

Armenians and The New World



300 Years Later

Once there was a little Armenian girl named Aghavni. Aghavni was ten years old. She was a happy child who loved being outdoors and playing with her friends. Aghavni didn't have a care in the world. She had an older sister and two younger brothers. Her father had died when she was very young and her mother raised the children with the help of her uncles and aunts. One of her uncles was the priest of the Armenian church in their village. Aghavni's family was very prosperous and happy. Everyone in the town respected them.

One day Aghavni's uncle, the Der Hayr, came to visit the family. He looked very preoccupied. Usually he would greet Aghavni with a big hug and kiss, but on this day she heard her mother and Der Hayr whispering in the kitchen. They both looked sad and troubled.

That evening Aghavni and her brothers and sisters were in for a bigger surprise. Her mother woke them up in the middle of the night, bundled them up in warm clothes and they left the house.

When they reached the edge of the town, Aghavni noticed that all of her aunts and uncles and cousins were waiting for them, and together they began their silent journey into the darkness. For days the family walked. There was not much food to eat; Aghavni's mother had only brought dried noodles with her. Every evening the family would gather around a fire and pray together and eat their small meal of boiled noodles. Most of the

time Aghavni was very hungry and tired.

Finally the family reached a large city, the city of Aleppo in Syria. Aghavni's uncle came to her one day and said:

"My darling Aghavni, you are so young and you seem to be getting weaker every day. I have found a nice family for you to live with for a while. You will stay with them and work for them. Soon when all of our troubles are over, I will come after you."

Aghavni was very frightened to leave her family but she knew that her uncle would return for her.

She lived with a French family. They spoke no Armenian and Aghavni spoke no French, but somehow through sign language they understood each other.

Aghavni did all of the cleaning in the house, making beds, scrubbing floors, cleaning bathrooms, dusting, and washing windows. At the end of the day she went to her small room where she ate her supper and cried herself to sleep.

Before she knew it, it was morning and she dragged herself up for another day of cleaning for the French family. The days went by slowly. Whenever Aghavni went to town she saw thousands of Armenians camped with no food. They were dirty and starving, they had no place to go. Then she felt lucky that her uncle had found a place for her. It made her struggle to go on, knowing that one day she would be back with her family.

Aghavni lived in Aleppo for three



years. She learned French and Arabic but she never forgot her Armenian language or her belief in God. Her uncle wrote letters to her from Jerusalem promising to return for her.

One bright sunny day Aghavni was in the courtyard of the house. She had taken the beautiful Oriental carpets outside and was beating them to clean them. She saw a man dressed in black come toward her. She looked at him from afar, then looked again, then started in disbelief. Her Der Hayr had come for her. She ran to him and kissed his hands, then hugged him and hugged him.

Aghavni and her uncle left Aleppo the next morning. They traveled to Jerusalem. The excitement was almost too much for Aghavni. Not only was she reunited with her dear uncle, but she was to go to the Holy Land, the place that she had always heard about but never dreamed she would see.

In Jerusalem, Aghavni lived with her uncle and aunt and her cousins in the Armenian Monastery. She loved visiting all the holy places where Christ had walked.

She visited the tomb of Christ, the very spot of the resurrection. And later she had a cross tattooed on her arm to show that she had visited the tomb of Christ.

Aghavni was happy living with her aunt and uncle. She missed her mother and sister and brothers, but they lived many miles away in Constantinople. The family had been separated now for four years. She forgot what her brothers looked like. They had been babies when they were separated.

One day, Aghavni's uncle received a letter from America from a young man who had been a neighbor of their family in their village. This young man had gone to America to work and was living with his cousins in a rooming house. When he and Aghavni were small children they used to play together. Their mothers had promised each other that when their children grew up they would be married. Now, many years later, from 10,000 miles away, Alzar was asking for Aghavni's hand in marriage. She was only 14 years old but she had already seen so much of the world, from her own small village to the big bustling city of Aleppo where there

were so many strange sounds and sights and smells, to the peaceful beauty and holiness of Jerusalem. Now she would go on the longest journey of her life, to America, a journey that would take ten months to complete, to meet a childhood playmate who was to become her husband. She remembered him as a boy but now he was a man, a stranger.

