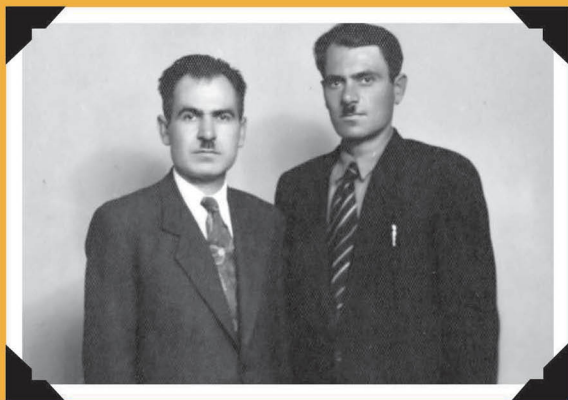
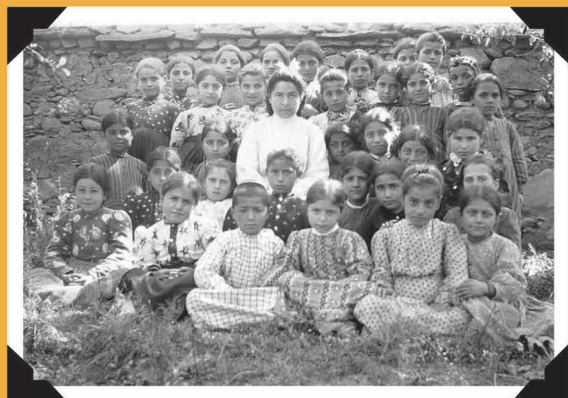


The **Grandchildren**



**The Hidden
Legacy of
“Lost”
Armenians
in Turkey**



**Ayşe Gül Altınay
Fethiye Çetin**

**With an introduction
by Gerard Libaridian**

Translated by Maureen Freely

The Grandchildren

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To Hrant Dink
in loving memory

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Foreword to the Turkish Edition

Ayşe Gül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin

This is not an easy book to read. The stories that follow were painful to tell, painful to hear, and painful to set down on paper. Only a few of the grandchildren we met were willing to share their stories in this volume. For those who agreed to do so, it was anything but easy, at least emotionally. And one had a change of heart very close to the time of publication. When this person informed us of her decision, we could hear deep fear and anxiety in her voice. Despite the fact that her story would remain anonymous, thus keeping her identity safe; this “grandchild” had been too deeply marked by the conflicts she had witnessed in the first decades of her life, not to mention the forced migration of her family from their Kurdish hometown in the 1990s, and the struggle to make a new life elsewhere, for her fears and anxieties to abate. The suffering of her Armenian grandfather was not in the past; three generations later, it was still shaping her present and her future.

This is not a book about 1915 so much as a book about what Hrant Dink described as being “stuck in a well 1915 meters deep.” It is a book that traces the deep scars that people living in these lands today still carry from the humanitarian catastrophe of 1915—and that finds them in the most unexpected places.

Almost a century later, what does it mean to be a grandchild of those who survived 1915? At least as important is to ask what happened next: what have these survivors had to endure, these grandchildren, parents and grandparents, their neighbors, and their friends? A hundred years on, why is it still so difficult, so painful, for grandmothers and grandfathers (or mothers and fathers, or any of us) to own up to our Armenian heritage? If we found a way to face up to this pain, and to this silence, would this free us to identify other silences, other sources

of anguish, bringing them to the surface by putting them into words? And could this process help to assuage yet other pains and silences before they have a chance to fester?

The narrators of these stories invite us to speak among ourselves, and with our families, our friends, and our neighbors, to listen to each others' stories.

First, they told us their stories, face to face. Some of these meetings were over in an hour; others went on for much longer. After telling us how they came to find out that their grandmothers or grandfathers were Armenian, they described how they shared this information and with whom, and what effect it had on them at various points in their lives. Together we discussed what we knew about 1915 and the Armenian presence in our lands, and what we thought about the public debates of recent years, identifying together the breaking points and meeting points, the times of hope and despair, and our dreams for the present and the future. Some of these grandchildren found their own way to us; others we approached ourselves. Most were not people we had known beforehand. It was while talking to them that we discovered how much we had yet to learn even from those we thought we knew.

