

Book Review

A Family's Journey through the Tortuous Roads of a Grim Survival

A special book release event was held on March 5 at Abril Bookstore in Glendale celebrating the publication of Alice Nazarian's book titled *BLOODY, BUT UNBOWED: A Memoir of the Ashur & Arshaluys Yousuf Family*. Over 125 attendees, including descendants of the late author, gathered to hear presentations made by Dr. S. Peter Cowe (UCLA Narekatsi Professor of Armenian Studies) and Dr. Rubina Peroomian (UCLA Research Associate). Speaking on behalf of the family were John Nazarian (son of author), Arda Darakjian Clark (granddaughter of author) and Haig Boyadjian (great-grandson of author).

Alice Nazarian's memoir tells the story of her parents and family in the shadow of the Armenian/Assyrian Genocide. Her father, Ashur Yousuf, a prominent Assyrian intellectual and professor at Euphrates College in Kharpert became a victim of the Genocide in 1915. Her mother, Arshaluys Yousuf, heroically struggled on after her husband's death, raising their six children while helping educate countless young children in orphanages and schools in the Middle East. The memoir comprises a narrative of the turbulent life of Arshaluys and a section devoted to writings by and about Ashur Yousuf. This English translation, while faithful to the original Armenian, contains some new material and an updated genealogy of the descendants of Ashur and Arshaluys Yousuf.

Alice Nazarian was the fifth child of Ashur and Arshaluys Yousuf. In addition to this memoir, she wrote numerous articles, poems, and lectures. She was well-known in Aleppo, Syria, as an educator and director of plays. Having lived most of her life in Aleppo, she immigrated to the United States in 1967, two years following the original Armenian publication of her memoir in Beirut. She died in Los Angeles in 1976.

Below is the review.

BY DR. RUBINA PEROOMIAN

An amazing life story!

The life of Arshaluys Yousuf, née Oghgassian, as told by her daughter Alice Nazarian!

The story of a woman, who proved herself to be way ahead of her time, who graduated from Euphrates College of Kharbert (Harput) to become a lifelong educator, loved and respected.

Arshaluys graduated college in 1895, the year when widespread massacres, later known as the Hamidian massacres engulfed the Armenian inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire. Arshaluys' erstwhile happy paternal home turned into a ruined hut of many losses, and the black veil of grief shrouded the family atmosphere.

Alice pictures the moment Arshaluys left that unhappy life as she went to join Ashur Yousuf, an educated man of Assyrian origin, in matrimony. "She came down the stairs faint-heartedly and left home without even looking back, as though haunted by the woes that had hovered above their home, and terrified by the thought of being hounded by them" (28). She was heading toward a happy life. But the wave of massacres did not spare Arshaluys' new nest of happiness. The murderers came to their door; and it was only a miracle that the new bride's tearful supplications softened the Kurds' hearts to let the man go. Ashur's life was saved. The next twenty years was peaceful and happy with five children filling Arshaluys' life with joy and happiness. Then came the dreadful year of 1915, massacres and deportations, the Genocide. Ashur Yousuf, a professor at the Euphrates College, along with many intellectuals and community leaders was



Dr. Rubina Peroomian

summoned to the police station for a "routine questioning" and never returned.

A young widow with six orphans—the sixth one born after her husband's murder—Arshaluys' life became a struggle to survive, challenged by unsurmountable tragedies and obstacles that threatened her fragile health and caused physical and emotional standstill. She fought against each one of them and rose again. "It is very much true that pain and suffering can shape character" (58), as Alice writes about her mother. In the police court, for example, she strongly and courageously stood against the police and denied his claim that mothers have helped their sons to run away to avoid forced conscription. She "lost her voice for three whole months," after she quelled a pandemonium in the girls' section of the Armenian orphanage in Dikranagert where she was the principal (87). She almost suffered a stroke from the shock of learning that an orphan girl endeared by the family had stolen all her jewelry, the gold coins that



BLOODY, BUT UNBOWED

—A Memoir of the Ashur & Arshaluys Yousuf family—

ALICE NAZARIAN

TRANSLATED BY ISIKHAN JINBASHIAN

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her orphan students had trusted her to safekeep, and a \$100 bill that Ashur's brother had sent her from United States. The incident left the family in destitute with no hope of recovery. But the most abominable outcome of this incident was that she was blasphemed, slandered and accused of staging a hoax in order to appropriate the gold coins in her safekeeping. Her reputation was ruined. She was absolutely demoralized (106-109).

