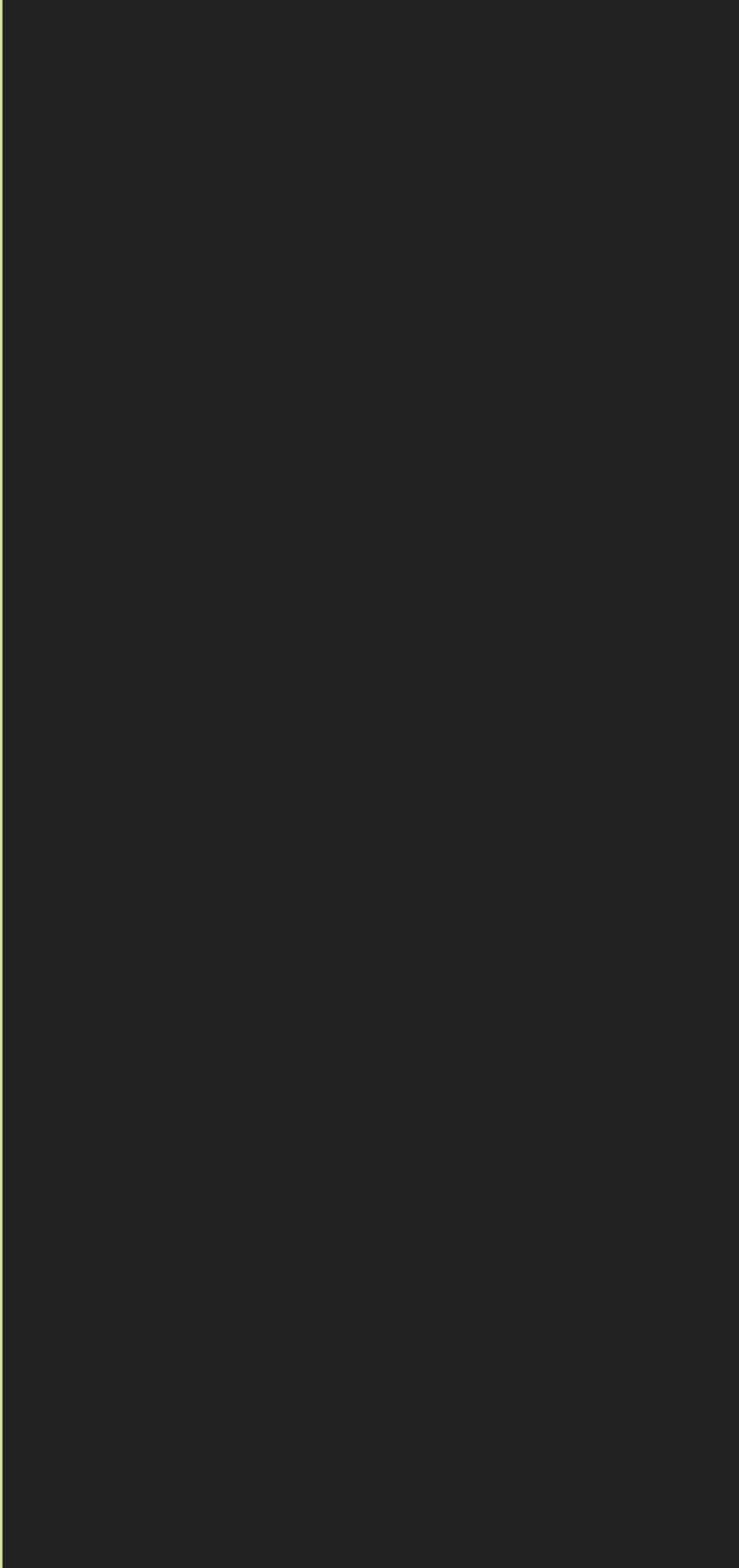


Juodas
sodas
kalnuose

/

A Black
Garden
In The
Mountains



Ieva Sriešliūtė

Taikos nerimas / Peace anxiety

Bahar Rumelili. Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties¹

[...]