We tried to listen carefully to these stories, asking few questions. Whatever they wanted to tell us, that was what we wanted to hear. When we set them down on paper afterward, we tried to preserve their particular way of speaking and the warmth of their voices. The narrators of the stories then looked over our drafts, made the necessary corrections, selected their pseudonyms, and gave the stories their final shape. Having noted that two women with the same grandmother had been very differently affected, we interviewed them separately. We had originally hoped to bring Ayça's and Güllü's accounts together in a single chapter, but because our recording of the meeting with the granddaughter calling herself Güllü was damaged, we were not able to do so. So, in the end, we added the part of her account we could save to the end of the story by the granddaughter calling herself Ayça. Hence, this book is composed of twenty-five stories in twenty-four chapters.

In almost every story, even where the names of the towns and villages have been changed, we have tried to identify the province in which it took place. There were several occasions when those sharing their stories were ready to disclose their identities, but in the end, we decided it would be better not to reveal anyone's identity. Only the two people who had already put their stories into the public domain (Bedrettin Aykın and Berke Baş) appear here under their own names.

Along the way, there were many surprises. We had expected to be interviewing the grandchildren and great grandchildren of Armenians who had individually joined Muslim families, but we came to discover that there were many other routes to surviving the catastrophe for which they had so many names—convoy, relocation, expulsion, migration, exile, slaughter, massacre, genocide, or just “those days.” There were lone survivors who found each other and married or somehow ended up in the same place. There were those who converted with their families or fellow villagers to Islam, continuing their lives as Muslims, and there were those who had later gone back to live inside or outside Turkey as Armenians or Assyrians. We met people who had remained Muslim but continued to have relations with family members who had gone back to living as Armenians or Assyrians, and people who had lost contact with their families under similar circumstances. We listened to the stories of those who had re-established contact with their Armenian mothers and fathers but had chosen to remain with their “new” families. And of course, we heard about many others who had never been given such a choice, and who carried through life with the hope of seeing their families once again . . .

We spoke to a great number of grandchildren in Adana, Adıyaman, Amasya, Ardahan, Artvin, Bingöl, Diyarbakır, Elazığ, Erzincan, Erzurum, Eskişehir, Gaziantep, Istanbul, İzmir, Kayseri, Konya, Malatya, Mardin, Muş, Ordu, Siirt, Sivas, Tokat, Trabzon, Tunceli, Urfa, and Van. Though they do not all appear in this volume, all were generous with their stories, telling us not just about their own lives but about their grandparents, about friends who were children of Islamized Armenians, about villages and neighborhoods entirely made up of Islamized Armenians. These families/villages/neighborhoods often had a policy of “not marrying out.” Some people with this background, we were told, went on to become involved in radical Islam or ultranationalism. Though some of our narrators linked the rise of religious or nationalist extremism in their families or societies with a desire to suppress their feared Armenian heritage, others told us that these orientations had less to do with their heritage than with recent political developments.

Almost all the grandchildren spoke of being deeply marked by the fear and sorrow they had endured, by the silences in their families, by the secrets they had not dared to share with anyone, and by the strain this had put on their relations with others. Most spoke openly, even angrily, of how painful it had been, to have to hide the truth about themselves and their families for so many long years. But each one had

experienced and made sense of these processes in their own way. Some, after discovering the truth about their heritage, spoke to us about how it had led them to question their identity and beliefs; others spoke of feeling “liberated.” There were, amongst our interviewees, some who began to think of themselves as Armenian, while others found beauty in their mixed heritage, or expressed the desire not to be boxed in by any identity whatsoever. Just as we heard from people with a wide range of backgrounds and experiences, we saw a great variety in the way these grandchildren defined themselves.

Many spoke of other sorrows. There was Aznif, for instance, whose beloved husband was killed before her eyes in 1915, who then had married a Muslim man escaping the war in Russia, and endured great suffering, surviving by extracting wheat grains from dung. There was the grandfather, who after marrying an Armenian by force and later expelling her from the house with her two sons, would in the 1940s be exiled by the state on account of being a Kurd, and would die in exile. There was Kişo, whose Armenian family had suffered the violence perpetrated by the Hamidiye Regiments, but the Islamized Armenian grandmother was so alarmed by the subsequent Armenian reprisals that she had fled from Muş with her children to take refuge in Silvan. There were Aslı, who, in the course of investigating her Armenian grandfather, discovered that her mother’s family, who she had thought to be Kırmanci Kurds from Sivas, were in reality Zazas who had changed their identity after fleeing from Erzincan; the many from Zaza and Kırmanci Kurdish families who had suffered detention, torture, and deportation, especially since the military coup in 1980; Ali, who, after suffering unspeakable torture that he could not share with anyone as a young man, had forged a bond with his grandmother, who could not share her story either; and Aslı, who, when she recalled taking her husband home from prison, made a connection between her own first-hand experience of the “Return to Life Operation” in an Istanbul prison and that of 1915. There were also the patriarchal practices that so many grandchildren identified and criticized as they described their grandmothers’ suffering; their allusions to violence visited on all women; the suffering of other women in their families who were forced to accept their Armenian grandmothers as second wives; the suffering that these women visited on those Armenian second wives; as well as the rare stories of the friendships they struck up with them . . .

