

ARMENIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE The Armenian genocide, more than a catastrophic experience for the victimized nation, brought about an end to the three-thousand-year Armenian presence in the western part of historic Armenia. The land was swept clean of its indigenous peo-

ple. The few survivors were not allowed to return to their homes, and, uprooted, they took refuge in the four corners of the world. With the influx of the refugees, the pre-World War I Armenian American diaspora, small in number and composed mostly of factory workers and shopkeepers, grew substantially and incorporated a new meaning that entailed a new frame of mind, a worldview, and a way of life.

The concept of diaspora, of course, was not new to Armenians. Many were poets and writers, who were engaged in literary activities away from the homeland, away but always near, because the bridges were not burned yet and the option to return was always open. The diaspora was actually a window to the world culture, to new schools of thought, and new literary directions. The genocide of 1915 cancelled all existing conventions and a priori assumptions. Cut off from the homeland and deprived of a collective national existence, Armenians in the diaspora struggled to survive and perpetuate as a nation in exile, a predicament conducive of a particular literary milieu with particular social, political, and cultural determinants reacting on the artist's individuality, intellect, and creative mind. The pre-genocide literary milieu had evolved into its antithesis in the post-genocide diaspora, as had collective national life into dispersion.

Indeed, it was between 1920 and the 1930s that the final dispersion of the Armenian people became a reality, and the full impact of the genocide sank in. Significantly, this period also coincided with the loss of the short-lived Armenian independence (May 1918–December 1920) and the realization of having been denied the freedom to live as a nation. The outcome was a unique psychological state that translated into nostalgic literature permeating pathetic sentimentalism, which stemmed not only from yearning for the lost homeland, but also from that strong sense of inhibition Armenian immigrant writers experienced in foreign, unfamiliar environments. And from that point it is not difficult to pass into the poetry of homesickness, which, as Hagop Oshagan, the renowned diaspora Armenian writer and critic, puts it, is a literary affliction, nonconforming with the prevailing concepts of world literature of the time. But, perhaps, this was the most feasible direction the literature of a nation of victims could take—an uprooted literature that had not yet taken root, or that was reluctant to take root in the new environment, a reason why the American scene was absent and if present, only as an alien and unfriendly environment, the cause of the pain and suffering of an exile. Even Ruben Darbinian, the prominent and long time editor of *Hairenik Monthly*, considered America a temporary station, sort of a haven for the survivors, with nothing interesting to affect literary creations.

In order to survive in the broadest sense and liberate literature and literary creativity from psychological, political, and emotive constraints, it was necessary to confront the Catastrophe to find a way to deal with it, to write it, in other words, to find literary tools to harness the horrifying images and the overpowering experience and bring them down into the realm of language. Very few were able to cross that bridge. The rest remained

entrapped in and overwhelmed by the traumatic experience of the past and the hardship to adjust to the present conditions.

The literature produced in this period, thus, mostly in the Armenian language and by immigrant writers, marks the inception of the Armenian American diaspora literature and is followed by a transitional period in which the themes and the style of the Old World gradually give in to the American Armenian reality. Of course, a literary historian would rightfully argue that the inception of the Armenian American literature dates back to the 1880s, coinciding also with the publication of the first periodical, *Aregak* (Sun), in 1888 in Jersey City, but the fact is that the bulk of Armenian American literature of substantial esthetic value owes its development to the influx of intellectuals who reached the United States in 1920s after the genocide.

The Periodical Press

With the scarcity of publications in separate volumes in the initial and the transitional stages, the Armenian periodical press in America remains as an important source of inquiry. It had, in effect, assumed an important role in the cultural development of the community. Mostly organs of Armenian political parties and thus each with a political mission, these periodicals were also dedicated to the preservation of the Armenian culture, language, and identity in the New World. On the one hand, they fostered the necessary literary milieu for artistic literature to develop. On the other hand, they reflected the community's literary taste and worked toward refining that taste and giving direction to art. In this dichotomy, it is natural, for socioeconomic reasons, to witness the periodicals succumbing to the average reader's convenience and priority to see his own image, his pains, and anxieties in it in the most simplistic way. It is also understandable why very little of the literature filling the pages of these periodicals is read today and is an integral part of the Armenian literary legacy of all times.

