

GENOCIDE PERSPECTIVES II

ESSAYS ON HOLOCAUST AND GENOCIDE

EDITORS: COLIN TATZ, PETER ARNOLD, SANDRA TATZ

Brandl & Schlesinger
with
The Australian Institute for Holocaust & Genocide Studies

Sydney 2003

WHEN DEATH IS A BLESSING AND LIFE A PROLONGED AGONY: WOMEN VICTIMS OF GENOCIDE

Rubina Perroomian

History is replete with atrocities of man against his own kind, but the twentieth century stands out in its abundance of genocidal acts, the ultimate form of human destruction committed against an ethnic or a religious group, a minority or a political opposition. At the start of the twenty-first century, we pause and look back to these atrocities and try to comprehend what made the last century so formidable, a century which could have shone out as one of great achievements, especially in the fields of space and technology. Perhaps we can learn from past mistakes, not only by focusing on the victimisers, but also by looking at public opinion about them, since, in order to get away with their diabolical plans, such men rely on the public's ignorance, indifference and forgetfulness. Understanding how so colossal a violation of human rights can come about is the first step in the difficult path of preventing future genocides. This step requires information, education, remembrance and a willingness to become involved. In the sense that literature reflects public opinion, I have turned my attention to literary portrayals of such suffering.

It is within this context that I have taken up the comparative study of the responses of victims of the two great genocides of the century, the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust, as recorded in the relevant literature. For the purpose of this essay, I have narrowed my focus to the most vulnerable group of victims: the women. I do not intend to prove that women suffered more than men. However, women were, beyond doubt, less equipped physically and emotionally to endure the calamity. They had to face tragic choices, decisions to live or die, with neither offering salvation and both requiring heavy compromises or extraordinary courage. My purpose is to attempt to generate interest in further research into the characteristic responses of female victims to such extreme circumstances.

Throughout the turbulent histories of both the Armenians and the Jews, surviving foreign oppression, persecution, devastation, massacre and forced

exile has been an art in itself. The continued existence of the survivors has been made possible only by a conscious and strenuous effort to understand the catastrophe, to explain it and, eventually, to come to terms with it. In other words, to respond to it. Both Armenian and Jewish literatures are the repositories of such responses. They are shaped by concepts and determinants deeply rooted in the culture, religion and traditions of the two peoples. In some cases, these concepts have proven adequate to explain the contemporary calamity, thus forming a continuum in the range of responses. In other instances, the magnitude of the catastrophe and the intensity of suffering have transcended all boundaries of imagination. The capacity to respond has been shattered, and new concepts and ideas have been born to explain the catastrophe, to make survival possible once again. In the literature of responses to catastrophe, the image of the victim emerges, in some cases unbroken, enduring the horrors of the disaster and, in other cases, tainted or devastated by the lethal blows of immeasurable pain and suffering. My objective is to pursue the image of female victims as reflected in the literary texts.

THE PROTOTYPE

Nothing is more eloquent than the images of *Mayr Hayastan* (Mother Armenia) in Movses Khorenatsi's 'Lamentation' and *Bat-Zion* (The Daughter of Zion) in the Book of Lamentations of Jeremiah (Lam. 1:6) as archetypes of female victims. Embedded in the collective memory of the two peoples, they symbolise the defiled and victimised women as personifications of the homeland ravaged and ruined under the yoke of foreign rulers. These images kindle the imagination of the artist responding to his contemporary national catastrophe. These women acquire flesh and blood, become real and heroically withstand torture and suffering. They set the example of martyrdom for a cause. Shushanik Vardeni's tale of martyrdom for Christianity (fifth century) is a fine example. Hripsime and the 40 virgins (late third century), martyred for their love of Christ, inspired Komitas Catholicos Aghtsetsi (a sixth to seventh century poet) to sing his beautiful ode:¹

For you, blessed martyrs,
The host of angels incorporeal
From heaven to earth descended, and men
celebrated with the Christ God's band of soldiers.

The same bravery and willingness to become martyrs of God is witnessed in the Jewish literature. Miriam, modelled after the woman in the legend of the Mother and Her Seven Sons in 2 Maccabees 7, is a venerated and commemorated role model. Further along in history, Solomon Bar Simon writes about the Crusader massacres of 1096:²

There women girded themselves with strength and slaughtered their sons and daughters, along with themselves ... Young women and the brides and the bridegrooms gazed through the windows and cried out loudly: 'Behold and see, our God, what we do for the sanctification of your holy Name.'

