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Edited by

Richard G. Hovannian
and
Simon Payaslian

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THE TEARS AND LAUGHTER
OF CILICIAN ARMENIA:
LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF DESTRUCTION
AND REVIVAL, 1909-1918

Rubina Peroomian

We should not lose our tenacity and falter in the face of life's calamities. We should confront them openly. . . . Our people need to sing and laugh in order to achieve mental and spiritual health without which progress is impossible.¹

Grigor Zohrap's (Krikor Zohrab) caveat, written two years after the Hamidian massacres of 1894-96, brings into focus the concern of Western Armenian literati for Armenian survival and perseverance. The act of mourning can be cathartic, relieving tensions and channeling the maddening torrent of imagery and emotions. In order to survive a traumatic collective experience and go on with life, however, the nation must be able to confront and comprehend the calamity, then leave it behind and take the path of revival. Was the Armenian nation given that chance? Did history offer the circumstances for healing? The story of the Cilician Armenian tragedy provides the answer.

Armenians had repeatedly experienced persecution under Ottoman rule, but the magnitude of the Hamidian massacres was beyond anything they could anticipate. Nevertheless, the aftermath was still livable, and the Armenian people was able to recuperate. The massacres were portrayed in prose and poetry, the sufferings immortalized, yet in many cases glimmers of hope for a brighter future colored the morbid scenes of blood and death. In the wake of the massacres, Siamanto would forecast a bright

¹ Excerpt from "Ergenk" [Let Us Sing], in *Masis* (Constantinople), Feb. 15, 1898.

daybreak.² Daniel Varuzhan (Taniel Varoujan) would hear the footsteps of the coming dawn.³ Optimism was slowly percolating. The retaliatory actions of revolutionary groups against Turkish and Kurdish oppressors inspired pride and worked toward restoring the national integrity and self-esteem that had been destroyed in the widespread submission and helpless surrender to the enemy's sword. While supplications to the Sublime Porte for amelioration of the Armenian situation and appeals to the European Powers for intervention were met with disdain and indifference, armed self-defense against repression was gaining momentum. Siamanto's credo, "Justice must be created and freedom fiercely seized," was becoming an increasingly popular response to repression.⁴ The heroic resistance of the Cilician Armenian stronghold of Zeitun during the 1895 massacres was an example to follow.

In such an atmosphere, the Young Turk revolution of 1908 and the restoration of the constitution in the Ottoman Empire was a blessing for Armenians and was received with much optimism and enthusiasm. Armenians hoped for the coming of a new era in which, as the Young Turks promised, Ottoman citizens of all races and creeds would receive equal treatment and would live as "brothers in this land of liberty." The massacre of Armenians in Cilicia less than a year after the revolution came as a shock to undermine the hope for peaceful coexistence.

Drawing evidence from the literary representations of life in Cilicia—or rather life and death in Cilicia—from the massacres of 1909 to the Genocide of 1915, this essay concentrates on the tears and laughter of the Cilician Armenians, that is, the destruction of the people, the ruin of their homeland, and, paradoxically, their struggle to survive and rebuild. In these literary representations, the individuality of the author is fused with the destiny of the victims, that is, these representations closely and truly

² See "Arshaloysnere" [The Dawns], a poem in the series "Diutsaznoren" [Heroically], in Siamanto, *Amboghchakan erker* [Complete Works] (Antelias: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1989), pp. 30-31.

³ See "Jarde (1895-96)" [The Carnage (1895-96)], in Daniel Varuzhan, *Banasteghtsakan erker* [Poetic Works] (Antelias: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1986), pp. 141-49.

⁴ See "Dareru vrezhe" [The Revenge of Centuries], a poem in the series "Hay-ordiner" [Sons of Armenians], in Siamanto, *Amboghchakan erker*, pp. 41-42.

embody the responses of the Armenian masses, those who fell victim and those who survived and continued. The study is based on a corpus of literary creations—poetry, essays, short stories, and memoirs. And while the focus is on artistic expressions of the 1909 massacres—literary works by Daniel Varuzhan, Siamanto, Zabel Yesayan (Zapel Esayan), Suren Partevian (Bartevian), and others—the genocidal experience of Cilician Armenians is based solely on memoirs. The artistic expressions of this latest catastrophe were to incubate for a few decades before reincarnating in the works of second- and third-generation Armenian writers and poets of Cilician origin. Indeed, what has come down as the immediate literary responses to the Cilician Armenian experience are mostly fragments of memoirs, a quotation here and there from a survivor who lived the hell. There are many folk songs in Turkish and Armenian, which represent a separate category or genre of the literature of atrocity but which are beyond the scope of this study.⁵

An analysis of the chain of events and the development of genocidal policies under the Young Turk rulers of the Ottoman Empire is not included in this discussion. The Armenian Genocide and its fore-shock in the Cilician massacres are taken as a point of departure and the focus of what may be called “the literature of atrocity.

The Destruction

“Cilicia is destroyed,” proclaimed Zabel Yesayan, who was visiting the disaster area as a member of one of the fact-finding delegations sent by the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople. “From what I have heard, I can tell that the entire Armenian people have fallen victim to the premeditated plan. . . . The conspiracy of the present government is evident.”⁶ Yesayan’s

⁵ For examples of such folk songs, see Verzhine Svazlian, *Mets Egherne: Arevmtahay banavor vkeyutiunner* [The Great Catastrophe: Western Armenian Oral Testimonies] (Erevan: Armenian National Academy of Sciences, 1995). This volume also includes the author’s recordings of testimonies by survivors, many of them from Cilician towns and villages who later settled in Soviet Armenia. A thematic study of this work and other available folk creations and oral testimonies can illuminate many folds in the story of the Cilician Armenian tragedy.

⁶ This is an excerpt from a letter Esayan wrote to her husband in Paris the first day

account of her close encounter with the disaster appeared in a collection of essays, *Averaknerun mej* (Amid the Ruins), published in 1911.⁷ This kaleidoscope of murder, destruction, and revival is also a powerful testimony to the author's struggle to overcome the paralyzing power of emotions and the inadequacy of language in the face of a catastrophe of such magnitude. She was determined, however, to record the suffering of the nation for posterity, to capture the unthinkable in the frame of human imagination.

