



Jordan Center for Persian Studies

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**REFLECTIONS OF  
ARMENIAN IDENTITY  
IN HISTORY AND  
HISTORIOGRAPHY**



# EFFECTS OF THE GENOCIDE, SECOND GENERATION VOICES

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The children of survivors of the Armenian Genocide are affected by their parents' traumatic experience: regardless of how they perceived and treated the parents' traumatic past, regardless of how the survivors themselves dealt with that past. The psychological effects of the trauma impressed upon the family atmosphere, and familial relationship.

Armenian survivors, refugees, newcomers, an insignificant minority or ethnic group in the New World, made their humble nests, raised a family and worked hard to provide a healthy and happy environment for their children to grow free of the scars of the past they themselves carried. They did not always succeed. The family atmosphere, which most of these first-generation survivors unconsciously provided, was rigid and unhappy. Janine Altounian, a daughter of Armenian Genocide survivors, epitomizes her parental home as "un foyer où la joie de vivre n'était guère à l'ordre du jour."<sup>1</sup> Nava Semel, daughter of Holocaust survivors, has a name for children who were born in such families. She calls them "Children of sad people," people who "forgot the habits of joy."<sup>2</sup>

The above testimony brings me to assert, at the outset, that transgenerational effect of a trauma is not a phenomenon unique to the Armenian Genocide, but a common trait in other genocides as well. Second generation Holocaust survivors, like Nava Semel and scholars, such as Alan Berger, Helen Epstein, and Eva Hoffman, among others, have dully examined this phenomenon.

Jack Danielian, psychologist, maintains, that "Trauma is contagious, and the contagion is likely to be insidious. All who come in contact with it can come away marked, including

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<sup>1</sup> Janine Altounian, born in Paris, is an essayist, translator. Her book on her father's memoir is a valuable contribution to understanding the mindset of the descendants of Genocide survivors and their perception of the parents' past. See, Vahram et Janine Altounian, *Mémoires du génocide arménien. Héritage traumatique et travail analytique* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 2009). The quotation above is from p. 118 of her essay, titled "Parcours d'un écrit de survivant," 113-47.

<sup>2</sup> Nava Semel, "Intersoul Flanking: Writing about the Holocaust," in *Second Generation Voices, Reflections by children of Holocaust Survivors & Perpetrators*, eds. Alan L. Berger and Naomi Berger (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 71.



victim, victim families and progeny..."<sup>3</sup> This notion is further corroborated by Ervin Staub, genocide scholar. He believes that, "our identity is deeply rooted in racial, ethnic, or religious groups, members of the group who were not present still carry many of the burdens of the collective experience."<sup>4</sup>

The psychological effect is there, and the memory of the traumatic experience of the parent is transmitted, no doubt, but how deep and to what extent? The contributory factors gaging the intensity are many: first are the circumstances within the new, unfamiliar world in which the survivors took refuge: is the atmosphere favorable or prejudicial? How much hardship is involved in their everyday struggle for survival? Then there is the relationship within the family of survivors: did survivor parents keep silence and did not share their harrowing ordeal? Was the parent's life story a tightly kept family secret? Did the survivor parents incessantly talk about their harrowing experience and admonished their children not to forget? Was the generation born in these families attentive to and conscientious of the family history which was often unthinkably depressing and discordant with the new environment? Was this generation absolutely detached from the Old World, busy making a successful life in the New World and completely aloof vis-à-vis the parents' past experience or, on the contrary, was entangled in its grips? Finding answers to these and more questions, painfully complex, by examining the literature of second generation Armenian writers and poets as a reflection, an echo, a testimony, have become my preoccupation and the topic of my research and writing for the last decade or so.<sup>5</sup>

To reach an in-depth understanding of the second-generation survivor syndrome, I have first concentrated on the parent-children relationship as the source and the feeder inspiring or provoking the literary responses. In my categorization, classification, or typification, I first tested the responses of those children who were **denied entry into the parents' past world of darkness**.

Many survivors of the Armenian Genocide chose not to speak to their children about their past, mostly out of fear of the harmful effects that these stories of blood and death could produce in the children's juvenile psyche. They consciously or subconsciously protected their children from the paralyzing memory with which they themselves had to live. Then there was this inexplicable self-blame or a sense of shame and reproach for having survived while other members of the family met a torturous death and perished: a temporary conversion to Islam, a "service" to the gendarmes or the "rescuer" Muslim man, a rape, a circumcision. Whatever the dark secret of their survival, they chose not to reveal. Others futilely believed that by not speaking about their traumatic past, they will manage to forget it

<sup>3</sup> Jack Danielian, "A Century of Silence, Terror and the Armenian Genocide," *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 70 (2010): 245-64.