The more important of these periodicals were: *Hairenik* daily newspaper and *Hairenik Weekly* (since 1898, New York, then Boston) and especially its literary monthly (1922-70). The paper particularly echoed the 1894-96 massacres of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire with literary responses that did not necessarily merit aesthetic value, but they appeared alongside the poems of great Armenian poets of Constantinople such as Siamanto and Daniel Varuzhan, who later became victims of genocide. Especially in the 1920s and 1930s, *Hairenik Monthly* was the repository of memoirs and eyewitness accounts of the survivors. Names that frequently appeared in *Hairenik* were: Hagop Oshagan, H. Siruni, Artashes Abeghian, Intra, Hamastegh, Aram Haigaz, Simon Vratsian, Aleksandr Khatisian, Malkhas, Destegul, Ruben Berberian, Levon Shant, Kostan Zarian, Varduhi Kalantar, Arsen Erkat, Sos Vani, Hrand Armen, Suren Saninian, Edvard Boyajian, A. Arpine, Chituni, Armenak Melikian Armenuhi Tikranian, Armen Anush,

Mari Kalaijian, Dzerun Torgomian, and later, Minas Teoleolian (sometimes using also Armen Amatian and Vazken Vanandian pen names), Gurgen Mkhitarian, Gevorg Tonapetian, and others, some of whom did not even live in United States but whose literature certainly impacted the Armenian American life and frame of mind. *Hairenik*, meaning homeland in Armenian, had actually become the reincarnation of the Armenian homeland, the embodiment of its natural beauty, its lifestyle, human relationships, national movements, and the struggle for freedom.

Nor Kir, a monthly, then quarterly (1936–54, New York), had these important names in it: Vahé Haig, Aram Haigaz, Vahé Vahian, Benjamin Nourikian, Andranik Andreasian, Hagop Asaturian, and Suren Manuelian. *Nor Kir* also introduced its readers to Soviet Armenian literature, abundantly publishing works of Soviet Armenian contemporary writers.

Piunik Monthly (1918–20, Boston) strove to gather new voices like Hamastegh, Shahan Natali, Karapet Sital, Vahé Haig, Hovhannes Avagian, Nshan Destegiul, and Arsen Erkat to continue in the footsteps of great Western Armenian writers who fell victim to the genocide.

Paykar Daily (since 1922, Boston), its literary quarterly (1930–31, 1963–68), and its annual volumes (1942–63) were surrounded by intellectuals such as Andranik Andreasian, Vahé Haig, Suren Samuelian, Noubar Agishian, and Zareh Melkonian.

Later on as the Armenian communities grew in America, literary journals were published in Los Angeles (*Navasart Monthly*, and the literary supplement of *Asbarez Daily*) and Montreal, Canada (the literary supplement of *Horizon Weekly*), and the names that often appear in these journals and have some degree of prestige in the field of Armenian literature are: Vahé Oshagan, Hakop Karapents, Garo Armenian, Vehanush Tekian, Vrej Armen, Biuzand Kranian, Jacque Hagopian, Hrant Markarian, Harutiun Berberian, Armen Tonoyan, Boghos Kupelian, Alicia Ghiragossian, Torkom Postachian, Arshavir Mkrtich, Jirayr Attarian, Loucik Melikian, Vanuhi Avetissian, Avetis Gevorgian (Hayordi), Vahé Berberian, Khoren Aramuni, Gevorg Kristinian, Vahram Hajian, and Grish Davtian. They all have their own published volumes in prose or poetry.

During its short life (1995–2000), the quarterly publication *Bats Namak* (Gourgen Arzoumanian, editor) became a stage for both renowned and novice poets and writers, a sort of a meeting place for new ideas in literary presentations and discussions. There appeared poems and prose from Raffi Setian, Marc Nichanian, Vardan Mateossian, Gevorg Manoyan, Raffi Ajemian, Ara Kazanchian, and Gevorg Bedikian.

