

Alina spent eight years of her childhood in a war zone. She and her family lived in Tehran, Iran, when Iraq invaded in 1980. The two countries had border disputes, especially about navigation rights along the Shatt al-Arab waterway, which gave both countries access to the Arabian Sea.

In just fifty-two days of the eight-year war, Tehran was hit by 118 missiles, according to the US National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health.

(<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22663911>)

“It was terrible,” Alina says. “I was ten or eleven years old at that time. There was a siren when the enemy was attacking and we went to an underground place at our school. I always felt we were going to get killed, we weren’t going to see our parents again and our parents wouldn’t see us. We had to turn off the lights at home so the enemy couldn’t see us. We put a special tape on the windows so the glass wouldn’t break when the bombs went off. Most of the windows in our house were cracked. I was always thinking that one of these enemies was under my bed or hiding in the house.”

It wasn’t the first time that Alina’s family, which is Armenian, had faced devastating violence. Two generations earlier, approximately one and a half million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire were massacred by Turks.

Armenians were a Christian minority in the Islamic empire. Some were prominent and influential, and that became a source of resentment and suspicion among Muslims.

In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, Armenians were considered a serious threat to the Ottoman Empire, which was fighting on the side of Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire against Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries, France, the Russian Empire and the United States.

The genocide began on April 24, 1915, the day the Turkish government rounded up more than two hundred Armenian intellectuals and community leaders. In the years that followed, Turks killed able-bodied men or used them as forced labor in the army. It sent women, children, the elderly and the infirm on marches through the Mesopotamian desert without food or water, where they either dropped dead or were shot when they stopped to rest. Turks drowned Armenians in rivers, threw them off cliffs, crucified them, and burned them alive. They kidnapped Armenian children and gave them to Turkish families.

The Turkish government hunted down Armenians as they fled to Syria, Greece, Russia, Iran, the United States and other countries. By the end of World War I, just three years after the genocide began, fewer than ten percent of Armenians remained in the Ottoman Empire.

Most of Alina’s and her husband’s families emigrated to Iran, where they already had family, and where Armenians have lived for centuries.

The majority of Armenians adapted to life in Iran, learning Arabic, Farsi and English. They also maintained their identity, living in a tight-knit community with their own churches, schools and cultural centers, and marching on the anniversary of the genocide every year.

Although most Iranians are kind and mellow, Alina says, the government discriminated against Armenians. “We couldn’t work in banks, the government or public places. They paid poor Muslims to beat Armenians, kill them, break our windows, burn our churches. And women in Iran were not safe. Men could do anything to them. I wouldn’t want any women to have to live the life I had there.”

Alina and her husband decided to leave Iran with their young daughter. She became a hairdresser so she could find work wherever they settled. They immigrated to the United States.

Some years ago, she went to Armenia for the first time, for a family gathering. The country is isolated and very poor, but the people are generous, she says. "They open a table for you and put so many things to eat on it. They offer everything they have."

They're proud that their country was one of the first to become Christian, barely three hundred years after the birth of Christ. This seems less important to Armenians who live outside the country.

And underneath it all, Armenians in Armenia are proud of their toughness. "They didn't leave during the genocide," Alina says. "They told us they're fighters. If someone forces them to do something, they fight back."

But even in Armenia, where people live everyday with the scars of the genocide, economics comes first. Almost all their consumer goods come from Turkey.

Alina, her husband and their daughter moved to Southern California twelve years ago to be near her husband's family in a well-established Iranian Armenian community. She began working in a hair salon owned by an Armenian hairdresser from Iran.

The family, which now includes two daughters, attends the local Iranian Armenian church. "Being Christian is really important to me," Alina says. "I want my children to have God in their life. Whatever else they have, to appreciate God."

She's also continued the Armenian tradition of piling her dining table high with cookies, squares and dates for guests. "When clients come to my house, they say I'm doing too much for them," she says. "I tell them, this is my culture. I'm transferring it to my kids. This is the way we show we care. We want you to enjoy it."

With Alina, everything comes down to family – and she's had an effect on at least one of her clients. "A client told me she was missing her daughter, who was away at university. My client bought her a plane ticket to fly home and they had a big family dinner for her. They hadn't had one for seventeen or eighteen years."

At the same time, Alina doesn't believe, as some in her community do, that her family needs to stay in their close-knit group and the children need to go to a private Armenian school.

"In Iran, Armenians were forced to stay with Armenians," she says. "I always wanted to get to know other people, and I want my children to get to know everyone. There are seventy different kinds of people here. My children should know everybody. This is the best we can do for them."

With help from her hairdressing clients, she improved her English. Her children go to public school, where they're learning Spanish. They learned Armenian from Alina and her husband.

Alina's daughter plays in an Armenian girls' basketball league, where any girl can join as long as she has one Armenian parent. But one girl has a Muslim parent as well, and some of the other parents don't want her on the team. Alina shakes her head.

Her openmindedness is tempered, though. "With any new ideas, I have to think about each one," she says.

And she worries that her daughters' exposure to people of different cultures might lead them away from the Armenian values she treasures, especially when they choose a husband.

"I can see some of my friends who married Americans and other kinds of people. Their life is totally different. I have a friend whose husband isn't Armenian. You know how important family is to us. He ignores her parents when they visit and goes to another room."

She's noticed young people being disrespectful to older people here. "Respect for the elderly is also very important," she says.

She sees a cultural difference at house parties as well. At some parties she's been to, she says, people just grab some food and go to a corner and talk to one person instead of everyone chatting around the table.

"When I talk to my kids, I give them these examples," she says. "I tell them it's not bad to fall in love with someone from outside. You have to make sure he's Christian, for sure. And I remind them that they have relatives here who don't speak English, and how would their husband talk to them?"