

January 15, 2021

In loving memory for Esgouhi Hajian.

BRIEF INTRO

Hello/Parev!

This is Anoush Bargamian and I want to thank you for joining us at, The Medz Mamas. So today my son Sevan will ask me some question's about my grandma, his great grandmother Esgouhi.

(Please note: The bold text in the body is not part of the audio. It is included as a longer version of our featured medz mama, Esgouhi Hajian's story.)

WHAT ARE YOUR FIRST MEMORIES OF HER AND HOW DID SHE COME TO THIS COUNTRY?

Esgouhi Hajian is my maternal medz mama. Medz mama is the Armenian word for grandma ... grandmother. All four of my grandparents came from the Armenian Highlands, the ancestral homeland of Armenians for several millenniums, until the Armenian Genocide.* All of my grandparents settled in Providence, Rhode Island. My grandma Esgouhi was the only living grandparent I knew as a child, and young adult. My first memories of my Grandma's home revolved around her kitchen. I remember the aroma of spices and herbs that she used in Armenian dishes like dolma, kufta, and stew.

Grandma's mother Anna Khimatian married her father (my great grandfather) Bedros Mahdesian, and they had four children, with Esgouhi as their second born. She was born in Palou Baghin, Kharpert, Turkey on January 6, 1906, on Armenian Christmas. In 1915, her father Bedros died just prior to the outbreak of the Armenian Genocide. From 1915 to 1923, the Ottoman Turkish government systematically planned the brutal annihilation of its Christian population, including Greeks, Assyrians and Armenians.

In 1915 at the age of nine, my grandmother, her three siblings and her mother Anna, along with the villagers, were forced to leave their homes by Turkish soldiers. They ended up marching through the Syrian Desert, and reached a refugee camp in Aleppo. **Along the way, three of Grandma's siblings died, leaving her as the only surviving child. My great grandmother Anna and grandmother Esgouhi, survived the Turkish soldier's bayonets by hiding under the dead bodies of fellow Armenians. Anna rarely spoke about their traumatic experiences, but said that "the bayonet just missed us by a finger's width."**

My grandmother and great-grandmother survived, and stayed at the refugee camp. They eventually travelled to Marseille, France and then on to the United States, arriving in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1922. **(My great grandma Anna, grandma Esgouhi, and Garabed Derderian (Anna's future husband), travelled from Aleppo, Syria to Marseille, France. For seven months the three of them stayed in a hotel with other Armenians also headed for the United States.)**

At the age of eighteen, Grandma married Kevork Hajian. They had four children and settled down in Rhode Island. My mother Kohar was their first born, followed by Anahid, Haroutune and Geoffrey. Together my grandparents filled their new life, in a new country, with new dreams and joyous memories. Grandma's home was filled with Armenian meals, music, newspapers, and conversation.

Back when my grandmother Esgouhi was a young girl in her village, she enjoyed school. Her mother (my great grandmother) Anna was a schoolteacher, while her uncle was the school's headmaster. Even though her own education was cut short because of the genocide, she saw education and music for her own children, as a top priority. My grandfather Kevork also had the same outlook on education. While his own education at a Jesuit school in Armenia was cut short, he continued to write and penned many articles that were published by the Hairenik Newspaper, under the name of Kevork Mardig.

As a young adult, I came to understand Grandma's determination to preserve an Armenian identity. **Our culture was kept alive by building and connecting with the Armenian community in Providence, Rhode Island. The Armenian language was spoken in Grandma's home and was my mother's first language. Because there was such an emphasis on maintaining an Armenian identity, my mom and her siblings attended Armenian school, twice a week after regular school. On a macro level, this is the story of Armenians in the diaspora, in every corner of the world. Genocide survivors and the generations that followed, created institutions to preserve the Armenian religion, language, history, and culture.**

WHAT ARMENIAN TRADITIONS DID SHE KEEP?

My Medz Mama Esgouhi also kept Armenian traditions alive especially at Easter. **Like so many Armenians in Armenia and throughout the diaspora, she would color eggs naturally, using onion skins.** My grandmother passed down the tradition of coloring eggs to my mom Kohar, and my mom to me and my siblings. **I also remember how my mom taught us how to play the Armenian Easter egg game. The goal was to tap each others eggs and the person whose egg didn't crack, would be the winner. The game was fun and at times got competitive.**

I love the fact that I have passed down this tradition to my children. And that this tradition connects us to the Armenian Highlands.

ARE THERE ANY SPECIAL OBJECTS THAT SHE HAD? (TELL ME ABOUT A SPECIAL OBJECT THAT BELONGED TO YOUR MEDZ MAMA & THE STORY BEHIND IT.)

My Medz Mama's treadle sewing machine is a special object that I see every day in my home. Her sewing machine has special meaning to me, because it connects me to her as granddaughter, artist, and human being. **As a young child I wanted to become an artist. My inspiration came from my grandmother, mother, and my aunt/horkor/father's sister.**

I remember my grandmother, watching her at her sewing machine in her home. There was always a new garment she'd be creating for a family member, in fact she was in constant creation mode. My grandmother created original designs, making her own patterns from newspaper. Her expertise and mastery was top notch. I remember my mom would say that even during the Great Depression of the 1930s, her classmates thought her family was wealthy, because of the way my grandmother would design their clothes.

But as an Armenian Genocide survivor and newcomer to this country, she faced many challenges. I really believe if my grandmother's circumstances were different, she would have gone to post-secondary school for a career in fashion design.

At the age of 50, my grandma became a widow. With my Uncle Geoffrey still a teenager, she knew she needed to work and become the provider for the family. She quickly learned how to drive so she could travel to work. She became a seamstress for a large clothing retail shop. Years later she continued to work, and I remember visiting her at Cherry & Webb, with my mom and siblings. She was well-respected and enjoyed working with people. I also admired the way she dressed up with style, and that she commanded respect just by her nature.

IF SHE WERE HERE, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO HER?

I am so proud and humbled to be your granddaughter. Your life journey is an example of resilience that I will return to again and again. **I am grateful for the way you and grandpa raised my mom to be proud of her Armenian identity. I see our identity as one of human strength, survival and love.**

There are times I imagine what it would be like to spend time with you either making a meal together, or creating a garment design together. And the stories we would share together... Most of all, I love you Grandma.

CREDITS

Esgouhi Hajian	Featured Medz Mama
Anoush Bargamian	Narration, Story Contributor, and Video
Sevan Buechele	Interviewer
Georgi-Ann Bargamian	Story Contributor
Pearl Hajian Bargamian	Story Contributor
Haig Beylerian	Musician "Karabakh Im" from album Armenian Folk Music For Guitar

***For the survivors and their descendants, the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923), is an open wound, because Turkey denies it to this day. One hundred and five years later, Armenians still suffer this continued genocidal agenda. On September 27, 2020, amid the COVID pandemic, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and mercenaries backed by Turkey, shelled and attacked the civilian population in Artsakh. This forced 100,000 Armenians to leave their ancestral homeland of several millenniums.**