<sup>4</sup> Ervin Staub, "Healing and Reconciliation," in *Looking Backward, Moving Forward, Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2003), 263-74. Quotation from p. 265.

<sup>5</sup> The book encapsulating the results of my research is titled *The Armenian Genocide in Literature, The Second Generation Responds* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2015).



and ward off the frequent incursions of painful memories and tormenting flashbacks. There were also survivors who, in their haste to start a new life in the New World and adopt new ways, refrained from revealing their past lest it set them apart from the mainstream society. And this is especially true in Armenian communities in Europe and North America, where discrimination, prejudice, and social rejection against the newcomers was the prevailing practice.<sup>6</sup> For still others, the burden of daily struggle for survival in a new and unfamiliar world weighed so heavily as to keep them from talking about their traumatic past. Within the family atmosphere of many survivors, therefore, speaking about the traumatic past, the Catastrophe was a taboo. It could only be hush-hushed in the narrow circle of family friends—mostly survivors themselves—or in brief references to it, often in the Turkish language, unintelligible to their children. In all cases, however, the shadow of the Genocide was ubiquitous. Mary Terzian, a daughter of Genocide survivors growing up in Cairo, Egypt, writes, “The effects of genocide were present in my mother’s glassy eyes and my father’s angry temper. It affected us all and will probably have its effect on a few more generations.”<sup>7</sup>

Psychologists believe that keeping secrets in the family, especially of traumatic nature, potentially can damage the mental health of the family members and destroy relationships. It can even cause physical pain, depression and anxiety in the keeper of the secret, when the secret is internalized. Most vulnerable in this situation are the children growing up in that family atmosphere, feeling an unnamed anxiety about something that is being hidden from them. The anxiety grows into an affliction when they think of themselves as personally responsible for that mysterious something, something they cannot identify. Suzanne Handler, MED, author of *The Secrets They Kept*, identifies five effects of keeping secrets in the family: It can destroy relationships; can affect children’s lives; can cause suspicion and resentment; can create a false sense of reality; can cause illness.<sup>8</sup> What would Handler think of the horrendous experience of the Genocide that many survivors tried to keep secret?

Virginia Haroutunian speaks of her mother’s mysterious past in *Orphan in the Sands*. On different occasions, Virginia had questioned her mother, but she was adamant. “Don’t ask, I don’t want to talk about it.”<sup>9</sup> Virginia resented her mother, that dry and cold woman who shrank with every word of endearment even if it came from her husband or children; who kept to herself, had no close friends, never visited her neighbors, refused to join any

<sup>6</sup> As David Kherdian writes of his mother, they were “victim[s] of America who/escaped the Turkish Genocide.” See, David Kherdian, *On the Death of my Father and other poems* (Fresno: Giligia Press, 1970), from the poem “A Family of Four.”

<sup>7</sup> Mary Terzian, *The Immigrants Daughter: A private battle to earn the right to self-actualization* (printed in the United States of America, 2005), xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Handler, MED, “5 Reasons Why Keeping Family Secrets Could be Harmful,” <http://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/08/22/5-reasons-why-keeping-family-secrets-could-be-harmful/>

<sup>9</sup> Virginia Haroutunian, *Orphan in the Sands* (N.p. [Michigan]: S.p., 1995), 130.



Armenian groups.<sup>10</sup> She had even refused to dance at her own wedding.<sup>11</sup> Virginia pours out her frustration and the deprivations she endured growing up in Pontiac, Michigan. It was only towards the end of her mother's life, after she had gone through a series of painful treatments for her throat cancer, that she finally gave in and shared with her daughter her horrible story of death marches, the killings, the torture, the rape, family members separated and lost, the seven-year-old girl wandering alone, hungry, thirsty, and sick with diarrhea, and the Turkish homes she took refuge and then ran away from their maltreatment; and finally, the miserable conditions in the American orphanage in Kharbert. Virginia knew now the reason for her mother's strange behavior. The deep resentment was now turned into an irremediable compunction.