As most of those sharing their stories in these pages suggest, any effort to present a hierarchy of suffering, or offer competing claims, or

to set out to decide which sort of suffering is the worst, is impossible, pointless, and problematic. On the contrary, the grandchildren in this book invite us to give equal importance to all the suffering they describe, to look for the ways in which these different forms of suffering are linked, and to work together to bring an end to them all.

It was Hrant Dink who extended this invitation to all the peoples of Turkey most powerfully; it was while we were working on this project that he was cruelly taken from us.

In death, as in life, Hrant Dink continues to exert a deep influence on our work. In an article he wrote after Hrant Dink's death, Ara Arabyan likened his death to that of Martin Luther King, who had a dream about a world in which everyone could live in peace, as equals. Hrant Dink had the same dream for the world, and for Turkey. His dream for Turkey embraced all its peoples, be they Turks or Kurds, Muslims, Jews or Christians, Roma, Alevi, Sunni, male, female, gay, lesbian, rich or poor . . . The mutual love between Hrant Dink and his Anatolian brothers, sisters, and friends was not the exception but the rule. He liked to call it the voice of conscience: "The voice of conscience, of reason, has been buried in silence," he said. "Now it is looking for a way out."

We hope that the doors opened by our beloved, much-missed Hrant Dink and by his wife Rakel, who grew up in a nomadic tribe speaking Kurdish, will never close, and that we shall all continue to work together to open yet more doors . . .

2009

Istanbul



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Foreword to the Transaction Edition

Ayşe Gül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin

From Whispers to Flowing Waters

Fethiye Çetin was an adult woman when her grandmother Seher started talking to her about her life as Heranush. This initial moment of shock (“my grandmother is originally Armenian”) was followed by years of painful sharing. The grandmother was telling her granddaughter things that she had kept to herself for seventy years. Then, it was her granddaughter’s turn to recite this story in her own inner voice, until she was ready to share it with friends, and finally, to write it down for the whole world.

Çetin remembers her years in military prison after the 1980 coup: “when I was telling my friends in prison about my grandmother, I would speak in a whisper. We were very courageous women, undertaking a courageous struggle against the military coup, and yet, we could only talk about my grandmother’s story in a whisper.”

It was almost thirty years after she began her slow and painful investigation into her grandmother’s “other life” that Çetin published *Anneannem* (My Grandmother). This was November 2004, just months before the ninetieth anniversary of 1915. And indeed, as we discuss in the postscript, 2005 would be a turning point in Turkey in terms of both the emergence of a national public debate on 1915 and the fate of Ottoman Armenians, as well as the recognition that a significant number of Armenians had survived the genocide by becoming Muslims.

In the eight years since the emergence of the public debate on Islamized Armenians, at least eighteen books of memoir, fiction, and research have directly addressed the issue. Among them is this volume, whose first Turkish edition sold out in two months. Currently, in its second

edition, it has also been translated into French and Eastern Armenian. In the meantime, *Anneannem* has been translated into eleven languages, reaching an increasingly global audience. In November 2013, the Hrant Dink Foundation organized an international conference on Islamized Armenians in Istanbul, the first international conference to be held on this topic.

This new visibility comes with its own questions: Why now? And why not until now? How can we account for the growing interest in this particular group of survivors? And how should we understand the nine decades of silence—a silence shared by Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, and international scholarly communities and publics? The postscript is a first attempt at answering these questions.

Here, we would like to share two other trajectories, one disturbing and tragic, and the other perhaps more hopeful. The tragic trajectory ends with the enormous loss of Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist, writer, intellectual, and dear friend to us both, and most especially to Fethiye Çetin, who was at the same time his lawyer. He was killed on January 19, 2007, in front of Agos, the prominent Armenian Turkish newspaper he had cofounded ten years before. Dink's and Agos's troubles with state institutions have a long history, but 2004 was particularly fraught, marking the beginning of his tragic end. It was in this year that he published the controversial story about Sabiha Gökçen, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's adopted daughter and the world's first woman combat pilot, being an Armenian orphan of 1915. Soon after this story was republished in a major daily, Dink and Agos started receiving threats. The harsh declaration of denial published by the Military Chief of Staff was followed by demonstrations by ultranationalists in front of the Agos office and law cases being filed for Hrant Dink's various speeches and writings. Three years and several court cases and defamation campaigns later, Dink was taken away from us.