Characteristically, none of the writers mentioned above are born and educated in the United States. They write in Armenian (only some are bilingual), and although they are to a great extent acculturated and most of them choose their topics from everyday life in America, their protagonists suffer the destiny of a diaspora Armenian with all the problems of culture shock and a dual identity.

The need to provide a forum for the English writers, immigrant or native, and to reach the new generation who did not read or write Armenian anymore, the *Hairenik* group in Boston began to publish the *Hairenik Weekly* in 1934 (renamed *Armenian Weekly* in 1969). Then again, in order to fill a void of scholarly articles on Armenian literature, history, and politics, the publication of *Armenian Review* was initiated (1949), which houses Armenian and non-Armenian literary critics, historians, and social and political scientists. Similar in content are the *Journal of Armenian Studies* (first issued in 1975, then regularly after 1985 as a twice-yearly publication of National Association for Armenian Studies and Research), *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* (issued yearly since 1984), and *Armenian Forum* (issued quarterly since 1998).

Ararat (since 1960, New Jersey), an English-language quarterly magazine of literature, history, popular culture, and art, has published works of almost all the Armenian American writers: John Andriasian, David Kherdian, William Saroyan, Levon Surmelian, Peter Sourian, Leo Hamalian, Edmond Azadian, Gevorg Dervish, Ara Baliozian, Vahé Oshagan, Tigran Guyumjian, and more recent writers and poets Haig Khachadourian, Diana Der Hovanessian, Leonardo Alishan, Izabelle Gabrielian, Arleen Vosgi Avakian, Nancy Kricorian, Florence Avakian, David Colonne, Margaret Bedrossian, Arpine Konalian Grenier, and Lou Ann Matossian.

RAFT: A Journal of Armenian Poetry and Criticism (1987–99), a yearly with Vahé Oshagan and Armenologist John Greppin, coeditors, aimed to introduce Armenian poetry old and new in their English original or English translation to English-speaking Armenian and non-Armenian audience. Vahé Oshagan's critical reviews, the literary works of Diana Der Hovanessian, Leonardo Alishan, Raffi Setian, Lorne Shirinian, Nancy Kricorian, Haig Khachadourian, Peter Balakian, and Garik Basmajian appeared regularly.

Diaspora, a journal of transnational studies (Khachig Tololyan, editor), is published three times a year and is dedicated to the multidisciplinary study of the history, culture, social structure, politics, and economics of both the traditional diasporas—Armenian, Greek, and Jewish—and those transnational dispersions. It is a forum for Armenian scholars expert in the field of transnational studies.

The above is only a very short list of Armenian or English language literary periodicals. There are still many that are mushrooming with the growth of the Armenian community and those literary periodicals that have had a longer life belong to church parishes, or compatriotic, cultural, and benevolent organizations. In the latter case articles or literary pieces are bilingual.

As a pattern, the newcomer writer either continues to write in Armenian or after a while, gaining competence in English and with an aim to reach a larger audience of English speakers, switches to English.

Individual Writers of Importance

Hamastegh (1895–1966), born in Kharbert, whose works were first published in *Hairenik*, continued in the pre-genocide tradition of Western

Armenian literature. He immigrated to America when he was sixteen years old but remained attached to the homeland he had left. He portrayed life in his native village and strove to keep the memory of the Old World alive. *Gyughe* (The Village, 1924), *Andzreve* (The Rain, 1929), *Spitak dziavor* (The White Horseman, 1952), *Kaj Nazar ev tasnerek patmvatskner* (The Brave Nazar and Thirteen Stories, 1955), and *Aghotaran* (Chapel, 1957) are some of his works.

