

**Witness Statement of: Rita Tankarian**

**No. of statement: 1**

**Date of statement: 24 May 2018**

## **GRENFELL TOWER PUBLIC INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF RITA TANKARIAN**

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I, RITA TANKARIAN, will say as follows:-

1. This statement is my account of events that took place on Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> June into the early hours of Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2017. I would like to make a further statement to address issues falling to be dealt with in Phase 2 of the inquiry.
2. I lived in Flat 141 on the 17<sup>th</sup> floor of Grenfell Tower with my nephew, Mesrob Khassemdjian who I call Robbie. My flat was a one bedroom flat with a kitchen, lounge and bathroom. The tenancy began in May 2003 and Robbie came to live with me 9 years ago. Although it was only a one bedroom flat it was able to accommodate Robbie, although there was not much space.

#### Background

3. I am Armenian but my family live in Lebanon. I moved to London in 1990 and my close family are split between Beirut and London. My youngest sister lives in Lebanon but my other sister, Lucy, lives in London. I have a strong relationship with all of my nephews and nieces. I am like a second mother to my sister's children, maybe because I don't have children of my own, and so when Robbie needed somewhere to live it was natural that he could stay with me.

4. Robbie came to live with me because his parents had to leave their flat in West London and move to North London. He did not want to leave the area and so came to live with me. At the time of the fire we had been living together for 9 years.
5. My flat had only one bedroom but Robbie and I never complained and were very happy living together. Robbie slept in the living room. But it was no problem really and I enjoyed living with Robbie and even following the fire we have chosen to live together. We cannot be separated and do not want the fire to have caused us to stop living together. In that small space, I always made a happy atmosphere and Robbie finished University.
6. I have scoliosis. [REDACTED] At the time the doctor told me that I must make sure not to fall or make sudden movements as doing so could cause serious damage. Having Robbie around has been a great help and comfort to me.

#### Refurbishment

7. I will speak more about the refurbishment in Phase 2 but would like to mention a few things now. During the refurbishment, the Council or TMO made several changes which were not good and they often did not tell us what they were going to do. I remember one day when Robbie and I came home. We came in and were surprised to see a gas pipe that they were installing in our flat, right in front of the door. Robbie said: "Why are you putting it there? We don't have gas, we use electricity – so why are you putting it there? We don't need it." He was worried about what would happen if there was a gas leak while we were sleeping. The gas pipes were a mess.
8. I know that it was not only us that had this problem. I spoke with one of our neighbours about it and one of the ladies said that we were lucky that it was just outside the flat, she had hers in the bedroom. Later they changed the hot water. Previously there was just one boiler for everyone in the building but they made it so that each flat needed to have its own boiler. They put the boiler in our hallway. As soon as you came into the entrance it was at the end of the door which was a stupid location for a boiler, restricting access and seemed to be cheap and unhelpful. They did all these things and it was no better. It was just a waste of time for us as we just had to clean everything up.

9. In the bathroom they took the panel under the shower and changed all of the pipes underneath and then replaced everything badly. As a result I had to buy new tiles and pay for the work to repair the bathroom to an acceptable state.

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10. On the day of the fire I had been shopping in Damasgate, an Arabic grocery store that I often go to. I like to buy a lot of food at one time that I then prepare. I remember that when Robbie got home that evening he opened the fridge and there was no space inside. He said: "You have bought the whole of Shepherd's Bush today!" I never thought that within a few hours I would not return to my flat and be on the streets.
11. On the night of the fire, I went to bed as normal and fell asleep at about 10:30pm. Up until the time I went to bed there was nothing unusual. I watched a film and took my medication as usual. I always check that Robbie is home and after he arrived home, about half an hour after I had gone to bed, I fell asleep.

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12. I was sleeping when suddenly Robbie came into my bedroom and woke me up. He said: "Aunty, wake up we have one minute to leave the flat because the whole building is on fire." Robbie is very clear minded and practical about things. I knew immediately that he was serious and that we were in danger. Straight away, I jumped from the bed. This was a very bad thing for me to do because of my back problems; I knew that I should not make any sudden movements but the urgency of the situation meant that I had to do this. Robbie has said that he has never seen me move so quickly in my life. Since then my back problems have worsened. I was scared and knew we were in a dangerous situation but I did not think that we were not going to come back to the flat. If I had realised, I would at least have brought my handbag and would have opened the wardrobe and taken out my jewellery.
13. Robbie is very decisive. He was clear minded and I think that saved us. Robbie saved my life. I had taken various tablets that evening and these make me sleep very deeply. If Robbie had not woken me up then I would never have woken up myself.