Her salvation from each insufferable coup du destin, hitting her several times in her life, was not only her strong character and optimism, but her piety and the haven she found in God, "She convinced herself, that in order to be worthy of the miraculous morning of the Resurrection, she needed first to carry the cross" (36). And in response to these calamities, as Alice puts it, "she never gave up. She lifted her eyes to the altar of faith, whose stones she had always anointed with a widow's prayers" (70). "With the incense of prayers, she clung to the cross of hope" (90). "She knelt down and surrendered her cause to God, beseeching him to make the truth known to everyone and exonerate her" (109). The latter is about the theft of her valuables. There are many other examples of that sort, always resulting in a good omen, a possibility of a solution to the mayhem, thus further strengthening her faith in God's intervention. "My mother's pillar of faith had grown all the stronger" (114). The only trauma she was unable to overcome was bearing witness to the ever-deteriorating health of her youngest son, Sargon, a deep sorrow that remained with her to the grave (93). Mother's faith in the power of God and His righteousness, taking refuge in God in moments of absolute despair and crisis was certainly transmitted to her daughter. Alice too shares the same conviction, the same outlook, "What sublime serenity can come over us when we place our full trust in

Providence! The altar of mercy is wide open to all who have total faith" (145).

This extreme faith in God's mercy puzzled me. With a life full of untold misery and loss of loved ones, obstacles in every step, how could she remain so strongly optimistic and find solace in her prayers. I even considered the family's belonging to the Evangelical Protestant Church, her upbringing by her reverent father, and the influence of the missionaries, whose guardianship and care the family enjoyed, being the reason for this frame of mind. I remembered my many readings of memoirs of survivors whose prayers to God in extreme moments of agony were more like an angry protest. "O God, for what sin of mine you have put me through such harsh punishment?" I had analyzed these desperate outcries. I had explained them to be the reverberation of Armenian traditional interpretations of historical calamities, attempts to find a meaning for the nation's sufferings, based on the concept of "sin and punishment" with its roots deep into the Old Testament, the indisputable source of knowledge that found its way into Armenia with the advent of Christianity. Lo and behold, the tower of sublime faith in God's mercy and goodwill crumbled on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Nothing could resist, no values could hold in the face of the unimagined, unexpected reality in Soviet Armenia where Arshaluys found herself with her deceased son's five orphans and her ailing son, Sargon. She had hastily embraced the call for repatriation and had rushed in with the first caravan. In a letter to Alice she wrote, "If one day, I'm given the privilege of standing before God's throne, my very first entreaty will be to know what great sin I have been found guilty of, the sin for which I have been so horribly punished in this world" (207). She protested, questioned God. Prayers could not help anymore. But she stayed the same brave and vibrant woman to the end of her turbulent life.

Ashur Yousuf's tragic death had left the family bereft of any source of income. Arshaluys had to rely solely on her own means and her strong will to survive. Ashur's brother in the United States, heavily shocked upon hearing about his brother's murder, suffered nervous breakdown and was unable to work. The \$100 bill, which Arshaluys preferred not to spend and keep it for the worst day of need, was the only aid he was able to send. In order to feed her children, she began selling household valuables to the surrounding Kurdish villages, that is, emptied Armenian villages now repopulated by Kurds. But the enterprise involved a perilous journey back and forth. She had to stop and knock on other doors. She tried her hand in education, becoming successful and much loved and appreciated director of various orphanages from Kharbert to Dikranakert, to Beirut. And when orphanages were phased



Portrait of Arshaluys Yousuf (seated) with 5 of her 6 children. Standing directly above her is author Alice Nazarian

out, she tried her luck in business, opening a grocery store in Beirut with her older son, George. That was a failure, and to keep the business going, she had to sell family's remaining valuables and memorable keepsakes. But her calling was in teaching where she performed the best with her own pedagogical principles and methodology, always striving to instill strong values in her students, even using the cane if it was needed to discipline a lazy, indifferent, or ill-behaved student. Arshaluys Yousuf was an innate pedagogue and psychologist and knew her students' special predicament, most of them being Genocide survivors, who lost one or both parents, who carried the scars of the trauma they experienced, scars that needed to be healed for the sake of a normal and a fulfilling future. Arshaluys realized that and, despite her own wounds, difficulties, and financial hardship, inspired her students with hope and optimism (158-159). She was invited to take a teaching position in newly established Armenian schools in Homs and later Aleppo. She accepted the offer and worked until an advanced age of 67, when she retired officially but resumed teaching the next year to support her son Sargon, who was born with serious health problems, and her five orphaned grandchildren left behind after George's horrifying death. She managed to leave her worries and troubles and her shattered life after that tragedy at the door of the school and greet her students with the same enthusiasm and cheerful face as before (194).

