

# Perpetual Journey: On Transformative Voyages and the Path Back Home

**Berj Dekramanjian.** Pre-doctoral Researcher at DemoSoc and PhD Fellow for the Agencia de Gestión de Ayudas Universitarias y de Investigación (AGAUR)

As an ethnic Armenian, Berj Dekramanjian's identity growing up in Lebanon was formed in part by constantly being reminded that he owed a great debt for simply being. His maternal great-grandfather Aram decided to leave his family in Antep, then a city in the Ottoman Empire. Expected to continue in his father's trade of traversing villages to re-shape and shine brass and copper cookware, Aram, full of whimsical hope for a better life, would decide to take to the seas, without ever gazing upon or setting foot in one. His decision to leave his hometown in the Bekaa Valley was full of hope for a better future due to constant political turmoil, which culminated in open skirmishes in the streets of Beirut. He lived in Tallinn, Maastricht and lastly Barcelona, the city he currently calls home. In his perpetual journey, he finds inexplicable joy knowing he has left pieces of himself at every spot on the path he has taken.

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.”

Marcel Proust

About nine years ago, in late May, I found myself sitting on a park bench in Balat, overlooking the Golden Horn, discerning passing planes as the sun was about to set. In true Istanbul fashion, I was surrounded by the perennial hum of the city, cut by car horns and children's clamor mixing with the trivial but heated exchanges of men gathered around rising columns of smoke. The moment seems to be forever imprinted on my memory. At the time, processing the novel sounds and sights seemed to be the most convincing self-inflicted diversion as I hyperventilated under the inescapable

weight of my solitude. I, for the first time, was experiencing what I should call my home for the foreseeable future.

I didn't, and in all truth, couldn't have grasped the magnitude of this moment of being, regardless of its novelty or intensity. I couldn't have imagined that it would be internalized and echoed three times since, in my first moments in Tallinn, Maastricht and lastly Barcelona, the city I currently call home. But it wouldn't be long before I would rationalize this aberration as an unavoidable precondition that has been passed down to me by a long line

of pilgrims that would anxiously laugh away onism.

My presence in Istanbul was in its simplest form strange. I'm a firm believer that our lives, as profound as they may subjectively be to us, are formed by a series of events, each predetermined by a probability of occurrence that preceding events impose on them. The fact of the matter is that I was a product of a tragedy preceding my birth that should have been sufficient for me to avoid being present in this captivating city. As an ethnic Armenian, my identity growing up in Lebanon was formed in part by constantly being reminded that I owed a great debt for simply being. I was reminded of my slim chances on multiple and even trivial occasions, and my decision to "go back" was met with a bewildered silence at best from those who surrounded me. The decision that in hindsight seems inevitable required a lot of masked confidence and unjustifiable stubbornness.

In contrast, it would not take much effort to convince a young man like myself, born to Armenian parents in the latter half of the 19th century, to leave the expanse I decided to now grace. And it was no different for my maternal great-grandfather Aram, who was around eighteen when he decided to leave his family in Antep, then a city in the Ottoman Empire. Expected to continue his father's trade of traversing villages to re-shape and shine brass and copper cookware, Aram, full of whimsical hope for a better life, would decide to take to the seas, without ever gazing upon or setting foot in one.

Like him, my decision to leave my hometown in the Bekaa Valley was full of hope for a better future. By then, I had already witnessed more than a dozen political assassinations, the

July war of 2006, and constant political turmoil, which culminated in open skirmishes in the streets of Beirut. I was young, a bit arrogant, and I wanted to rise up. I firmly believed that the political feuds, as well as borders and national divisions, were superficial. Working with Greenpeace in Istanbul, for what I thought would be a year, I could pursue my humanistic duty of reinforcing the possible coexistence of Kani Bozuku<sup>1</sup> and Vayri Kazans,<sup>2</sup> and dedicate my time and self to the rivers and forests, and the Mediterranean Sea that eclipses them. So it was to be expected that my high hopes would be dearly rewarded by fate as, in my preconceived attempt to escape political tension, I would walk into my new office on my very first day tear-gassed by the riot police, as my gallant hopes would happen to coincide with the start of the Gezi Park protests.