14. There was no smoke or sign of danger inside our flat. Inside the flat everything was still completely normal at that stage. In the flat there was no sign of fire. I could not smell any burning or see any smoke. As soon as we walked out of the front door to our flat I remember looking at the lifts and saw that both were out of order and in the hallway, smoke was coming from every direction.
15. That night Robbie's girlfriend, Fung was also staying with us. There was no sign of the fire inside our flat before we left but as soon as I walked out of our front door into the lift area, I could immediately smell the fire. From every corner when we opened the flat door the smoke was there. We could smell it. The smoke smelt like burning plastic but it was not hot. There was no alarm going off.
16. I walked towards the stairs. On the way out of my flat I said to Robbie that we should knock on the door to our neighbours' and friends' flat, Khadija and Sabah. I went to Khadija's flat and rang the bell but she didn't answer. Robbie told me that I should go down the stairs. I started to walk towards the stairs with Fung and Robbie started to bang on the door to Flat 143, which was Khadija's flat. Khadija opened the door and Robbie told her that there was a fire and that they should leave. When Robbie did that I think he also banged on the door to Flat 142 and then turned and joined us. Khadija went back into her flat to wake Sabah. With my walking problems it would have been easier to take the lift but when I looked both of them were out of service. While Robbie was banging on the doors to warn people I crossed the landing area from my flat and started going down the stairs with Fung.
17. In my 14 years in the Tower I had only ever used the stairs once before. It was on an occasion when there was no lift working. It was hard for me to walk because my back is bad and I have spinal problems. The walk downstairs was slow and exhausting. It took me a long time to walk down; Fung stood near me the whole time, supporting me as I walked.
18. Robbie caught up with us quite quickly and walked behind. We had only come down about 10 stairs by the time he reached us. As we started to come down, the smoke was getting thicker and thicker on the stairs. The smoke was white and grey, as if it was foggy. It smelt of burning plastic as in the hallway. As we came down the stairs,



we didn't hear any fire alarms. The only thing I could hear was a low humming noise. I have no idea what was causing it and had never heard it before.

19. Getting out of the Tower was terrifying. Smoke was on the stairs from the moment we entered the stairway and was always there as we continued walking down the stairs. The further down we went the more smoke there was, but we were always able to see where we were going. There was lighting the whole way down. I found it hard to walk and needed support to get down. The smoke continued to get worse. I was in pain and my legs were hurting but I knew I had to get out. At the beginning it was fine to see through the smoke but later, as we went further down, it became more and more hazy.
20. When we were on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor the smoke started increasing a lot. It was a grey white colour and I remember Robbie cried out to me: "Don't breathe Aunty! Cover your mouth!" I was really anxious. My breathing was getting more and more difficult. I was breathing very quickly but only shallow breaths. On the way down Fung was always next to me and Robbie was behind. In the pictures that the police have shown us, Robbie was behind me and I was holding on to Fung on one side and the hand rail on the other.
21. It was only when we reached the 4<sup>th</sup> floor that I saw a fire fighter with a hose. We had to step over the hose to carry on down the stairs. I remember Robbie told the fireman, "We are already here and I know my way" so we carried on without further help. It is good that the fire fighter didn't tell us to go back up as I believe others were told to go back upstairs. But even if we had been told to leave we would not have gone back. I know that I saw the fire hose when we were at the 4<sup>th</sup> floor because after that, below that, the style of the building changes. There were three floors further down to go and it was hard to walk. On the 4<sup>th</sup> floor I also saw a lady that I knew from the building that I always saw, who is always drunk. She was standing in front of one of the doors. I don't remember seeing anyone else on the stairs on the way down and it was only me, Robbie and Fung walking down the stairs.
22. All the way down I was scared of falling, especially because of my back. I was so anxious coming down. It was terrifying.

23. At the bottom of the stairs there were two exit doors. I don't remember which one we came out from. I just remember Robbie guiding me about which one to use. We left the building at around 1:20am. I say this because the image from a CCTV that the police have shown me has a time on it, which is 01:27.