In *My Literary Profile: A Memoir*, Helene Pilibosian speaks of her parents, "their attitudes and expressions, their way of living in the Boston area and adjustment to this country, their stories and their anger, their relationships to one another."<sup>12</sup> They raised their children with the inflexible customs, outlooks, traditions, and set of values of the Old World, and molded their character and personality, even with some repression, only to find themselves in psychological conflict with their children as well as with the outside world. The dark shadow of the great loss they experienced influenced their behavior and the personality of the children they raised. Through Helene Pilibosian's narrative, comes across her mother's rigid personality and behavior. She was a shy, unsociable woman, an embarrassment when she despaired, and that happened every so often.<sup>13</sup> She was angry at her daughter for reasons Helene could not understand. It was saddening for Helene when, in a crowded place, her mother would insist on returning home immediately, "with a sudden attack of claustrophobia."<sup>14</sup> She was a strict mother, never showing affection. "Unfortunately, in our family there was little communication of tender emotions, the hug and the kiss seeming nonexistent and sometimes the positive feelings also."<sup>15</sup> She constantly criticized Helene and put her down. She considered her incapable of taking care of herself or doing housework.<sup>16</sup> She did not value her daughter's creativity and her success in poetry writing. Helene knew nothing about her mother's ordeal during the Genocide, and she admits that she never really showed interest in hearing her story until much later, as she studied that period of Armenian history. She interviewed her mother shortly before her death and was shocked and horrified hearing what she had been through. At the age of 91, Yeghsa had confessed about her being rescued by a Turk and having lived in a Turkish family. The confession made her so tense and distraught that she could not continue. Apparently, as her daughter had surmised, she

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>12</sup> Helene Pilibosian, *My Literary Profile: A Memoir* (Watertown: Ohan Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 79.



had been raped, beaten, and left unconscious half-dead.<sup>17</sup> Now she understood the source of her mother's strange behavior, her mother with anxieties of surviving starvation, seeing her mother walk away never to return, seeing the dead and the dying, experiencing the insecurity of orphanages. She wished that her mother could have the opportunity to seek psychiatric help "to ease the burden of the hurt she carried to give her some satisfaction and tranquility in her life and render our lives with her easier and more satisfying."<sup>18</sup> And indeed, the family atmosphere pushed Helene into a **state of a severe depression**, incapacitating her, driving her to seek psychiatric help even shock treatment. And this became another subject of her mother's derision, suspicion, and criticism.

In *Passage to Ararat*, Michael J. Arlen remembers **hating his father, being afraid of him**, though at the same time he confessed he loved him. He admits that this hatred must have been because of the fear that he always felt "of being exposed in some way, or pulled down by the connection," connection with anything Armenian, Armenian and Turkish, the Turkish massacres of Armenians, and everything pejorative that came with it.<sup>19</sup> And at the end, in his later years, long after his father's death, when he came to the full realization of the Armenian past and his connection to it, he wondered why all this camouflage? Why did his father avoid the "collective unconscious" about his racial past which was his identity?

David Kherdian's father, Melkon, was a survivor of the 1909 Adana massacres:

My father came from Adana  
but his father was born in Kharpert,  
where, my mother says:  
"Most of the people were educated  
at the University," but  
my father wasn't educated anywhere<sup>20</sup>

That is all he knew about his father's past, a past he could not, he would not want to penetrate. The father-and-son relationship was shrouded by untold but mysterious stories of torture and death creating an abyss between the two that lasted his father's lifetime. The result was an intricate feeling of **awe, respect, admiration**, and at the same time **fear, resentment**, and **alienation** that young David held for his father:

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 21-2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>19</sup> Michael J. Arlen, *Passage to Ararat* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975), 11-12.

<sup>20</sup> David Kherdian, "My Father," in *On the Death of my Father and Other Poems* (Fresno: Giligia Press, 1968, 1970), np. About the title poem of this collection "On the Death of my Father," William Saroyan has said "The title poem is one of the best lyric poems in American poetry" (<http://www.davidkherdian.com/node/24>). The poem is also included in *Forgotten Bread: First-Generation Armenian American Writers*, ed. David Kherdian (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2007), 323.



legs like piano stumps  
 chest like a barrel (much  
 in the manner of Babe Ruth)  
 he growled like a crossed  
 lion when Armenian-angry,  
 but was bear silent when not

and died in a Milwaukee hospital  
 on my sister's fifteenth birthday  
 far from any home.<sup>21</sup>

In his "struggle for identity," David, born in Racine Wisconsin, **shunned away from everything Armenian and what his father represented.**<sup>22</sup> His "resistance to Armenian food," his "preference for everything American," his arguments with his father "over spading the / vegetable patch, painting the / garden fence ochre instead of blue,"<sup>23</sup> were all symptoms of an alienated soul caught between a past he despised and ignored and a world of the present around him he so enthusiastically embraced.

It is only after his father's death that Kherdian experienced the creeping into his heart of a new, reversed sensation which is not unusual or farfetched in these kinds of parent-children relationship. The posthumous bonding resulted in a feeling of guilt and regret. He began reading about the history of the Armenian massacres, and he found the explanation of his father's strange disposition.

