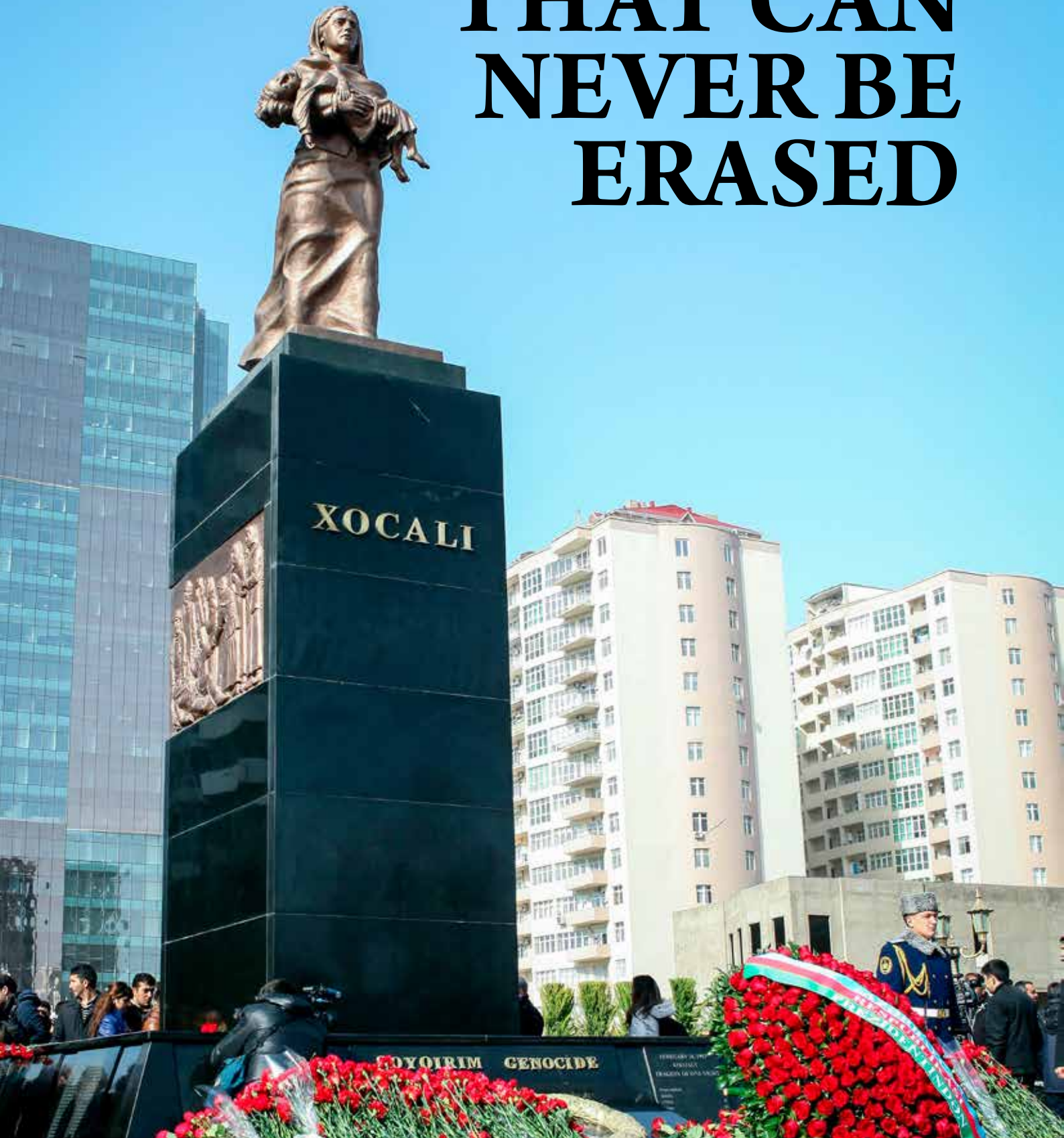


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A MEMORY THAT CAN NEVER BE ERASED



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FEBRUARY 19, 1915
ARMENIAN
TRAGEDY OR GENOCIDE

Following the threa

Clear to me on my first walk through the streets of Baku, back in April 2000, was the intriguingly vibrant history etched into its buildings: and plaques remembering celebrated inhabitants. However, I noted some listed as dying in 1937 and 1938, and I soon picked up on their cause of death - Stalin. Relieved of the Stalinist yoke in 1991, Azerbaijan has since then prospered.

But students also updated me on more recent tragedies that threatened their nation's independence: massacres and destruction resulting from Armenia's early 90s invasion and occupation of the western territories of Karabakh and seven surrounding districts. Up to one million Azerbaijanis, around 15% of the population, were driven out of their homes, some 20,000 lost their lives.