As shocking as his assassination was, the funeral, which brought together close to 200,000 people walking eight kilometers from the Agos office to the Armenian cemetery where he would be buried, caused great nationalist anxiety and debate. This silent mourners carried two signs, "We are all Armenians" and "We are all Hrant Dink," in three languages (Turkish, Armenian, and Kurdish), drawing attention to the high numbers of Turkish citizens who were ready to challenge the basic claims of Turkish nationalism by identifying politically as Armenians, as well as to the possible number of Islamized Armenian descendants among them.

By 2007, there were already several books on Islamized Armenians in the public domain, and these had initiated public debate. Dink himself was greatly excited by this “unsilencing” of one of the most commonly shared “family secrets” since 1915. He had been personally involved not just in Fethiye Çetin’s own search for her Armenian relatives but in the international matching of stories of Armenians and their distant Muslim relatives in Turkey, witnessing both the life-shattering traumas and life-changing reunions. During the last dinner Ayşe Gül Altınay and Hrant Dink shared, only a few weeks before his death, he talked at length about the foreword he wanted to write for this very book. It gives us great pain to present this book without his foreword . . .

One of Dink’s many remarkable qualities was his eternally hopeful disposition, which was underpinned by a very powerful politics of hope. When he first published the obituary written by Fethiye Çetin for her grandmother in *Agos*, he was hopeful that this would initiate a whole new process of coming to terms, as well as a process of family reunion. The 219th issue of *Agos* in June 2000 has the news of Çetin’s first conversation (over the phone) with her Armenian relatives in the United States, the Gadarian family, as one of its front-page stories. Right on top of it is another that features Gerard Libaridian’s recent visit to Istanbul, where he speaks about the prospects and challenges of a lasting peace process in the Caucasus between Armenia, Turkey, and Azerbaijan. One can say that the creative collaboration that has led to the English publication of this book is the fruit of a match made by Dink (and *Agos*) more than thirteen years ago.

The whole back page of the same *Agos* issue carries a very moving piece by Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian, who initiated the search for the Gadarian family of Habab, (known as Havav village in Palu district in its original Armenian rendering), his own hometown, after reading the obituary by Çetin published in the French Armenian newspaper *Haratch*. He writes about both his personal response to Çetin’s and Heranush’s story, and the cold reception of this news by the Diaspora Armenians. Archbishop Mesrob Ashjian, who we have recently learned was a dear lifetime friend of Gerard Libaridian, is no longer with us. Like Dink, he would probably have been moved even more deeply by the recent gatherings of Armenians, Turks, Kurds, and others in his village Habab, to work for or to celebrate the restoration of the two historical fountains that had been ruined after the tragic removal and massacre of the Armenians of Habab in 1915.

Habab, officially renamed as Ekinözü, was Fethiye Çetin's grandmother's village. Upon reading her book, several villagers of Habab, including the owner of the property on which the ruined fountains lay, contacted Çetin and asked her to visit the village and help them restore these fountains. The restoration of the Habab fountains constitutes a unique example of engaging with the Armenian heritage of Anatolia. The first "civil" effort to restore an old Armenian site, the Habab restoration process was undertaken by the Hrant Dink Foundation, and Çetin personally, with the support of both local villagers and officials, and of the National Ministry of Culture and Tourism.

Yet, it was no easy process to engage any of these actors in a potentially unsettling project of creating an alternative local memory. After a long process of obtaining official permissions and support, Çetin and her project partners from the Hrant Dink Foundation, spent four months in Habab, convincing local villagers and officials, and engaging them in the restoration project, as well as coordinating the inflow of volunteers from Turkey and abroad, including Armenia. In the end, the fountains were opened in November 2011 with ceremonies on two consecutive days—the first day with local officials and male villagers, as well as journalists and members of the Dink family and Hrant Dink Foundation; the second day with feminists from different parts of the country and the women villagers. Many villagers identify the second ceremony with women and children as being a historic day, particularly for the women of the village.

A third ceremony around the fountains took place in May 2012, this time with the participation of more than one thousand people from around Turkey, the Armenian Diaspora, and the surrounding villages. When it was time for singing and dancing to songs in Armenian, Kurdish, Arabic, and Turkish, not all of the local officials felt comfortable joining in, but the villagers and their guests from Istanbul and from around the world had already filled the space by the constructed stage, making it difficult to move.

