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# The truth of the Armenian genocide in Edgar Hilsenrath's fiction

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Artistic literature, and in this case the imaginative portrayal of the Armenian genocide, carries a truth about the crime of genocide that may be different from the actual reality. It may even appear unreal. However, it conveys the truth with an impact on the reader that no historical document or text can have. "The visionary sphere" of genocide fictionalized is as important as "the world of logic." It is the most efficient vehicle for increased understanding of genocide. I have expounded on this idea elsewhere, and I must reiterate that "with the generations of the survivors of a historical catastrophe the overall portrait and the indelible impression of that catastrophe are shaped not so much by the hard facts but with the strokes of the artist's brush fictionalizing the event."<sup>1</sup> From this point of view, Edgar Hilsenrath's novel, *The Story of the Last Thought*, is not only an innovative work of art, but also a valuable, even a unique, addition to Armenian genocide literature. It offers an important contribution to promoting knowledge about the Catastrophe.

Edgar Hilsenrath's radically abstract work of fiction manifests a singular approach to the Armenian genocide, one never attempted by an Armenian author. With a detached stand of an "outsider," he succeeds in building up the inner reality of the genocide and its impact upon the victims and the victimizers. The language that Hilsenrath uses to describe Armenians in their daily habits is sometimes terribly repulsive and irritating. It really is difficult for an Armenian reader to digest it all without rebelling against the author for so casually portraying in such unexpected, unliterary words the ugly facets of human life, or rather Armenian life, which Armenians have so carefully sanitized in their literary representations. There are absolutely no taboos observed or limits on language use in Hilsenrath's novel, *The Story of the Last Thought*. (*The Story of the Last Thought* won Hilsenrath the prestigious Alfred Döblin Prize in 1989, awarded by the Günter Grass Foundation.) The same openness is demonstrated in the characterization of the Turk. Hilsenrath attests that Armenians have "been living with the Turks in the same country for centuries, and often you can hardly distinguish them from the Turks." But he says, "If you want to know whether anyone is Armenian, look in their eyes."<sup>2</sup> To a Turk, "An Armenian's eyes are lecherous, spiteful, greedy, cunning, sly, just like the eyes of the Jews and the Greeks. These three people personify the evil of the world ... Even if there was no other reason to root them out, their eyes would be a reason." And Meddah, the story-teller in the book, retorts, "Vali Bey, if you look an Armenian in the

eyes, then you are looking in your own eyes!" (pp 67–68). And Meddah sees how the Vali turns pale. The Vali knows that it is the Turk's own characteristics that he sees in the mirror of an Armenian's eyes.

To the impressive range of material Hilsenrath has amassed over years of research and observation, his narrative remains composed and dispassionate, eschewing idealization of the victims or justification of the victimizers' conduct. His analysis is realistic, and, despite the fictitious and often fantastic characters he creates and the element of fiction in the narrative, his delineation of historical events and personages remains close to the recorded history of the time. He provides the ground and leaves it to the reader to dig out the roots of the genocidal act, the make-up of the victimizer's psyche and the victim's behavior. A case in point is his *The Story of the Last Thought*.

### The missing word

A short paragraph on the back cover of the novel's English translation explains the scope of the work and provides the background upon which the story unfolds:

The story is that of the best-forgotten crime of the century; the holocaust of the Armenian people by the Turks in 1915. Yet here it is both history and fable, told in a sequence of beautifully written conversations and stories, polished by exotic myth and vivid imagery. It takes the Armenian Thovma Khatisian back to the past to see the atrocities as his forebears saw them, tracing his father's life from an idyllic mountain village to the torture chambers of the Turkish rulers, delving far back into Armenian history, vividly recreating the folklore, legends and traditions of an early Christian people.

On the dust jacket of the original German novel, there is a slightly different explanation:

The fairy tale tells us that the last thought of a human being stands outside time. Sitting at the gate of the Anatolian town of Bakir, the last thought of Thovma Khatisian once more experiences the sufferings of the Armenians as reflected in the history of the family of Thovma Khatisian, their last descendent. Led by Meddah the storyteller, Thovma follows the footprints of his father, which lead from a little idyllic mountain village to the torture chambers of the Turkish rulers. He becomes an eyewitness to the great 1915 massacre of the Armenians, which served the government in Constantinople as a means to solve the Armenian problem once and for all.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, the two paragraphs provide a brief and useful sketch of the book, and so obviate the need to burden this thematic analysis with a summary. However, my objective in bringing these two quotations together is to demonstrate that neither the publisher of the German original nor that of the English translation uses the word genocide: "holocaust," "great massacre," but never genocide. Is this due to political expediency, extreme caution not to offend those who keep denying the truth about the Armenian genocide? But these consider-

ations remain the author's unwavering commitment to the historical truth as it unfolds.