THE IMPACT OF RENAISSANCE THOUGHT

The emancipation movement of the nineteenth century among Armenian and Jewish intellectuals gradually made its way into the populace, bringing about some degree of modernisation, enlightenment and secularisation of thought and outlook. Especially in East European Jewish communities, the *Haskalah* writers endeavoured to institutionalise secular literature and disseminate *maskilim* thought. They advocated a balanced and peaceful coexistence between Jews and Christians. They even went so far as to promote integration with the Christian, or gentile, societies to the extent of compromising Jewish tradition. As most of the *maskilim* writers were drawn towards international socialism as a reaction to the Tsarist repression, their responses to the Jewish pogroms lacked national aspirations. The fight was against antisemitism but, more importantly, it entailed self-criticism and the laying bare of the corruption of traditional Jewish infrastructures. In other words, the trend was towards the internationalisation of the problem. It was not until the late nineteenth century and the post World War I pogroms that progressive Jewish intellectuals began to nurture the idea of Jewish national sovereignty and a vision of returning to the land of Zion.

The trend of modernisation as an offshoot of the enlightenment movement among both Jews and Armenians had also resulted in assimilation and loss of ethnic identity, particularly amongst the younger generations. Many young females responded to the governments' discrimination (Russian or East European) and prejudice against ethnic minorities (Jews and Armenians) by becoming one with the mainstream, by wholeheartedly adopting its culture and life-style. Such women were criticised and labelled as disgraces to family

and community. The Armenian and Jewish literature of the Enlightenment promoted the true heroine for her chastity and loyalty to her language, religion and ethnic heritage.

My search to find a female lyric figure who responded to the Jewish plight in the second half of the nineteenth century was not successful. Perhaps someone with a deeper familiarity with Jewish literature could produce better results. What caught my attention, however, was the mid-nineteenth century character of a grandmother (during the Cantonist era) cursing and complaining that not even the *Tokheha* listed among its curses the possibility of Jews being kidnapped by other, pious Jews.³ Cursing and complaining, as well as lamentation on the loss, seemed also to be the reaction of female victims of the 1881 and later pogroms. In a parody entitled 'Burned Out', Sholem Y. Abramovitch attests to this phenomenon. In this 'lachrymose historiography', as Salo Baron terms it, he criticises the traditional responses to catastrophe and the recourse to traditional explanations of sin and punishment:⁴

While the men of Beggarsburg were talking to me, the womenfolk added their own spice, seasoning their husbands' talk with lamentations and groans, with oaths and curses, as (was) their way.

Lamentation is also the lyric heroine's response in Judah Leib Gordon's poem 'My Sister Ruhamah'. The memory of *Bat-Zion* and the personification of Israel reverberates throughout:⁵

Why do you sob, my sister Ruhamah?
Why are you downcast, why is your spirit agitated?
Because plunderers have fallen upon your honour and profaned it?
If the fist has triumphed, the hand of the enemy grown mighty,
Can the blame be yours, my sister Ruhamah?

This piece also reveals another example of Jewish recourse to traditional explanations as an attempt to cope with such misfortune.

The Armenian Renaissance literary responses to catastrophe, on the other hand, took a political turn. National emancipation as a goal, and armed struggle as a means to achieve that goal, were pursued. Patriotism, aspiration for freedom and armed resistance were favourite themes of the literature of the second half of the nineteenth century. This literature inspired valiant acts of

self-defence and retaliation and, in turn, was inspired by such acts. In this literature, the image of the Armenian woman emerged — in her classic role of devoted mother and supporting wife — but her responses to the victimisation of son or husband took a different path.

Smbat, a young Armenian political activist, is murdered in a Turkish prison, and his mother laments his death: 'My dearest Smbat, my beloved son'. Her words of sorrow, however, do not echo the traditional elegy of a mourning mother. Her lamentations, as Mihran Damadian aims to portray, embody a rebellious spirit against the Turk and against the God of the Armenians:⁶

Hungering and thirsting for Armenian blood
 [Turks] threw thee into prison, O my dear,
 And chained thee cruelly; thy pleading prayers
 The God of Armenians did not hear...
 Oh let it reach the highest heaven, the voice
 Of my lament, a mother's sighing breath!
 And let Armenia's valiant-hearted men
 Take vengeance for my son's untimely death!

Two characteristics in this poem are significantly different from traditional responses. First, the enemy is identified. The mournful mother points to the enemy and calls for revenge, contrary to the previous trend, where the identity of the enemy was not important. The enemy was regarded as a tool in the hands of God, executing His wrath against a sinful nation. The second break from tradition lies in the mother's not expecting God to avenge her son's murder, but the 'valiant men of Armenia'.