Beniamin Nourigian (1894), born in Kharbert, immigrated to America before 1915, and he too continued in the tradition of the pre-genocide Western Armenian literature. His short stories and novels paint the nature and the lifestyle of the Old Country and embody the author's unabated yearning for that life. His works were published in *Nor Kir* and in separate volumes, *Aigekutk* (Harvest, 1937), *Pandukht hoginer* (Migrant Souls, 1959), and *Karot hayreni* (Yearning for the Homeland, 1978).

Vahé Haig (1896–1983), born in Kharbert, immigrated to America in 1920 after he had already made his career as a writer in Constantinople. He continued it in America, and his works were published in many periodicals of the time. His short stories of life in the Old Country were published in *Haireni Tskhan* (Paternal Hearth) in five volumes. He also has essays on historical events of the past, the massacres of Yozgat, and the Armenian community in Fresno.

Aram Haigaz (1900–86), born in Shapin Garahisar, as a fifteen-year-old boy participated in his town's armed self-defense against the Turkish army of executioners. He later described this heroic venture in his work, *Chors tari Kurdistani lernerun mej* (Four Years in the Mountains of Kurdistan, 1973). *Tseghin dzayne* in two volumes (The Voice of the Race, 1949 and 1954), *Chors ashkharh* (Four Worlds, 1962), *Pandok* (Hotel, 1967), and *Karot* (Yearning, 1971) are some of his other works.

Hagop Asadurian (1903–2003), born in Chomakhlu, immigrated in 1920 after spending his early teenage years in orphanages. He was the only survivor of his family. A self-taught man of letters, he became a regular contributor for *Nor Kir* with his poetry, creative prose, and literary criticism. His fictionalized autobiography, *Hovagimin tornere* (The Grand Children of Hovagim, 1965) was a contribution to the fiftieth anniversary of the genocide.

A. Arpiné (1908–2003), born in Marzovan, settled in the United States in 1931. Some of her writings, scattered in periodicals of the 1940s, were published between 1967 and 1980 in three volumes depicting Armenian life, struggles, pain, and happiness in America.

Biuzand Kranian (1912–), born in Aintab, belongs to the generation of Armenians who had lost their language to Turkish oppression. He learned his mother tongue, which was not his mother's tongue, after the family's escape to Aleppo. His literature in prose and poetry reflects the gradual influence of the American culture, lifestyle, and literary trends. The bulk of it is published in two volumes in 1975 and 1980.

Jacque Hagopian (1917-), born in Jerusalem, is the poet of love and life, but most of all he sings the love of his Armenian homeland. With a fiery style, he inspires national pride and aspiration.

Lucik Melikian (1922-), born in Tehran, was a young but renowned writer when she immigrated to the United States. With her experience of the American life, she continued to portray the diaspora Armenian and the reality of the diaspora communities. She is one of the few Armenian immigrant writers who ventured into using the English language in her work. *Forbidden Days of Ramazan* and *From Hunger to Caviar* are her novels in English, the latter dealing with the genocide.

To create Armenian literature using the English language as a medium of artistic expression was a paradox and an issue for long debate, especially among those intellectuals who regarded the phenomenon as a sign of surrender and assimilation. But how is it possible to disqualify Emmanuel Varandyan and disown *The Well of Ararat* (1938), which encompasses Armenian village life in Persia before 1915, evolving past the immigration to America and the whole scope of its impact; or how is it possible to discredit Bedros Margosian (*Of Desert Bondage*, 1940), Marie Sarafian Bunker (*Armenian Romance*, 1941), and Nishan Der-Hagopian (*Out of Inferno*, 1949), all of whom depicted the massacres and deportation of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire? Where can you put William Saroyan? He is an Armenian, and his literature belongs to the Armenian literary legacy—even as much as he is American producing in the American mainstream literary world (if such a thing exists).