The events roll like a movie strip, and the world evolving before the reader's eyes is certainly an imagined one, but with a solid historical background and matter-of-fact implications with political relevance for the present reality. Thovma Khatisian's last thought is in pursuit of the final truth before it (he) takes flight into eternity. The last thought crosses Thovma Khatisian's 73-year life span back and forth. He dives into the distant past. He delves into a futile search for the Armenian file in the Turkish archives, the file "on the forgotten genocide," only to meet a callous archivist who "explains" why that file cannot be found. The author's reference is, of course, to the revisionist literature by the Turks and the denial campaign including *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed*.<sup>4</sup> The truth is denied. The truth has fallen victim to political exigencies. The world is aware but prefers to look the other way. In a desperate move to alter this indifference, Khatisian's last thought flies to the United Nations, where he ends up addressing the silence in the empty chamber. The members of the audience exit the hall one by one because no one wants to hear about the Armenian genocide, and if they hear it, they would not want to pass it on. He recounts the story of his family and all Armenian families that have fallen victim to the Turkish atrocities:

I told the silence the story of the genocide. I made the silence aware of how important it is that it should be spoken of in public. I said: "Everyone must know!" For how will genocide be prevented in future if everyone declares they knew nothing about it, and they did nothing to prevent it because they couldn't even imagine such a thing ... I claimed nothing for my people, and I demanded no punishment for the persecutors. I said "I only want to break the silence." (p 14)

The silence dominating the empty UN chambers mirrors the silence of the nations who witnessed the massacres. As Meddah the story-teller puts it: "The extermination of the Armenians in Turkey—the execution of a whole people—depends ultimately not only on their exterminators but also the silence of their allies" (pp 155–156).

### A historical novel

Characterizing this work of fiction as a fairy tale, as the publisher of the German original has done, I would say, merely reflects the author's narrative technique. Cast in the mold of a historical novel—since it describes a historical event—the narrative takes an absolute abstract form and creates a reality of its own that is, perhaps, more convincing than that of historiography. The protagonist, with an assumed name of Thovma Khatisian, is an imaginary character with an uncertain beginning and an unknown end. To Thovma's question about how he came into this world, Meddah the story-teller answers, "Hayastan bore you, Thovma Khatisian. And the winds from the mountains of Kurdistan. The dust bore you.

And the hot sun that shone over the country road" (p 5). Meddah spins the tale of Thovma's birth with different variations as though he were relating a fairy tale. But for anyone familiar with the stories of the Armenian massacres and deportations, all of these variations sound plausible. A pregnant woman in labor walks along with "several thousand" other deportees, women, children and old men, stumbling here and there, screaming, a *saptieh* (Turkish gendarme) performs a "Caesarian section" (p 6), that is, he splits her stomach open with his bayonet, and Thovma creeps out (p 463). Whatever the story of his birth, Thovma Khatanian is as real as his constructed identity.

This abstraction in the narrative technique, in any event, does not prevent the novel from being a historical one, just as Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* is a historical novel. So each of these novels tells the story of Armenian sufferings in quite a different way; yet they both reveal an undeniable reality. "By accident I encountered the Armenian problem," writes Hilsenrath. "When I started to read about it, I noticed the similarities between the two genocides. Of course I had read Werfel's great novel and thought that someone should write a modern novel on this subject completely differently than Werfel. That was in 1970. I did some research in the New York Public Library but gave up because the topic was too difficult. I emigrated to Germany in 1975."<sup>5</sup> Hilsenrath eventually achieved his goal. The novel materialized not as a challenge to Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, about which Hans Christoph Buch wrote, "One must read Werfel's novel in order to regain a concept of what a genocide is,"<sup>6</sup> but a modern post-Holocaust conceptualization of the history of genocide. Indeed, in the words of Rachel Kirby, in her valuable analysis of the link between the two German-Jewish novels on the Armenian genocide, "Hilsenrath counters Werfel's realism with folkloric fantasy, his solemnity with bawdiness and dark humor, and his message of hope with confrontational denunciation and pessimism. His *Story*, in short, does justice both to Werfel, as its literary progenitor, and to the sensibilities of post-Holocaust readers."<sup>7</sup>