Ellen Sarkisian Chesnut and her siblings grew up in San Francisco with their parents, both survivors of the Genocide. Looking back to her childhood, she attests that the shadow of Genocide dominated the family atmosphere. Her father never succeeded to cast off that shadow revealing its existence in his periodic outbursts of rage. Ellen's parents were anything but normal compared to the easygoing American families she knew. Her book, *Deli Sarkis: The Scars he Carried, A Daughter Confronts the Armenian Genocide and Tells Her Father's Story*, clearly shows the impact of the ordeal each one of her parents had experienced during the massacres and deportations.

When we were growing up, his rages would come and go. Sometimes he would be so understanding and speak so softly and sweetly, like the father we always dreamed about. At other times he would be critical of us all and beside himself

<sup>21</sup> Kherdian, "My Father."

<sup>22</sup> For a broader biography of this author, see Aris Janigian's article on David Kherdian in *Forgotten Bread*, 318-21.

<sup>23</sup> Quotations from David Kherdian's "For My Father," in *Homage to Adana* (Fresno: Giligia Press, 1970), n.p.



with anger. I tried to understand, but could never discover the reason for this split-personality.<sup>24</sup>

The resulting reaction Ellen and her two sisters revealed was **alienation and distancing**. They sought to live away from their parental home and keep a safe distance from that depressing atmosphere. However, the solution did not provide them peace of mind and a chance to live a normal and unfettered life.

Overprotectiveness is often a characteristic trait in the family of survivors. The burden of losses they have experienced drives these parents to this harmful attitude toward their offspring, lest they too perish. Children grow up **insecure, exceedingly dependent on confirmations for their deeds to come from others, never able to make decisions about their life, their career, and their relationships**. Virginia Haroutunian's life is a case in point. Diana Der-Hovanessian explains this phenomenon as a post-genocide Diasporan-Armenian reality:

why Armenian children  
are raised with so much wonder, as if  
might disappear  
at any moment<sup>25</sup>

Mary Terzian, in hindsight explains her father's overreaction to her walking down the busy streets of Cairo to the English Catholic School, in a time when political turmoil had just broken out in Egypt against British oppressors. "Of course, Father is a genocide survivor, one who has seen rape, murder, and death as regular casualties of political strife."<sup>26</sup> That is a big difference compared to the generation born in the Free World and without the tragic experience their parents have endured.

**But the story must be told.** Despite being shut off from the parents' past, or even if having learned about it all along, a realization after the parents' death or just before their death opens a complex world of suffering and survival of the whole nation for the son or daughter of the survivor. And the urge sets in: the story should be shared with the world. In some cases, the progeny has a chance to interview the parents before their passing, collect enough information, and concoct the life story of the survivor. In other cases, elderly parents are encouraged to write their memoirs. With the feeling of a filial duty or impressed by the macabre past of the parent and of the whole nation, or perhaps as a way of cleansing one's guilty conscious for not understanding or not wanting to understand the parent's dilemma in due time, he/she undertakes the task of introducing that story to make the world know

<sup>24</sup> Ellen Sarkisian Chesnut, *Deli Sarkis: The Scars he Carried, A Daughter Confronts the Armenian Genocide and Tells Her Father's Story* (Minneapolis: Two Harbors Press, 2014), 158.

<sup>25</sup> Diana Der Hovanessian, "Diaspora," in *About Time* (New York: Ashod Press, 1987), 22.

<sup>26</sup> Terzian, 184.



about that colossal crime, that is a crime against humanity committed with impunity.<sup>27</sup> In still other cases, the collected information or the rough draft of the parent's memoir—often times a late discovery—is used as raw material into a novel and introduced as the fictionalized story of the Armenian Genocide.

David Kherdian's *The Road from Home, The Story of an Armenian Girl* (1979), the story of David's mother, Veron Dumehjian, is one of the first examples and a debut for the author in this painful domain. Some thirty years later, in a flyer publicizing the book *The Forgotten Bread*, with seventeen writers and poets presented in the volume, a quotation from David Kherdian reads, "our stories contain us and reveal us and inform us, filling us with the real pride that comes from having lived and endured, not only with our lives intact, but with our stories told. For without our stories we are nothing." A later example is Agop J. Hacikyan's *A Summer Without Dawn* (2000). Driven to tell the story of his parents' and his people's suffering, Hacikyan is also in pursuit of the perpetuation of the memory of the Genocide, making sure that the memory will be transmitted from generation to generation.