Although Alice Nazarian dedicates this book to the life of her mother and speaks little of her own unfortunate experiences and the difficult childhood and adolescence she had, vignettes of her life enfold throughout. Then her own life story, her sentiments and woes take center stage beginning with a chapter titled "A Page from my Teenage Woes." Here, she particularly describes her experience in the Ghazir orphanage near Beirut, where she entered at age 13, "as though a lamb to be slaughtered" (96). And indeed, this first separation from her mother had cost her health down to hospitalization with inexplicable fever and headache. She was homesick, and nothing helped her, no

medicine, no gentle admonitions, and no fellow orphans' caress, until her mother came and took her back to the all-boys orphanage where she worked. The missionaries had given her special permission to keep the daughter despite the law prohibiting the presence of a teenage girl in a boys' orphanage. Alice's life story continues in a chapter titled "A Fateful Acquaintance," as the family moves to Homs, Syria. It is here that she meets her future husband, Nazar Nazarian, who had been a twelve-year-old boy during the Genocide, and who happened to be their next-door neighbor. Alice gives much detailed account of the circumstances of their acquaintance and tender sentiments gradually developing between the two. After much tribulation and suspense, Alice's mother finally gives her consent and Alice and Nazar are engaged in Aleppo in August 1927. They get married the next year.

Alice Nazarian's command of the language, ease of expression, and especially her free spirit comes across throughout the narrative. Thanks to her mother's involvement in educational institutions as well as her initiations of literary and theatrical events, Alice's intellect found the necessary environment to advance regardless of her incomplete formal education. She teaches under the wings of her mother in Aleppo Armenian kindergarten before marriage. She is brave enough to resist the traditional constraints imposed on new brides in Armenian patriarchal families, like the bridal custom of keeping quiet in front of her in-laws. But she is a person of wisdom and principles to guarantee a smooth and happy marital life, or as she formulates "to form a happy and enviable nest" (156). These principles were transmitted to her by her mother genetically and verbally through a long poem of 12 commandments (152-155) gifted to her on her wedding day. And indeed, many of these commandments or simply advices/recommendations work even today in our modern society. Furthermore, as the foundation of a happy marriage, even today, or especially today, her husband, Nazar, reciprocated the effort, by encouraging his wife, recognizing her talents and abilities and helping her to advance them, supporting her

in all her endeavors. The feminist in me would stress on this point and aspire it for every married woman in our society.

Mary/Maro, the youngest in the family, has a special place in Alice's narrative. Born six months after her father was murdered, she carries the trauma and its lasting effects in her subconscious and then in her adult inner psyche from cradle to death. Maro was a poet, a playwright, a teacher, and she excelled in everything she did. She was her mother's soulmate, her partner in grief and suffering, hence her melancholy, her susceptibility. She always had her mother's special attention and extraordinary, jealousy provoking affection, but that did not help to heal her fragile, oversensitive soul, oversensitive to the extent of foreboding bad omen. She foresaw the demise of their brother George in a dreadful dream and alarmingly warned her mother (174). The dream came true. George was burned in a horrific accident. The car he was repairing in his shop had caught fire

spirit dominates throughout. Alice includes in her 1965 publication his writings, prose and poetry—some in Armenian, others in Turkish with Armenian letters, which is curious but not uncommon—as well as his biography, dedication notes, and eulogies in his memory, published in a booklet in 1919 by the Assyrian Five Association. The English version includes the translation of this booklet, Armenian to English and Turkish to English, as well as additional material procured from Modern Assyrian Research Archives. Indeed, Part II of the English version is a tribute to an exceptional person who even after his death continued as a role model and a source of inspiration for the Yousuf family and its descendants. Ashur Yousuf was Assyrian, a victim of the Genocide of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians. He was murdered leaving his six orphan children in the care of their Armenian mother. The children were brought up as Armenians, and the family tree at the end of



Faculty of Euphrates College, including Prof. Ashur Yousuf

burning his skin beyond repair. Alice lived the last hours of her brother struggling with the excruciating pain of the burns that covered all his body. The description of these last hours of horror and agony is the climax of all the sufferings of this miserable family in anticipation of an irreparable loss and the gradual thickening of the shadow of death that shrouded the hospital bed while the family watched helplessly. The year was 1944, the night before the celebration of the miracle of Easter. Alice confesses that "The last, horrendous images of my brother were so indelibly imprinted in my mind that I was overrun by them whenever I was alone." She suffered nervous breakdown and went through medical treatment. But more than the medical care she received, what helped her gain her health back, was "the succor provided by my angelic mother—at a time when she needed the most support" (195). She could not imagine at that time that very soon her sister-in law was going to suffer the same fate as her husband and lie in a grave next to him.