### Characterizing each other

An outsider could hardly tell the Armenians from the Turks. They looked alike, except for the Armenian eyes, as Meddah specified. But each had drawn a clear and fixed image of the other. "If you aren't good ... the Kurds will get you," mothers tell their children. And indeed, "Armenian women are more frightened of the Kurds than they are of the Turks, although the Kurds are harmless people compared with the Turks" (p 187). In an engagement party, the blessing that the boy receives from the guests is, "May Jesus Christ protect your bride from the Kurds" (p 207). "The Armenians can't protect their womenfolk," the story-teller explains, "because they're not allowed to carry weapons." And the Turkish authorities are not interested in intervening. "[T]hey find it only right that the Kurds terrorize them, hold them in check, so to speak, as the long arm of the

Sultan" (p 207). In a situation like this, "An Armenian never knows when a Turk is going to burn his house down over his head. So he's always ready to jump" (p 47).

"They're traitors," says a Turkish official, explaining why he has hanged three Armenians. "All Armenians are traitors," adds another, "and actually they all ought to be hanged" (p 28). When the Turkish official is asked if he has any proof, the answer is "We have indications. There is no need to prove the treason, the conspiracy between the Armenians on both sides of the Turkish-Russian border, against the Empire. The Turk simply knows it, and a bottle of Russian schnapps found on an Armenian, or a letter from a grandmother on the Russian side delivered two years after the postman got it, are adequate reason to persecute Armenians."

It is not only treason of which the Armenians are accused. "They exploit us Turks and act as if they were our lords and masters ... And everything is in their hands. The banks and money exchanges, the crafts and trade. They are the doctors and the lawyers, and they send their sons and daughters to good schools ... And they league with the enemy" (pp 32–33). The characters of the two races are revealed in their deeds and thoughts, as well as through anticipated behavior.

The character of the Turk is completed in graphic descriptions of scenes in the public steam bath and lavatory. But the most horrifying of all is what goes on in the prison cell, where Vartan Khatisian, Thovma's father, is tortured with the most appalling, despicably sadistic methods. Hilsenrath has certainly mastered the secrets of Turkish torture, which has an ancient history. As Hilsenrath attests, "there has been torture in Turkish prisons as far back as memory goes" (p 374). Here, in this prison cell, the Turk displays his filth in the most abhorrent sexual performance on a prisoner ever recorded in any book on torture techniques. That little house of *hukumet* in the city of Bakir, "a few days journey in the donkey cart from Erzerum" (p 162), emerges as a microcosm of the Ottoman government in its brutality, corruption, inefficiency, banality, irrationality, and perfidy. And everywhere there is fear hanging in the air. "The people breathe it in, whether they will or not ... And the Mudir is frightened ... and that's why he wants to frighten other people, so that they can be more frightened than he is" (p 115).

### The roots of denial

The Turks consider Armenian nationalism a potential danger for the Empire and use that as a reason or rather a pretext to eradicate the Armenians in order to get rid of the danger. But Hilsenrath's satirical style and his use of parody in recording the Turkish description of that "nationalism" and the "Armenian world conspiracy" to topple the Empire show how ridiculous and unfounded this Turkish reasoning is and how Hilsenrath himself scorns the justifications the Turks make for the murder of the Armenian people.

Throughout their history of oppression and subjugation, the Turks have invented justifications for persecuting their subjects. They always find reasons. "Where do they find them?" asks the story-teller's shadow. "In their fears," replies the story-teller. Armenians must be guilty, he explains, for if proven otherwise, "that would call everything in question ... all the justifications of Turkish history, and of those who write it" (p 345).