In another poem, Mkrtych Peshiktashlian, a contemporary of Damadian, depicts the death of a wounded freedom fighter during the Zeitun uprising. The dying youth regards his death as a sacrifice on the altar of the freedom of the Armenian people, and calls his mother not to weep but to be proud:⁷

Come, tremble not, draw near.
 Gaze on thy son's blood streaming wounds
 Without a sigh or tear.
 Let Turkish mothers rend their hair
 Do thou glad news to Zeitun bear!

The ancient Armenian martyrological literature is replete with accounts of mourning mothers who find solace in the glorious vision of their dead sons soaring to heaven on the wings of angels. Their strong Christian faith led them to believe that their sons would join the ranks of the heavenly hosts for having accepted martyrdom for the sake of Christianity. But now the context is secular. The catharsis offered to the mournful mother is vengeance, the sight of the enemy scattered dead in the battlefield. Instead of the soothing vision of immortality for her son, she expects the emancipation of Zeitun as a reward.

Another significant turn in Armenian responses occurs in the genre of lullabies. These ordinarily soothing and sentimental songs took a new twist in Rapael Patkanian's poetry: 'Awake my darling! Open your bright eyes, dark and deep'. The mother has made a golden belt from which hangs a sword; a steed stands in wait outside the door:

Awake, and take thy sword!...

Thy nation is in misery; in fetters, lo! they weep;

Thy brethren are in slavery, my loved one; wilt thou sleep?

The image of the Armenian woman emerging from the Armenian Renaissance literature is rarely a source of corporeal pleasures; rather, she comes forth as an understanding and devoted mother and wife supporting the nation's struggle for justice and freedom.

CHALLENGING THE ELEVATED IMAGE

There are extreme circumstances, however, in which human behaviour, moral order and traditional concepts shaping outlooks and responses to trauma are tested. The massacres of Ottoman Armenians in 1894–1896 were such catastrophes. The image of the Armenian woman did not come out of it absolutely indomitable and clean. More often than not, it emerged shaken and tainted. The traditional responses no longer held true. The outbursts of protest and nationalistic pride propagated by the nineteenth century Renaissance *literati* fell short of explaining the unprecedented and unexpected disaster. However, the Renaissance ideology of national emancipation by means of armed struggle still lingered in Armenian responses to these massacres. The new twist was an unleashed expression of anger and protest.

In the lyric poem *Hayhoyank* (The Curse), written in response to the massacres of 1894–1896, Daniel Varuzhan nurtures the idea that the catastrophe was the outcome of a failing Divine Promise and denies the failure of Renaissance ideologies. Curiously, the religious atmosphere in the poem, a setting more suitable for traditional responses, is self-negating; it has been put to subversive use. The lyric heroine, an unnamed old woman, stands above the crowd of wretched survivors of a mass slaughter, and raising her clenching fists toward the sky, curses God for what befell the Armenian nation. She challenges the covenant between man and God; she questions God's judgment, protests His indifference toward the persecution of a people who faithfully worshipped Him and sacrificed their lives for Him. But the old woman is alone in her outburst. The frightened youngsters in the crowd begin to cry, women pray. The old woman, as a lone heroine of this strange uprising, walks to the edge of the abyss and hurls herself down. With her death, the angry voice of protest is stifled in embryo.

Varuzhan's *Jarde* (The Carnage), another poem in response to the massacres of 1894–1896, stays closer to ancient archetypes and is reminiscent of Judah Leib Gordon's recourse to *Bat-Zion*. However, there is a significant new twist. The mourning Mother Armenia weeps, not over the ruined land, but because her friends (meaning the European Powers) deserted her and abandoned their promise to intervene with the Sultan. Moreover, Mother Armenia laments, not the loss of her sons, but their servitude — still unarmed, still unprepared to defend themselves. Varuzhan expresses his disenchantment and frustration in a poetic metaphor: 'Instead of blood on their boots, they carry the yellow mud of the wheat fields.'⁸ In this long poem, female survivors are gathered to mourn over the dead, but their lamentation is an outcry against Islam, against Turkish mothers, and against the Sultan himself.

Suren Partevian, through whose entire literary legacy permeates the horrors of genocide, devoted a collection of short stories entitled *Hayuhin* (The Armenian Woman) to Armenian women, victims of the massacres of 1894–1896. The dedication note reads,⁹

To you,

Armenian woman,

I dedicate these stories

Inspired by your tragic fate.

Partevian depicts the traumatic experience of the Armenian woman, who possesses, as he puts it, 'an unbelievable interfusion of patience, endurance, docility, and superhuman tolerance for pain and suffering'.