Anoush Suni, who has done ethnographic research during the restoration process, argues that "the restoration project represents a triple act of resistance, firstly as it creates a space to acknowledge and give voice to silenced histories, secondly through its gender activism in placing women's stories at the center of the project, and [...] finally, through the physical reconstruction of the fountains, the project is confronting and reversing processes of destruction."¹

Can one reverse the processes of destruction beyond physical restoration of select sites? Can one relieve the great pain endured by the Armenians of Anatolia and by the Islamized survivors, who could barely “whisper” their stories to their children and grandchildren, if at all? Can one repair the deep anxieties, pain, fear, and suffering that fell upon not only the converted survivors, but their loved ones who survived in the diaspora or in Istanbul (with, or often without, the knowledge of their survival) or their children and grandchildren whose lives continue to be shaped by such feelings? It is not possible to answer any of these difficult questions with a “yes.”

Even so, the stories in this book also point to the ongoing survival of hope, along with love, courage, compassion, and curiosity. What gives us hope is that the grandchildren who share their stories in this book have expressed great relief upon reading the whole book in its original Turkish edition and finding out that they were not alone. Since the publication of the book, many others have come forward, asking us to publish their stories as well—some turned out to be old friends, who for the first time were sharing this aspect of their lives with us. Since its publication, the book has not received a single negative public response in Turkey, apart from a review published in the book section of *Agos*, criticizing us for not being “political” enough in pushing for the recognition of the Armenian genocide. As this critique suggests, the public debate in Turkey since the early 2000s has experienced a major transformation.

The flowing waters of the Habab fountains bear witness to this transformation at the very local level. From whispers to flowing waters . . . It has not been easy, and it has been the most vulnerable who have paid the highest price, most catastrophically Hrant Dink himself. This book is dedicated to his loving memory . . . We continue to be inspired by his courage, sincerity, and his powerful politics of hope.

May the waters continue to flow—washing away barriers, touching, connecting, transforming, soothing, healing . . .

October 2013
Istanbul

Note

1. Anoush Suni, “Renovation as Resistance: The Restoration of the Habab Fountains.” Conference presentation, Hrant Dink Memorial Workshop 2012: New Forms of Social Protest, Istanbul, May 25, 2012.



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Preface to the Turkish Edition

Fethiye Çetin

When I was a child, my grandmother would take me by the hand and together we would set out on journeys. The place we went most often to, during our summer holidays, was Çermik, where my grandmother had ceased to be the Armenian Heranush and began to live as Seher, the name by which she would continue to be known for the rest of her life. This was where she passed from childhood to adolescence, where she married and gave birth to her first children.

For me, Çermik meant going to houses where my grandmother engaged in endless conversations while I played in gardens full of fruit trees and secret hiding places; it meant branches laden with fruit, and fruit laid away in secret stores.

Many years later, my grandmother took me out on a journey very different from the ones I had known as a child. There were no gardens on this journey, no games or jokes. We went to other places, to witness other scenes, and though they were shocking, painful, and distressing, they were, in equal measure, illuminating and liberating.

This journey did not end just with new questions: it offered a chance to be free of the limits and chains of official history and official ideology, and of the nationalist mentality from which they sprang; at the same time, it offered an opportunity to escape from all forms of captivity, and cross all borders.

My own journey began when I heard my grandmother's story. I went on to make other discoveries; I confronted difficult truths; there were lines I had to cross and chains I had to break, just as there were deeply concealed prejudices to overcome; it was a journey that cleansed my conscience and put me in touch with my humanity, and it is not over

yet. It still offers me a chance to restore and enrich my understanding of what it means to be human.

Many others traveled with me. With only our hearts as guides, we moved forward together, keeping our eyes open, asking questions, making discoveries, and sharing them; we cried together, laughed together, and—most important of all—we learned together.

When my grandmother was first telling me her story, she would pause after each painful memory, and fall into silence, before saying, “May those days be gone, and may they never come back.” When you first hear these words, you like to think that no one could ever object to them, and that everyone surely must agree, but putting this wish into practice is not as easy as it first appears. It is a formidable process, but it is a duty we cannot shirk.

If we really mean it when we say, “May those days be gone, may they never come back, and may no one ever have to live through them ever again,” then there is a way forward, and it begins with understanding the past.

This is the first thing we must do if we are to understand what it is that must go and never come back, we must first know what those days were all about, and what it meant to go through them.