From the same vantage point and with the same attitude Hilsenrath presents the massacres of 1894–1896 and the 1915 defense of Van, which latter event the Turks labeled as an Armenian uprising. "What was actually self-defense could now be publicized by the Turkish press and the drummers and the town criers in the villages and towns as high treason, as an Armenian uprising behind the lines on the Turkish front. All that was necessary was to prove that the revolt was spreading outside the region" (p 357). Hilsenrath offers here a perfect example of provocation thesis as expanded by Robert F. Melson. Melson writes: "The provocation thesis argues that something in the actions or the demeanor of the victims causes the perpetrator, the provoked party, to react with violence. The causal connection, though not explicit, assumes a linkage from the victim to the perpetrator from the provocateur to the provoked."<sup>8</sup> Joyce Apsel, quoting this passage in her article on the denial of the Armenian genocide, explains that with this thesis Melson suggests the importance of examining both victim's and perpetrator's motives, actions, and perceptions, as well as the prevailing circumstances for a complete explanation. To understand the roots of the Turkish genocidal act is to delve into these factors, and Hilsenrath is doing just that. On the other hand, Hilsenrath's abstract conceptualization of these factors, Melson's analysis of the causes of the Armenian genocide, and Apsel's research on the official Turkish government denial account in the internet today, both speak of the pervasion of the provocation thesis as central to the Turkish denial argument.

The seeds of denial were sown at the outset of the genocidal process through fabricated justifications for the actions taken by the government. Mass arrests and military operations against the civilian population, that is, the widespread massacres, were labeled as a necessary means to quell the revolt and neutralize a dangerous scheme of conspiracy against the empire. As for the deportations, they were simply called "resettlement made necessary by the war on strategic grounds" (p 380).

The most preposterous of these justifications, however, is the record of Vartan Khatisian's trial, pages and pages of ridiculous interrogation and lies upon lies pouring out of Thovma's father, characterized as the confessions of a "dangerous spy." The torture had borne no result, but now the threat was being made not to his person but to others whom he valued more than his life. He would admit to any guilt and confess to any crime that the prosecutor's sick mind could hatch, down to having assassinated the Austrian Crown Prince and his wife in Sarajevo in order to start a world war that would benefit the Armenian conspiracy, only to save the life of his wife and his unborn child. Hilsenrath has cleverly and creatively come up with these outrageous allegations to show the farcical absurdity of all other such allegations officially made by the government and still

maintained today. And if later on, much later in the future, the story-teller should recount the story of Vartan's trial for the "historical snoopers," they will shake their heads and say, "We don't believe that. It's absolute rubbish!" the story-teller will answer, "Of course, it's rubbish. But listen, ladies and gentlemen. Will it really be very significant if we add one more to the thousand false charges brought against the Armenians ..." (p 389).

As ridiculous as these allegations sound, "this idea of Armenian world conspiracy is lurking in a lot of people's minds" (p 159). After witnessing the trial, an Austrian and a German officer ponder the matter. They know that the Constantinople government will not buy the rubbish that was concocted in the court in Bakir. But they also know that "they'll find a convincing pretext, one based on evidence, to justify certain government measures in the eyes of the world, especially of the allies," even though "there's no pretext convincing enough to justify measures against a whole people" (p 153).

Turkish denial of the Armenian genocide has become a matter of government policy, with all its ramifications. The truth of the history is denied to Turkey's own people. It is effaced from the history books. The past is washed out of the collective memory. However, Hilsenrath holds the modern Turk today equally responsible even if he has been denied knowledge of the full scope of the events or if he detaches himself from the deeds of his own ancestors. In an imaginary conversation in a 1989 setting, the Turkish prime minister retorts to his Armenian psychiatrist, who is none other than Thovma Khatisian's last thought, "That's nothing to do with me. It's nothing to do with anybody, none of the present-day Turks" (p 11). The Turk had been complaining about his nightmares and the voice of the last thought tells him that his nightmares are because of the Armenians the Turks destroyed. And these are not "lying stories put out by [the] enemies." This is "genocide." But the Turks keep silent about it. "There's nothing about it in [their] history."