Amid the Ruins begins with the cries and moaning of half-mad half-dead creatures, the "survivors" of the tragedy, coupled with powerful descriptions of smoldering ruins, heaps of decomposing corpses, half-burned naked bodies, mounds of bones, dried pools of blood. "Kill me before you go and trample on my dead body as you leave, because you have no remedy for my suffering," a woman cries out to her.⁸ There was no remedy, indeed, no cure for the women who had witnessed their daughters being raped, their sons and husbands being shot or hurled into a pit and set on fire. There was no remedy for the thousands of hungry, half-naked orphans who huddled together in the churches, schools, hospitals, and makeshift orphanages to share each other's fears, pain, misery, and nightmares. Yesayan's "Vorbere" (The Orphans) can overshadow any horror story or tragic episode of human suffering. The magnitude of anguish and agony that was the destiny of these children of the nation challenges all imagination.⁹

From time to time, the morbid scenes of destruction and death are interspersed with depictions of epic self-defense. Yesayan praises the heroes of Hajin, Sis, Sheikh-Murad, Kars-Bazar, and Chork Marzban (Dort-Yol), who took up arms and fought against the Turks. In these instances, her pen soars; for a brief moment, her admiration and pride outshine the mournful images she records page after page.

she came into contact with the widespread destruction. See Zapel Esayan, *Namakner* [Letters], ed. Arpik Avetisyan (Erevan: Erevan State University Press, 1979), p. 93.

⁷ *Averaknerun mej* was first published in Constantinople in 1911. The citations below are to a subsequent edition (Beirut: Etvan Press, 1957).

⁸ *Ibid.*, from the essay "Vorbere," p. 67.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-74.

Like Zabel Yesayan, Suren Partevian served in a delegation sent by the Armenian Patriarchate to investigate the situation and provide relief to the survivors. Like Yesayan, he experienced the obstacles placed by the local government. Like Yesayan, he, too, witnessed the horror and the tragedy and wrought them into a testimonial artifact, the artistic expression of the catastrophe titled *Kilikian arhavirke* (The Cilician Horror).¹⁰ In this collection of essays, fact and fiction combine to portray the victimization of the Cilician Armenians, their disillusionment, their political misgivings, and their misguided trust in the goodwill of the Young Turks.

Paralysis of diction and the inability to paint the true picture of pain and misery characterize Partevian's response, as was the case with Yesayan: "This is the first time I discover so brutally the impotence of my pen, the painful struggle, the inadequacy of all the meanings of the word to capture the scenes around me . . . the horrifying reality that crushes my soul."¹¹ But Partevian remains faithful to his self-assigned mission to record what he has come to witness, always adding his own reaction in sorrowful exclamations: *Vakh yavrum, vakh . . .* (Ah! My dear one, ah! Oh, you crushed and doomed generation),¹² or in sarcastic remarks: "Justice? Beyond the gallows of Adana, can a road to Justice still exist?"¹³ Crushed with raging emotions, he feels the urge to run away, to hide his tears, to restore his sanity. Unusual mounds of soil emanating a heavy odor catch his attention in a camp. "These are our little ones, our dead little ones," the survivors explain: "We buried them here, beside our tents. We could not reach the cemetery. . . . With one hand we would close their eyes, and with the other we would dig a little to bury them."¹⁴

But the prose of Yesayan and Partevian pales in comparison with the burning intensity of the poetic responses of Siamanto, Daniel Varuzhan, and Ruben Sevak (Rupen Sevag). In an at-

¹⁰ Suren Partevian, *Kilikian arhavirke* (Constantinople: Nshan Papikian Press, 1909).

¹¹ Ibid., p. 34, from the essay "Bot ev ahazang" [Bad News and Alarm].

¹² Ibid., p. 44, from the essay "Veraprogħnerun hamar ognutian kocher" [Appeals for Aid to the Survivors].

¹³ Ibid., p. 112, from the essay "Depi ardarutiun" [Toward Justice].

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 163, from the essay "Avernerun vra" [On the Ruins].

mosphere of mystic awe, these poets depict the tears and suffering of the victims of the Cilician catastrophe. They pour out their raging souls and protest against God. With their exceptional talent for versification, rich language, and strong imagery, they capture the situation in the power of poetry. History documents and even tries to explain the massacres of 1909, but memoirs, testimonies, and eyewitness accounts mix fact and imagination to paint the horrifying truth the way it was. Poetry captures one instant, one image, and the impact is incomparable.

Yesayan depicts the agony of a mother gone mad, who had to strangle her newborn in a dark cellar where people had taken refuge, lest the hungry baby's screams reach the Turkish mob and give away their hiding place.¹⁵ Siamanto's "Kheghtamah" (Strangled to Death), inspired by the same incident, provides one of the most striking and sinister landscapes in the literature of atrocity:

And in a dug-out cellar, forty people—
like terrified cattle.

We massed together,
shivering, bruising each other,
and our silence grew into panic,
as if we were looking at the Demon.

From sunrise to sunrise,
we were like gravestones and hungry.
We tried to kill our rage, our homesickness,
and the silence was endless space filling. . . .

Out there, the Turks like thousands of jackals,
not tired of wasting our orchards and villages,
trying to find us.

In the darkness we heard
the flash-dance crackling, flaring in the sun—
guns, spears, bayonets, and swords.

Corpses like uprooted trees
fell on the roof of our cellar.
Through the walls we heard shrieks, mute breathing,

¹⁵ See Esayan, from the essay "Averaknerun mej," in the volume of the same title, p. 27.

the ghost given up.
Blood seeped through earth ceiling
and trickled [down] our faces.

Then a newborn began to squeal.
The mother was sobbing . . .
“God have mercy. My breasts are dry
and he’s already sucked my blood.”

“We gotta strangle him,” - someone said.

“It’s the only way,” the others said.
“Strangle me first, then my son.”

“They have heard us, and they are digging, the bastards.”

“The child’s betrayed us.”

“The roof’s falling in.”

“Christ, a shaft of light.”
“I beg you . . . here is my throat.”

In the dark, the mother
offered her throat, then her son’s . . .

Then like snakes, two arms found the infant,
and the silence in the cellar was a storm.
I thought we had all died.

Then we heard the man above cursing
and the killers left.

Was this salvation? Can slaves be saved?
Every day that mother half-naked stands by the road delirious,
hanging on the skirt of a stranger, the enemy, the passerby.