Theodore Kharpertian had not cared to ask about his father's past all his life. Upon his mother's insistence, however, he took up the task of writing his story. He was forty-five and his father, Hagop, was already eighty-seven. Significant in *Hagop: An Armenian Genocide Survivor's Journey to Freedom* is Theodore's idea of asking his father's permission to be happy and to let go his guilty conscious of having so much, "stable, loving parents, a good home, a nation that, in principle, strove to guarantee my fundamental human rights."<sup>28</sup> All that in contrast with his father's pain of so much loss and injustice he suffered. Theodore's action is an evidence of subconsciously inherited sentiment which had a nevertheless shifted foundation. His father's feeling of guilt for having survived while others perished, very much common among the survivors of the Armenian Genocide, had gone through a transformation in the next generation's psyche, and the catalyst is the distance of time and place with the actual losses the first-generation survivors experienced.

Kay Mouradian's *A Gift in the Sunlight, An Armenian Story* (2005), is a testimony of a strange transformation in her mother's heart in her last years of life and her urging Kay to write and publish her story for the world to know. The book was a beginning for Mouradian's

<sup>27</sup> In Perroomian, *The Armenian Genocide in Literature: Perceptions of Those Who Lived through the Years of Calamity* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, 2012, 2014), this author has introduced a number of memoirs by first-generation survivors published by their children, either in the original Armenian or in English or French translation. Examples are: *To Armenians with Love* (1996), Hovhannes Mugrditchian's memoir translated into English and published by his son, Paul Martin; *A Hair's Breadth from Death* [2003], Hampartzoum Chitjian's life story, dictated in Armenian, translated into English by his daughter Sara Zaruhi Chitjian, and published in Armenian and English editions; *Le journal de mon père* (2008), Hrant Sarian's diary translated into French and published electronically by his daughter, Louise Kiffer; and *Im housheri chanaparhov* (2009), Yervand Kyureghyan's manuscript published in its original form by his son Varouzh Kyureghyan with Introduction, explanations, and commentary.

<sup>28</sup> Kharpertian, Theodore, *Hagop: An Armenian Genocide Survivor's Journey to Freedom* (Belmont: Armenian Heritage Press, National Association for Armenian Studies and Research, 2003), 128.



dedicating her time for spreading the stories of the Armenian Genocide and to teach the youth about this unforgivable crime against humanity.

Ellen Sarkisian Chesnut's *Deli Sarkis: The Scars he Carried, A Daughter Confronts the Armenian Genocide and Tells Her Father's Story* (2014), works in the same path: the world should know what the Turks did which became the survivors' lifelong ordeal and their children's hardship to cope with it.

Research done on the children of Holocaust survivors indicates that, as Ervin Staub puts it, "the trauma of parents does not usually result in psychopathology in children. However, some of the children, especially those whose parents do not talk about their own suffering, are affected in their interpersonal relationships."<sup>29</sup>

In the new and totally unfamiliar environment Armenian refugees raised their children instilling in them a large dosage of Armenianness with admonishments like, "You are Armenian, and don't you forget." Or "My family perished in the desert and you have to compensate for their loss by staying close to your roots." Mary Terzian learned about the meaning of all this only when she was much older. Then she came to see,

why graduation from Armenian school, even from kindergarten, is so meaningful in our immigrant community. We represent the sprouts of a massacred generation. Every commencement is regeneration from the ashes and triumph over the perpetrators who wanted to erase our nation from the face of the earth.<sup>30</sup>

The technique used was the accentuation of cultural, religious, and ethnic differences in favor of what is Armenian which often produced a vexing and discomforting stance vis-à-vis the mainstream society in which they eventually had to enter right out of a **strict Armenian home**. As a result, a sense of **alienation and marginality** was generated. Mary Terzian experienced this shock when she graduated from the Armenian Community School in Cairo and began to attend the Immaculate Conception School in town, run by Irish nuns. She observes,

To be absorbed into the foreign culture means enduring transformation that is partly suicide, partly betrayal, and partly reincarnation. Which part of the identity will be kept, which sector will be reshaped, and which segment will be abandoned are subject to debate.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Ervin Staub, "Healing and Reconciliation," in *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide*, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2003), 265.

<sup>30</sup> Terzian, 61.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 182. It should be noted here that the Armenian community in Egypt, mostly in Cairo and Alexandria, had a long history of existence and prosperity with old established schools, churches, news media, cultural, and political organizations and institutions. Armenians maintained social and business interactions with mainstream Egyptian society. The refugees of 1915 deportations and massacres joined this established structure, but with an inclination to stay within the boundaries of their own community.



Vahé Oshagan pictures a case of total alienation from the family in a short story titled *Dektember 31* (December 31), where one day the son left the Armenian home with all its shackles and restrictions, went away and never looked back.