What My Grandmother Recalled

From the time she first shared her story, my grandmother spoke of lonely, forgotten, silent men and women who had been taken away from their parents and their families and all those they loved—taken away from everything they knew, in short—to live, one might say, among the enemy. She spoke of their being never quite accepted and so suffering as a consequence, and she spoke of the longings she and so many others carried with them throughout their lives.

These men and women revisited their painful memories in the silence of their own hearts, and if they sometimes confided in those whom they knew best, it was only in whispers: they did not dare speak louder about the traumas of the past. They were not able to hear their own voices.

However, there were those, and there are many examples of this, who did not wish their painful experiences to be forgotten. When they were old, or on the brink of death, they whispered the whole truth to those closest to them, thus liberating themselves from the inner voice that had for so long been locked inside them.

We, the grandchildren, who have inherited those sorrows and traumatic memories from our grandmothers and grandfathers, are aware

that our voices can be heard, and so they will be. Our voices have echoed throughout these lands and beyond.

The stories of other grandparents who shared that fate have been told now. They have made their way into books and documentaries that have themselves crossed borders. My own book has been translated into seven languages.¹ In all these languages, the book went into second printings.

The Power of Stories

Hundreds of grandchildren came to me with stories about their grandparents that are similar to mine, often through channels that boggle the mind. Mostly, we were meeting for the first time, but we opened our hearts and shared our stories, and by the time we parted, we felt as if we had been friends for forty years. In spite of all the differences between us, we were able to savor together the reawakened consciences, the intimacy, and the enchanting strength that their stories brought.

After I published *My Grandmother* in 2004, people would come up to me wherever I went, sometimes even stopping me in the street, and what these many hundreds of people told me was that they had begun asking themselves this question: “Why is it that my grandmother had no relatives, why was she all alone?” Or: “Why do I know nothing about my family’s history before my grandfather?”

From the moment we first entertain the idea that our grandmother or grandfather might come from another religion, or another ethnic group, from the moment we begin to wonder if a grandparent belongs to a group defined as “the enemy”—that is the moment when we can no longer think of that group as the “other.”

That is when we want to know more about the history of the land in which we grew up. That is when we start noticing details that until that moment were lost on us: names, monuments, and ruins all start to mean something. We notice a local history that doesn’t match up with official history. It becomes apparent that the claim to ethnic purity is one great colossal lie.

My Grandmother is a story set in Turkey but its sorrows are universal. That is why it has affected readers in all languages it has reached, and why all readers have found in it something of themselves. When we went to speak in other countries, we heard of many similar sorrows, especially from the Second World War, in packed rooms where mothers and grandmothers shared their stories.

Since publishing *My Grandmother*, I have met up several times with friends and others from the town where I grew up. Each had a story to tell, and when we realized that, until that moment, we had not shared the stories our elders passed on to us—that, until that moment, we had not known each other well enough—we were shocked.

The Grandchildren's Stories That Can Finally Be Shared

It might seem otherwise, but you will soon see that the present book is turned not toward the past but to the present, and not toward death but toward life. It does not seek to draw us into dark thoughts; rather, it offers hope. That is because this book does not belong to the grandparents. It belongs to the grandchildren. At last the grandchildren have a chance to talk about how they were themselves affected by the sorrows their elders passed on to them, about how they have carried them through life, how they propose to talk about their painful history, and how they can find a way to move beyond them. Each of their stories affects us in a different way, but together they call to mind Paul Rusesabagina's* matchless words:

We cannot change the past,
But we can make the future better.

I hope that these stories will serve as an encouragement, however small, to listen to each other's sorrows, and seek to understand them, and in so doing, to work toward a better future.

May those days never return, and may we always know peace in a world of freedom and justice

* *Rusesabagina (b. Ruanda, 1954) saved the lives of roughly 1260 Tutsis and Hutus during the genocide that began on April 6, 1994.*

Note

1. Since this text was written for the original Turkish publication, this book has been translated and published in three more languages.

Acknowledgments

This book is a direct descendent of the human rights lawyer Fethiye Çetin's memoir, *Anneannem* (My Grandmother). Published by Metis Publishing in 2004, *Anneannem* tells how Fethiye Çetin discovered in adulthood that her grandmother was Armenian. After sharing her grandmother's story, she goes on to describe how it affected her, and how it changed her life. Many others with similar histories got in touch with Fethiye Çetin after reading the book. In 2005, we began to seek out these and other grandchildren, to listen to their stories.

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