent camp, but most of his relatives did not make it to safety.

Looking back, Gulmammad gives much credit to his parents who pushed him to read and learn while at the refugee camp. In the 10 years he spent at the refugee camp, he did not have the privilege of attending regular school that was not available at the camp. He, independently, learned everything from school books, provided by UNICEF (United Nations International Childrens Emergency Fund). Pursuing his studies, he was admitted to a top university in Baku to later on winning full scholarships in Italy and subsequently at Syracuse University in the US, where he graduated with a PhD in Biological Physics. He now teaches physics at Azerbaijan's top university ADA University.

This is a story of survival and persistence, an astonishing journey that started in a refugee tent camp to a teaching position at a prominent university.

With all that he had experienced, Gulmammad Mammadov's message is compassionate: In spite of all that took place, there is no animosity. I often visit my family's graveyard through Google Earth.

All we want is for the conflict to end in fairness; the kids of the Nagorno-Karabakh region have rights and hopes, so why were they deprived of a happy childhood?

The next survivor's story was of Tural Ganjaliyev, who, at the age of 12-year-old became a refugee from the town of Shusha in the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan.

Founded in 1850s, Shusha is the historic capital of the Karabakh region, and at all times was considered a center of Azerbaijani music and culture. The famous Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyli, the founder of the first opera and operetta in the Muslim world, is from Shusha, as many other distinguished Azerbaijani composers, poets, singers, writers and other cultural figures.

Therefore, Shusha's invasion and loss were traumatic for the Azerbaijani people and still is.

When, in 1992, the Armenian troops invaded and occupied his hometown, they expelled Tural and his entire family from Shusha that had almost 40,000 residents, all of them Azerbaijani civilians. Overnight all the 40,000 Azerbaijanis became refugees and till today are unable to return to their homes and land while Armenia has illegally settled in their homes some 3,000 Armenians, some of whom are now even renting these homes to tourists through Airbnb.

Tural remembers a happy childhood enjoying life in the rich in minerals, geysers, red oak tree forests of the Nagorno-Karabakh region where agriculture was flourishing and people of all ethnic groups lived peacefully together.

Tural's parents sensed the upcoming upheaval and sent him and his brother to relatives in Baku while his parents stayed behind holding to their house and belongings, hoping all will end up alright.

We lived with our Armenian neighbors peacefully and in friendship, Tural told me. We did not know what was coming. We could not fight the onslaught because we had no guns and no arms to defend ourselves. It was all a nightmare that ended up with us never being able to return to our homes and land, which we can only see from Google Earth satellite images.

Tural Ganjaliyev is an accomplished and well-educated man, fluent in Azerbaijani, Armenian, English, French and Russian. As of last year, he acts as the Chairman of the Azerbaijani Community of Nagorno-Karabakh, representing over 80,000 Azerbaijani refugees from the Nagorno-Karabakh region, presently occupied by Armenia. In his current position his mission is to educate the world about the refugees he represents, advocating for the return of these refugees to their homes and lands, and promoting the idea of peaceful coexistence between Azerbaijanis and Armenians in the Nagorno-Karabakh region.

The only lady in the delegation was Durdane Agayeva, a refugee from the town of Khojaly, who, at 20-year-old, was wounded during the Khojaly Massacre of 1992, and with her brother, Elshad, was captured by the Armenian troops and spent many days in terrifying captivity.

During her captivity, Durdane was continuously beaten, tortured and humiliated by the Armenian troops. At one time, when she lost consciousness, the Armenians thought her for dead and threw her into the garbage pile. Luckily, she was released in exchange for gasoline and cigarettes, and was handed over to the Azerbaijani side.

Sitting opposite me, when she was telling her story, her eyes filled with tears. It is obvious that Durdane's emotional state is fragile and the past is still very fresh in her mind. I saw what human

beings could be capable of doing when they lose every trace of humanity and are filled with hatred. I still have nightmares, she told me in Azerbaijani through an interpreter.

For many years, Durdane was ashamed to tell her captivity story. But a few years ago, she overcame her fear and shame, and courageously, she now tells her journey of horror. She wants the world to know about such atrocities, while attempting to ensure they are not repeated elsewhere.

Durdane is a symbol of resilience, courage, and determination. Despite her tragedy, while yearning to return to her land, she nowadays also promotes the idea of Azerbaijani-Armenian peaceful coexistence in Karabakh.

The last but not the least, as such personal stories are thousands-fold in Azerbaijan, I heard from Jeyhun Alakbarov, from the town of Khojaly who was 16-year-old at the time of the invasion and massacre.

From the 613 people who lost their lives in the Khojaly massacre, he knew some 500 of them. Jeyhun lost 49 of his relatives and has almost no extended family left.

When I asked him what he remembers from that night he told me: It was a harsh winter condition. At early morning we moved through the mountains and the river to Agdam, and I could smell blood on the way. There was one Armenian tank that caught children and the elderly. It feels like I am living through this frightening experience over and over again.

Why?

It did not make sense to me and I was wondering why, all of a sudden, the centuries of Azerbaijani-Armenian coexistence fell apart and so fast.

Seeing what happened during WWII Holocaust, no one thought such crimes against humanity could ever happen again. The Karabakh survivors said that the Armenians who committed the atrocities were extremists. They were supported by the Armenian state and collected funds to purchase arms and common cause from the residents of what later became the invaded and occupied lands.

The Nagorno-Karabakh is a puppet regime governed today by Armenia, they said. With, It is a world of double standards and if hate could be eliminated ... , they concluded their chat with me.

In Conclusion

As a daughter of Holocaust survivors and to have listened to the stories of the survivors of the Nagorno-Karabakh atrocities, we can all agree that hatred has no boundaries. And as my parents were lucky to remain alive and went on to build a life, and as these four amazing people remained alive and moved on to build a life, we should all agree that a person can create all the possibilities to make life to be what the person wants it to be; not how forbearing circumstance may have wanted a persons life to become.

[https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Nagorno\\_Karabakh\\_Refugees\\_Stories\\_of\\_Loss\\_Survival\\_amp\\_Hope-1358945](https://azertag.az/en/xeber/Nagorno_Karabakh_Refugees_Stories_of_Loss_Survival_amp_Hope-1358945)

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