As time went by and the concept of Armenian American literature as part of the Armenian diaspora literature was shaped, the relevancy of the theme to Armenian life and the diaspora Armenian mindset—context, milieu, and historicity—rather than the language of expression became the norm for categorization. This was a definite sign of acculturation, an attempt to get out of isolation and find a niche for the Armenian American minority—their cultural values, art, and tradition—in mainstream America, to give and to receive. The publication of *Three Words* by *Hairenik Weekly* (1939), the first anthology of short stories and poems by Armenian American writers and translations from Armenian literature, is evidence for that willingness. Also significant is Ruben Darbinian's preface that clearly speaks of the transformation of his initial view—and the initial stance of Armenian intellectuals in America—of America being a temporary station with nothing to offer to the Armenian literature.

Levon-Zaven Surmelian (1907, Trabizond) began to write poetry in Armenian when he was dragging his life in the orphanages. *Luis Zvart* (1924), his first and only collection of poetry, speaks of the pain and deprivations of a young boy who lived through the atrocities and witnessed the demise of his family. He stopped writing in Armenian in the United States. His two major works, *I Ask You, Ladies and Gentlemen* (1945, and the second edition in 1980 with William Saroyan's foreword) and *98.6°* (1950), have the

Armenian genocide as their leitmotif and are based on his own life experience. He continued producing literature in English, translating the Armenian national epic (*Daredevils of Sasun*, 1965) and Armenian legends and folklore (*Apples of Immortality: Folktales of Armenia*, 1968). *Techniques of Fiction Writing: Measure and Madness* is his contribution to literary theory and criticism.

Leon Srabian Herald (1912, Erzincan) published his first volume of poetry, *This Waking Hour*, in 1925 in America. Since then, he has been a regular contributor to American and Armenian periodicals.

Richard Hagopian's (1914–76) short story "The Burning Acid" (1944 in a volume of short stories, titled *The Dove Brings Peace*) is the story of the death of the nation and the painful birth of the diaspora, communities of dead Armenians (in America) whose predicament—a result of the genocide—is transformed into an unbearable pain, hatred, and frustration burning their souls like acid. The novel *Faraway the Spring* (1952) is life in the Old Country evolving through the story of a genocide survivor who has made home and is raising children in America, but he is a misfit. He can't belong.

Peter Sourian's *The Gate* (1965) is the story of three generations of Armenians rooted in the Ottoman Empire. The father miraculously survives the genocide and attempts to make a new life. His son, a young man, immigrates to America and submerges himself in the mainstream society. He refuses to teach Armenian to his children whom he raises as true Americans. But he is involuntarily drawn back to his heritage.

And finally, William Saroyan (1908–81), born in Fresno, California, the son of immigrant parents from Bitlis, took his first steps toward fame in American literature in the 1930s. His Armenian background, cultural values, the discriminations against his people in his hometown, Armenian tales, and stories of Turkish persecutions have shaped his outlook on life and influenced his literature.

The Renewed Recourse to the Past

Coinciding with the trend of searching for one's roots in America, the African American movement of the 1960s, the worldwide commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Armenian genocide in 1965, and the heightened political activism of the Armenian diaspora played a pivotal role in sensitizing the new generation and in directing attention to the unhealed wound of genocide. After all, it was all right to look for your ancestors, to have your roots in another part of the world, to have inherited a completely different culture and still be a good citizen—a member of the mainstream. This was a beginning for the new diaspora Armenian reality, which called for a stronger commitment to the cause of national ideology. It kindled self-consciousness and self-recognition among a stratum of youth, who were now thoroughly immersed in the mainstream culture yet still searching for the source of their own particularity.

The echoes of this search reverberate both in the works of immigrant writers and of those born in America; however, there is a significant difference. The American-born writer has not gained enough command of the Armenian language to be able to use it in artistic expression and therefore writes in English. The literature of American-born Armenian writers is readily available to an English reader interested in ethnic literature; the immigrant's literature in Armenian is not, but yet is an equally important part of the Armenian American literature.