I argue that conflicts help contain the existential anxieties – of death, meaninglessness, and condemnation – respectively by establishing definite objects of fear, producing systems of meaning that clearly differentiate friends from enemies, and setting unequivocal moral standards premised on the necessity for survival. Consequently, conflict transformation/ resolution unleashes these anxieties by diminishing and eliminating fears, undermining certitude, generating moral ambiguities, and most importantly, by disrupting the routines and habits through which these anxieties are contained in everyday life. The anxieties that are unleashed by conflict resolution and peace processes can be aptly referred to as ‘peace anxieties’.

Peace anxieties generate a striving to re-establish the pre-existing objects of fear, systems of meaning and standards of moral purpose. Yet, at the same time, due to its inherent ambivalence and positive potential, anxiety provides the actor with that critical, yet fleeting, moment of freedom and choice so intensely studied by Kierkegaard (1980, 1983). At this moment of freedom, one possibility is to contain anxiety by returning to the pre-established object of fear, the enemy, and its associated system of meaning and standard of moral purpose. The other is to choose anxiety over fear in the short-run, with the expectation that in the long-run, new systems of meaning, and standards of moral purpose will be established wherein the act of peace-making will be deemed to be one of courage. Thus, anxiety is an integral part of conflict resolution/peace processes, and performs a dual role: on the one hand, it generates a longing for a return to conflict and to its established objects of fear, systems of meaning, and standards of morality. On the other, and at the same time, by unsettling the established systems of meaning, it provides the actors with the

1 Excerpt from *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (ed. Bahar Rumelili), 2015, p. 13 – 16

necessary realm of individual freedom and choice to enact change. In other words, in the context of conflict resolution/peace processes, anxiety emerges as both a necessary condition and an undermining force.

Although anxieties are experienced individually, the objects of fear, systems of meaning, and standards of morality through which individuals contain anxiety are socially and politically produced. What unleashes anxiety at the individual level, therefore, are disruptions in the political and social processes through which anxieties have heretofore been contained.

These political and social processes implicate the society and state in anxiety, and complicate and circumscribe the positive potential and realm of choice present in anxiety. In addition, anxiety, like other emotions, also has a social dimension that cannot be reduced to the aggregation of individual-level emotions.² Emotions are socially meaningful practices and therefore, the reflexive awareness and practical expression of anxiety rests on shared understandings and expectations (Bialy-Mattern 2011). Therefore, although ontological security and anxiety are essentially individual-level concepts, it would be misplaced to study their role in conflict resolution/peace processes purely at the individual level, independently of their societal and state level repercussions and collective dimension.

[...]

Securitization is a key political process in the containment of anxiety and production of ontological security. The vast literature on securitization theory has studied how, by pronouncing certain issues as security issues, political actors instil a sense of imminent threat and danger in society and legitimize exceptional measures. Apart from the seminal study of Huysmans (1998), less attention has been paid to the ways in which securitization is implicated in the production of ontological security. Securitization establishes objects of fear, which serves to displace the existential anxieties onto concrete threats that can be managed, attacked, and endured. But we cannot assume that all acts of securitization will achieve the necessary resonance and thereby succeed in generating a framework of ontological security. In that respect, conflicts structure, regularize, and provide a stable and legitimate focal point for securitization practices. In other words, conflicts facilitate the production of ontological security, by regularizing and legitimating securitization.

[...]

The key to conflict resolution lies in this very possibility of containing anxiety without securitization. Regardless of the method through which it is achieved, conflict resolution necessitates and entails a process of desecuritization, which removes the object of fear from the security realm, and diminishes fears by de-elevating the perception of threat and instilling a sense of normalcy (Wæver 1995; Hansen 2012). Because conflicts integrally link processes of securitization and meaning constitution, desecuritization activates a simultaneous process of deconstruction of these systems of meaning and moral standard.³ When the object of fear is removed from the security realm, its status as the Other becomes ambiguous, and this ambiguity unsettles the previously taken-for-granted self-understandings about being and identity (Rumelili forthcoming).