*It would not take much effort to convince a young man like myself, born to Armenian parents in the latter half of the 19th century, to leave the expanse I decided to now grace*

My great-grandfather, experiencing the political turmoil of his time and with an admittedly more advanced ability to attract misfortune, shared my hopeful outlook regarding his leap, albeit more grounded. Considering his chances, he decided to leave and escaped what eventually culminated into the systematic destruction of the community he left behind. But as fate would have it, my great-grandfather's hopes would be met with something "worse" that would have been impossible for him to expect. His journey would take him to Syria, Egypt and Yemen but would come to an unex-

---

1. Corrupt blood is a slur used against Armenians in Turkey.

2. Ferocious animal is a slur used by western Armenians to describe Turks.



View of Tallinn (Berj Dekramanjan).

pected and brutal halt as he reached the shores of India. Taken as a captive, he would have half his hair shaved off and be compelled into forced labor. Initially being worked to the point of collapse, he would eventually be known for his knack for bread making, and serve as a baker before being ultimately freed. Making a few stops on his way back in Yafa and Sidon, Aram would eventually settle in Aleppo.

It is rare to think of any major life-changing events that conform to our expectations. We build up our plans and ambitions of gain, basing them on lessons our surroundings have already taught us. Venturing out into unknown worlds opens up the gates for learning what initially we were too ignorant to even ask about. Exploration shapes us, and its lessons take root so deeply that they slowly cloud our ability to

imagine a time when they were not an integral part of our nature and disposition.

My growth in Istanbul extended far beyond what I initially anticipated. Although I've had many of the heated conversations I relished and campaigned for countless environmental issues, I can admit that even convincing a few deniers and going as far as blocking a major coal port on the Marmara Sea have not had the impact I hoped. But looking back to life in Istanbul, the warmest-feeling memories cannot be confined to major events. My footprint might certainly have been insignificant in the grand scheme of things but, as an individual, I changed much more than I anticipated.

I slowly found myself amongst a group of people, trying to better their world and overcome their own challenges. I have learned a

language within six months, not by attending school but by constantly finding myself with individuals just as curious and talkative as myself. I learned that having a friend that you can trust your life to isn't an empty expression, and that loyalty is measured not by blind approval but by risking your own well-being for the sake of protecting what you consider dear.

The sorrow that I associated with my identity turned out to only be a fraction of a world I have not yet discovered. My roots took on new life as I've had the tactile sense of ancient Armenian letters on walls not deemed worthy to be identified on any map. I've heard different interpretations of songs I knew since childhood and learned that the lyrics are just as beautiful. Assuming that I would be speaking to tell the story of a collective past, I had not thought that I would actually have the chance to listen to someone who discovered his own very recently, like his grandfather, an orphaned crypto-Armenian had to keep it a secret to protect himself and his family.

Compelling as his story might have been, I became familiar with Aram's story only recently. However, I have spent my childhood being captivated by the accounts of another wanderer, my paternal grandfather Puzant, as he spoke about his own journey. The intensity of his tales, the vivid description of the numerous backdrops mixed with the untamed imagination of a curious young listener, has bred a fascination that I've always tried to satisfy. But now I was equipped with knowledge and experience one can only gain through practice. I could walk down rough trails. My year, which has extended to three, has given me the opportunity to broaden my plans so they would better suit my ambitions.

Being from the generation born after the atrocities that Aram tried to escape from, Puzant was born and spent his early years in a migrant refugee community in Aleppo, Syria. Education, not being the priority of his family

at the time, pushed him to be a day laborer from the age of seven, helping blue-collar workers for whatever he can scrap. He decided to take his own leap like a young man and, as Syria was at the time under the French Mandate, decided to try his fortune with the *Légion Étrangère*. He hadn't been assigned any combat duty but as a mechanic he had been dispatched to missions in France, southern Italy and far-out posts in the deserts of Algeria and Libya. He proudly retold his adventures and how his affinity for festive outings has spared him from late-night aerial raids and almost certain demise.