[—Do you see these hands of mine? Do you see these hands?
It was I who strangled my newborn in that cellar . . .
Believe me, it was I who strangled him,
 what unfair people you are,
Strangle me at least. I have no strength in my hands.
It was I, in that cellar, who strangled my newborn
 with all my strength. . .

Have you no heart? Strangle me. My hands
have no strength any more. . . .]¹⁶

The poem belongs to Siamanto's series about the Cilician massacres titled *Karmir lurer barekames* (Bloody News from My Friend). Each poem in this series is more shocking and powerful than the next, painting the morbid and unthinkable scenes of the atrocity. An excerpt from "Pare" (The Dance) reads:

. . . A garden city [Partez] changed to ash heaps.
Corpses piled to the top of trees.
And from the waters, from the springs,
from the brooks and from the roads,
the roar of your blood. . . .

Suddenly I heard from a distance
a black mob of men, whipping, leading twenty girls.
Twenty young women pushed into my vineyard
while the men sang lewd songs
"When we beat the drums, you dance!"

And their whips began to crack ferociously
against the flesh of the Armenian women
who longed for death

. . . "You must dance, faithless heathen
beauties. Dance with open breasts to death,
smiling at us without complaints!" . . .

. . . Someone brought a bucket
then, of kerosene. Oh human justice
I spit at your forehead. . . .

¹⁶ The quotation is a translation by Peter Balakian and Nvart Yeghlian, published in *Raft* 8 (1994): 23-25. The translation may have some poetic value and proper idiomatic English usage, but it is abridged and schematic. It hardly conveys the tension, the meaning, and the impact building up within the original. Further, some inaccuracies in translation have distorted the original meaning. I have inserted in brackets my own translation of the last six lines in the Armenian original. The Balakian-Yeghlian translation goes: "I strangled my baby. It's true. / Have pity on me, for I'm a coward. / You could wring my neck in a second. / Have you no heart?" For the Armenian original, see Siamanto, *Amboghchakan erker*, pp. 163-64.

“You must dance. And here is a fragrance
Arabia does not have.” And with a torch,
set on fire the naked flesh.¹⁷

An excerpt from another poem, “Khache” (The Cross), reads:

My hands have seen
as much horror as my eyes.
Forgive me today my good friend of old dreams,
forgive me for disrupting your grief again.
Even though my hands shake like a dead branch,

I want to testify about what’s happening to our orphaned race.

It was in a churchyard,
a mother pleading for her only son,
pulling out her hair.
But who was left to listen?
Every soul wounded.
Every mother next to a dead son.
She was sewing a shroud,
fell on the dusty stones of the church floor:
“I want my son or my death.”
She lit candles, burned incense,
wailed at the deaf dome above.
When she gave up on God,
she went to the Turks
and kissed their swords,
begging for her boy.
A mob gathered in the churchyard
returning from more killing.
Beneath a tent—widows, corpses, orphans,
and like hyenas,
the mob came to wipe their swords.

“Your son?—No problem. We’ll fetch him.
Isn’t he tall and bright-eyed?
The one who fought yesterday trying to defend you?

¹⁷ Diana Der Hovannesian and Marzbed Margossian, trans. and ed., *Anthology of Armenian Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), pp. 143-45. The word in the first line of the poem “Partez” is translated as “a garden city,” converted from the Turkish word for garden, “Baghche,” whereas here the name Baghche actually refers to the Cilician town where the incident occurred.

He's in the vestibule praying for you.
Don't worry, it's his turn, he'll be free today."

Then the gendarmes huddled,
and giggling like croaking ravens,
bowed before her.
"Take off that flowery dress, we need it."

In a minute the men came running out of the vestibule
with a blood-soaked dress.
"Isn't this your dress?
Doesn't it smell familiar? What kind of
mother are you?
Smell it, go ahead!
Don't be mad; we sacrificed your son on the altar
with white cloths and candles.

Now we'll paint your cross . . .
bring the nails and hammers
before the dress dries."

Then one of the Turks took the bloody dress
and painted a cross on the chapel wall.
Beneath the tents the widows buried their heads.
In the church that Turk pointed to the cross.
"Kneel down and pray.
[As you did to Christ. What better saint than this?
Kneel down, crazy woman, kneel down and pray
in front of your son.
These nails and hammers are for you.
We are ready to crucify you. . . . Do you believe in
resurrection?
If not, kneel down in front of your son and pray, crazy
woman."]¹⁸

Siamanto's achievement lies in his artistic combination of eye-

¹⁸ This translation is also by Peter Balakian and Nvart Yeghlian, *Raft* 8 (1994): 20-22. Again, the translation is abridged and schematic; for the sake of accuracy, I have inserted in brackets my own translation of the last six lines in the Armenian original. The Balakian-Yeghlian translation goes, "We'll do it to you like you did it to Christ. /Hey mother, pray to your son. /Haven't you faith in the resurrection?" For the Armenian original, see Siamanto, *Amboghchakan erker*, pp. 154-55.

witness accounts with poetic excellence. The result is a powerful tension created by the contrast between the dark scenes of murder, torture, and death and the rich poetic style and language. These poems are a beautifully crafted memorialization of this massacre. But how can “beautiful” and “massacre” be paired? Aren’t they binary oppositions? Is it not a sin to draw pleasure from such horrendous scenes? (Pleasure in the Aristotelian sense, to be sure, that a well-made work of art can bring regardless of the subject matter.) But this is the inherent characteristic of genocide literature. The greater the contrasts, the deeper impact they produce.

In terms of artistic quality and conceptualization, Siamanto’s “Bloody News from My Friend” does not stand in isolation. Daniel Varuzhan’s “Kilikian mokhirnerun” (To the Ashes of Cilicia) also serves as a monument to the memory of the Cilician holocaust. His piercing words become epitaphs carved on the imaginary tombstones marking the graves the victims never had. Ruben Sevak’s “Karmir girke” (The Red [Bloody] Book), comprising three groupings of poems, represents another extraordinary conceptualization of the victims’ journey to heaven, their soliloquies directed at God whom they beseech, curse, and deny.

It is significant that the accounts of plunder and murder or sheepish surrender to atrocity are often juxtaposed with either incidents of heroic self-defense or a more unusual way of resistance—the determination to overcome the calamity, to survive and rebuild. These responses are typically shown as intrinsic to the collective psyche of the Armenian people. Indeed, with a look to the past, it is easy to trace the reverberations of these characteristic responses in the history of the persecution, endurance and survival of the Armenian people.