Roxana Gabriela Andrei. Nagorno-Karabakh: Why do Peace Processes Fail 'From the Inside'?²

In January 2019, one of the most enduring protracted conflicts in Europe, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, took a noteworthy turn of rhetoric when the foreign ministers of Armenia and Azerbaijan announced, during the Paris meeting of the Organisation's for Security and Cooperation (OSCE) Minsk Group, that they agreed to take "concrete measures to prepare the populations for peace" (OSCE, 2019). This narrative shift is particularly important after almost three years of intensified geopolitical, hard security-oriented narratives around Nagorno-Karabakh, after the April 2016 events when the highest degree of armed violence since the cease fire in 1994 has resurged. It had brought the South Caucasus back on the table of the conflict and security talks among the main regional state and institutional players and it questioned once more the efficiency of the regional peace processes. What is however notable, besides the change in the narratives of the conflict parties, is their call upon the necessity to prepare the populations to accept a peace deal and the initial unpopularity of this decision for compromise within the general public of Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Azerbaijan, despite three decades of conflict.

[...]

When the collective identity of an actor has been built on narratives and routines of conflict that have become deeply entrenched, the attempts to eliminate the conflict on which it has been forged may be perceived as a cause of anxiety, as a threat to the identity itself. These actors, facing the loss of their ontological security, will take seemingly contradictory steps in order to preserve their identity and their sense of stability (Huysmans, 1998; McSweeney, 2004; Steele, 2008), even if this means endangering their physical security (Mitzen, 2006). Under these circumstance, conflict may become a preference (Mitzen, 2006), a routine in itself (Rumelili, 2015a).

In the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the announcement during the OSCE Minsk Group Paris meeting in January 2019, that the populations of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and consequently of Nagorno-Karabakh should prepare for peace, after three decades of conflict, may have initially acted as a perturbing existential crisis that came to disrupt long-time entrenched routines and narratives of conflict and enmity. Although deep-seeded habits and self-narratives have the potential to change and to be reformulated over time, I argue that the actors' resistance to change, in this case to peace, may be instrumentalized as a mean to preserve their sense of stability, their self identities, and thus their sense of ontological security. Although a peace compromise is expected to enhance their physical security, the collective actors engaged in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict may find it initially more secure to maintain the old self-narratives and identities of adversaries and a rhetoric of war.

Especially in the case of protracted conflicts, such as the one in

Nagorno-Karabakh, actors find it difficult to change their narratives and the enemy images developed about their traditional rivals (Loizides, 2015; Rumelili, 2015a), even when the adversaries signal their intention to cooperate (Rumelili, 2015a). As a consequence, when confronted with the possibility of the conflict to end, they might develop “peace anxieties” (Rumelili, 2015a, p. 13) and they may choose to maintain conflict as a mean to preserve their ontological security (Rumelili, 2015b; Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2017), their previous stability and routine.

In addition to Loizides’ and Rumelili’s theoretical inputs on actors’ difficulty to change their narratives about their adversaries when they manifest their intention to cooperate I argue that, when confronted with the perspective of a sudden change, in the form of a peace compromise, the actors may find it hard to renounce their previous self-narratives and images about themselves even when the signal for cooperation comes from their own community. Therefore, it is not a lack of trust in the long-term enemy that impedes actors to embrace peace, but their own insecurities about the disturbance the change would bring.

Armenia, the de facto winner of the war, will, in this context, consider both material and cognitive benefits of peace. A change in the status quo might be resisted for the fear of losing the territories under its control, but also its self-identity entrenched during the past three decades of conflict, namely the status and prestige of a winner and protector of Nagorno-Karabakh. Moreover, the change would imply a difficult to accept shift in its self-narrative and image about its enduring rival, Azerbaijan, from enemy to potential partner in the region. For some Armenian politicians, who have been long using the war in Nagorno-Karabakh as a strong catalyst for electoral gains, peace would imply an important disruption in their narratives that would perturb their own identity claims which have been forged on Armenia’s image as an enemy of Azerbaijan and winner of the war.