And two stories stood out for the destructive horror of the invasion: that of Khojaly town, whose people were driven out in 1992 on a cold 26 February night, wading a river, climbing snow-covered forested hills and, by early morning, into a clearing where a line of men waited to gun them down; 613 died, many others were captured, tortured and held as hostages.

Then there was Aghdam, a city described by a French Reuters' journalist who'd witnessed the straggling arrival there of Khojaly survivors; "I remember it being so green."

Since described as a "Hiroshima of the Caucasus", a stone upon another stone was a rare sight in Aghdam by the time the lands were liberated and returned to Azerbaijan, in November 2020.

So I wondered how people who'd lived so long in internal exile felt about the return; their memories, the intervening 28 years, and their hopes.

Yasemen Hasanova - Khojaly

I first met Yasemen khanim in 2011 during research for a magazine article. This was about the massacre of her fellow citizens of Khojaly by Armenians invading Karabakh (<https://is.gd/hV4gNP>). Azerbaijan worked with a will to accommodate the million homeless, but the interviews we did were in her still temporary accommodation in a former Soviet sanatorium on the Caspian Sea coast that had been allocated to Khojaly Internally Displaced People (IDPs). The conversations with Yasemen khanim and fellow survivors were so taxing that our translator had to take moments to recover her composure and quell a lump in her throat, before she could pass on what they had told her. 12-year-old Yasemen had waded the River Gargar and climbed



through that snow-coated forest to the fusillade of bullets.

We soon decided that to properly convey the magnitude of what had been inflicted on the people of Khojaly required more than an article; the eventual result was a book: *Khojaly Witness of a War Crime: Armenia in the Dock* (2015).

By 2019, frustrations had grown with Armenia's continued occupation of Azerbaijan's western lands and with international gamesmanship, especially in the form of the cynically impotent OSCE Minsk Group. We met up with Yasemen khanim again to show the reality; the sorrow, but also the kindness and strength of spirit of these lovely people, to forefront their humanity over the sterility of international politics and statistics. A video resulted: *Khojaly: the Grief of a Nation 2019* (+2021 postscript) <https://is.gd/cOUiEt>

Eventually, and inevitably, Azerbaijan's patience expired and, after almost 30 years of futile international politicking, the country asserted its rights. In the 44-day 2nd Karabakh War of October-November 2020, with astonishing speed, spirit and technique, it reclaimed all the territories that had been illegally occupied.

Enter the positive

Although reconstruction began almost immediately, and at pace, this did not mean that people could immediately return to their former homes. The extent of wanton destruction that had been meted out to those lands was almost as distressing as that inflicted on its inhabitants. Thus, following victory, the conflicting emotions: for a wrong righted, for the lives lost, for homes and lands returned, for their total despoliation...

So what did news of the return mean to someone who had lost father, mother and home to the invasion and occupation?

Yasemen, now in much more suitable accommodation near Baku, had moved on, as a school teacher like her father, who had died trying to fight off the invaders; a rifle against tanks. She taught at the Khojaly School in Baku for 15 years, and I'd asked her what she told her pupils about the home town she'd been forced to leave: "I tell them how beautiful it was."

Every piece of land...like someone calling

"I didn't know if I was happy or sad. Happy, but then... the loss of martyrs. Time seems frozen. Sad, after a childish feeling that my parents would be there to greet me. Every piece of land there has associations, like someone calling.

I sensed my Mum standing at the window, her short-sleeved arms folded, as she leaned on the ledge, calling me from the window. They say my voice is like hers.



I know that things have changed in Khojaly; the Gargar is still there, but the smaller streams have gone. The springs have gone; even the one whose water I'd bring for my Dad's tea. The jasmine tree has gone."



Yasemen's younger brother, eight years old in 1992, had been back to Khojaly and told her the changes.

"Our father's bed was there, and there was still soil in front of the kitchen, but the vine had been cut down. The house had been occupied by Armenians from Syria. The apple tree had gone - the one with an apple I'd (secretly) bitten with my Dad saying it didn't look like a bird's bite."

To return?

Asking her about herself going there, also produced a mixture of emotions:

"I'd like my visit to be recorded... Some returners have said they can feel the ghosts and I worry that by going there I'll be stepping on bones. They have also said they don't feel good when sleeping alone. As if it's still happening."

Yasemen only found out years later what had happened to her mother, who'd refused to leave without her husband who was out trying to stop the Armenians. A photograph was then published that included her mother's body lying before her grandfather's house. What happened to her aunt and cousins is still unknown. They feared that they'd been dumped in their garden's well, but only (!) animal bones had been found there. The search for bodies buried in Khojaly continues.