Partevian's stories are populated with women who react to the victimisation differently, but in many ways symptomatic of the collapse of moral order. Saiko kills her newborn because she had conceived it during a two-month forced conjugal relationship with her Kurdish abductor. The innocent child becomes the substitute effigy upon which she releases her suppressed hatred and frustration at unfulfilled revenge against the real criminal. To be sure, Saiko emerges as a tainted symbol of violated morality. Her outrageous response not only fails to help restore moral order but, even more emphatically, demonstrates its fatal collapse and its irreversible impact on the human psyche.

Siranush becomes melancholic and, under the pressure of her unforgettable traumatic experience, gradually loses her sanity. She lives with the haunting memory of the day her parents were slaughtered. From her hiding place, she had heard their helpless screams and the roaring laughter of the Turkish mob enjoying the killing and plunder. That day she had escaped death, yet she paid dearly for her survival. The undying pain drove her mad and finally caused her death.

Zapel, too, goes insane. She had witnessed the killing of her younger brother who had tried to prevent her abduction. The murderers had taken her to a bordello where she was forced to dance and serve the Turkish clients. One night, she spots her older brother sitting in the crowd, as a guest of a Turkish officer. She cries out for help, hoping that her brother would rescue her from that dungeon. But the brother, disguised as a Turk, denies knowing her at all and walks away indifferently.

Sarah sells her body to a Kurd for a piece of bread to feed her starving brother and sister. They are the only survivors of their large family. After eating her share of the bread, she regains her strength and comes to realise what she has done, the sacrifice she has made. In a moment of rage, she kills the Kurd to avenge her shame and disgrace. Once again, the killing demonstrates the collapse of moral order.

The collapse of traditional morality was also the case with the East European Jewish communities facing increased persecutions, escalating into pogroms, both before and during World War I. And once again, the response of the *literati* amounted largely to introspective criticism, laying bare the collapse of morality and depicting the lowest human traits in the struggle to

survive. The difference is that the writer criticises the phenomenon without sympathy for the victim. Leyb Olitzky ridicules a rabbi who preaches an exaggerated practice of religious piety and laments the collapse of Jewish morality, while his own daughters have become whores serving Russian and German officers. David Roskies discusses the wartime literature:¹⁰

There is scarcely a Jewish prose account, fictional or autobiographical, that does not dwell on the pornography of the war. At best, wives and especially daughters were sent to the local commandant to finagle a permit for flour, salt, lumber, or what have you, invoking nothing more than their feminine charms.

The victims in these cases are, of course, not the men, who profited from the favours brought home, but the women who actually performed acts of prostitution in return for these favours. These women's responses to their predicament are not as outrageous as that of Saiko, Zapel or Sarah. There is no testimony of their regret and sense of indignity. However, they will most likely come out of their forced predicament demoralised and tainted, incapable of building a new, healthy, normal life as survivors.

Other than these abnormal situations, Jewish women of the nineteenth and early twentieth century were 'exemplary' wives — kind, devoted, docile, observing piety in religion, and altogether recognising their limits and not mixing in their husbands' affairs. Thus, they were also unable to express their thoughts or interpretations of collective traumatic experiences. Yankel, a Jewish fellow in Krushnik, Poland, talks about his imprisonment in 'Tales of 1001 Night(s)'. A brief reference to his wife's wailing about his lot reveals his view on women: 'As you'd expect, a wife. What does a woman know anyway?'¹¹

Zapel Esayan's accounts of the Armenian massacres in Cilicia in 1909, *Averakneru mej* (Amidst the Ruins), is full of testimonies of women survivors. Portrayed through these testimonies, with the least degree of fictionalisation, the Armenian woman appears at times as an embodiment of cowardice and self-centred drives, ready to sacrifice anything for the sake of mere survival. At other times, she appears like an ancient goddess of courage and endurance. A young woman from Aken asks, 'We survived, but we will soon die. That is all right. Tell me! Will our sufferings serve a purpose? Is there hope of deliverance for our nation?' Esayan praises the woman's courage and her determination to endure physical pain. 'She suffers, but only her doleful eyes and occasional shivering betray the consuming pain in her mutilated body.'¹²

This woman's response to the Armenian plight lacks the traditional catharsis. The only solace is the hope for a better future for Armenians. A woman of Dort Yol, whose son was killed defending the city, tearfully vows, 'If the Turks attack us again, the sons that were born to us, the sons that we nursed and raised will be on the ramparts again to defend the city, to fight and die on the ramparts.'¹³

Esayan also speaks of women who can sell out their neighbours to save their own necks. They snatch the relief food and clothing and will not share with those in need. Esayan's treatment of female victims is realistic. Unlike Partevian, she does not fetishise Armenian women and irrationally justify their reactions to trauma. But she clearly sides with the brave ones, those who 'have descended from a very noble vein of the race', those who took arms to defend themselves.¹⁴