For the de facto leadership of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has had a major influence on the Armenia’s politics over the past decades and it even provided its patron state with two presidents, a change in the status quo would not only disrupt the physical security of being politically, militarily and economically protected by Armenia, but also a critical perturbation in its narratives about the Self and Other. Thus, it would have to change the enemy routines into accepting back the Azerbaijanis and narrate them, from now on, as co-existing neighbors. As a consequence, the return of the occupied territories to Azerbaijan and a peace compromise would imply not only a perception of a possible threat to Armenia’s and Nagorno-Karabakh’s physical security, but also an essential disruption of their ontological security, of an essential part of their self-identity which has been constructed around the war.

For Azerbaijan, an initial refrain from embracing a peace compromise would mainly revolve around the anxiety of losing its ontological security, although such evolution would enhance its physical security, as well as that of the Azerbaijanis in Nagorno-Karabakh. Whilst Azerbaijan would have the most to gain in terms of material benefits and physical security, in the face of a peace prospect, the self-narratives of some of its officials remained rigid and centered around the same discursive routines that have modeled the political and military identity of some of its central figures over the past decades. To this, it might have also contributed the self-perception of status and prestige developed during the past years, due to Azerbaijan’s economic boost follow-

ing the revenues from natural gas and oil exports, which have also facilitated the development of its military power, successfully tested during the April 2016 clashes with Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh. A part of Azerbaijan might find it difficult to reconcile with the image of a compromising, good-willing neighbor. For this reason, Azerbaijan might choose to take all necessary measures to maintain their ontological security, their entrenched routines and narratives, even if this might limit their physical security.

Douglas Becker. Memory and trauma as elements of identity in foreign policymaking³

[...]

The nature of the trauma story

The first issue is to ask what the nature of the victimhood is. In essence, is the victim's trauma story one of exclusion or inclusion? Is the victim state seeking to have its trauma recorded and recognized within a broader narrative of trauma, or is it presenting its trauma as a unique experience that might 'crowd out' other potential traumas? And is the victim state responsible for the trauma of other states, and hence might a recognition of its own victimhood potentially create a moral equivalency argument to blunt criticism against the state for its own crimes?

Consider, for example, the difference between the trauma story of Armenians and Jews as victims of genocide contrasted with the trauma of Germany and Japan in the Second World War. In the former case, the challenge that they have faced within their trauma response is an international recognition of their suffering. In both cases, this recognition has enabled their communities to have their own independent states. Certainly, there are significantly different paths and different levels of controversy surrounding their 'right to exist'. Armenians chose the protection of the Soviet Union following the First World War, rather than to join with the Turks, who had committed genocide against them. Their independence arose exogenously of their trauma, because they were simply one of the 15 Soviet republics to gain independence upon the breakup of the Soviet Union. Israel faces a more existential threat, with the international perception that the moral authority under which they made their declaration of independence and secured recognition for their state was owed to the trauma experience of the Jews under the Holocaust. Yet both have adopted a more aggressive foreign policy stance, particularly when faced with threats to their security. Both embody the fight mechanism in their post-trauma stress responses.

For the Armenians, genocide is the lens through which they experience the world around them. Following the breakup of the Soviet Union, the presence of a large Armenian community in the Azerbaijani region of Nagorno-Karabakh was history repeating itself. A large Armenian Christian community living surrounded by a Muslim 'Turkish' community suggested

3 Excerpt from *Memory and Trauma in International Relations* (ed. Dovile Budryte, Erica Resende), 2014, p. 64 - 65

a definitive repeat of the 1915 genocide. Western states – most notably the United States, with its sizable Armenian population and its historic interest in Armenia (see, for example, Balakian 2004) – supported Armenia, and muted any criticism of its aggression and human rights abuses. The war that ensued in the 1990s and continues to this day is a direct result of the Armenian historical memory as to the threat posed by an Armenian minority in a Muslim nation. The collective memory of victimhood was then wielded as a sword by Armenian militias, as well as the newly independent state, to propel an aggressive, militaristic foreign policy.

