



Refugee Women as Domestics

A Documentary Account

In an effort to homogenize its population, the Ottoman Turkish government, under cover of the war, tried to destroy one of its racial, linguistic, and religious minorities. From 1915 to 1922, approximately 1,500,000 Armenians succumbed to disease, starvation, thirst, exposure, and murder. Others were lost to the Armenian nation because they had been taken captive by Turks or Kurds or because they had been forced to renounce their Christian faith and adopt Islam.

The destruction was well-planned. First, Armenian soldiers in the Turkish army were disarmed and shot; Armenian leaders were rounded up and never heard from again. Rendered defenceless and leaderless, the people were then systematically deported

from their towns and villages. Once in the outskirts, the men and boys were segregated from the rest of the people and killed. “The greatest torment was reserved for the women and children, who were driven for weeks over mountains and deserts, often dehumanized by being stripped naked and repeatedly preyed upon and abused. Many took their own and their children’s lives by flinging themselves from cliffs and into rivers rather than prolonging their humiliation and suffering. In this manner an entire nation melted away, and the Armenian people were effectively eliminated from their homeland of nearly three thousand years.¹

Many of the children who survived the Armenian Genocide did not belong anywhere. For years they wandered in limbo —

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Young women training in post-genocide orphanage, Middle East, 1920s

parentless, homeless and stateless. Some were fortunate in being taken in by orphanages, hurriedly set up to meet the needs of thousands of these destitute children. As they reached adolescence, the youngsters were sent out to fend for themselves. Girls were shipped to different countries (mainly as domestic workers), and boys were contracted out as farm labourers.

The Armenian Relief Association of Canada (ARAC), a non-government organization, and later the United Church of Canada (UCC)² were instrumental in bringing to Canada about fifty of these young refugee women as domestics. They ranged in age from fifteen to twenty-six, and came from different countries of asylum including the Middle East, Greece, France, Bulgaria and Austria. Sponsorship was usually arranged jointly between the ARAC and a relative, a friend or a Canadian organization. Reverend Ira Pierce, who worked for both the ARAC and the UCC, coordinated this work until he retired in 1930.

A young boy brought to Canada to be trained as a farmer appealed to Mr. Pierce:

I have a sister in Greece under the care of the NER (Near East Relief) orphanage of the USA. I would be very happy if I could get her into Canada, because she is the only one that's left from my dearest family. And if you would like to know my heart is this—that I am willing to do the best I can for her future. Please to tell me what to do and if you

could help me some way or other, I would be very much obliged and thankful... I am working on the farm for John Cowie, and he promised me to take all the responsibilities about her after she arrives to Canada, and he has got a place and work for her, and both of us will be on the same farm.

And also he is ready to fill the application, that might be wanted from Canadian government.³

A letter-writer from the Women's Institute of Fergus, Ontario, made similar inquires:

_____ has a sister in France who is so anxious to come to Canada, but of course has not the funds. Judging from her letters she is a wonderfully good, intelligent girl. Would it be possible to bring this girl to Canada if the funds were provided. How much would it cost? And is there a very great deal of "red tape" connected with reuniting the Armenian families? Our Women's Institute might undertake this work.⁴

In his turn, Mr. Pierce lobbied persistently with authorities in the Department of Immigration and Colonization:

I find there are approximately twenty-one of them [girls brought in for domestic labour] having residence in Canada extending over a period varying from two to five years. Of the twenty-one, four have married and gone to the United States, not by pre-arrangement

but in the natural course of contact with young Armenians visiting our community. Two are happily married to young Armenians here in Canada. The remaining fifteen are in domestic employment in Canadian homes, chiefly in Toronto. These homes speak most highly of these girls in regard to character and type of service rendered. Their welfare is being carefully guarded by our Department. In all the years of their presence in Canada, they have been no financial charge whatsoever upon those who sponsored their coming. The experiment on the whole has been gratifying and successful.

There has come a time now when there is an accumulation of requests for more of these for similar employment. Corresponding to these requests we have on file a number of urgent appeals from high class Armenian girls wishing to come to our country on the basis of domestic employment. A few of these are related to our boys who are doing well with farmers and who are pressing their desire for the coming of their relatives.⁵

From 1919-30, Canadian government officials granted asylum to about 1,200 Armenian refugees — not a very high number, considering that approximately 1,500,000 had died and between 500,000 and 1,000,000 Armenians had been left homeless. Armenians were excluded from Canada because, as refugees, they were unable to comply with all the immigration regulations (notably the requirement of a valid passport). They were also restricted because they had been classified as people of the Asiatic race, a classification they resisted on the grounds that, while they were indigenous to Asia Minor, they were racially and linguistically Indo-European.