The Will to Survive and Begin Anew

Yesayan’s response to the Cilician massacres unfolds in a vision of revival. She enthusiastically discovers a sense of determination in the victims to overcome their irreparable loss and to build a new life upon the ruins of the old:

In a few years the orchards will bear fruit again; the fields will be covered with the golden grain of copious crops, and the chil-

dren's cries will once again fill the empty houses. . . . The tortured but invincible race will persevere despite all murderous intentions.¹⁹

From here on, toward the end of *Amid the Ruins*, scenes of despair are increasingly coupled with efforts toward revival. Heartrending laments are counterbalanced by visions of future prosperity:

The plans of the enemy had once again proven futile, and in spite of our hopelessly sad impressions, the immortality and the ingenuity of the nation had escaped the hatchets, swords, guns and fire. . . . In the face of our persistent vitality, the enemy was condemned to impotence, and this feeling hovered over the ruins, rose from the ashes, has reflected in the ghostly appearances of the widows, and glittered in the eyes of the orphans.²⁰

And the summation of her observations is that "Adana was being resurrected from the ashes."²¹

Indeed, Cilicia was being rebuilt. Cilician Armenians with their feet firmly planted on their ancestral land were building their lives anew. The economy was booming. Ruined towns and villages were being rebuilt. Although Turkish was the main language used in Cilicia and speaking Armenian was still frowned upon, cultural and political life was at its peak. New parochial schools were opened to teach Armenian to children who came mostly from Turkish-speaking families. Educational institutions operated by the Armenian Church and the missionaries trained and educated a generation of Armenian youth, inculcating a consciousness of their history and heritage.

As Sokrat Terzian attests, Hajin was boasting of its many new and rebuilt schools and the 2,000 students attending those schools. After their heroic resistance to the massacres of 1909, the Armenians of Hajin had been able to inspire awe and respect among the Turks. They were even entrusted with high-ranking positions in the regional government.²²

¹⁹ Esayan, *Averaknerun mej*, pp. 165-66.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 221-22.

²¹ Ibid., p. 226.

²² See Sokrat H. Terzian, *Hajini utamsia diutsaznamarte* [The Eight-Month Heroic Struggle of Hajin] (Athens: Parthenon Press, 1937), pp. 81-87. Sokrat Terzian

Hovhannes Mkrtichian (Mugrditchian) recalls his return in 1913 to his native village of Lapaji, one of the several Armenian villages in the Amanus Mountains. He had been sent to the Jerusalem seminary before the massacres, during which every member of his family, except for an older brother, was killed. Now he was returning to serve his people as a teacher, to fulfill the promise he had made to his mother before he left. The villagers were building a new church upon the ashes of the old one, he attests, with a room for the new school. But this time they had learned their lesson. They were also building a secret vault in the church to store weapons and ammunition in case they were needed for future self-defense.²³

Yes, Armenian life was thriving in Cilicia, but the bitter memory of the massacres remained, combined with a lingering mistrust for the Turks. In her eyewitness accounts of the Cilician massacres, Yesayan spoke of the shattered trust and foresaw that this sentiment would endure:

What will not be replaced or compensated in the aftermath of this inexplicable catastrophe is not so much the houses that were turned to ashes, or the ruined orchards, or the vast number of dead. Rather, it is the paralyzing and hopeless sensation reflected in the eyes of the survivors. It is the feelings of a nation trampled and crushed under brutal heels. Those who rose yearning for light and freedom were crushed with pitiless cruelty.²⁴

Partevian, too, was certain that Armenians would survive this catastrophe and would rebuild their homes. However, he doubted whether the faith Armenians had once had in their Turkish neighbors would ever be restored:

The bodies of the dead will be buried; the wounds will heal, the tears will dry up, the blood will be wiped away, the ruins will be

was the son of Harutun Terzian, an Armenian deputy in the regional assembly of the province of Adana.

²³ Hovhannes Mugrditchian, *To Armenians with Love: The Memoirs of a Patriot*, trans. Arra Sevakian, ed. Christopher Gilson and Paul Martin (np., 1996), p. 37. Hovhannes did not stay long in Lapaji. A convicted Turkish murderer in the village killed Hovhannes' brother in revenge and threatened to kill him, too. Hovhannes returned to Sis to assume a teaching position there.

²⁴ Esayan, *Averaknerun mej*, p. 28.

rebuilt, the catastrophe will be redressed. But there is something broken, something sunken in our souls; there is a ravage of faith, a pain of frustration that will remain incurable.²⁵

Suspicion and mistrust remained with every surviving Cilician Armenian like a vexing question with no answer. After all, the growing new generation for the most part consisted of orphans who had witnessed the brutal and cold-blooded killing of their parents, the looting of their family belongings by people whom they knew and met in the street everyday. Hakob Guyumchian (Hagop Kuyumjian) who as a little boy moved to Adana with his family, speaks of this haunting thought when he recounts the horrifying stories that were circulating about the 1909 massacres.

It seemed as if every family had lost a member or two in that massacre. . . . In their woeful stories, all the storytellers reiterated with bewilderment how the Turks, with no fear of God, even set the Armenian church on fire. But what seemed truly incredible was that the Turks of the same neighborhood had broken into their Armenian neighbors' houses and slaughtered the Armenians they had met and greeted in the street for years. We heard all this and we began to hate the Turks, including our neighbors with whose children we sometimes played.²⁶

With the outbreak of war, things changed for the worse. Hakob attests to the shift in the Turkish attitude toward their Armenian neighbors. "We would hear the vilifying words '*giavur*,' '*khinzir giavur*' [infidel, infidel pig] everywhere we went. The Turks had begun to be estranged from the Armenians. Even we, the children, felt that hostility and did not dare to enter Turkish quarters where groups of Turkish boys would assault us, and sometimes grown-up Turks would also join in to slap and kick us around."²⁷

Local governments were looking for pretexts to begin the persecutions, and if no pretext could be found, one was fabricated.

²⁵ Partevian, *Kilikian arhavirke*, p. 200, from the essay "Andarmanelin" [The Incurable].

²⁶ Hakob Guyumchian, *Ariunot anapat* [Bloody Desert] (Boston: Baikar Press, 1949), pp. 91-92.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 145.