Ashur Yousuf rarely appears in the narrative although his shadow, his guiding

the book shows that most of them married into Armenian families. Even more, Rasin, Alice's oldest brother, who escaped to Armenia to avoid forced conscription, and the horror stories that went around about the fate of Christian conscripts, changed his last name to Hovsepian (Hovsepyan), which is of course the direct translation of the name Yousuf. However, the Assyrian blood in their veins remained recognized and respected as was Assyrian ancestral traditions. Arshaluys had been the gatekeeper of that consciousness. "[S]he instilled and nurtured in her children respect toward and interest in her educator husband's beloved people, the Assyrians" (162).

What we have here, and what I have the privilege to present, is the story of a family of survivors of the Genocide, one of thousands, an account of the macabre impact of the Genocide that generations of survivors struggled to cope with. Alice Nazarian eternalized and published the story in «Արևոնն ժպիսը» in 1965 in Beirut. Today, 54 years later this Armenian memoir has risen from the ashes of oblivion and has gained a

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new life in its English translation by Ishkhan Jinbashian, thanks to Alice's son, John Nazarian, who initiated the project, Arda Darakjian Clark, Alice's granddaughter, who edited and finetuned the translation and together with Haig Boyadjian, Arshaluys' great-great-grandson and Alice's great-grandson, they put together the family tree that includes five generations. In fact, this English publication is a family project in honor of their ancestors, to share their incredible story with today's audience, a story "unique, yet communal" as Sargon George Donabed puts it in his "Introduction to the English translation" (xvi). Changing the title from "bloody smile," which would have been the direct translation of the Armenian original, to "Bloodied but Unbowed" gives a new twist to the story and epitomizes Arshaluys' character, an "unconquerable soul" who withstood unspeakable hardship, whose "head is bloody, but unbowed" (quotations from the poem "Invictus" which inspired the new title).

This story is a testimony to the impact of Genocide, the resilience, the resolve to survive and persevere in the most detrimental circumstances. It belongs to the genre of memoir, whose intrinsic value is in its role helping to understand what genocide is, what Armenian Genocide is. I have written and repeated many times in my speeches, "documents, statistics, and data cannot paint the entire picture, the landscape of tears and blood, unthinkable atrocities and superhuman resistance and resilience. It is not possible to penetrate the world of the Armenian Genocide without reading the memoirs, the artistic literature, and the eyewitness accounts." (The Armenian Genocide in Literature, Perceptions of Those Who Lived Through the years of Calamity, 2012, 2014, p. 4)



Descendants of Ashur-and Arshaluys Yousuf

But Alice Nazarian is not an ordinary memoirist or a chronicler of her mother's life story. She has produced a work of art. Does this suggest putting it to the test of aesthetic judgment? Shall I seek its aesthetic value as it is customary in literary criticism? Is it relevant? Lawrence Langer, renowned Holocaust scholar, writes, "Whatever 'beauty' Holocaust art achieves is soiled by the misery of the theme." No doubt, her style is flowery, a little grandiloquent at times, with intricate metaphoric expressions, I would say, a writing style favored by men and women with a high intellectual caliber in their time. She begins with a dedication note in verse spilling out her profound love and respect for her mother:

Ի՞նչ պէտք էր ծօնի հեռաւոր դամբանին՝
Սկիփուլու սիրու հրակելու,
Ի՞նչ պէտք էր խօնի պարզելու քաջ ուղիու
ովանա սիրու սիրալու:

That love and respect echoes in every page of her narrative with ornate expressions and imagery. To cite some examples: «Հազի խնդութեան բաժակը ծեր առած, մտահոգութեան ժահը կարեցաւ անոր

(213). It was a day in February 1957. The poem "A Son's Tale," «Հեքեարը որդուոյն», about her brother Rasin, explains what had happened.

This versified story is certainly a literary piece, a most appropriate way to end this somber story of a family who survived the Genocide to suffer its emotive, economic, and psychological tribulations and dire consequences. This is an important dimension, the uniqueness of Alice's story that concentrates not so much on the years of Calamity. It is not a story replete with gruesome scenes of atrocities like many survivor memoirs available today in their original Armenian or translated and republished through the efforts of the survivor's children or grandchildren.

The publication of «Արիւնու ժախոր» coincided with the 50th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, the beginning of a period when recollections of the past were encouraged; survivors were urged to write their memoirs; the Armenian youth refused to carry the cloak of victimhood and demanded justice. A plethora of literature, depicting the horrifying scenes of Turkish atrocities appeared in different genres—poetry, memoirs, eyewitness accounts. This is the literature that formed the foundation for the next and next generation to let out the cry of the nation—with an unparalleled Trauma in its past—for ultimate redress, for healing that will be possible only when both the victims and the perpetrators of the Trauma engage. Until such time, in the words of Margaret DeCanio, "time cannot quench the bitterness of the memories." Let us keep the memory alive. Let us not stop demanding ultimate redress.

BLOODY, BUT UNBOWED may we purchased online at ninevehpress.com or at Abril Bookstore in Glendale, CA.