Gerard Chaliand was fully exposed to the stories of atrocity against his family. He was a son of a survivor growing up in France, with the stories of his grandmother who was also a survivor. Perhaps, it was the high dosage of this inculcated history of blood and tears that made him discard “the tracks of the tribe,” distance himself from “the ring of women spilling their sorrow,” forget the pain of “being the heir of a genocide... stuck in the throat as an aching shard.” Chaliand’s alienation lasted a quarter of a century, a period of experimentation with “adventures of all human beings,” and of escalation in his highly respected career, to come back to the realization of the undeniable effects of the Genocide.<sup>32</sup>

Virginia Haroutunian speaks of her shock as she discovered that the lifestyle in her Armenian family, the everyday rituals and cultural practices were different from everybody else in her class. Her strict mother did not allow going out with friends or dating, which she considered “improper and immoral.” “Only street girls sit in a car alone with a boy,” she said.<sup>33</sup> Virginia was left with “a growing **sense of isolation and depression**.” This harmful sense of isolation, generating an array of various consequences, in Virginia’s case drove her towards overeating.

The polarization, as Kherdian attests, was confusing and destructive for this first generation born in America, or Europe, or any other discriminatory conditions in that matter. The result was sometimes “**bragging, lying, or withdrawal**,”<sup>34</sup> not normal in any case.

The duality between the Armenian home and the outside world in the Boston area was the source of constant tension in Helene Pilibosian’s childhood resulting in fits of **resentment and rebellion at home and alienation and marginality outside**. “Home was very much Armenian, and school was very much American.”<sup>35</sup> Children picked up this feeling of too much Armenianness from remarks by their teachers or other children. In schools or in workplaces Armenians were looked down especially if they spoke Armenian.<sup>36</sup> The result was a sense of humiliation, “*Armenian inferiority complex*”<sup>37</sup> spreading across the generation born to these survivors of the Armenian Genocide.

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<sup>32</sup> Gérard Chaliand is an expert in armed-conflict studies and in international and strategic relations, but also a historian, writer, and poet. He was born in 1934 in France, in a family of survivors of the Genocide. I have discussed in more detail Chaliand’s perception of his inherited past in *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915: The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature* (Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum–Institute, 2008, 2012), 165–68.

<sup>33</sup> Haroutunian, 74.

<sup>34</sup> Kherdian, “Our Block,” in *Forgotten Bread*, 328–330.

<sup>35</sup> Pilibosian, 37.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



No matter what the perception of the family atmosphere, the second-generation survivor feels **the obligation to remember. The burden of remembrance is passed on.** This is demonstrated by the many ways which the memory is treated. Some take a pilgrimage to Western Armenia to find the town, the village, the house, their parents called home. They are fulfilling their parents' often times unspoken wish to find their home and follow the route they walked to say a prayer for the unburied dead. The artist within that Genocide survivor's descendant is inspired to dedicate a literary work to that unique experience. The outcome is more than often a well-researched and emotionally charged piece, a story enveloping the parents' life-long ordeal and his/her own affliction on their side.

The trouble and the pain in the process pays off at the end even if it takes great talent and perseverance in digging deep to find the big picture, chasing the silences or trying to fill the mysterious gaps in the parents' narratives. Alice Tashjian did just that to concoct her mother's story, *Silences: My Mother's Will to Survive*. She had realized that there were certainly gaps in her story: "Her stories were selected remembrances of events she chose to tell."<sup>38</sup> She was determined to complete the story and find out more clearly the reason behind her mother's abstinence and selective narrative. Margaret Ajemian Ahnert's *The Knock at the Door, A journey Through the Darkness of the Armenian Genocide* is another example of how the parent's memory is treated.<sup>39</sup>

The burden of remembrance is passed on inspiring literary works. Diana Der Hovanessian, vowed to remember and pass on the memory when she was only twelve and her father took her to Michigan to visit the grave of her grandmother Zarif.

Standing at her grave I wanted  
to promise her something  
about remembering.

I wanted to tell her  
if I had children they would know  
how she lost her arm. I wanted  
to tell her that although  
most of her family was killed by  
Turks those of us who were left  
were hers too  
but I didn't know  
how to talk to the dead.

<sup>38</sup> Alice Agnes Tashjian, *Silences: My Mother's Will to Survive* (Princeton, NJ.: Blue Pansy, 1995), 7-8.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Ajemian Ahnert, *The Knock at the Door: A Journey through the Darkness of the Armenian Genocide* (New York: Beaufort Books, 2007). A thematic analysis of Ester/Gezeer Kateejeh's experience as an Armenian girl abused and exploited during the Genocide appeared in, Perroomian, *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915*.