The Turks will certainly reject Edgar Hilsenrath and his Armenian novel altogether. They will declare him biased and his narrative a figment of the imagination. They will hold Hilsenrath's own statement as evidence: Hilsenrath was quoted saying, "The Armenians say that the book had an Armenian soul. This is because while writing, I identified one hundred percent with the victims."<sup>9</sup> This attitude toward the truth in Hilsenrath's fiction will add "one more to the thousand false" grounds of their denial of the Armenian genocide. However, historical truth can be suppressed but never abolished. Documentary literature will eventually overwhelm the deniers' efforts, and the irrefutable truth displayed in fiction and poetry will contribute to laying bare the historical reality. Referring back to the beginning of this article, the role of artistic literature and the power of an artist's imagination in bringing the unthinkable atrocity down into the realm of human understanding and consciousness is immense. Artistic literature, in most cases, is more powerful than historical narrative. Not only does it contextualize the event to make it more graspable, but also through the stories and characters it creates, the truth emerges more authenticable than historical reality itself.

## A search for self-identity

An important element unfolding in Hilsenrath's narrative is the link between the Armenian genocide and the survivors' search for self-identity. The Armenian Diaspora author looks at the psychological impact of the genocide to define the identity that arises from the psyche of the survivor. As Dagmar Lorenz notes in his review, the character of Khatisian had a choice of self-identities: Turkish, Swiss, or Armenian. "The last was for him the hardest to attain, since he had to reconstruct or even construct an entire biography and national history. Yet he chooses to become a survivor of the massacres and a witness."<sup>10</sup> Thovma's inquiries lead him to patch together his own story, albeit an imagined reality. And one day, Thovma's last thought asserts, "I had a genuine family history. I knew my roots. I had a father and a mother again, and I had many relatives. I also had a name with a tradition, one that I could pass on to my children and grandchildren" (p 16).

Indeed, nowhere in Armenian- or non-Armenian-language creative writing has the theme of the survivors' search for self-identity been so masterfully laid out and so naturally developed as in *The Story of the Last Thought*. And this is so despite the fact that the novel is constructed around a purely fictitious and imaginative setting which also sets it apart from all other novels of genocide. I am not aware of any survivor story of the Armenian genocide that covers so much ground and treats such a vast array of issues pertaining to the atrocities, the victimization, the survival, the pain of losing one's home, family, and identity, of being cast into an unknown world, helpless and alone, and then, above all, of being denied truth and justice. And all this is crafted in a breathtaking narrative against a rich background of ancient Armenian history, the relationship between Armenians, Turks, and Kurds, their customs, traditions, mores, beliefs, superstitions, folklore, culture and lifestyle which is so primitive but so rich and beautiful at the same time.

Hilsenrath is compelling as he interweaves imagination, dream, and reality in the last thought of Thovma Khatisian at the end of the long and torturous road called "life." In fact, the entire span of the novel, the whole array of occurrences, reminiscences, accounts of ancient history, hindsight analysis of political events and ideas, takes place in a moment, equal to the dying man's last breath. Thovma is dying, and his last thought, although just a fraction of a single second long, is clearer than any other, a thought that bridges his corporeal life with continuity. This is a well-chosen metaphor for the ultimate stage of survival of a nation: "That state of order in my head will gently rock me out of this life. People will say of me: look this man died like a tree. A tree can shed its leaves, but never its roots. And why should it be different for men?" (p 17).

Hilsenrath constructs an identity and posits it in the thoughts of all the survivors, there to remain through their last breath. And before they die the last thoughts of all the survivors fly back "on the eagle's wing to Mount Ararat. And from there down into the wide Armenian country that is called Hayastan." Perhaps their thoughts never left these places. Perhaps Armenians never left these places.

The thoughts of Armenians were everywhere. They were on every flower, on every blade of grass, on all the buds on the trees.

And the day came to an end. And it grew dark. Then a whisper arose from the petals of the flowers and the buds of the trees. And whispers came from the grass, and indeed from the whole countryside. "When the Armenians whisper at night, the Turks have nightmares," said the voice. (p 462)

Thovma's parents too are united in that dreamland. Vartan and Anahit are waiting for their son, whom they now name Hayk "like the first of the Armenians" (p 463). The wait is not long. An entire lifetime can pass in only one second, in a dream, anyway. Thovma is ready to draw his last breath. He opens his eyes for the last time, and his last thought comes out clear: "I know that my last thought will fly back into the gaps in the Turkish history books. And because I know that, I shall die more peacefully than others before me who didn't know it" (p 465).