Aghavni bid her uncle and his family good-bye, and she traveled to Constantinople to start her journey with her mother. They boarded a steamship in Constantinople and crossed the Mediterranean Sea to Marseille, France.

They waited for four months in Marseille to receive permission to cross the Atlantic by ship. Their journey took three months. When they reached the shore of America, they saw the Statue of Liberty and realized the promise of a new life. Aghavni and her mother went to Ellis Island where they had to remain for one week for a physical examination. Then they took a train to Detroit, Michigan, to meet Aghavni's future husband, Alzar.

Five years earlier in 1915, Aghavni had left her secure village in fright. Her childhood had ended the night that the whole family left. Her beautiful life had ended. Who would think that five years later she would change from a child to a woman in a new world — a world of opportunity and plenty and best of all, freedom. America was her new world. She married Alzar a few months later and raised two children. Soon she became a proud citizen of the United States of America. Her brothers and sister came to America, but she never again saw her beloved uncle, the sweet

Der Hayr who had saved the family from death and who had spent his life helping and protecting them.

Today, we are all here because of our brave grandparents who came to the New World from the Old World. They raised families, they started businesses, they built Armenian churches, and they became citizens of the United States of America. They never forgot their homeland, but they loved America as their *new land*.

The Pilgrims landed in America on Plymouth Rock in 1620. Three hundred years later in 1920, Aghavni came to the land first settled by the Pilgrims to start her own new world.

When the Pilgrims had been in the New World for one year they celebrated their new life and God's gift to them with a great feast. Today we call this feast Thanksgiving Day. It is celebrated on the last Thursday in November everywhere in America.

When the Armenians came to America, they wanted to thank God in their own way so they also had a huge feast. This feast is called a "madagh."



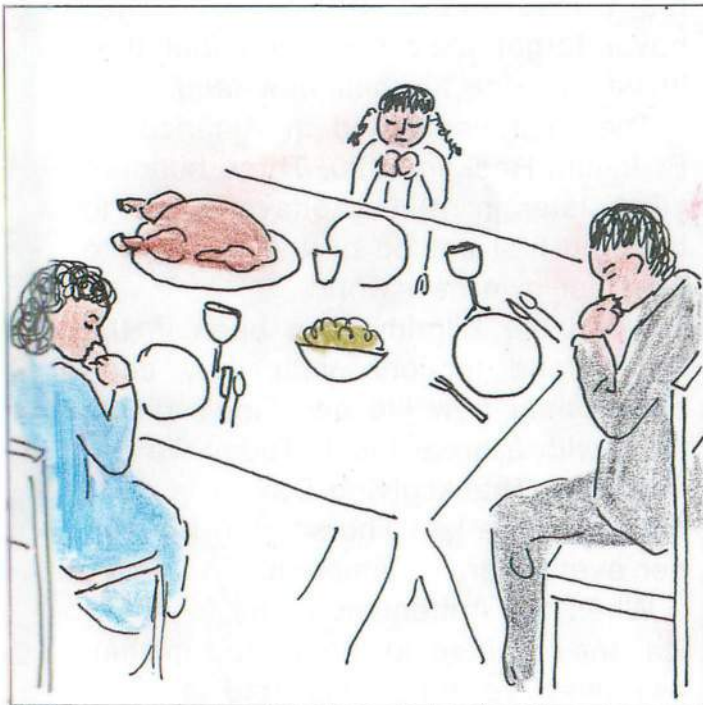
Look at the two pictures below. One is of a modern Thanksgiving and the other is a Madagh. How are they similar?

Who is at the Thanksgiving?
Who is at the madagh?

What are they eating at the Thanksgiving?

What are they eating at the madagh?

Why do we celebrate Thanksgiving and madagh?



Ask your grandparents or parents to tell you how they first came to this country. Draw a picture or write the story down so you can share it with the class next week.