When I came home  
I wrote my first poem.<sup>40</sup>

Helene Pilibosian turned a cold shoulder toward her parents' and her people's past, did not show interest to hear their stories, but as she grew more secure and self-confident she dug into the history of her nation, and in her later years, with the powerful tool of poetic expression in her hand, after her parents were already gone, she set out to celebrate their memory and eternalize the history of her nation in the context of American present. Her life is a quest for peace and equilibrium in an existence that rose from **a chaotic mix of two worlds**, always in conflict with each other, contradicting each other and refusing to reach a synthesis.<sup>41</sup> In her poetry reverberates her struggle to define her identity in scattered lines such as "the Turkish sword"; "the hoary history"; "The apricot spoke Armenian,/and there I found my seed"; "My mouth is dry/with stories of the desert/of Der-el-Zor so long ago"; "Remembrance is the epitaph/for the ghosts of humble glory."

In some second-generation survivors, the pain of that transmitted memory of the Genocide is so vivid and life-affecting as if **the past is lived like the present**. In the poem "An Inconvenient Genocide," Alicia Ghiragossian speaks of that ever-present affliction,

Pain is always fresh  
hidden  
in the mysterious wiring  
of the billions of cells  
playing trick on our mind  
mingling with the vibrations  
of our blood  
infecting and affecting life.<sup>42</sup>

The past is lived like the present, and sometimes it overshadows the present with such intensity that a slight association in the present life with that of the past takes the second-generation survivor to the place and the time in which the adopted past event has occurred. And this is despite the fact that he/she is not only a generation removed and thus away temporally, but also away geographically.

Diana Der-Hovanessian experiences this strange feeling of being transported in the past while driving in the dark, looking for street signs. A bizarre psychological turnabout generates a state of mind to see the sign "Channing" as *Chankeri*. Then on the next turn it is *Ayash* instead of "Ayer." And she is with Siamanto, Rouben Sevak, and Grigor Zohrab, and other Armenian poets and writers and intellectuals arrested in Constantinople on the eve of

<sup>40</sup> Diana Der Hovanessian, "How to Talk with the Dead," *RAFT* 11 (1997): 20-1.

<sup>41</sup> See my review of Pilibosian's *History's Twist: The Armenians*, in the *Journal of the Society of Armenian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2009): 145-48.

<sup>42</sup> Alicia Ghiragossian, "An Inconvenient Genocide," (Glendale: "A New Age" Publications, 2009), 14.



April 24 (11), 1915 and murdered in the *Ayash* prison and on the road from *Chankeri*. Lorne Shirinian writes about her and her close association with the dead land, Armenia. "In the time warp called America/you mythologize the dead land/find yourself stranded between fable and reality." And indeed, this close association produces hallucinatory encounters in her life. Shirinian continues,

you spot Varoujan dancing in Harvard Square  
 you bump into Siamanto at Wordsworth's bookstore  
 you receive a phone call; Tourian is lost in Watertown.<sup>43</sup>

With that same type of association, Hakop Karapents is transported to Urfa. He is attending the opening session of the Urban Renewal Federation of America's (URFA) annual conference in Hartford.<sup>44</sup>

Living the years of calamity all over again, some survivors penned their memoirs to show the world the magnitude of the Catastrophe. Armenian organizations struggled in the labyrinths of world politics to make the world know about the committed crime and help to recompense. But the world responded with indifference and conveniently accepted the Turkish side of the story. The **perpetrator's continued denial, and the indifference of the world community become sources of anger and frustration** in the second-generation survivors, and they responded: Some idealized and eternalized in their literature the daring acts of young Armenians, the freedom fighters, in their acts of violence against the deniers, descendants of the perpetrators. They stressed the fact that the purpose of these acts is less to avenge their ancestors than to shake up the world's indifference to the Cause and the continued suffering of Armenian survivors of the Genocide. Hakob Karapents' *Seneak tiv 842* (Room number 842), Vahé Oshagan's *Ahabekich* (Terrorist) and *Telefone, Lizboni nahataknerun* (The Telephone, to the Martyrs of Lisbon), Boghos Kupelian's *Pasport, vep merorya hay azatamartikneru kyanken* (Passport, a novel about the life of Armenian freedom-fighters of our days) are examples. Others combatted the denialism giving birth to exquisite pieces of poetry. Hrand Markarian's *Mets Tarapank/The Great Agony*, Diana Der-Hovanessian's poems "Keri's Curse," "The Political Poem," and "At Mt. Auburn Cemetery," Alicia Ghiragossian's, "An Inconvenient Genocide" encapsulate the rage and frustration caused by callous denialism.