"I am happy that justice is being done... but they took my childhood and my dream of my father tying the red ribbon around me for my wedding. That was always a time of great joy in Khojaly, and to hear of people who lost their parents is unbearable."

Her thoughts constantly turned back to her parents. "19 March was my mother's birthday [we met on 9 March]. My father's body was brought to Baku - happy and sad. I see them in our house in my dreams. Father taught the 10th and 11th grades in the Central School. He was like a friend to the students. He was very enthusiastic about Azerbaijan's independence. He was killed deep in the forest on 29 February, he would say, 'Never be a captive' and he carried a spare bullet in his pocket. They had to use a sleigh to retrieve his body."

Yasemen's father, Tofiq Huseynov, is a National Hero of Azerbaijan and is buried in *Shahidler Khiyabani* (Martyrs' Avenue) on the heights above Baku.

"Of course I would live there again, and I hope they will name the school after my father."



Ilgar Rasul - Aghdam

Born in 1966, in Aghdam city, Ilgar Rasul was forced out of his home in 1993 by the Armenian invasion. Why the occupiers needed Aghdam so much is still something of a mystery. When it was reclaimed in 2020, there was nothing left of it; the destruction was total. (see <https://is.gd/2qWs7F>)

A green and pleasant land

Ilgar was born into a family of intellect; his father a journalist and municipal official, and his mother engaged in Eastern Studies. He backs up the French journalist's vision of a city "so green" with his account of their large, 19th century house being surrounded by trees and a water channel in which women stood up to their knees washing clothes. The boys would also use nets to fish out the fallen fruit: quince, nuts and peaches. Black and white mulberries were more normally harvested, and eaten, when local boys gathered to hold the blanket into which the fruit fell from the shaken trees.

"The whole city was green, with flowers and wild herbs that were used to make pickles. Butterflies were everywhere; discarded pips and fruit stones soon sprouted."



After schooling within walking distance, he studied car mechanics at the local Technical College before doing two years' Soviet army service in Moscow.

"People from all over Karabakh came to study at the Technical College. There were good teachers and a good social life."

By the time he graduated - in 1989 with a 'Red' (excellent) diploma - there were already rumblings to the west. And the bombing of Aghdam began in 1992.

Ilgar got work in Russia two months before the occupation; his mother, who was then head of libraries, stayed on, but was forced to leave in July 1993. Ilgar, of course, could not return home.

What was left?

Well, there was nothing at all left of the Imaret Stadium, once home to the Qarabag football club, now champions of Azerbaijan, with famed exploits in Europe's Champions' League.

"I played as a defender for the College team and also for a local area team we called the Firemen. We once

played Qarabag in Imaret Stadium. The Firemen managed to come together again and two years ago we played a memorial 30th anniversary game."

A few of the steps up to Ilgar's house now climb to nothingness. All the trees have gone: a huge walnut orchard, the spreading plane trees. The water channels are dry. The large cemetery, with the graves of his father and grandfather, is gone.

A numbness

"This was something you never imagine experiencing. You hear about such things, but words can't describe the reality. It's not pain, it's a numbness; the mind just cannot accept that there's nothing left.





Then you understand that an enemy did this; you feel sorry for them - humans can't do this, how could they be so bad, so cruel? It's heartbreaking that a nation could show itself to the world as the destroyer of everything, even the trees. Why destroy, and not use? Only the mosque was left; as a lookout post, or maybe to appease Iran; anyway, they kept animals there."

After losing his home:

"It took time to adapt, we'd lost everything, our neighbours, our routine. In Baku we were put into student rooms. It was a shock to lose home and space. And it took time before I could get work and an apartment.

In a way, though, I was lucky; some people were still living in railway wagons.

Creative resolve

I changed my career from engineer to journalism, following my father. And now I am also a writer, with six books published, novels and autobiography."

Also of huge significance for Ilgar was the liberation of Shusha from occupation on 8 November 2020.

"In Aghdam there was always great interest in Shusha. We couldn't live without Shusha, it was the key. Every summer we spent two months in Shusha." (See <https://is.gd/8m1MHV>)



Out of Darkness...

In some ways, the impetus for this article came from the national response in Azerbaijan to the recovery of its lands in 2020. Plans were immediately announced and soon put into effect towards restoration. A visit to the rubble of Aghdam dropped my jaw and the contrast between those who destroyed and those who are constructing could not be greater. The interviews with

Yasemen khanim and Ilgar bey underlined the difference. After enduring the most atrocious circumstances imaginable they refused to be beaten down. By coincidence, they both resolved to continue a family tradition, one in education, the other in journalism and literature. My own home town in the UK has the motto, 'Out of darkness cometh light', and that is what I took from these two survivors and thrivers against horrific odds. ✨