In mid-March 1915, Armenian draftees of Zeitun who had escaped the tortures of the *amele taburi* (labor battalions) took refuge in the mountains to avoid Turkish reprisal. The government in Aleppo used this as a pretext to spread the word of an “uprising” in Zeitun and sent an army to deal with it. Some Armenians refused to obey orders to disarm and did not heed Catholicos Sahak I Khapayan’s (Sahag Khabayan) admonition to keep the peace and turn in all weapons. They stood against the army of a few thousand, when the appeal came again from the catholicos and Armenian leaders of Cilicia to lay down their arms so as not to incite the Turks and jeopardize all of Cilicia’s Armenians. Grigor Palakian (Krikoris Balakian) believed that if the Armenians in Zeitun had been given a chance to stand against the Turks all the way, the Turkish army would never have been able to disarm these brave men and women and deport them. He deplores the fact that they were never given this chance.²⁸

The land of the brave was emptied. The entire population of Zeitun and the surrounding villages was put on the road, one caravan toward Deir el-Zor, another one in the direction of Sultaniye. Teodik records an eyewitness account, giving evidence of the hardship, the humiliation, and the torture the deportees endured. In one of these heartrending episodes, a woman in labor cannot keep up with the caravan. The deportees plead with the *zaptiye* (police) to halt and allow them to help her, but he refuses. Women who dare to stay behind to help are beaten and driven away. “She will die, the poor thing . . . for God’s sake,” they beg. “*Gebersin!* [Let her croak],” shouts the guard, and the caravan moves on, leaving the woman screaming in pain. Coincidentally, Teodik comes across another eyewitness account which brings the story to a close. An Armenian soldier reminisces about passing the same road through Guleg Boghazi a few days later. He and his friend spot large birds diving in the valley nearby and flying up again.

Out of curiosity, we approached the deep valley, and there was the most horrific scene I have ever come across. A woman was

²⁸ Grigor Palakian, *Hay Goghgotan* [The Armenian Golgotha], first published in Vienna, 1922; quotations from republication (Erevan: Hayastan Press, 1991), p. 66.

lying under a tree. A feeble moaning came from a bloody bundle between her legs. We could not figure out why the woman was shaking her arm like a fan. We went closer. The bundle was a newborn baby with its nose and mouth pecked away by the birds. The mother, breathing her last, kept fanning with her arm to ward off the ravens picking at her baby. . . . My friend, a priest, stopped dumbfounded and whispered, "O, you Armenian heroine, if there is no paradise out there beyond this life, one has to be created for you alone."²⁹

Haykaz (Haygaz) Ghazarian depicts an incident in Dort-Yol which marked the beginning of the persecutions and eventual deportation of its Armenian inhabitants. A fellow named Saljian had allegedly sold foodstuff to the British army and had spied for them. This was a pretext to arrest several Armenians and send them to Adana to be hanged. Ghazarian attests that it was later known that the Saljian story was completely fabricated.³⁰

Sokrat Terzian writes about the provocative measures the local government of Hajin took, as early as December 1914, to spread the story that the Hnchakian leaders were planning to arm the population in self-defense and punish the traitors. That was the beginning of the arrests and persecutions. Full compliance with the government by surrendering all arms and other weaponry made no difference. The arrests and torture increased and terror was spread in the city when the army of three thousand, in charge of executing the deportation of Zeitun Armenians, entered Hajin and besieged the city. Two hundred Armenian leaders and intellectuals were imprisoned and tortured. There were rumors that Avni Bey, the head of the Adana war tribunal, had requested the order to execute them immediately, but the Adana government preferred to deport the entire population.³¹ Turkish hatred for Armenians had resurfaced to play an important role in the realization of the government's genocidal plans.

²⁹ Teodik, "Mor sere" [Mother's Love] in *Azge che merats ev anhnar e vor merni: Banti ev aksori tariner* [The Nation Has Not Died and It Is Impossible That It Dies: Years of Prison and Exile] (Antelias: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1985), pp. 125-27.

³⁰ Haykazn G. Ghazarian, *Tseghaspan turke* [The Genocidal Turk] (Beirut: Hamazkayin Press, 1968), p. 176.

³¹ Terzian, *Hajini utamsia diutsaznamarte*, pp. 89-99.

Cilicia Amid Massacres and Deportations

Turkey had entered the Great War and was calling on all its able-bodied sons to mobilize for the defense of their homeland. In normal situations, this would have been an expected procedure. But the occasion rather served the Young Turk government as a way to terrorize the Armenians on the pretext of disarming them and conscripting their youth into the army. History has documented the experience of the Armenian draftees and the nefarious initiative of forming unarmed military labor battalions known as the *amele taburi*. Personal recollections offer deeper insight and add a human dimension to the historical fact. Hakob Guyumchian who was then a young boy, recalls the terror that was caused by the conscription of Armenian men. With no regard to age or circumstances or whether or not the person had paid the exemption tax, men were seized in the streets and taken away with no word to their families.³² He remembers how his uncle, Barsegh Emi, knocked on their door one night and collapsed once inside the house, out of breath, out of strength. He was in rags and his feet were covered with sores oozing blood and puss. He had run away from the labor battalions with horror stories to tell.³³

When the deportations began, Hakob Guyumchian's family was one of the last ones to leave town. Rumors of a malevolent plan against Armenians had been circulating in Adana for some time, and the arrival of the first caravan of deportees from Zeitun substantiated the rumors. The town had sunk into a funereal gloom. In the midst of uncertainty and anticipation of some omen, there was a flicker of hope, as Guyumchian writes: "Perhaps we will be spared; perhaps the war will end; perhaps we will be saved by the English and the French."³⁴ And then one day it was Adana's turn. Quarter by quarter, the population was moved out. No explanation was given. The caravans were moving toward Aleppo. Would they reach Aleppo? No one knew.

Guyumchian gives a detailed, day-by-day account of the ordeal. As the days passed, the scant provisions dwindled. Money was stolen. The gendarmes began to treat the deportees like cattle.

³² Guyumchian, *Ariunot anapat*, pp. 149-50.

³³ Ibid., pp. 146-49.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 152.

Gradually the numbers of corpses along the roadside increased, the assaults by Arab and Chechen (Circassian) tribesmen following the caravan intensified, there were more and more shootings, rapes, and robberies, the deportees lost their last belongings, and still they kept walking under the desert sun with no food or water until it was clear to everyone that their destination was nothing but Death.