Pre-Holocaust Jewish writers witnessed the moral decline of the Jewish communities and their inability to defend themselves. In the words of Alan Mintz:¹⁵

The entire enterprise of European Jewry had to be viewed as no longer viable and as already under the [threat] of destruction. During World War I and the Russian Revolution and Civil War, the violence against Jews, on a much vaster scale than in preceding decades, strengthened the power of this analysis, and practically caused the removal of almost all Hebrew writers and the institutions of Hebrew literary productions to Palestine. In Hebrew literature between the wars, the works of Uri Zvi Greenberg, Yitshak Lamdan, Hayim Hazaz, and S.Y. Agnon ... established an apocalyptic mode replete with visions of destruction.

AND THE GENOCIDE

There are many examples within the Jewish and Armenian literature where the enemy is addressed as an entity and targeted as the murderer, the perpetrator of the calamity. It is also true, however, that there is, in many cases, a deliberate or subconscious abstinence of reference to the source of the evil. Nelly Sachs, a Jewish poetess-survivor, offers the most explicit example of a victim's behaviour revealing this phenomenon. She is one of the most noted of writers whose works symbolise the Jewish suffering. As Edward Alexander puts it, she 'assimilate[s] the Holocaust into the poetic

imagination and into Jewish history'. But her critics maintain that 'the themes and symbols of her poems so thoroughly integrate the Holocaust into the long history of the Jewish people that "they diminish the uniqueness of the horror and ... turn the murderers into impersonal and abstract forces"'. Alexander offers an interesting explanation: 'If in her work, the German murderers are disembodied and without personal identity, it is because that is, in metaphysical (but not legal) justice, their due for turning millions of Jewish victims into smoke.'¹⁶ This reasoning may not hold true for Armenian women. They, too, overlooked the perpetrators. However, this was most probably because tradition dictated them to turn to God and ask 'for which sins of ours are we being punished'. Or, perhaps, they were so deeply engulfed in their misery that their only preoccupation was finding the means to survive without even thinking about an explanation.¹⁷

Nelly Sachs's poetry is replete with visions of re-birth, lines such as: 'The sinking occurs for the sake of rising', or 'How to listen ... [so that] on the day of destruction ... [they will be able to hear] how in death life begins.' As a survivor herself, she juxtaposes her doleful experience with the hope of resurrection, the re-birth of the Jewish people in their ancient homeland. Such optimism is utterly absent in Armenian responses. In the state of total devastation of Armenian life in the Ottoman Empire and the sweeping away of the entire Armenian population of historic Armenia, there could not exist a flicker of hope for re-birth on ancient Armenian homeland. The case was different with Zapel Esayan responding to the 1909 massacres of Cilician Armenians. There, total destruction did not occur, and the survivors continued their life in their ravaged homes and ransacked towns and villages. Re-birth was possible. And Esayan foresaw the future:¹⁸

In a few years the orchards will bear fruit again, the fields will be covered with the golden grain of copious crops, and the children's cries will once again fill the empty houses ... The tortured but invincible race will persevere despite all murderous intentions.

Once again, in another episode, with a similar optimism and oratorical style, she romanticises the revival of the survivors and proudly attests:¹⁹

The plans of the enemy once again had proven fruitless, and in spite of our hopelessly sad impressions, the immortality and ingenuity of the nation had escaped the hatchets, swords, guns, and fire ... The enemy was condemned to

impotence; and this feeling hovered over the ruins, rose from the ashes of the martyrs, reflected in the ghostly appearance of widows, and glittered in the eyes of the orphans.

Partevian's particular sympathy and reverence toward Armenian women victims continued to be reflected in his fictional narratives on the massacres and deportations of 1915.

In *Anmah botse* (The Undying Flame), Siranush is an educated woman, more alert than her husband. She can realistically judge the Turkish–Armenian relationship and see the imminent catastrophe. A woman of action, she decides to join the forces of resistance and fight, but she is entrapped by the cunning intrigues of her Turkish admirer. The Turk, a close friend of the family, arranges the murder of Siranush's husband so as to abduct her. Under his threats, she finally surrenders herself to him to save the life of her young and only son. But soon after she arranges her son's escape, she commits suicide to put an end to her defiled existence.²⁰

In *Dzaine huchets* (The Sound Echoed), princess Sonia Asaturof, a Russified Armenian woman, lives a lavish life in Tbilisi, but is suddenly sensitised to the Armenian plight and the massacre and deportation of her fellow Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. She joins the Armenian volunteers fighting the Turks alongside the Russian army and works as a nurse in the battlefield. She is eventually killed while gathering information on the enemy's movements. In this same story, Zaruhi also joins the volunteers and, disguised as a young man, fights the Turks. Her secret is revealed when she is wounded. Their characterisation symbolises Partevian's overly romantic interpretation of the women's role in the Armenian armed struggle.