The declaration of an independent Nagorno-Karabakh region has created an ongoing war between that entity, backed by Armenia (with Armenians insisting on its independence, and that therefore all negotiations must be between that republic and Azerbaijan) and the host government. One of the roots of the conflict lies in how the maps were drawn by Stalin in the early 1920s, isolating an Armenian community within the borders of Azerbaijan. But at the root of Armenia's insistence on supporting this breakaway republic lies its historical memory of the genocide. First, the importance of territory in the Armenian national psyche is reinforced with the loss of Armenian territory as a result of Turkish expulsions during the genocide. The threat of expulsion of Armenians from the Karabakh mountain region (despite the lack of an Azerbaijani threat to do so) reminds the Armenians of a painful trauma. Second, the fact that Azerbaijanis are Muslims (as well as Turkic, with historical implications) reinforces the Armenian conception that all Turkic Muslim peoples threaten Armenians. The lens through which Armenians view this conflict is distinctly that of the memory of trauma. The foundational cause of this conflict is memory of trauma.

[...]





Prieš karą mes buvome kaimynai / Before War We Used To Be Neighbours

**Svetlana Alexievich.
On Romeo and Juliet... Except
their names were Margarita
and Abulfaz⁴**

Margarita K., Armenian refugee, 41 years old

[...]

The most beautiful holiday, everyone's favorite, was Navruz. Navruz Bayram is the celebration of the arrival of spring. People waited for it all year long, it's celebrated for seven days. During Navruz, people didn't close their gates or doors...no lock and keys day or night. We'd make bonfires...bonfires burned on the roofs and in the courtyards. The whole city was filled with bonfires! People would throw fragrant rue into the fire and ask for happiness, saying "Sarylygin sene, gyrgyzylygin mene"—"My hardships to you, my happiness to me." "Gyrgyzylygin mene..." Anyone could go into anyone else's house—and everyone would be welcomed as a guest, served milk[...]"

And on the seventh day, the most important day of the holiday, everyone came together at one table...We would all carry our tables into the courtyard and make one long, long table. This table would be covered in Georgian khinkali, Armenian boraki and basturma, Russian bliny, Tatar echnpochmak, Ukrainian vareniki, meat and chestnuts Azeri-style...Miss Klava would

4 Excerpt from Svetlana Alexeyevich, *Second hand time*, 2013

bring her signature “herring under a fur coat” and Miss Sarah her stuffed fish. We drank wine and Armenian cognac. And Azerbaijani cognac. We sang Armenian and Azerbaijani songs. And the Russian “Katyusha”: “The apple and pear trees were in bloom...The mists swam over the river...” Finally, it would be time for dessert: bakhlava, sheker-churek...To me, these are still the most delicious things in the world! My mother was the best at making sweet pastries. “What magical hands you have, Knarik! What light dough!” The neighbors would always praise her.

My mother was close with Zeinab, and Zeinab had two daughters and a son, Anar, who was in the same class as me at school. “You’ll marry your daughter to my Anar,” Zeinab would joke. “Then we’ll be relatives.” [She talks to herself.] I’m not going to cry... There’s no need to cry... When the pogroms on Armenians began... Zeinab, our sweet Auntie Zeinab and her son Anar... We fled, and kind people hid us... While we were gone, they took our refrigerator and television in the night... our gas stove and our new Yugoslavian wall cabinet... Anar and his friends ran into my husband and beat him with iron rods. “What kind of Azerbaijani are you? You’re a traitor! You live with an Armenian woman—our enemy!” My friend took me in to live with her, she hid me up in her attic... Every night, they would unseal the attic, feed me, and then I would have to go back up there, and they would nail the door shut. Dead shut. If anyone found me, they’d kill me! When I came out of hiding, my bangs had gone gray... [Very quietly.] I tell people: No need to cry about me... but here I am crying... When we were in school, I had a crush on Anar, he was good-looking. One time, we even kissed... “Hello, Queen!” He’d wait for me at the gates of our school. “Hello, Queen!”

[...]

