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OP-ED

Our stories of challenge and triumph help future generations survive / Opinion

BY RAFFI JOE WARTANIAN

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Younger generations learn where they come from when they hear the stories of older relatives. *Getty Images*

I watched the casket lower into the Earth before the video signal froze into a pixelated blur of tombstones and trees. My gaze shifted focus, and I noticed my reflection in the computer screen. I considered turning off the monitor and pretending like none of it was happening.

Then, the video signal resumed. Masked workers carried off the metal frame and rope used to lower my great uncle Apar's casket. In black and gold vestments, the Armenian priest approached the camera. "May God bless his soul," he said. "Thank you for watching."

COVID-19 was Apar's diagnosis, which exacerbated other underlying health issues. On March 19, he was admitted to New York Presbyterian-Queens hospital. Exceptional healthcare professionals gave him a well-lit room along with the dignity and love we could not share in person. Nurses facilitated video calls and did their best to make Apar comfortable as he continued to smile and blow us

kisses, even as his lungs and other vital organs deteriorated. He lasted nine days in the hospital, after 90 years of life.

Following the virtual funeral, we assembled a video conference with Apar's siblings and relatives in Maryland, New York, Dubai, Cyprus, Uruguay and Canada. We shared stories, poems, songs and photos. Our gathering gave us comfort, but the screens reduced us to flattened versions of ourselves. Technological difficulties meant an hour of delay. The hiss of a boiler in my basement office felt more present than the video feed of my family.

I didn't know what to do with the pain after the ceremony, so I turned to a 2014 video [interview](#) I conducted with Apar. Even at his advanced age — 84 at the time — his voice boomed from his sturdy 6'5 frame. He punctuated points with twirling hands and enunciated vowels with a singsong lilt.

He described his childhood in a Syrian refugee camp of Armenian genocide survivors. He told me how his father, Mardiros, a genocide survivor, taught himself French, moved his family to Lebanon and managed a road construction enterprise. Like his father, Apar fashioned himself an entrepreneur. He ran a spirits store near Beirut's airport district, then turned to selling jewelry as Lebanon's 15-year civil war started in 1975.

About an hour into our interview, Apar recounted a day in the early years of the civil war when he had to catch a flight. Reports suggested a day of safe travel. With Mardiros in the passenger seat, Apar drove to the airport district and began to cross a bridge.

Suddenly, a vehicle in front of them rolled over a bomb. "Their car exploded into a hundred pieces," Apar recalled. Bullets fired from snipers positioned around the bridge. One entered Apar's body near his left shoulder, past his heart, and out through his back. Another remained lodged inside his chest cavity.

"I started vomiting blood," he recalled. Apar tried to steer through the carnage and reach the bottom of the bridge for safe cover. "My body was freezing, and I felt myself starting to faint." He didn't remember who started to drive the car next, but he recollected the sound of bullets rattling under the hood of the vehicle as it sped to a nearby hospital. Even in the emergency room, militants asked Apar who shot him. "I was afraid of giving the wrong answer," he said, "because they might think I'm on the wrong side of the conflict. Even in a vulnerable position like that, you have to be smart."

I paused the video to process the story. I considered the strength required to endure the constant threat of violence, joblessness and confusion that engulfed Apar and generations of people who lived through Lebanon's civil war. Likewise, a generation before, their parents and grandparents miraculously survived the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923. And a generation after, Lebanon's national nightmare lingered through decades of crippling corruption and violence, evident during Tuesday's devastating blast that [rocked](#) Beirut. I have wondered what it might mean for our current pandemic to extend for eight years, or even 15. What resilience would we summon? Who would we become? How would we learn from survivors of past calamities?

Our family could not pay our respects at Apar's grave in nearby Queens, nor could we bid a proper farewell during a virtual funeral. Listening to Apar's interview, however, offered an important lesson: No pandemic can erase the stories we remember, share and preserve.

COVID-19 may break our families, but it need not break our bonds. Apar is dead, but his memory lives. He taught me that no matter the upheaval — pandemic, war, genocide — we are and must continue to be the keepers of each other's stories. This is how we can survive.

Raffi Joe Wartanian is a first-generation Armenian-American storyteller and musician.
