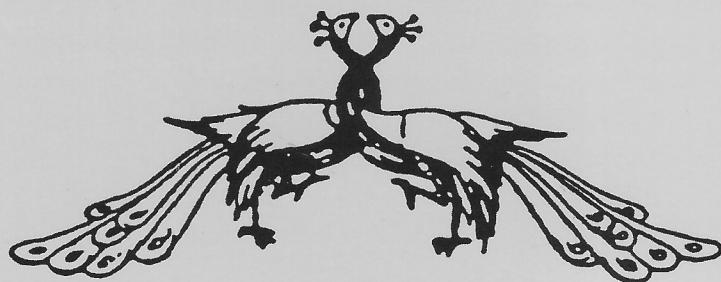


JSAS

VOLUME 14

(2005)

**JOURNAL
OF THE
SOCIETY FOR
ARMENIAN STUDIES**



LORNE SHIRINIAN. *Quest for Closure: The Armenian Genocide and the Search for Justice in Canada*. Kingston, Ont.: Blue Heron Press, 1999. Pp. 267, illus., maps, appendices, and index.

The work under review is an interesting departure from its author's literary output encompassing varied genres of artistic creations and criticism. This is a

⁴ See also the edition published by the Gomidas Institute.

history of the Armenian presence in Canada with maps, documents, factual information, statistical tables, photographs with informative captions, and archival materials; however, it is not a history book. A firm and pressing voice for a long awaited justice is heard throughout the entire narrative. The voice is a call for justice to a country that hosted Armenians fleeing persecution, profited from their toil and culture, and yet keeps denying them the compensation of duly and appropriately acknowledging the catastrophe that weighs on each and every Canadian Armenian's soul. The book is certain to make an impact. The two forewords and one commentary opening it are witness to that. Statements made by Joy Kogawa, author; Ed Broadbent, university professor and political activist; and Alan Whitehorn, professor of Political Science, speak of an undercurrent of Canadian intellectuals who would like to see their government to take action and are ready to fight for it.

The "Introduction" provides a brief survey of Armenian history with useful and necessary information for the non-Armenian reader. The body of the book consists of seven chapters, beginning with the Armenian presence in the Americas, the reasons for their migration from Anatolia, and the gradual increase of Armenian immigrants in Canada, fluctuating with the changes in Canadian immigration law and more particularly with the changing policies vis-à-vis Armenian immigration. Shirinian reminds us that before the relaxation of immigration laws, up until the late 1940s, the Canadian government restricted the entry of Armenians and other Asiatic races to avoid socio-economic problems and the "alteration of the character of their population" (p. 16).

Based on research and observation, Shirinian maintains that "Armenians in Canada have lived with all the attendant problems of an exiled and diasporic people," and the open wound of Genocide makes their lives even more difficult. He ascertains that the wound remains open because "their government has not seen its way clear to give official recognition and acknowledgement of the terrible trauma that was inflicted upon them. . ." (p. 22). Therefore, as Shirinian sees it, for Canadians or any other non-Armenian, to understand the Canadian Armenian collective psyche one has to understand the Genocide and its aftermath.

Chapters Two and Three (75 pages altogether) are thus dedicated to the factual narrative of the Armenian Genocide and relating photographs. With long citations from Arnold Toynbee, Armin Wegner, Ambassador Morgenthau, renowned historians, and eyewitnesses, Shirinian draws his own conclusion, convincingly demonstrating the nature of the crime to be nothing but genocide against a nation (p. 32). Shirinian then dwells on the aftermath of the Genocide, and again, based on various foreign reports, draws a deplorable picture of the tragic state of the survivors continuing on into the later years when Kemal Atatürk's military campaign caused the final cleansing of the remaining Armenian element in the former Ottoman Empire and the new Republic of Turkey. The detailed example of events in Kharberd, based on the eyewitness accounts of Leslie A. Davis and Henry H. Riggs, and materials collected by Viscount James Bryce, is cited as a representative picture of the whole, to "give the reader a much closer perspective of what

occurred and thus allow one to receive a deeper impression of the impact of the Genocide" (p. 41).