The 55 pages (pp. 157-212) of Guyumchian's memoirs, written with amazing clarity and unembellished simplicity, portray the true face of hell through which this ten-year-old boy lived. Day in and day out for several weeks, Hakob's life was filled with scenes of unequaled atrocities. He witnessed sexual assaults on little girls, young and old women, and even corpses. He walked along roads strewn with bloody pieces of human bodies. He was caught off-guard by sudden attacks by the gendarmes, who raided the caravan instead of guarding and leading it. Under the hooves of their horses, the gendarmes crushed those who did not have the strength to clear out of the way, as if to get rid of these moving skeletons who refused to give up. Hakob lost dear ones to random executions carried out by the most brutal methods: the victims' brains were shot out, the dead and the dying were cut into pieces, the bellies of pregnant women were slashed open, the bloody fetus scooped out and thrown up into the air. His ears were filled with the demonic laughter that accompanied these bloody-minded devilish orgies. Then it was farewell to his two-year-old brother, whom his emaciated, half-dead parents could no longer carry. The family, which had managed to keep together during the first weeks, was beginning to dissipate. A few hours later, his mother fell unconscious, with her last words calling the name of her little son left behind. Was she dead? They did not know. They abandoned her and continued to walk. Then some Arabs snatched away his two younger brothers. Hakob and his father did not react. They did not even turn to look at the screaming boys.

Now it was his father's turn. A soldier beckoned him and without a reason opened fire. Hakob was left alone to face the total liquidation of the remaining deportees a few days later. He remembers waking up under a pile of corpses. But how he escaped the executioners' sword, how he managed to get out of the pile and start walking again, how he came to join another caravan

of deportees, he still cannot remember. All he knows is that he continued to walk on that blood-stained desert sand, and one day, while he was walking with the new caravan, a Kurdish woman paid the gendarme a few coins and took him to her village. Hakob was saved, but he had to start a new life as a Muslim in a remote and extremely backward Kurdish village. His story does not end here, as he had to endure two long years of captivity before he attained another short-lived period of freedom after the fall of the Young Turk government at the end of 1918.

This is just one story among thousands of others told and untold. One year after the first caravans had marched out of Cilicia, the Very Reverend Grigoris Palakian and about a hundred other exiles reached Cilicia. The corpses left to rot along the roads were now dry skeletons, bones, and skulls. Shukri Bey, the Turkish officer who had escorted the exiles, confessed to Palakian that he had received orders to get rid of the corpses and dispose of the evidence; so he had his men dig a huge pit, throw in the bodies and cover up the pit, but the heavy rains had washed away the soil and exposed the corpses.

Palakian, himself a victim of persecution, had come into close contact with the Armenian tragedy and made a vow to himself if by some miracle he survived he would record every detail for the world to know. Indeed, his 400-page account of what he saw and heard is valuable testimony relating to the crime of genocide. He casually managed to extract Shukri Bey's detailed account of the massacres. And, of course, Shukri Bey had nothing to hide. With pleasure and pride he had performed his holy duty toward God and caliph and now boasted about it.

When passing by Yozgat, Palakian asked Shukri Bey about the lot of Armenians in this region, and Shukri answered that the Armenians there had not been deported, because the *kaimakam* (county governor), held a special grudge against them and "had pledged on the head of the Prophet not to leave one single Armenian." After having disposed of the men, the *kaimakam* had announced to the women that their men had reached Aleppo safely and were asking the women to join them. The women were given four days to gather up everything they could, rent carts, horses or donkeys and get on the road. Carts and horses had to be brought in neighboring Turkish villages. At the end of the first day on the road, Shukri Bey ordered the Turks to unload

everything and leave. Then the looting began with the most cruel methods of body searches. Shukri Bey admitted that the pillage—jewelry, money, and valuables—was worth no less than 30,000 gold pieces. After that, the slaughter began with the help of the Turkish population summoned from distant villages. The people of the neighboring villages were excluded at this stage, lest there be instances of kindheartedness in attempts to spare a friend or shelter an acquaintance. The slaughter was carried out with the most primitive of weapons, including knives, axes, and shovels. Then the people of the neighboring Turkish villages were allowed to strip the dead and take away the clothing. Shukri Bey laughingly noted that in this stage the most enthusiastic looters were women. They even cut open the bellies of decomposing bodies, and, with their hands deep in the intestines, searched for pieces of jewelry that might have been swallowed before the body search. And indeed some were lucky enough to find what they were seeking. Within a day they were already selling the jewels in the Yozgat market. The carnage completed by humans, it was now the turn of the dogs, which were attracted from far away by the smell of blood.³⁵

Palakian tries hard to portray the dreadful reality that constituted Shukri Bey's "achievements." It was not easy, he admitted: "It is impossible not only to write but also to conceive of this colossal carnage or drama with all its details, because in order to have such strong conceptual powers, one has to have the inner resources of a criminal."³⁶

The caravan had been on the road for a long time and had suffered innumerable hardships. But all along, the exiles had sustained the hope that their ordeal would be over once they reached the Armenian town of Hajin. They were unaware of the lot of that city and all of Cilicia. Their disappointment was immense. Instead of the bustling city, they came upon its ruins, ashes, and deserted orchards.

To contrast this *danse macabre* and the gruesome imagery of the city, Palakian recalled the past when Armenian life was thriving and happy songs of love and labor filled the air. Now, with the town turned into a gigantic skeleton, Palakian had no

³⁵ Palakian, *Hay Goghgotan*, pp. 201-07.

³⁶ Ibid.

bright and hopeful forecast for the future. The revival of Cilician Armenia was a farfetched notion. Cilicia, the erstwhile bastion of the Rubenian (Rubenid) eagles, was destroyed, once and for all, Palakian writes. The bare walls of burned churches remained standing as symbols of eternal protest against Turkish brutality and beastly carnage. The once bustling Armenian town of Hajin, with its population of some 28,000, was reduced to only about 350 children and very old men and women. "The Turks, in their ability to ruin, destroy, loot, sack, exploit, and kill, can undoubtedly out-perform all humankind. These people have never built anything and for centuries they have always destroyed what their neighbors have built,"³⁷ concludes Palakian.