Lorne Shirinian, a Canadian Armenian poet and literary critic, published an anthology of the Armenian North American poets (1974) in which he views the new trend as the result of "our fathers' efforts to keep Armenian culture vital in the diaspora, perhaps we can say that now the second and third generations are beginning to experience a new awareness of their heritage" (1). Indeed, there is rarely a piece of poetry in that anthology which does not betray its author's cultural background and ancestry. Archie Minasian, Peter Manuelian, James Magorian, David Kherdian, Helen Pilibosian, Ralph Setian, Alan Hovhaness, Leo Hamalian, Vaughn Koumjian, Mary Avakian Freericks, Harold Bond, Michael Casey, John Vartoukian, Shant Basmajian, Ara Baliozian, Diana Der Hovanessian, Hagop Missak Merjian, Lorne Shirinian, Harry Keyishian, and Vivian Kurkjian, authors chosen for this anthology, were predominantly born in America and have several volumes of poetry and fiction to their credit.

Memoirs—Revival of the Tragic Past

Interest in one's origin and ethnic history kindled the memory of the genocide in the acculturated Armenian youth in America. A renewed interest in the traumatic experience of their parents in the Old Country encouraged memoir writing. In fact, the post-1965 era has seen an upsurge of published memoirs, mostly in English but also in Armenian. Decades after the immediate Armenian language responses, survivors who were in their old age were encouraged by their children to write.

Kerop Bedoukian's memoir, *Some of Us Survived* (1979) reassumes the unique perspective of a nine-year-old boy from Sivas, playing games with death around him. "I forced myself to examine the stinking bodies, to guess their time of death. There came a time, when the body melted completely into the sun under the hot desert sun—I thought this happened in about six days. When I saw a baby still clinging to her dead mother's breast, I knew this death was quite recent."

Alice Muggerditchian Shipley's memoir, *We Walked Then Ran* (1983), delineates an unusual route of escape from Diarbekir to Kharbert, Der-sim, Erzincan, Erzerum, and then to Tbilisi, Baku, Astrakhan, up the Volga River, over the Arctic Ocean and the North Sea to Great Britain and freedom.

John Minassian had a duty. He could not forget what someone said to him in a Turkish prison: "We may not survive, but your generation has a call and a duty." *Many Hills Yet to Climb* (1986) fulfilled that call of duty.

Hovhannes Mugrditchian's *To Armenians With Love, The Memoirs of a Patriot* (1996) is an English rendering of the old man's Armenian manuscript. "For our children and grandchildren, we knew we had to have an English-language version," his son contended.

Bertha (Berjuhi) Nakshian Ketchian wrote her story at the behest of her son and daughter. *In the Shadow of the Fortress: The Genocide Remembered* was published in the English original in 1988. In the introduction she writes, "We—the survivors—are living eyewitnesses of the genocide of Armenians by the Turks. What was documented in writing and pictures at the time is now being denied," and continues, "recognition of the crime does not bring the victims back, but it eases somewhat the pain of the living."

The Armenian genocide survivors had long years to live out and recall the event, to play and replay the traumatic experiences in their mind before it was crystallized into narrative.

Testimonies as Raw Material

In addition to their function as an effective transmitter of memory, the oral and written testimonies of the first-generation survivors served as raw material to inspire literary responses by the second and third generations, who took on the role of storyteller, for they rarely leave the raw material untouched. The material is transformed into a structured and organized memoir or a novel with a specific form and style, embellished by the authors' artistic skills and rich imagination. The most common difficulty in this complicated task is the struggle to overcome emotion, to be able to relive the world of genocide and to produce an authentic expression of the painful saga.

David Kherdian gives one of the earliest examples. *The Road from Home: The Story of an Armenian Girl* (1979) is a touching account of young Veron Dumehjian, David's mother, and her miraculous survival.

Efronia: An Armenian Love Story (1994) is another example. Efronia Katchadourian's memoir of some five hundred pages was translated into English by her son and then turned into a nicely wrought piece of creative literature, a love story, by her non-Armenian daughter-in-law, Stina Katchadourian.

In *Rise the Euphrates* (1994), Carol Edgarian skillfully blends the facts of the Armenian genocide and the traumatic experience of the survivor generation with the attractions and fun and multiple opportunities that American culture can offer a third-generation Armenian American teenager. It comes through clearly in Edgarian's work that no matter how deeply assimilated to the culture and lifestyle of the mainstream, no matter how aloof from the Armenian past, this American-born generation still carries traces of the wounds of the genocide.