But the Turks continue to deny, and this means dying "every time/we are invalidated/through denial," Alicia Ghiragossian writes,

<sup>43</sup> Lorne Shirinian, "Armenian Poets, for DDH" in *Earthquake, Poems* (Lewistown, Queenstone, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 18-9. Diana Der Hovanessian admired Daniel Varoujan (Varuzhan), a great poet who was murdered in 1915 as well. Bedros Tourian (Petros Dourian), was a Constantinople born Armenian poet, who in his short life (1851-1872) left a rich legacy of romantic poetry and drama.

<sup>44</sup> Hakob Karapents, *Mer nakhnikneri stvernere* [The shadows of our ancestors] in *Ankatar* [Incomplete], a collection of short stories (New York: Vosketar, 1987), 33-49.



So we  
the children of survivors  
of an inconvenient genocide  
are reporting  
with earthshaking resonance:

*Yes. It happened.  
And we have not forgotten.*

It was the same rage and frustration that drove Mae Derdarian to take up a project she had overlooked for years. When she read an advertisement sponsored by the Turkish government stating that what happened was not a genocide, as Armenians claim, but a civil war between Turks and Armenians, she was outraged. She remembered a manuscript that her mother's best friend, Vergeen Meghrouni, had entrusted to her twenty years earlier, before she died in 1975, asking her to prepare it for publication. The manuscript contained her life story, her experience during the trying years of the Genocide and her survival. Derdarian set to work, and the result was *Vergeen: A Survivor of the Armenian Genocide*,<sup>45</sup> a book that received deserved publicity and accolades. Some reviewers regarded the book as the Armenian version of Anne Frank's Diary.<sup>46</sup> The book was Derdarian's powerful response to Turkish denial in which reverberates Vergeen's objective in writing her life story, "to immerse the reader in her story and to refute historical revisionists who deny and distort the facts of the Armenian holocaust." Vergeen had begun her narrative affirming "I was THERE! I was an EYEWITNES! I was a VICTIM!"<sup>47</sup> And what Vergeen had witnessed and endured is beyond imagination. She takes the reader to the killing fields, to listen to the cries of pain and the supplication to have mercy, to spare, "*Khntrem, khntrem*" (Please, please). And then the helpless moaning, "*Allah nerdehseen?*" (God, where are you?). Vergeen lost her innocence, her spirit and her faith to the atrocities, "My faith in religion was destroyed. I hadn't prayed or gone to church since fleeing from my Arab captors; and my aversion to prayer has continued since then."<sup>48</sup>

Building on Ervin Staub's concept of the process of the healing denied to Armenians, I conclude this cursory glance on the second-generation responses to the Armenian Genocide: historians are pushed to reiterate their irrefutable findings and probe deeper to discover new facts. Artists, writers, and poets use the medium best available to them to confront the Genocide in art, and prove in the way they know best, that what happened in 1915

<sup>45</sup> Mae M. Derdarian, *Vergeen: A Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (Los Angeles: Atmus Press, 1997).

<sup>46</sup> In an important monograph, *Genocide, A Comprehensive Introduction* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), Adam Jones has chosen Mae Derdarian's book and Vergeen's experience as a case study to introduce the Armenian Genocide. The Chapter on the Armenian Genocide (101-23) houses this case study titled "One Woman's Story: Vergeen," 109-11.

<sup>47</sup> Derdarian, 1.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 213.



could not be less than genocide. The second-generation Armenian artistic expressions are inherent carriers of that state of mind and that mission. Their literature echoes the nation's collective psyche shaped by the violence, the pain of dispersion, the effects of self-accusation, the struggle to cope with a dual identity or a search for identity, the struggle to cast off the shadow of the past, and the effects of the past and present stance of the perpetrators and world bystanders. As Diana Der-Hovanessian writes,

Even though your mother was a baby  
in Worcester, and safe  
and your father a young soldier  
in Murad's mountains  
and you a generation from being born,  
.....  
even without a single  
relative who lived to march,  
lived past the march. We are children of Der Zor.<sup>49</sup>

The literary representations of the Armenian Genocide will continue to shape the understanding of this unresolved injustice for generations to come. They will function as the most effective transmitters of memory, shoring up commitment to the national struggle. These literary representations will stand as a monument to the memory of the Armenian tragic past, but more than that, they will work as an impetus to find a way to resolve the tragedy in order to make national survival and perpetuation possible.

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<sup>49</sup> Excerpt from Part 2 of the three-part poem, "Tryptich," titled "Why Sand Scorches Armenians," in *About Time*, 14.