Little is known of the fate of the deported people of Hajin. Memoirs are scarce. Minas Evikhanian's account in Sokrat Terzian's *Hajini utamsia diutsaznamarte* is a rare testimonial. This survivor from Hajin recalls his escape from death in Deir el-Zor.

There were 20,000 in our caravan, mostly Armenians from Hajin, when we reached Deir el-Zor. Thousands of *chetes* [mounted bandits] surrounded us and divided us into two rows. Every five minutes, twenty of us were taken away to the brink of the huge pit that had been dug to serve as a mass grave. There, four executioners were waiting with spears to butcher the victims and throw them into the pit to die. When it was my turn, with a swift and agile movement I threw myself into the pit, before they managed to cut me. I hid under the rising tide of blood and the cut-up pieces of human bodies. I heard gun shots but they missed me. I got out after three or four days. I must have fainted in there out of hunger and fear. O God! Will my wretched human tongue ever be able to describe what I went through? I can only say that I have lived through hell before dying. Now I have no fear of death or hell.³⁸

The landscape was even more bleak in Sis (today's Kozan), once the capital of the Rubenian kingdom. Out of 800 Armenian households, Palakian notes, only 50 or 60 people, mostly relatives and friends of a Turkified Armenian deputy, were spared. The Armenian houses were now occupied by Turks from the

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 271-95, quotation, p. 289.

³⁸ Terzian, *Hajini utamsia diutsaznamarte*, pp. 100-01.

surrounding towns and villages, and the cathedral of Sis, the seat of the Cilician Catholicosate, was transformed into a school for Turkish refugee boys. As to the valuables and the sacred items, the clergy had taken with them what they could carry. Those objects left behind were stolen or destroyed. The two-hundred-year-old marble throne of the catholicos was among the items crushed to pieces.³⁹

The death road took Palakian and his fellow exiles to Hasanbeyli and Kanle Gechid (which in translation means "the bloody pass"). Here, two Armenian soldiers who were still serving in the army told Palakian the horrible story of the liquidation of an Armenian camp of 80,000 deportees who had been left as prey to hunger, disease, rainstorms, and freezing cold for weeks. Then, one day in the fall of 1915, Sevkiat Mudur, the officer in charge, had decided to drive the few thousand still alive out toward Islahiye. The rugged mountain pass would hasten the liquidation process. Under the cracking whips, the pushing and the pulling, the living skeletons began to move. The two Armenian soldiers watched helplessly as mothers placed their half-dead babies on the huge pile of unburied corpses—so that they could carry their older children. They heard the last whimpers of the babies calling after their mothers.

Palakian interrupts his account of this dreadful scene to interject: "Is the human mind capable of imagining this?" He is not sure if he can transmit the impact of this tragic landscape of hills made of the thousands of unburied corpses, and mothers with their dying children in their arms adding them to that huge pile of human remains and walking away crushed and helpless with a curse on their lips: "May God give them what they deserve." The camp was deserted and quiet. "But at night the silence was broken by the howling of dogs and wolves attacking the corpses and the occasional feeble cries of children still alive. The beasts were feasting upon the half-dead with their blood still warm."⁴⁰ This was an episode from one of the most notorious Cilician sites of butchery.

Hovhannes Mkrtichian was teaching at the Armenian school in Osmaniye, when the war broke out. Because of the town's

³⁹ Palakian, *Hay Goghgotan*, p. 319.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 341.

location as a stop along the Baghdad Railway, a large military force was stationed there, and to accommodate the military the government had confiscated a number of buildings, including the Armenian school. From then on Armenian life in Osmaniye was in disarray. The first deportees from Zeitun passed through the city in May 1915, confirming the ominous rumors of the government's decision and the lot of the Armenian population of the empire. Hovhannes and the priest were not allowed to meet the deportees and help them. He remembers, though, his brief visit in June with Grigor Zohrap and Vardges Serenkulian (Vartkes Serengulian), two Armenian deputies to the Ottoman Parliament who passed through Osmaniye on their way to exile and death. A month later it was the turn of Hovhannes' family to leave. Osmaniye was swept clean of its Armenian population of a few hundred households, and Armenian houses were handed over to Turkish *muhajirs* (refugees) from the Balkans.⁴¹

The next station was Katma, where Hovannes' family joined some 20,000 Armenians from various places to be moved to Deir el-Zor. Escape was the only alternative to certain death. Hovhannes and seven other families succeeded in bribing the soldiers and escaping to Aleppo. After that, it was a story of constant evasion and hiding, always with the danger of being discovered and sent into exile. The swollen and unrecognizable corpses lying beside the roads they traveled were constant reminders of the destiny that awaited them. A fortunate turn of fate allowed them to take brief refuge as railroad workers in Intilli under the protection of an Armenian engineer and his German chief. But that was only a short reprieve. "In the spring of 1916, strict orders came by telegram that the 50,000 Armenians working on the railway tunnels from Intilli and Aydun all the way to Aleppo must be deported to designated exile locations immediately and without exception."⁴²

Soon Hovhannes and his party were part of the caravan to Birejik, traveling along the banks of the Euphrates by way of Fundujak, Marash, and Aintab. Their caravan followed the route that an earlier one had taken, and the naked bodies of old people and small children spoke of the atrocities committed against the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 332.

⁴² Mugrditchian, *To Armenians with Love*, p. 55.

previous caravan. "We were only beginning to experience the terrible things that would take place before we reach the bloody banks of the Euphrates on our way to the desert."⁴³ Indeed, girls were snatched away, and old men and women who could not keep pace were beaten to death. But apparently this was not enough. They only lost "a few," as the zaptiye in charge of the caravan had apologetically reported to his chief. The situation was quickly remedied with random gunfire, making the loss was considerable. Then the attacks of Turkish villagers "with hatchets, scythes, shovels, truncheons and sickles took a further toll of nearly five hundred persons. Not content with the slaughter, they took many of the younger men and women away with them."⁴⁴

The caravan moved on, and the numbers rapidly diminished under continuous attacks and random executions, thirst, starvation, and then a typhus epidemic. It is amazing how Hovhannes managed to stay alive, never losing hope, always devising a means of escape, being caught, tortured and sent back time and again. It is amazing how he was always able to find a miraculous explanation for his losses. The night when his little girl died of starvation, "a supernatural phenomenon occurred," he writes. "At exactly midnight, an arc-shaped light suddenly appeared. Like a rainbow, it reached down to her. Bewildered, I began to pray. In a short time the light disappeared. And at that moment our little one stopped breathing. Her sinless soul had surely soared with the light of that rainbow."⁴⁵

Along the way he and his wife were separated, while he escaped another arrest. He managed to stay alive while his wife was taken to the infamous camp of Meskene, a station along the way to the final destination, the liquidation stations in Raqqa or Deir el-Zor.⁴⁶ It was again only by sheer luck that after eight

⁴³ Ibid., p. 56.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 66.