IMAGES NOT SO BRIGHT

Religious, cultural and traditional determinants collapse and moral order loses its meaning when, after months of dehumanising, incapacitating torture, the wretched deportees come face to face with a choice between death and survival. They must either starve to death or eat their own children's corpses, they too being victims of starvation. Aram Antonian reports instances of cannibalism in the desert of Der-El-Zor. In *Mets vochire* (The Great Crime), a famine-stricken girl is lying on the desert sand with her helpless mother on her side. The girl smells meat cooking nearby. 'Mother, go ask some for me. I

cannot go on any more.' The mother returns empty-handed. 'They didn't give you a piece?' the girl asks. 'When I die, mother, you eat my flesh alone; share it with no one.'²¹ The Turkish atrocities did not end with murder and plunder; in some instances they squeezed out of their victims the last traces of humanity, reducing them to the status of lowly animals, putting the burden of guilt on the survivors to live a torturous life of lingering shame and remorse.

In an episode entitled *Mayrere* (The Mothers) in *Ain sev orerun* (In Those Dark Days), another collection of stories by Antonian, Lusik lives the agony of waiting for her son when rescuers are trying to pull him out of the raging waters of the Euphrates. Is he alive, or has she also lost her last son? The scene of her gradual loss of senses and reason surpasses any description of motherly love. She throws herself on her son's dead body, caresses him and utters words of endearment. Then she starts screaming and cursing. She showers the body with warm kisses as though to find a meagre spark of life in it. Suddenly, in a violent fit of madness, she lets out a piecing, deafening scream, tears open her shirt, and her bony chest opens wide with two unsightly, dried-up and skinny breasts hanging. She sinks her teeth deep into her son's neck and the dark blood gushes out, painting the woman's face with a deadly colour. That is the last sign of life coming from her paralysed brain. She collapses unconscious, her teeth still clenched on the boy's neck, the blood oozing from the wound drop by drop, running into the desert sand, and tracing sinister configurations as though to record the story of this horrifying episode.²² This is the story of the crucifixion of a nation. It is human tragedy in the extreme: a woman victim of genocide seized in an extreme fit of hopeless love, hatred and revenge, encapsulated into a prolonged agony and death.

Antonian depicts a caravan of women arriving at a concentration camp near Meskeneh, after a long, arduous trek on foot, without food and water. The appearance of these moving skeletons, he writes, was painful proof of the transformation of human beings, born with the right to enjoy life, to love and to be loved, into filthy and faceless creatures. Antonian's juxtaposition of the present with the imagined normal life these women lived before the catastrophe is shattering. It is hard 'to imagine that these breasts have had their graceful period of virginity; to imagine that these breasts round and firm, shining with snow-white brightness, with pink nipples, caressed by desirous hands, have experienced sensuous pleasures'.²³ What human virtue can one expect from these creatures robbed of all traces of humanity and womanhood? Skin and bone, barefoot, half-naked, their skin encrusted with

dirt and filth, they can bear any dehumanising humiliation only to get to the water in sight in the camp.

But the nightwatchmen have no mercy. These Armenian fellow-deportees, appointed by the *gendarmes* to guard the camp, are worse than the *gendarmes*. They can be most ruthless executioners to please their Turkish masters and to receive small favours from them. They beat the women, poor creatures, who do not look like women any more. They have long lost their physical appeal due to the hardships of deportation. 'Luckier' are the women, young and pretty of course, whom the nightwatchmen select to offer to satisfy the sadistic, sexual needs of the Turks in charge of the concentration camp. The inmates are aware of this. But 'for them that was a natural precondition for living, a sort of a tax to pay. When their innocent daughters were snatched away to be raped and then passed around among the lower ranking officers, they made no protest. They sometimes even handed over their daughters as ransom to alleviate their own suffering.'²⁴ But when it comes to the question of who to blame, Antonian points to the victims. Why should Armenian women lose their pride and dignity and turn into such lowly creatures? Why should men treat their wives and daughters as commodities to trade in return for a little bit of comfort? The response is internalised. The problem lies with the enemy within, just the way the Jewish *literati* responded to the World War I pogroms.