Were the Canadians aware of what was going on half a world away? Obviously, they were informed. Major Canadian newspapers of the time reported about the events, described the cruelties, the rapes, the carnage, and bloody scenes of massacres. The *Globe* quoted Giacomo Gorrini declaring: "The decree, which was published on June 24, ordered the massacre of Armenians, and forms the blackest page in Ottoman history" (p. 63). Very few Armenian survivors reached Canada in the aftermath of Genocide. Among the few were about a hundred orphan boys who were placed in a farm home in Georgetown, as a result of which they came to be known as the Georgetown Boys.

The Canadian-Armenian community grew in number and importance to become a voice in the state's politics and economic structure. But these new immigrants had brought with them their past, their grievances, the horrible trauma most of them had experienced and survived as lone representatives of their large families in Western Armenia. And they expected to find relief, social, political, economic, and most importantly, psychological. That did not happen. The wound was not healed. "It seems to many outsiders a long way from the Near East eighty-five years ago, but for Armenians, the Genocide still haunts old and young generation alike" (p. 107).

The initial position of understanding the plight of their new citizens soon changed, and successive Canadian governments refused to acknowledge the predicament of the Armenian immigrants and remedy their injured psyche. This attitude gave rise to the "revolutionary activity undertaken by a small number of Armenians" (p. 100). Would the reader understand and condone these acts, which many have callously labeled as Armenian terrorism? In order to set "the social and political context" in which these actions can be understood, Shirinian steps back in history, traces the evolution of Armenian political thought and the history of Armenian struggle for freedom and justice, and the eventual abandonment of the Armenians' cause by the European powers. He then describes the anger and frustration, which drove these youths to sacrifice their lives only to make the world acknowledge and recognize the horrendous calamity that their ancestors suffered and the grave injustice Armenians still bear. With a congenial voice, he attests, "Like so many other revolutionary groups that hoped to be a vanguard to popular mass struggle, Armenian militants hoped to create a popular mass struggle involving all Armenians. However, this never came close to being realized" (p. 118). Nonetheless, it is beyond doubt, that as Shirinian attests, intense political activism in 1970s and 80s led international organizations and various governments to pass resolutions acknowledging the Armenian Genocide.

Shirinian must have had a strong motive to dedicate such a long section to the actions of these revolutionary groups and the reactions of the Canadian Armenian community and the Canadian media to these acts. I would say it is a bit overdone. However, it would be unfair not to note that such detailed information on these so

called terrorist acts and their impact on Canadian and Canadian-Armenian society provides a rare and reliable resource on this issue for today.

The chapter ends with an account of the struggle to include the teaching of the Armenian Genocide in school curricula and the strong Turkish lobby against it. Shirinian describes how political exigencies and historical revisionism affected the initially adopted curriculum and replaced it with a watered down two-sided narrative and how Turkish and pro-Turkish lobbies continued to block any reference to the Armenian Genocide in all spheres, including the Canadian government's official position in this regard.

How strange it is that Canadian governments during and after World War I were fully aware of what went on in Ottoman Turkey. As Shirinian describes, citing letters and governmental reports in Chapter Five, they even took measures to compensate survivors who reached Canada for loss of life and property. "Over time, however, the government's consciousness diminished as other matters became pressing" (p. 155). Canadian Governments refused to recognize the Armenian Genocide officially. Despite the fact that many governmental officials, time and again, publicly acknowledged the Armenian Genocide, the federal government's official position is still that of the genocide deniers, sympathizing with the victims' suffering by employing "the terms, *deportations, massacres, calamity, tragedy, atrocity*," (p. 173) but avoiding the use of the word *genocide*.

If the *Revival*, the monument erected at the Armenian Community Center in Toronto (photograph on page 81), symbolizes the "rebirth of the Armenian people after the 1915 Genocide," *Quest for Closure* symbolizes the Canadian-Armenians' relentless struggle against the denial of the Armenian Genocide and for the government's recognition of this colossal injustice done to its Armenian citizens.

Can closure be achieved if the Canadian government properly recognizes the Armenian Genocide? Emphasizing the importance of such a move, Shirinian asserts that the continuation of the genocidal process in the Turkish denial and the destruction of Armenian cultural monuments are obstacles hindering the possibility of that closure. The quest is made with the hope of an eventual closure. The healing process has not begun.

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

RUBINA PEROOMIAN