And soon "Anahit, the mother of Armenia," found "her lost son. Hayk will be fruitful and have many descendants ... And the children of Hayk and their children's children, will people this land, which was always meant for them" (p 464).

But the Turkish minister is upset. He appears in the last fraction of the last second: "'Whispering is infectious,' says the minister. 'If the dead Armenians whisper, it could cross the border and be heard everywhere ... It would be a great whispering if everybody in the world who's been persecuted suddenly began to whisper their complaints ... and think of nightmares that would keep us awake'" (p 466). With this thought, in the last paragraph of his novel, Hilsenrath suddenly cracks the particularistic shell of the Armenian genocide and opens it into the universal. The persecution of the Armenians, their sufferings and complaints become those of humanity. The Armenian genocide becomes a crime against humanity.

### Connecting biography and literature

Could anyone who did not experience the world of genocide paint so accurate and powerful a picture of mass destruction? Hilsenrath was a survivor of the Holocaust, and perhaps it was in search of the answer to his own questions about German atrocities and Jewish victimization that he delved into another genocide, a genocide at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Elie Wiesel claims that only one who has been there has the right to speak.<sup>11</sup> Alvin Rosenfeld asserts that "the best portrayals of 'life' in Nazi concentration camps are produced by those who themselves experienced the meaninglessness of the two categories of life and death."<sup>12</sup> Hilsenrath lived the hell. "Born in Leipzig in 1926, he was later taken to Romania by his family to escape Nazi persecution. When German troops invaded, he was deported to the Ukraine and sent to a concentration camp. After the liberation, he went to Palestine on one of the first refugee trains ..."<sup>13</sup> In 1951 he moved to New York and in 1975 to

Berlin where he now resides. Hilsenrath has written five novels on the Holocaust of the Jewish people.<sup>14</sup> His last novel, on the genocide of the Armenians, is his due to all humanity, and it could not be so successful if it weren't written by someone who knew what it meant to be persecuted for what one is, for what god one worships. And significantly, there is a link in the novel between the Armenian genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, not through reiterating Adolf Hitler's famous statement, "Who, after all, remembers the extermination of the Armenians?"—a statement that has been rendered trite with overuse—but by the double victimization of Vartan Khatisian. This clever and innovative conceptualization emphasizes the idea of genocide affecting the whole of humanity. The crime of genocide committed against a specific group of people is a crime against the entire human race. And furthermore, the crime affects not only the victims but also the victimizers. "Among the souls of the gassed and burnt Jews sitting that day on the chimney of the incinerators, there was also the soul of a Turk and that of an Armenian called Vartan Khatisian" (p 459).

Armenian genocide literature is replete with descriptions of horrifying scenes of mass murder and the ordeal of deportation. The prevailing mood is gloomy and intense. The descriptions are permeated with either deep sorrow or anger and revolt against the perpetrators. The Armenian writer, no matter how far removed in time and space from the Event, cannot treat the death of his/her people with such cool as Hilsenrath has succeeded in doing. Is it because he is a non-Armenian, and can easily detach himself from the Event and consider it as an objective, unbiased observer? Is it because he is a non-Armenian writing in a more accessible language? Perhaps both factors are influential.

With a casual and playful approach, always mixed with irony and biting humor, Hilsenrath describes the death march. And the impact is tremendous:

It was all done very humanely. And Allah was witness, that it was no fault of the *saptiehs* that Armenians had so much baggage, more than they could carry. Most of it was lying on the road after the saptiehs had begun to drive the people on with curses and insults, tickling them up a beat with their riding-whips. Since many of the Armenians, especially the very old ones, couldn't walk fast enough, the whips didn't just tickle them but beat them. But that was unavoidable, for how else could the order to continue marching be carried out? And later, when the very old and weak ones collapsed and had to be shot, because no one was allowed to stay behind, at any rate not alive, it was clear to the saptiehs that they really had dealt with them humanely. (p 393)

In another instance, the story-teller describes the Kurdish assault on the wretched remainder of the 5000 deportees when they arrived deeper into the Kurdish area.

They raped every woman that had survived. And they rode over the women like the waves of the sea over the sandbanks. Many of them carried women off, others left the women lying down and cut their throats, either because they were dead already or because they looked so old that they were ashamed to have done it with them.