That was then, when the Jews looked at the phenomena as their internal drama. This is almost non-existent in responses to the Holocaust. Holocaust literature focuses on the external enemy. There is no criticism or chastisement of the victims, committing lowly acts to survive the death camps. On the contrary, they are purged of any blame; they are mythified, as Ka-Tzetnik's *House of Dolls* sets the example. Young, attractive Jewish women are sterilised and sent to the 'House' to entertain German officers. Ka-Tzetnik's principal focus is not on these women's cunning intrigues, internal skirmishes, and immoral behaviour for the sake of survival, but on their suffering. With profound sympathy, he describes their pain and the degradation and humiliation they go through in that hellish environment. His protagonist is an innocent girl, named Daniella, who struggles to sustain her moral integrity. She dreams about her past, her family. She imagines herself beyond that Hell, in a life where moral values prevailed. Her spiritual survival is realised by her living two lives. 'Two existences. Severed and sundered. No connection or bridge between them. Which is reality and which is nightmare? ... Can she be living these two lives simultaneously?'²⁵ Daniella's

attempted escape and her death cleanse her of all the stains which the life of a prostitute had left on her soul. Her character remains in literature as the symbolisation of the innocent victim of man's inhumanity to man.

Life was prolonged agony in the Armenian concentration camp in Meskeneh. Antonian, an inmate of that camp, tried to record this agony as close to the unthinkable reality as he could. An old woman is fighting with a man, another deportee like her. They grapple with each other in the mud, shout and curse. The man grabs the old woman's hair and knocks her down, rubbing her face in the mud. The skirmish continues for a while. Then the man stands up. But why did the old woman start the ridiculous fight? The man had been able to bribe the undertakers to remove the body of his daughter from his tent. Because the old woman had no money, the undertakers refused to take her grandson's body. 'Leave your dead outside, like others do', they told her. She begged them to carry the corpse away, to make room for her last grandchild burning in fever. He, too, the last survivor of the family, had come down with typhus. The old woman, left with a rotting corpse and a dying child, and in a nearly maddened state, attacks the man to empty her anger, her grudge, the agony of the entire nation, on another victim of that same agony.²⁶ Antonian's fiction is crowded with these characters — faceless, nameless women for whom femininity, moral standards, human dignity, and normal patterns of behaviour had long lost their meaning. The only question was survival at any expense. Other inmates kept watching the bizarre fight with cold and indifferent gaze. When death was everywhere and ever-present, when it was a blessing for those still living, grieving over the dead had no meaning at all.

Charlotte Delbo, a survivor of Auschwitz, describes the feeling in a poetic interjection in *None of Us Will Return*.²⁷

O you who know
 did you know that one can see one's mother dead
 and not cry
 O you who know
 did you know that in the morning one wants to die
 that in the evening one is afraid
 O you who know
 did you know that one day is more than a year
 one minute more than a lifetime...

In this same collection of stories, the 'dancing skeleton of a woman freezing to death' is shocking evidence of the meaninglessness of life and death when the boundary between the two is obliterated. In the same context of a marginal existence between life and death, Delbo describes a dying woman, another faceless, moving skeleton, with her fellow inmates turned into aloof spectators. Lawrence Langer explains:²⁸

From the window of their barracks, the narrator and her friends see a pile of corpses dumped naked in the nearby snow. Suddenly, one of the living sees the hand of one of the 'corpses' move — she is still alive ... But atrocity desensitises compassion, eliminates the once clear border between life and death, makes longing to die more of a virtue at times than the will to live. The narrator looks numbly at the spreading fingers and feels void of response.

Delbo's re-imagined Auschwitz trilogy, *A Useless Knowledge*, *None of Us Will Return*, and *Measure of Our Days*, is a repository of images of women, victims of the unthinkable atrocity and of survivors, who try, to no avail, to adjust to life after death. For these victims and survivors, 'living is a merely physical exertion, while dying is the literal defeat of the body'.²⁹

Armenians did not have a Nelly Sachs or a Charlotte Delbo to eternalise, in art, the pathetic struggle, the heroism, the determination and the falterings of Armenian women, that have come to us through the unembellished accounts of survivors of the Armenian Genocide. The story of each one of them deserves an elaborate work of art. And yet, in spite of the abundance of genocide fiction, the true literary art about the genocide is yet to be born. Will the young generation of today succeed?

