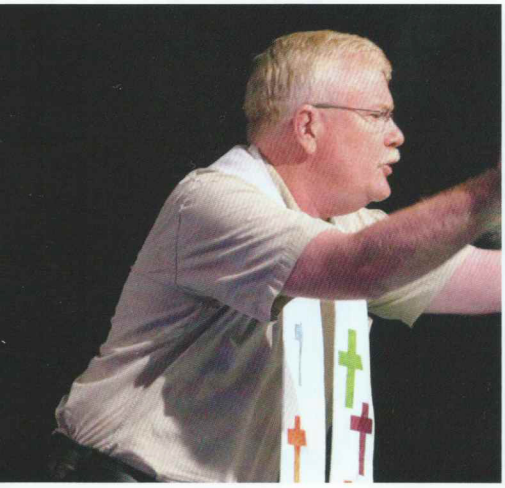
Volume 5 • Issue 2 • Summer 2015

The Racial Ethnic TORCH

BIGTENT

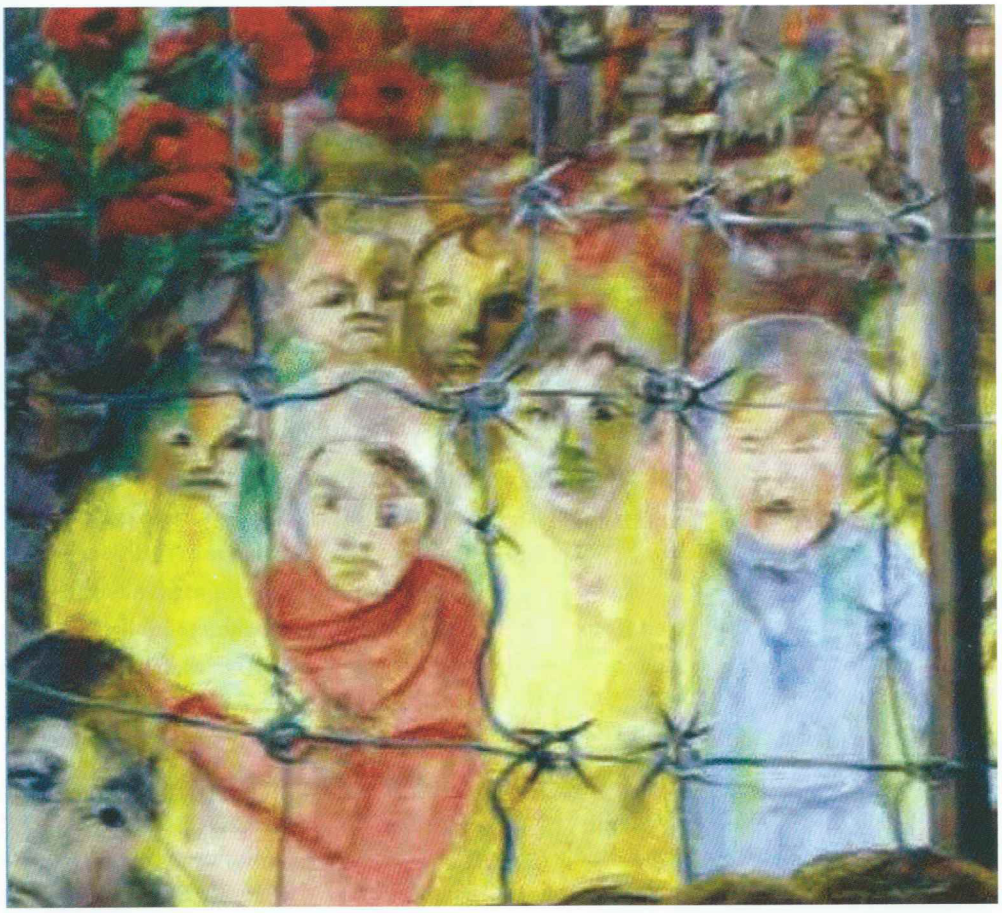


GROW | TRANSFORM | EMPOWER | LEAD | DEVELOP

An Artists Journey: Lucy Janjigian

by Kristena Morse

Born in Jerusalem and of Armenian descent, Lucy Janjigian spent her early years in an English mission school, where she studied English and Arabic. "I grew up in a very diverse area. I played with Muslim, Arabic, Christian, and many other children who lived in my neighborhood. We all played together and learned together and really enjoyed the time we had together." That all changed for Lucy in 1947 when the United Nations voted to partition Palestine. "With that division, my world completely changed. People were displaced and homes were taken and demolished."



As violence and unrest in Palestine escalated, Lucy's family relocated to the Transjordan region. "We spent the summer of 1948 there. When the school year was about to begin, there was no class for me where we were. I was in tenth grade, so one of the bishops in the area helped make arrangements for me to attend a boarding school in Beirut to be trained as a teacher. Nobody said, 'Where do you want to go?' or 'What do you want to do?' That just wasn't an option at that time."