My grandmother had survived the Armenian pogrom of 1915. I remember when I was little, she would tell me about it: “When I was a little girl like you, they murdered my father, my mother, and my aunt. And all of our sheep...” My grandma always had sad eyes. “Our neighbors were the ones who did it... Before that, they had been normal—you could even say good—people. We all sat around the same table on holidays...” I thought that it had all been so long ago... Could something like that really happen today? I asked my mother: “Mama, did you notice that the boys in the courtyard have stopped playing war and started playing killing Armenians? Who taught them that?” “Quiet, daughter. Or the neighbors will hear you.” My mother was always crying. She just sat there and wept. Once, I saw the children dragging some dummy through the courtyard and poking it with sticks, children’s daggers. “Who’s that?” I called over little Orkhan, Zeinab’s grandson. “That’s an old Armenian woman. We’re killing her. Auntie Rita, what are you? Why do you have a Russian name?” My mother had named me... Mama liked Russian names. Her whole life, she’d dreamed of seeing Moscow...

My father had abandoned us, he lived with another woman, but he was still my father. I went to him with the news: “Papa, I’m getting married!” “Is he a good guy?” “Very. But his name is Abulfaz...” My father didn’t say anything, he wanted me to be happy. But I had fallen in love with a Muslim... he prayed to a different God. My father said nothing. And then Abulfaz came

to our house: “I want to ask for your hand.” “But why are you here alone without your groomsmen? Where are your relatives?” “They’re all against it, but I don’t need anyone but you.” And I...I didn’t need anyone else, either. What could we do with our love?

The things happening all around us were very different from what was happening inside of us...radically different. At night, the city was chillingly quiet...How can it go on like this, I can’t stand it. What is all this—the horror! During the day, people weren’t laughing anymore, they weren’t joking around, they’d stopped buying flowers. It used to be that there was always someone walking down the street with a bouquet. People kissing here and there. Now the same people were walking down the street avoiding one another’s gaze...Something loomed over everyone and everything, some sort of foreboding...

I can’t remember everything precisely anymore...the situation changed from day to day. Today, everyone knows about Sumgait...it’s only thirty kilometers outside of Baku...The first pogrom happened there. One of the girls we worked with was from there. One day, after everyone had gone home, she started staying at the telegraph office. She’d spend the night in the storeroom. She walked around in tears, wouldn’t even look out the window, and didn’t speak to anyone. We asked her what was wrong, she wouldn’t say. And when she finally opened her mouth and started telling us... I wished I’d never heard...I didn’t want to hear about those things! I didn’t want to hear anything! What was going on! What is this—how could they! “What happened to your house?” “It was looted.” “What happened to your parents?” “They took my mother out into the courtyard, stripped her naked, and threw her on the fire! And then they forced my pregnant sister to dance around the fire... Then, after they killed her, they dug the baby out of her with metal rods...” “Shut up! Shut up!” “My father was hacked to pieces with an ax...My relatives only recognized him by his shoes...” “Stop! I’m begging you!” “Men, young and old, in groups of twenty or thirty, got together and started breaking into the houses where Armenian families lived. They killed and raped daughters in front of their fathers, wives in front of husbands...” “Stop it! Just cry instead.” But she wouldn’t cry. She was too scared...“They torched cars. At the cemetery, they knocked over tombstones with Armenian last names on them. They even hate the dead...” “Hush! Are people really capable of such things?!” All of us became afraid of her...Meanwhile, on television, on the radio, and in newspapers, there wasn’t a single word about Sumgait. All we had were rumors...Much later, people would ask me: “How did you survive? How could you go on living after all that?”

Spring came. Women put on their light dresses...It was so beautiful all around us, and yet there was so much terror! Do you understand...? And the sea.