The women portrayed in the Jewish and Armenian literature may not have the immaculate holiness of the Virgin Mary, or the glory of *Bat-Zion*, to deserve the commemorative rituals of their own. Nor do they have the nobility of Shushanik or Miriam to symbolise the glory of martyrdom. These women are not poetic figures, but they are the collective embodiment of all these literary heroines in their survival in modern times and in modern 'civilisation', when subjected to the most unimaginable suffering. They are not always the typical heroines who transcend torture and pain with a halo above their head. These ordinary human beings suffer without the consolation of being remembered, commemorated and glorified, without the consolation of being rewarded with immortality for their martyrdom. At times, they suffer physical and moral exhaustion and give in. At other times, they

fall, like unknown soldiers, holding the dignity of their gender and the pride of their nation above their own lives. They are nameless victims of atrocity: innocent, defenceless creatures, deserving a sympathetic pen to create a monument to victimisation, dedicated to all women who suffered the most heinous crime in the history of mankind — genocide.

ENDNOTES

1. Levon Mkrtichian (1986), comp. and comm., *Hai dasakan knarergutun* [Armenian Classic Lyric Poems] Erevan, Sovetakan Grogh, 150–54. My translation.
2. David G. Roskies (ed.) (1988), *The Literature of Destruction: Jewish Responses to Catastrophe*, Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem, The Jewish Publication Society, 80–81.
3. For this citation and a description of Cantonism, the forced conscription of Jewish youth into the Tsarist army, and the brutalities of Jewish religious leaders to facilitate the draft, see David G. Roskies (1984), *Against the Apocalypse: Responses to Catastrophe in Modern Jewish Culture*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 57–62.
4. *The Literature of Destruction*, 136–44. The quotation is from 141.
5. Alan Mintz (1984), *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 115.
6. Mihran Damadian (1978), *The Lament of Martyred Smbat's Mother*, in *Armenian Poems*, trans. Alice Stone Blackwell, Delmar, New York, Caravan Books, 277–78.
7. The Zeitun uprising in 1860 was the first outburst of collective protest against the Ottoman government's oppressions and discriminatory taxes extracted from minorities. For the English rendering of this poem, see Aram Tolegian (1979), comp. and trans., *Armenian Poetry Old and New*, Detroit, Wane University Press, 117.
8. Daniel Varuzhan (1986), *Jarde* [The Carnage] in *Banasteghsakan Erker* [Poetic Works], Antelias, Lebanon, Cilician Catholicosate Press, 141–49. My translation.
9. See Suren Partevian (1911), *Hayuhin* [The Armenian Woman], Constantinople, Palents Bookstore.
10. For wartime testimonies, see Roskies, *Against the Apocalypse*, 116–17. The quotation is from 116.
11. Sholem Aleichem, 'Tales of 1001 Nights' in *The Literature of Destruction*, 227.
12. Zapel Esayan (1957), *Averakneru mej* [Amidst the Ruins], Beirut, Etvan Press, 57. All quotations from Esayan are my translations.
13. *Averakneru mej* [Amidst the Ruins], 20.
14. *Ibid.*, 203.
15. Alan Mintz (1984) 9.
16. Edward Alexander (1977), *The Resonance of Dust: Essays on Holocaust Literature and Jewish Fate*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 43.
17. It would be a rewarding experience to undertake the comparison of the themes of Nelly Sachs's poetry and Zapel Esayan's response to the massacres of Cilicia. They were both eye-witnesses to the calamity. They both had the chance to write about their experience looking back on the carnage away in time and distance from the disastrous event.
18. *Averakneru mej* [Amidst the Ruins], 165–66.
19. *Ibid.*, 221–22.
20. Partevian's *Anmah botse* [The Undying Flame] 1917 and *Dzaine hinchets* [The Sound Echoed] 1916 were published jointly in 1917 one publication, Alexandria, Aram Stepanian Press.

21. Aram Antonian (1977 [1921]) (2nd ed.), *Mets vochire* [*The Great Crime*], Beirut, Ghukas Karapetian Publishing, 116–17.
22. Aram Antonian (1919), *Ain sev orerun* [*In Those Dark Days*], Boston, Hayrenik Press, 66. Quotations from Antonian are my translations.
23. Ibid., 80–81, from the story entitled *Jur ... Jur* [*Water ... Water*].
24. Ibid., 94.
25. For this quotation and a discussion of *The House of Dolls*, see Alan J. Yuter (1983), *The Holocaust in Hebrew Literature: From Genocide to Rebirth*, Port Washington, New York, National University Publications, Associated Faculty Press, 5–17. This quotation from 10.
26. *Ain sev orerun* [*In Those Dark Days*], 134, from a story entitled 'Kiankin hognutiune' ['The Weariness of Life'].
27. Cited in Lawrence L. Langer (1978), *The Age of Atrocity*, Boston, Mass., Beacon Press, 204. Langer discusses Delbo's work at length at 201–44.
28. Ibid., 204–05.
29. Ibid., 206.