

The Armenian Weekly

Gunaysu: My Silent Sister

By [Ayse Gunaysu](#) // January 2, 2013 in [Ayse Gunaysu](#) // 0 Comments // [Email](#) // [Print](#)

The setting is a small, beautiful, historical city in the south of Poland, Wroclaw. It's night-time on the 11th of November 2012. The St. Anthony of Padua Church is full. People are listening to a small chorus singing Armenian liturgical songs. On my left I hear Talin singing along under her breath to songs she has known since her childhood, very softly and so low that I can hardly differentiate it from the chorus's singing, an unearthly sound filling the air. Looking at the small group of singers, I see faces radiating an inner light that adds something very special to the lighting of the church itself. Faces of young people from South Africa, Denmark, Spain, Poland, and other nations, singing Armenian hymns. With them is that very unusual family of Aram and Virginia Kerovpyan, with their two daughters and son, who have all dedicated themselves to Armenian traditional monophonic and modal singing; and Baron Nisan Calgiciyan, a master singer from the Armenian Holy Trinity Church in Istanbul, and his students Murat Iclinalca and Altug Yilmaz, also from Istanbul, a music researcher who for the past two years has been working with the Kerovpyan family. Listening to them is an unusual, yet very exceptional experience that makes one wish they could continue forever.



A scene from the St. Anthony of Padua Church, Wroclaw, Poland. People from South Africa, Denmark, Spain, Poland, and other nations, sing Armenian hymns with Aram and Virginia Kerovpyan, and Baron Nishan Chalgician.

The concert is the last event in the Grotowski Institute's two-day exchange called "My Silent Sister," the 2012 edition of the VoicEncounters project, organized by the institute's theater group Teatr ZAR, a multinational group formed by the apprentices of the Grotowski Institute, and founded and directed by Jaroslaw Fret. Since 2011 they have been working on a new performance project called "Armine, Sister," which explores Armenian culture and history. During expeditions to Istanbul, Western Armenia, Yerevan, and Jerusalem, ZAR members have met with singers, choir leaders, musicians, and researchers. "My Silent Sister" is meant to set the ground for the upcoming spring 2013 event, which, they say, will have as its core the heritage of Armenia and its diaspora.

My two-day Wroclaw visit was like a dream. I found myself with a group of young people, both Polish and from other parts of the world, at the Institute and the Teatr ZAR who were different—and I mean belonging to a different human species. They truly care about others, devote time to understand, feel, and reach others, want to really know what others at the other end of the world have gone through, and are still going through. And this has given all of them, without exception, a different aura, a sort of hard-to-describe transparency, a face full of meaning and understanding.

The event also included film screenings, of Serge Avedikian's "The Barking Island" and Suzanne Khardalian's "I Hate Dogs," "Back to Ararat," and the unforgettable "Grandma's Tattoos." There was also a workshop called "Modal Singing: A Journey with Sounds" with Aram and Virginia Kerovpyan; a presentation of the film project "Winds of Armine: Expedition to Anatolia" by Nathalie Rossetti and Turi Finochiaro (an exceptional couple, full of warmth and sensitive energy); and the exhibition "Images from Anatolia" by Magdalena Madra, a heartrending collection of photographs of the remains of Armenian churches, monasteries, cemeteries, and the like.

On 10th of November, historian Ara Sarafian from the Gomidas Institute, London, gave a presentation titled, "A History of Genocide: Memory, Continuity, and Defiance," accompanied by maps strikingly demonstrating the scale of destruction. His paper deals with the ongoing official Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide, using the 1916 British Parliamentary Blue Book as an example. During the talk, he pointed out the offensive nature of this denial process, wherein Turkish state institutions and their supporters (in this case the Turkish Parliament and its supporting institutions) have actively sought to assert the claim that the British fabricated the Armenian Genocide thesis during World War I, and that the British should apologize for their offense. "Although it was a ludicrous assertion, as has been shown over and over again, the Turkish effort showed the belligerency of official Turkey in denying the genocide of Armenians, both in Turkey and abroad," he said.

The same day, I was a panelist, along with Talin Suciyan from the University of Munich, with Ara Sarafian as the moderator, on a panel at the institute titled, "Witnessing After Witnessing: A History of Denial."

Suciyan drew a vivid, warmly personal, yet highly representative picture of an Armenian child growing up in an environment of denialism. "Whether it is a cemetery, or public garden of Ukraine [built on a destructed Armenian cemetery], or the house of Dadyans, or the shanty houses in the place of their house, or the house of my cousin, or the occupied house of my grandparents in that little suburb of Istanbul, or the roads that people like my grandfather, constructed anywhere in Turkey [during their compulsory additional military service, in effect a forced labor campaign designed in 1941 exclusively for non-Muslims], or the public space where people were banned to talk in our mother tongue, there is one thing which is in common: the toil, the labor, the houses, the cemetery, the district, the language, our very existence,

is a matter of obscurity," she said.

The whole thing—the performances, the presentations, the generosity of the institute, the warm-heartedness, kindness, and close-to-heart approach of the people of the institute; the Polish people of Wroclaw who, although naturally not familiar with the Armenian Genocide or the state of affairs in Turkey, filled the room in any event—was all unbelievably moving, enriching, and encouraging. The generosity of the institute, first and foremost by Director Jaroslaw Fret, then dear Ditte, Magda, Nini, Dan, Tornek, Maite (who took care of us that cold night, brought us—Talin and I—hot soup and made us feel as if we had met a sister we were unaware of until then), and all the others whose names I cannot remember, was a blessing. Simply knowing them, having the mere knowledge of their existence and their heartfelt efforts, make me feel safer in this unsafe world, and have strengthened my belief in what I do, as well.

For the full text of Gunaysu's talk during the aforementioned panel discussion, click [here](#).



About Ayse Gunaysu

Ayse Gunaysu is a professional translator, human rights advocate, and feminist. She has been a member of the Committee Against Racism and Discrimination of the Human Rights Association of Turkey (Istanbul branch) since 1995, and was a columnist in a pro-Kurdish daily from 2005–07. Since 2008, she writes a bi-weekly column, titled "Letters from Istanbul," for the Armenian Weekly. [More Posts](#)

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