I was preparing for our wedding...My mother pleaded, “Daughter, think about what you’re doing.” My father said nothing. Abulfaz and I would walk down the street together, sometimes we would run into his sisters: “Why did you tell me she’s ugly? Look at what a cute little girl she is.” Whenever they saw us, they’d whisper those kinds of things to each other. Abulfaz! Abulfaz! I begged him: “We should get married, but do we really need to have

a big wedding?” “What’s wrong with you? My people believe that a person’s life consists of just three days: the day you’re born, the day you get married, and the day you die.” He had to have a proper wedding. Without a wedding, we couldn’t be happy. His parents were against it—categorically against it! They gave him no money for the wedding and wouldn’t even return the money he’d earned himself. But everything had to be done according to custom, according to the traditions...Azerbaijani traditions are beautiful, I love them. The first time the groomsmen come, they are heard out and sent away, and only on the second try do they get an agreement or rejection. That’s when they drink wine. Then it’s the groom’s job to buy a white dress and a ring, and bring them to the bride’s house in the morning. And it has to be on a sunny day...because you have to convince happiness to stay, you have to ward off the forces of darkness. The bride accepts the gifts and thanks the groom, kissing him in front of everyone. She wears a white shawl over her shoulders, a symbol of her purity. On the wedding day, the couple is brought gifts by both sides of the family, they receive a mountain of gifts that are placed on large trays and tied with red ribbons. They also blow up hundreds of balloons and fly them over the bride’s house for several days afterward, the longer the better, it means that their love is strong and mutual.

My wedding...our wedding...all of the gifts from both the bride’s side and the groom’s side were purchased by my mother...and the white dress and the gold ring, too. At the table, before the first toast, members of the bride’s family are supposed to get up and praise the bride and the groom’s parents, the groom. My grandfather spoke about me, and when he was finished, he asked Abulfaz, “And who is going to say something about you?” “I’ll say it myself,” he replied. “I love your daughter. I love her more than life itself.” The way he said that got everyone on his side. They threw small change and rice at us, for happiness and wealth.

[...]

My Baku...

The sea...

The sun...

It’s not my Baku anymore...

[...]

We named our daughter Ira...Irinka...We decided that she should have a Russian name, it might protect her. The first time Abulfaz held her, he cried. He wept with joy... There was joy in those days, as well. Our joy! Around then, his mother got sick...He started going to see his family all the time. When he’d come back from seeing them...I won’t be able to find the words...for how he was when he’d come back. It was like he was a stranger with a face I didn’t recognize. Of course, I was scared. There were tons of refugees flooding the city, Azerbaijani families fleeing Armenia. They showed up empty-handed, without anything, exactly the same way Armenians fled Baku. And they told the same stories. Oh! It was all identical. They spoke about Khodjali, where there had been a pogrom on Azerbaijanis. About how the Armenians had murdered them, throwing women out of windows...cutting people’s heads off... pissing on the dead...No horror film can scare me now! I’ve seen so much and

heard so much—too much! I couldn't sleep at night, I kept turning and turning it over in my mind—we simply had to leave. We just had to! We couldn't go on like this, I couldn't. Run...run to forget...and if I had stayed, I would have died. I'm sure I would have died...

My mother left first...After her, it was my father with his second family. Then me and my daughter. We had false documents, passports with Azerbaijani last names...It took us three months to buy the tickets, that's how long the lines were! When we got on the airplane, there were more cases of fruit and cardboard boxes of flowers than passengers. Business! Business was booming. In front of us, there were these young Azerbaijanis who drank wine the whole way there. They said they were leaving because they didn't want to kill anyone. They didn't want to go to war and die. It was 1991...The fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh was in full swing...Our fellow passengers confessed: "We don't want to lie down under a tank. We're not ready." In Moscow, our cousin came to meet us at the airport... "Where's Abulfaz?" "He'll be here in a month." My relatives got together that evening. Everyone begged me: "Talk, please talk, don't be scared. Silent people get sick." A month later, I started talking, even though I thought I'd never talk again. That I'd shut up for good. I waited, and waited...and waited...Abulfaz didn't join us in a month...or six months. It took him seven years. Seven years...seven...If it hadn't been for my daughter, I wouldn't have made it. My daughter saved me. For her sake, I held on with all my strength. In order to survive, you need to find at least the thinnest thread...In order to survive waiting that long...It was morning, just another morning...He stepped into our apartment and embraced us. Then he just stood there. One minute he was standing there in the entrance, and the next, I was watching him collapse in slow motion. Moments later, he was lying on the floor, still in his coat and hat. We dragged him to the sofa and rested him on top of it. We got so scared: We had to call a doctor, but how? We weren't registered to live in Moscow, we didn't have insurance. We were refugees! As we were trying to figure out what to do, my mother burst into tears. My daughter was in the corner, staring with wild eyes...We'd waited for Papa for so long, and now, here he was, dying. Finally, he opened his eyes: "I don't need a doctor, don't worry. It's over! I'm home." I'm going to cry now...Now I'm going to cry...[For the first time in our entire conversation, she breaks down in tears.] How could I not cry? For a month, he followed me around the apartment on his knees, kissing my hands. "What are you trying to say?" "I love you." "Where have you been all this time?"