⁴⁶ Meskene was the site of a concentration camp where the renowned writer Aram Antonian spent time before his escape to Aleppo. After the war, he published stories inspired by eyewitness accounts of camp incidents in a collection titled *Ain sev orerun* [In Those Dark Days] (Boston: Hairenik Press, 1919). For a discussion of Antonian's work, see Rubina Peroomian, *Literary Responses to Catastrophe: A Comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish Experience* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993), Ch. 6, "Aram Antonian."

months of separation, Hovhannes and his wife were reunited in Aleppo toward the end of March 1917.

The stories of Cilician Armenian suffering are not abundant. The existing texts cannot be compared with the works of lasting literary value that were written in response to the 1909 massacres. The few great men of letters who were part of prewar Cilician Armenian cultural life did not survive the death marches to give artistic expression to their unique experience. Years later a few survivors ventured to write their memoirs in a safer atmosphere, mitigated by the distance of time and space. Theirs was not a venture into the realm of *belles lettres* but a drive to tell their story, to speak of their sufferings and of the sufferings of the entire nation for the whole world to know. Theirs was a melange of fact, fiction, memory and testimony to further the understanding of the Armenian Genocide.

Could Zabel Yesayan create another masterpiece on the Catastrophe of 1915, so much more formidable than the massacres of 1909 around which *Amid the Ruins* was woven? Curiously, she avoided writing about it even though she came into contact with its immediate aftermath in her mission to Cilicia to seek out surviving orphans. She collected evidence of the atrocity and planned to publish her findings but never did. As Krikor Beldian puts it, the reason remains a puzzle. She did record the recollections of Haik (Haig) Toroyan in the form of testimony, without embellishment and without attempting an artistic conceptualization. This was perhaps a conscious decision arising from her conviction that forging art from such a great catastrophe is sacrilegious.⁴⁷ But even if she had ventured to render the Genocide in artistic form, she would have had nothing more to describe than morbid accounts of more plunder, rape, and murder, more hopeless and gloomy scenes of pain and suffering with no better prospect on the horizon. In a letter to Zareh Vorbuni (Vorpuni), she gave another reason for her restraint. She wrote that Armenian writers living in the uncertainty of the Diaspora, disillusioned with the present, should not transform their own dilemmas into literature of mystical and religious sentimentalism. That kind of literature,

⁴⁷ Krikor Beldian, in *Mard* [Mankind] (Antelias: Catholicosate of Cilicia, 1997), p. 170, discusses Esayan's post-Genocide literary activities and her views about genocide narrative.

she thought, was unsuitable for Armenian youth who should be looking to the future with optimism.⁴⁸

Yesayan had nothing optimistic to transmit to the young generation of survivors. She could not textualize the revival of the nation, as she had witnessed it in the aftermath of the 1909 massacres. The survivors of the Genocide had no homeland upon which to rebuild and continue living as a nation. She yearned for the homeland snatched away, and that yearning was turned into a need to “let out the scream of the nation suffering for centuries.”⁴⁹ She struggled in vain to find a literary mold to transcend the Genocide and secure survival through art.

The theme of revival, so masterfully developed in *Amid the Ruins*, reverberated weakly and sounded artificial in *Barpa Khachik* (Uncle Khachik), the novel she wrote in Armenia in 1936. Disillusioned with France and the French Armenian community, she had turned to Soviet Armenia as a haven for the survivors of the Genocide. But the revival of the nation she expected to find there was stillborn. The theme of revival echoes only in a few communist slogans she reiterates here and there in her novel: “Long live the struggling international proletariat,” or “Long live the victorious proletariat of Russia.”⁵⁰

The magnitude of the genocidal experience of the Cilician Armenians could never be fully captured, being reduced to a few memoirs and narratives. The ashes of the holocaust and the blood of the carnage did not give birth to world-class literary works of artistic excellence. It was too overwhelming.

* * *

Armenian Cilicia is now a memory—memory of paradise lost, of homeland, of centuries-old Armenian life. It is a source of irreconcilable pain from an ordeal that can never be forgotten. Cilicia is a heritage transmitted from generation to generation. For the descendants of survivors, it is a measure of their bond to

⁴⁸ Esayan, *Letters*, p. 265.

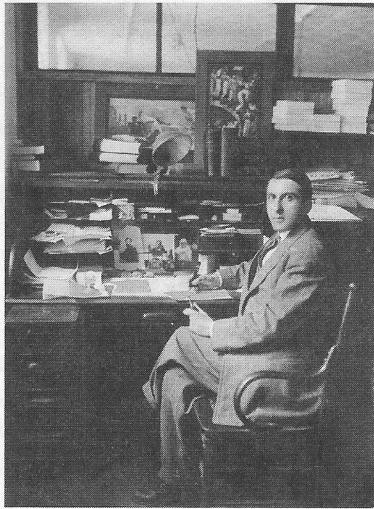
⁴⁹ Zapel Esayan, “Hogis aksoryal” [My Exiled Soul], in *Erker* [Works] (Erevan: Haypethrat, 1959), p. 151. For an analysis of Esayan’s literary responses to the 1909 massacres and subsequent references to the Genocide of 1915 in her literature, see Peroomian, *Literary Responses*, Ch. 4, “Zapel Esayan.”

⁵⁰ Zapel Esayan, *Barpa Khachik* [Uncle Khachik] (Erevan: Hayastan Press, 1966).

their roots, their identity. Cilicia is a literary theme, an abundant source of doleful imagery, a source of metaphors that impose upon the poetic imagination of third- and fourth-generation poets and writers. It is through literature that Armenian Cilicia lives on.



Daniel Varuzhan
(Taniel Varoujan)



Siamanto
(Adom Yarjanian)



Suren Partevian
(Suren Bartevian)



Ruben Sevak
(Rupen Sevag)