She spent two years in boarding school in Lebanon at The British Lebanese Training College. After completing the program, Lucy went back to Jerusalem, where her mother and father were still living. "My father never actually left Jerusalem. My mother and I moved away when the violence escalated, but my father stayed behind to protect the students and the school where he taught. He was able to ensure that the school remained neutral and was protected in the midst of violence, as both armies wanted to use the school as a base. When the war quieted down, my father became the first non-British headmaster of the school."

Following the completion of her teaching program at 17, Lucy spent the next year working with refugees across the region. "I had to verify that the people who were looking for resources—for food, water, shelter, etc.—were, in fact, refugees. I had to verify that they had lost their jobs, their homes . . . everything. It was an incredibly painful and moving experience. Looking back, I learned a lot about myself and about others during that time. It was difficult, but moving."

While still working with refugees across the region, Lucy received a phone call from St. Paul School, the boarding school from which she had recently graduated. The principal claimed that she still owed the school money for the time she spent there as a boarding student and invited her to pay off that debt by serving as a teacher in Damascus. "I didn't have the money to pay back my debt in any other way, so I went. I spent the next year teaching seventh grade."

Shortly thereafter, her journey to the United States began to unfold, following what she calls "some sort of divine intervention." One afternoon, her brother was walking the streets of Jerusalem where he encountered a young American man who told him that he wanted to go to Petra. Lucy notes, "At that time, Petra didn't have hotels, and transportation was scarce. My father had traveled there before, so my brother invited this man to come back to our home to speak with my father to learn more and prepare for his trip." During that visit, Lucy shared

her desire to go to the United States with the visitor, who was working as a missionary in Turkey at the time. "He said to me, 'Why don't you wait for a year? Let me go back to the United States and find a way to help get you there.' That's exactly what he did."

The home where this all began to unfold wasn't a home at all, but rather the school where her father taught. In 1947, the house that Lucy and her family had been living in became part of what was known as 'no-man's-land,' and the area in front of her home became the dividing line between what is now Israel and Jordan. "One night, the apartment building behind our house, which was a Jewish apartment building, was demolished by the Jewish soldiers so they could fire against the Arabs. Our windows and all of the glassware in the house were broken. It was a terrifying, terrifying night. We left the next morning and never returned."

After her encounter with the American man in her family's tiny apartment at the school, Lucy found herself on a path that led her out of the violence and the chaos and to the United States. In 1952—the year she taught school in Damascus—Lucy received a scholarship to attend Heidelberg College in Tiffin, Ohio. "Because of my teaching certificate, I received a one-year credit at Heidelberg and a three-year scholarship with an assistantship to cover the rest of my studies." From there, she received a fellowship to attend Emory University, where she earned a degree in plant ecology. She also met her husband during her time at Emory, and the two were married in 1956. Shortly thereafter, they returned to Lebanon where Lucy worked doing soil fungus research at the American University at Beirut. About a year and a half after the couple moved to Lebanon, her husband was sent to the United States for a business trip and she tagged along. "I had been missing the United States, so I asked him if I could go too. We were headed to New York City. On the day that we landed in the United States, marines landed in Lebanon and civil war ensued. We never returned to our home there."

Instead, she and her husband worked to build a life for themselves in New York City. Lucy took a job at Columbia Medical Center in the dermatology department, where she worked for several years. During that time, the couple also established citizenship and eventually obtained green cards. They also began building a life for themselves in the faith community, frequently attending church services at the Armenian Church in New York City. "After we had children and moved out of the city, it became too difficult for us to attend church there. We found a lovely Presbyterian church near our home in New Jersey and began attending there. I've been Presbyterian ever since," she notes.

She credits her experiences across the Middle East, as well as her Christian faith, as being incredibly influential to her work. "As my children grew and I found myself with more and more free time on my hands, I began asking God what he would have me do, how he would have me serve. I often thought 'I know there is more for me than this. God has a plan to use me.'" A trained biologist, Lucy began painting and taking art classes more than 40 years ago. Much of her work depicts the experiences in her life, and her work has been recognized and exhibited around the world. Her "Journey to Resurrection" series features 33 paintings that show the evolution of many years of Bible study and her personal experiences growing up in Jerusalem. Her "Uprooted" series, inspired by her parents' story, is composed of 19 paintings that depict the plight of Armenians who were victims of genocide by Ottoman Turks between 1915 and 1918.

"I've been very blessed in my life and in my work. Very, very blessed, with a beautiful family and friends, a rich life, and a wonderful church."

Lucy has been actively involved in her church as a deacon and ruling elder as well as with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) on a national level for many years. Today, she still serves as a board member of the Presbyterian Hunger Program and with the Churchwide Coordinating Team of Presbyterian Women.