#### Outside the Tower

24. We came out from the main entrance, turned left and walked round to where the grass is, near Kensington Leisure centre and the Academy. There were lots of people there already.
25. When we got down and reached the east side of the Tower I looked up and saw that the fire had reached the whole way to the top of the Tower. I was so shocked to see this. I looked up and it was just unbelievable: the fire was moving so quickly and I saw the fire climbing up and even wrapping around the Tower. It happened very quickly in front of my eyes. I was utterly shocked by how quickly it moved. I think it took about 10 minutes to climb up the whole side of the Tower. It looked like petrol on fire.
26. When I looked up at the Tower I saw that there were people standing by many of the windows. People were waving and shouting. I remember Robbie shouting desperately at people to come down, but at that time the fire brigade were not telling people to come out.
27. My friend, the [REDACTED] lady Karen, was left upstairs on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor because they were telling her that she shouldn't come out. She told me that on the way out, on the stairs, she lost her son. Thankfully later somebody brought the boy downstairs and they were reunited. Karen was taken to the hospital at 3:30am. Karen told me about this in the hotel. At the time, I knew that she was upstairs as I couldn't see her outside the Tower.
28. I stayed outside the Tower, on the grassy side, for about one and half hours. It was terrible. People were screaming and calling out to save those trapped inside. People were waving pillows and scarves from the windows to say that they were still in the Tower and needed to be saved.

29. When I was still inside the Tower it was very frightening. Then came the shock of seeing just how bad the fire was and how quickly it developed as I stood outside watching. After about an hour there was a helicopter circling the building. I wondered and asked Robbie why they were there. Robbie said he thought it was a BBC helicopter that had come to take pictures.
30. A couple of times as we were standing watching I asked Robbie whether he thought I would be able to go up and get my jewellery. I don't think I knew what I was saying. It was the shock of seeing my whole house, everything I owned and had worked for being lost. It was my life going up in flames. Robbie turned to me at one point and said, "Look at me and look at the building – after a couple of hours it will not be there anymore". He was right. I was terrified about where I would go and what would I do. At the time I was thinking: where are we going to stay tomorrow?
31. After some time Robbie called his father who took a taxi straight away to come to see us. Robbie's father called me and said where are you? I explained where we were but the police were not letting him get any closer. Robbie told him to take a different route around the leisure centre and he found us quite quickly. We were standing near the leisure centre with everyone else. It was horrific: the windows were on fire and crashed down out of the building. After a couple of hours I could not stay any longer. The police told us that we had to move on.

#### Khadija

32. One of my best friends in the Tower was Khadija. I have known Khadija since 2003. She lived in the Tower before me and she was my close friend for 14 years. When I first arrived from Beirut she would even cook for Robbie and help look after him. Khadija was everything to Sabah, her husband. While watching the Tower burning, I saw Sabah, standing beside me. I asked how Khadija was and he said that he didn't know and that he had lost her on the stairs between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> floor. I asked how that was possible that they had got separated? He said something happened and he hadn't been able to see her anymore and had lost her hand. I couldn't understand why he had made it out and how he was not with her. He said that he didn't know – he didn't even have the key to the flat because she had locked the door. I was upset,

shocked and terrified. The fire was getting worse and worse and now my friends were going.

33. Later, when the police took us to the Rugby Club, Robbie came to see me and said that he was worried because he didn't know where Khadija was. I was sick with worry for them and terrified that something had happened. We knew that if Khadija was not in hospital then she would have tried to find Sabah.
34. Eventually I found out that Khadija had not made it out of the building alive. I don't know what happened to her. This makes it harder to understand and move on. Maybe the smoke was too thick? Maybe she saw that the fire was too much, or maybe she went running back upstairs to try and get things and when she did try to come down perhaps the smoke was too much for her.
35. I couldn't tell Robbie that Khadija had died for ten days after I found out. I could not speak about it. The shock of the night was too much. I just could not speak about these things. It is still hard now.

#### Impact

36. We lost so much that night. It was not just a fire but a life. The fire took my memories - such as photographs of Robbie since the time that he was born. I kept my flat very well and now everything has gone. More than possessions are the loss of the neighbourhood and the people inside the Tower. Khadija was a close friend but over the years I came to recognise and say hello to most people living there. I spent a lot of time waiting for lifts and so would speak to people. I knew the Lebanese family who died upstairs on the top floor and I especially remember the little girl called Zainab. Every time I came home she was there. She used to fight with her grandma about who would open the door to the Tower.
37. I have questions about what happened and why that I want the Public Inquiry to answer. One of my main questions is why the fire brigade were telling people to stay inside their flats. It seems to me that many lives were lost because of this. Looking at the Tower that night, it was obvious the fire was too large and too serious to deal with.

**Statement of truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this statement are true.

I am willing for this statement to form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and to be published on the Inquiry's website.

Signed: 

Dated: 24-May-2018.