*Being from the generation born after the atrocities that Aram tried to escape from, Puzant was born and spent his early years in a migrant refugee community in Aleppo, Syria*

I've always thought that a quest like my grandfather's would be personally unattainable. That his bravery and confidence in the face of glaring uncertainty and his adamant being of self in the most exotic of settings were due to his unique predisposition. However, partially taking into account the strength of his character, and disregarding what the modern depiction of travel and tourism might show, I found joy in the aspect of travel that presents a chance to become an improved version of ourselves through the trials, hardships and endless daily puzzles it requires us to solve, simply to carry on with one's daily life. One final thing I owe to my initial travel was the wings that it gave me and the weight of indecision in the face of uncertainty that it has lifted from my shoulders. I have now experienced the agitation of monetary hardship, learned how to mostly avoid dangerous situations and individuals, and moved to live in six different houses, sharing my space with people that had an array of unique opinions on how they wanted to lead their own lives.

I was becoming increasingly restless, and my appetite for novelty was growing. It was the right time to leave behind familiar sights and faces and move ahead with the memories made. I decided to delve back into my interest in academic psychology, and I couldn't have chosen a more fascinating place to take that step forward than Estonia. The medieval streets of Tallinn and its magical dark forests and bogs, the restrained and forthright attitude ingrained in its culture, and the silent yet harsh icy weather were as foreign as foreign can get for a Levantine Mediterranean man. I took petty pride in the rareness of my context and tried to estimate the probable number of people who were born where I was and lived where I decided to be.

*No traveler can expect the peculiar incidents that might manifest on their journey, nor the lessons that will be engrained and ardently shape them. And it would be naïve to expect to maintain our grip on what happens to what we leave behind*

I have spent nearly two years on my own expedition to test the limits of my grandfather's. Setting off from Tallinn, I have lived for a few months in the south of the Netherlands, and coursed through Riga, Bavaria and Belgium. This was my time for discovery and my time to weave together various landscapes week after week. I was on a mission to quench my thirst and my eagerness to jump from one story to another was permitted at the expense of weariness.

I think back on that time and can't help but ponder on what I might have missed had I introduced some form of stability instead. Well aware of the stories I helped create in these years of days and moments, the true arc of this period culminated with accepting my duty to shape what is to come. Just as I have

previously come to terms with who I am and how I came to be, my weariness has led me to meditate and come to terms with who and what I do not allow myself to be.

At the end of his route, Aram eventually settled in Aleppo to become what he could only become, a baker. There he raised a family and delved deeper into his spiritual self. Puzant, in his turn, repurposed his knowledge of tanks to establish his name as a transport truck chassis specialist in Lebanon. He decided to call my birthplace Zahle his home and built his life around the goal of distancing his children from conflict.

I am still attached to the idea that my desire to travel is linked to an uncontrollable hereditary disposition. But I'm also aware that it is a pleasant defensive shield that staves off any agitating thoughts of cyclical violence, economic hardship and internal unease that often fuel human mobility. No traveler can expect the peculiar incidents that might manifest on their journey, nor the lessons that will be engrained and ardently shape them. And it would be naïve to expect to maintain our grip on what happens to what we leave behind.

It hasn't been long since I realized the significance of how my forefathers' respective stories end. I have matured enough to accept that going back home might not entail going back. Aram's birthplace was razed, while Puzant's was full of strife with coups and political upheaval. And, in turn, my Lebanon has been scarred with economic upheaval and haunted by the echoes of a blast that obliterated a quarter of Beirut in August of 2020.

With my arrival in Barcelona, the time has finally come to break away from the story of my grandparents. I shared with my forefathers their appetite to burst through the shell that fate has brought us to. Deep down, I'm confident that we shared a moment transcending time when we decided to defy fate to spawn again in a different setting. All of us in a way

have left as exiles, and all of us yearned for a piece of home that has changed while we were away and we were unable to return to.

Now four years have passed since I first landed in Barcelona. In this city, I met the person that made those years pass in a blink, yet managed to enrich it with countless memories. I have set a course for a career that sees my curiosity as a friend and not a foe. Although I all but memorized the narrow streets of the inner city, I still find myself elated as I stumble on

yet another corner that reminds me of Beirut. I wake up every morning to be greeted by the sun and bike to work as I breathe in the breeze of the sea. I celebrate chances to branch out and leave for a few days, only to be relieved as I'm welcomed to my orange little house, to my home.

In my perpetual journey, I find inexplicable joy knowing I have left pieces of myself at every spot on the path I have taken. And I look forward to times where my past and future selves can meet.