



Q&A with Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch

Author of *Dance of the Banished*

Zeynep's portion of the story takes place in a tumultuous time and place: the Ottoman Empire during the Young Turk revolution and the Armenian Genocide. What challenges did you face in your research for Zeynep's perspective?

I rely heavily on first person accounts to build scenes and timelines in my novels. The problem while writing *Dance of the Banished* was that I could find no first person account from the perspective of an Alevi Kurd, even though thousands of Alevi Kurds witnessed the Genocide and their rescue operations are well-documented in other first person accounts. The trick

was to wade through first person accounts of missionaries, Genocide survivors and others and piece together what Zeynep's life would have been like during WWI and the Armenian Genocide. I also had to read up on Alevi beliefs. After I finished writing the novel, I sent it to Suleyman Goven, who is of Alevi Kurd heritage. He gave me detailed feedback to make Zeynep more authentic.

This is not the first time you have written about controversial historical events. What draws you to tell the stories that some would rather see forgotten?

I feel a responsibility to give a voice to people whose experiences have been silenced for political or religious reasons. I need to be passionate about my subject because otherwise I'd get bored with my own words. Writing these untold bits of history is my way of honouring the survivors.

Why do you think it is important for books on these subjects to be directed at children and young adults?

If I had written this book for adults I would have had to pad it with fluff and I don't like writing fluff. I wanted to write a short but powerful and historically accurate novel. That by definition is a young adult novel.

The experiences of Ali in *Dance of the Banished* were based on actual events that took place in Canada during World War I, but that were forgotten for nearly a century. How did you come across the story?

Ali is interned by Canada in WWI. I knew about this incident for quite some time as my own grandfather had been interned. What I didn't know was that 100 men who had emigrated from the Ottoman Empire and lived in Brantford had been interned. That information was brought to me by two Brantford historians. Figuring out who these men were became a journey in itself.

This year has been a time of commemoration both for the Armenian Genocide and the internment of so-called enemy aliens in Canada during World War I. You have been involved in events and speaking engagements for both. Have you had any particularly memorable experiences?

The local commemoration of the centenary of WWI internment took place on August 22, which was a Friday, and we began it at 11am. Despite it being held right before a long weekend and in the middle of a work day, the church hall was packed. Most people interned had been Ukrainian, but people from all different backgrounds came out. One woman who came out was Sharon Gashgarian, who was of Ukrainian heritage but had married an Armenian. She was blown away by the cover art on *Dance of the Banished* and contacted me later, asking permission to create a fabric art work based on the cover art. I contacted Pascal Milelli, the artist commissioned to create a painting for the cover, and he was fine with Sharon's request.

I bought the original, and showed it to Sharon.

Tonight (April 21) I did a reading at the Brantford Public Library to commemorate the Armenian Genocide. This was part of a worldwide reading event to pay tribute to the many writers who have been killed for speaking out about the Genocide. Sharon attended, and she brought her fabric art. I brought Pascal's original and we have both of them up on easels, covered with Ukrainian shawls. We revealed them both to the audience and Sharon presented me with her art work. It is breathtaking.

For the rest of the month, Sharon's fabric art will be hanging in the front window of the Brantford Public Library, surrounded by my books and other books about the Armenian Genocide.



Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch is the multi-award winning author of more than a dozen historical picture books, chapter books, and juvenile and young adult novels. Her first work of narrative non-fiction, *Last Airlift: A Vietnamese Orphan's Rescue from War*, won the Red Cedar Information Book Award, was an OLA Red Maple Honour Book, and was nominated for the Hamilton Literary Award. *Last Airlift* was followed in 2012 *One Step at a Time: A Vietnamese Child Finds Her Way*, winner of the 2014 OLA Silver Birch Non-Fiction Award. In 2008, in recognition of her outstanding achievement in the development of the culture of Ukraine, Marsha was awarded the Order of Princess Olha, which was bestowed upon her personally by the president of Ukraine. Marsha lives in Brantford, Ontario, and has been appointed to the Canadian First World War Internment Recognition Endowment Council.

LINKS

The Zoryan Institute | Primary documents from survivors of the Armenian Genocide
www.zoryaninstitute.org/collections.html

The 100 Voices Project | Descendants of survivors tell their ancestors' stories on video
www.youtube.com/channel/UC6daK6SM9HzgflInBC0Fwag

Pajama Press | Further resources about *Dance of the Banished* and Marsha Forchuk Skrypuch
pajamapress.ca/book/dance_of_the_banished