In view of the success which has attended the previous movement, which success, I think, is due very largely to the intelligent follow-up work done by your Board, [United Church of Canada] the Minister [of Immigration and Colonization] has agreed to the admission of fifteen additional Armenian girls conditional on the following:

- 1. that these girls shall be able to comply with the passport regulation, i.e. they shall be able to produce valid passports and of course pass medical inspection.*

2. that there shall not be included in the group any girl who has first or second degree relatives in the United States and no relatives in Canada.
3. that we will not admit the relative of any Armenian boy or girl who was admitted to Canada conditional on taking farm work or domestic service and has not observed the condition of his or her own entry. On the other hand, every consideration will be given to the inclusion of relatives of boys or girls who came in for farm work or domestic service and have remained in one or other of these occupations.
4. that the girls or young women to be admitted will be placed in domestic employment in Canada by your Board and given the usual aftercare and also the placement reported to the Department.
5. that none of the above named are leaving behind other members of their families whose admission to Canada will be applied for later and that no person shall be included who has any intention of proceeding after to join relatives or friends in the United States.⁶

Mr. Pierce maintained very strict supervision over the girls, particularly with respect to the fulfillment of the labour contract which ranged from one to two years. In the following case, a young woman's betrothal led him to interfere with the marriage arrangements until the work contract had been fulfilled:

I have just learned that you have become engaged to _____ one of our orphan wards, here in Toronto. I am sure that what you have done, and the method of doing it, is more a matter of not knowing, and appreciating certain facts. Nevertheless, I must point out to you that in effect, you have done that which is criminal according to the law of this country under which we all live. _____ is a minor, and cannot be engaged to be married, nor can she be married, without the direct permission of her legal guardian, which is the Armenian Relief Association of Canada. Had you come to us, and discussed this matter, the present situation would have



Annual picnic of the Toronto Armenian community, 1930s Photos: courtesy I. Kapriellian

been far happier and more satisfactory, but as it is, we cannot tolerate it.... Please do not think that I am objecting to the marriage of our girls. If it is done properly, and in the right way, the Armenian Relief Association will look upon it as the natural and correct destiny of every one of our girls.⁷

On the whole, the experiment with the girls was mutually beneficial. They were saved from the loneliness of the orphanages and were allowed admission to Canada at a time when their refugee status and their classification as Asiatics obstructed their entry. In some cases they managed to sponsor other family members. Through contact with their Canadian employers, they learned about Canada and Canadian ways and managed to adjust relatively painlessly to Canadian society. At the same time they fulfilled a much needed service in Canadian homes.

We are greatly obliged to you and Mrs. Pierce for securing _____ to help us in our home. _____ is proving most satisfactory in her services, and a splendid girl in every way. Having had long, and often trying, experience with maids and nurses, I feel qualified to judge and may tell you, gratefully, that I have not had so great satisfaction with any young girl.

Everyone is surprised by _____ good English speech, and her attractive personality. But what matters most to me, her happy disposition and dependable qualities of character make her a desir-

able companion for our children.

It is a good deal to expect an outsider in a home to cook good meals, take an intelligent interest in the well-being of the family, and to conduct herself like a lady, but _____ does just so.⁸

An interviewee talked about her personal experience:

“My mother died during the war and I was adopted by the mayor of Kharpert. When the war ended, the German general sent two soldiers to take me to the orphanage but the mayor wouldn't give me up. He told them he had adopted me and I was his child. But my aunt kept insisting; after a struggle, they took me to the Danish orphanage [for Armenian refugee children in Kharpert. I spoke only Turkish so the teachers taught me Armenian and gradually in four years, from 1919 to 1922, I learned to speak, read and write Armenian. When the German general left Kharpert, at the time of Kemal [Mustapha Kema, later Atatürk], the Turks burned all the Armenian books and replaced them with Turkish ones. Then we had to learn Turkish.

Around 1922, it was unsafe [for Armenians] in Kharpert, with the rise of Mustapha Kemal, so the Americans and Danes took us out in wagons and mule trains. They made boxes and put them on either side of the mules. We sat in the boxes. The Turks let us leave on condition that we never return. During our march, beautiful girls covered their faces with mud, a dark brown clay, so that they would look ugly.

Then they covered their faces with a veil. All this so they would not be abducted [by Turks, Kurds or Arabs]. At Mosul, we saw a lot of bones, skeletons. The people were crying and praying over the remains of the Armenians who had died during the deportations in 1915. At one point, I washed my face in a dirty creek and got an infection in my eyes [trachoma]. Both my eyes were closed up and the nurse had to take care of me; she used a blue stone as medicine.

We reached Aleppo and the Americans, who had taken over by this time, bathed and fed us. After two days, they put us on a train to Beirut and the Bird's Nest orphanage which Miss Jacobsen and Miss Petersen had prepared for us [both women were Danish Missionaries]. We had only forty or fifty girls there at first. Then when the Americans [Near East Relief] began closing down their orphanages, they sent the older girls out to factories to weave rugs, or to wealthy Syrian Armenian homes as domestics, or to the hospitals to work. A group was sent to Egypt and another to France, I think as domestics. The little children came to our orphanage.