...They stole his passport...and after he got a new one, they did it again...It was all his relatives' fault...

...His cousins came to Baku...They'd been forced out of Yerevan where they'd lived for several generations. Every night, they'd tell stories...always making sure that he could hear...A boy had been skinned alive and hanged from a tree. They'd branded a neighbor's forehead with a hot horseshoe... And then, and then... "And where do you think you're going?" "To be with my wife." "You're leaving us for our enemy. You're no brother of ours. You're not our son."

...I'd call him...They'd say, "He's not home," and tell him that I'd called and said I was getting remarried. I kept calling and calling. His sister would answer the phone: "Forget this phone number. He's with another woman now. A Muslim."

...My father...He wanted me to be happy...He took away my passport and

gave it to some guys to put a stamp in it certifying that I was divorced. To falsify my documents. They wrote something in it, washed it off, tried to fix it, and in the end, they made a hole in my passport. "Papa! Why did you do that? You know I love him!" "You love our enemy." My passport is ruined, it's not valid anymore...

...I read Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet...two enemy families, the Capulets and the Montagues. It's about my life...I understood everything, every word... I didn't recognize my daughter. She started smiling from the moment she saw him, "Papa! Papochka!" She was little...Before he came home, she'd take his photos out of the suitcase and kiss them. But only when she thought I wasn't looking...so I wouldn't cry...

But this is not the end...You think that's it? The end? Oh no, not yet...

...We live here as though we're at war...Everywhere we go, we're foreigners. Spending time by the sea would cure me. My sea! But there's no sea anywhere near here...

[...]

Ieva Sriebaliūtė.

A Small Story on a Village Exchange

In 1989, when Armenian – Azerbaijani war over Nagorno-Karabakh region broke out, Azerbaijani minorities, persecuted in Armenia as well as Armenian minorities, persecuted in Azerbaijan, started fleeing both countries.

In the midst of war, Azerbaijani residents of Kyzyl-Shafag - a village in northern Armenia - and Armenian residents of Kerkenj - a village in central Azerbaijan - realizing they will inevitably have to flee, organized a peaceful exchange of their homes. Despite the ethnic tensions, understanding that both sides of the conflict are going through the same atrocities, Azerbaijani and Armenian minorities cooperated and helped each other relocate safely into each other's houses on the different sides of the border. Beginning with a few families, ultimately entire villages swapped.



Original agreement and the list of the people who exchanged houses. Photo by Seda Muradyan

Respecting the customs of both sides, the exchange was negotiated by the elderly of both villages. The conclusion of the agreement to swap villages was marked by an Azerbaijani ritual of “ehsan” – a feast which symbolizes the inviolability of the deal. The best cattle were slaughtered for the feast with both Azerbaijani and Armenian sides participating, eating together and making a promise to take care of each other's houses, family graves and cemeteries. The promise stands up to this day.

Nagorno-Karabakh war ended in 1994, however no peace agreement was reached and it continues to be a frozen conflict. The people who exchanged villages have not been able to return to their homes. While there are no diplomatic relations between Armenia and Azerbaijani, the two Azerbaijani and Armenian communities who took part in the exchange continue to communicate, sending each other videotapes of their villages, houses and cemetery.

Special thanks to Seda Muradyan for providing more information about this case and documentary material. Above are shots from Seda Muradyan's documentary *From Home to Home*.



... I'll send the tape to Azerbaijan.



This is the front part of the building that you left.



This is your house with a few changes.



And here is the apple tree.