Even this harrowing picture is not spared an anticlimactic finale, an ironic afterthought which the story-teller appends: "The Kurds had stripped the victims

of their clothes and shoes, but that did not worry the escort, for they thought that, after all, it was summertime and the victims wouldn't get cold if they drove them on naked and barefoot" (p 397).

Religious and racial differences were two major components of the Nazi drive to exterminate the Jews. Hilsenrath's consciousness of that is reflected in *The Story of the Last Thought*. A representative of the Special Organization (*Teshkilete Mahsuseh*) explains, "Abdul Hamid thought the problem can be solved simply by making Muslims of the Armenians. But we Young Turks have learned from the Europeans that it's not only the religion of our citizens that we have to think about, but the national attitude, the race, and the blood" (p 373). Armenians were of no use in concocting the new Turk, the only inhabitant of modern Turkey; in fact, they were an obstacle and had to be eliminated. Was this not the embryonic form of the Nazi ideology that cost the lives of the Jews, Gypsies and others? But the Jews were the chosen people, the trunk of the oak tree in the Prophet Isaiah's analogy: the tree sheds thousands of leaves in the autumn but the trunk endures (Isaiah 6:13). The Jewish people survived and flourished. Hilsenrath uses the same metaphor for Armenians, "a tree can shed its leaves, but never its roots," and prophesizes the survival of the Armenians.

Bernard Cohen, pondering on the future of American Jews, and mindful of the prophet's words, asserted, that "it is the 'Sheor Yoshuv,' the saving remnant, that will assure continuity of Judaism and of the Jewish people."<sup>15</sup> The Sheor Yoshuv of the Armenians, Hilsenrath believes, will assure the survival of the nation.

## Notes and References

1. Rubina Peroomian, "Problematic aspects of reading genocide literature: a search for a guideline or a canon," in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *Remembrance and Denial* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999), p 184.
2. Edgar Hilsenrath, *The Story of the Last Thought*, Hugh Young, trans. (London: Scribners, 1990; 2nd edn, London: Sphere Books, 1991), p 26. Subsequent page references are to the second edition.
3. The passage is quoted in Dagmar C. G. Lorenz, "Hilsenrath's other genocide," in the *Simon Wiesenthal Center Annual*, Vol 7, p 1. The German novel, *Märchen vom letzten Gedanken*, was published by Piper Verlag GmbH, Munich, in 1989.
4. This book by Turkish diplomat Kamuran Gurun is only one example of the literature of denial. For a discussion and listing of this genre of literature on the Armenian genocide, see Joyce Apsel, "Official denial: the Armenian genocide, genocide studies and the Internet," presented at the Association of Genocide Scholars Fourth International Biennial Conference, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, June 10–12, 2001.
5. Uwe Makino, "Die Wahrheit anders ersählen": Zu Edgar Hilsenraths Armenien-Roman," *Doitsu Buuka*, Vol 3, 1998, p 4 ("To tell the truth differently": about Edgar Hilsenrath's Armenia novel"). I am grateful to Professor Karine Doerr of Concordia University for providing me with a translation of the article.
6. For this statement and a discussion of the historicity of Franz Werfel's novel, see Rachel Kirby, *The Culturally Complex Individual, Franz Werfel's Reflections on Minority Identity and Historical Depiction in The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1999). Quotation from p 171.
7. Ibid, p 180.
8. See Joyce Apsel, "Official denial: the Armenian genocide, genocide studies and the Internet." Apsel is quoting Robert F. Melson, *Revolution and Genocide on the Origins of the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p 12.
9. Uwe Makino, "Die Wahrheit anders erzählen": Zu Edgar Hilsenraths Armenien-Roman."

10. Lorenz, "Hilsenrath's other genocide," p 3.
11. Quoted by David Roskies, "The Holocaust according to literary critics," *Prooftext*, Vol 1, 1981, pp 209–216 (see p 210 for this quotation).
12. *Ibid.*
13. Cited from the inside cover of the novel's English translation.
14. More famous among his novels are: *Nacht (Night)* (Munich: 1964; Cologne: 1976) and *Der Nazi und der Friseur (The Nazi and the Hairdresser)* (Cologne: 1977).
15. Bernard Cohen, *Sociocultural Changes in American Jewish Life as Reflected in Selected Literature* (Rutherford, Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1972), p 250.