In the Bird's Nest, we were all little. They didn't keep girls after they reached fourteen or fifteen. Sent them out. At first, I didn't feel like a lost orphan girl because my aunt was with me, a seamstress in the orphanage; she was like a mother to me. My grandmother was still alive, as well, so I had my Armenian identity. But my aunt left in 1923 to marry her fiancé in America. I felt very alone.

Miss Petersen was a lamb, you could hug and kiss her but Miss Jacobsen was strict. She was honest and clean. CLEAN. She used to examine our nails and even our feet. She was very strict. She spanked children for wetting their beds at night. Poor things. It could have been because of sickness. [Bed wetting is not uncommon among children who have experienced trauma]. In the orphanage they tried to keep us Armenian but also taught us French, English and Arabic. We had religious education. Miss Jacobsen was an athletic woman so we had basketball, volleyball and track and field. I loved basketball, the high jump and running. We were well fed in the orphanage. Never went hungry. We had cracked wheat, soups, spinach, eggs and sometimes even meat.

When I was fourteen [1926], I finished my public schooling and they put me in with the girls who did embroidery. Every girl had a job to do — cleaning, making beds. Mine was embroidery. We made beautiful tablecloths. Ten girls working on this side and ten on the other. Miss Jacobsen would send them to Denmark to raise money to provide for our school. My father, who had been in America when the Genocide started, had volunteered to fight with the Armenian forces in Armenia and was killed in action. In the meantime my uncle and aunt were in the United States but entry was restricted to children, no nieces.

Mr. Pierce, who worked for the United Church, had been a missionary in Kharpert and knew my family there. When my aunt heard that the United Church was sponsoring girls to come in to Canada as domestics, she appealed to him to bring me out. My uncle sent my passage money. Altogether, twelve girls from Miss Jacobsen's orphanage came to Canada; we all had relatives who paid for our passage.

I was so happy when I heard I was going to Canada. I didn't know anything about Canada. No idea. Cold, snow. But I wanted to get away from the orphanage. My aunt and uncle were in America and I wanted to be near them. I felt lonely in the orphanage. I was beginning to feel like an orphan. I didn't know what a domestic was or what she did.

On our way, our travel agent, a very fine gentleman in Beirut, advised my friend and me: "Don't marry the first man who asks you. Don't marry the second. Wait until twelve men have asked you before you make up your mind. Don't rush into marriage." That was a bit of good advice for two fifteen year old girls coming to a strange land. He introduced us to the captain, who cautioned us in English not to open our cabin door to strangers and not to walk on the deck at night.

The trip took a whole month, but I loved the ship. No seasickness at all for me. Everyday we took a sponge bath. We had short hair; all Miss Jacobsen's girls had short hair. She had given us a set of clean clothes which she told us to wear on the ship and throw away before landing. She had given us cloth for sanitary pads, three sets of underwear and all clean, new clothes. For immigration inspection she instructed us to wear a whole set of new clothes.

When we reached Immigration they gave us the fourth or fifth grade books to read in English [literacy test]. Because we had learned some English in the orphanage, we had no problems.

I loved Canada. When I put my foot on Canadian land, when I saw that pure white snow, I fell in love. I loved it then and I still love it.

My first job was as a mother's helper with a family with a seven year-old boy and a thirteen year old girl. I got up at seven, dressed in my black and white uniform, and did the chores. She did the laundry and cooking, I cleaned, waxed and dusted, set the table and did the dishes. After lunch, I had a bath and put on my white and yellow uniform. I hated wearing the cap, which made me feel like a slave. So she said it was okay not to wear it. I had a couple of hours break in the afternoons; I read or crocheted. Then I helped her prepare dinner. At first I was a little nervous with the vacuum cleaner, but after I learned the buttons it was fine. But I never did the wash. I was afraid of the wringer. By 7:30, the work was done and I spent my evenings reading or doing crochet. Basically, I did whatever I was told.

I had my own room upstairs, opposite her daughter's room. It was a beautiful room. Well furnished. I ate whatever they ate, never went hungry. I just watched and copied them to learn Canadian ways. Whatever they did, I did. I saved my \$3.00 a week salary. They were very kind people and I stayed with them for fifteen months. The only problem was that she was too strict about the curfew, said I had to be in by ten. I wanted to go out with my friends sometimes.

So Mr. Pierce placed me in another fine home.

He put us girls in respectable homes, very good people. Except for one case, where my friend had to look after four children and the mistress was out all the time. My friend was overworked. But I was lucky; my second family was even more cultured than the first. I am still friends with them. During the three years that I worked for them I was very happy. She was motherly, never treated me like a maid, but like a daughter. Paid me \$40.00 a month — of course I was more experienced by this time and I could cook rather well. They taught me about Canada and Canadian customs, took me to concerts