Mae M. Derdarian speaks with the voice of her grandmother, adding her own imagination and artistic skill to create a work of art, *Vergeen: A Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (1996). The author's motivation was not only to tell her grandmother's story, but also, as she notes in the "Acknowledgement" of her book, "to immerse the reader in her story and to refute historical revisionists who deny and distort the facts of the Armenian holocaust." Vergeen cries out to the world and to the deniers, "I was there! I was an eyewitness! I was a victim!"

Lines in the Sand (2001), a novel by Thomas A. Ohanian, is subtitled *Love, Tragedy, and the Armenian Genocide*. It is, according to the author's note, "a work of fiction in a background of history." Most interesting is the juxtaposition of the Armenian and the Jewish tragedies and effacement of the time span between them. "The little black lines of news type became trains carrying Jews, moving through the dense forests: . . . And as the wheels swerved along the curving track the snaking train turned into shifting, moving people. Walking, in the desert. Lines of people. Lines in the sand."

A Sudden Discovery of the Past

Many of the survivors refrained from speaking of their horrible experience, especially to their children. There was this inexplicable sense of reproach for having survived while other members of the family met a torturous death. Then, there was this inner compulsion to leave everything behind and live in the new environment, integrated into the mainstream like everyone else, fearing that if they told their stories, it would set them apart. The prevailing discrimination and prejudice against the newcomers bolstered that mentality. There was also the burden of daily struggle for survival in a new, unfamiliar world. "Victim of America who escaped the Turkish Genocide," David Kherdian writes of his mother. Beyond this, there was the intent to spare their children, to protect them against the paralyzing memory with which they had to live. After the parent's death, through fragmented memorabilia left behind, or because of renewed interest and the usual reverence that creeps into one's heart toward a dead parent, the son or daughter discovered the full scope of the source of that unexplained pain and disposition, the tremendous burden of memory that had weighed so heavily upon the parent.

Virginia Haroutounian's *Orphan in the Sands* (1995) is the story of the author's mother, who only in the final days of her life shared with her daughter her terrible ordeal during and after the genocide. It is also the story of the daughter, who resented her mother's strange behavior, and all her life strove to adjust to it, only to learn in the end that it was the genocide and its aftereffects that caused her unfathomable, peculiar behavior, ruining her mother's and her own life.

David Kherdian speaks of the same experience in a collection of poems and the series dedicated to his father, *Homage to Adana* (1970), Adana being the father's birthplace in the Old Country. The burden of tragic memories

had been indirectly yet effectively transmitted, for it fit perfectly into the family atmosphere and the parent-children relationship experienced by the generation born to the survivors of the genocide.

Agop Hacikyan knew very little of the Armenian past when he was growing up in Istanbul. His parents, both survivors of the genocide, kept silent, and their reason, obviously, was not only psychological but also political. The new regime in Turkey had successfully suppressed the historical memory of its citizens. But the conspicuous silence and the occasional references to *aksor* (meaning exile, as survivors referred to the deportation) were factors that spurred Hacikyan to write a series of novels decades later, beginning with *Tomas* (1970) to *A Summer Without Dawn* (2000) translated from the French original (*Eté sans aube* [1991]).

Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate* (1998) is a journey into the past after a sudden discovery of a family secret tied with the Old World. The result, as the author himself puts it, is a "polyphonic, multilayered memoir" in which "personal discovery and history merge."

Vickie Smith Foston comes across the astonishing truth about her roots, heritage, and background. *Victoria's Secret: A Conspiracy of Silence* (2001) is the story of that journey into the past.

Micheline Aharonian Marcom knew very little about her family and the history of her people. *Three Apples Fell from Heaven* (2001) is the result of her search woven into an abstract and complex tapestry wherein the voices of the dead and the living intermingle to evoke a surrealistic tableau of suffering and death.

Children of Der Zor

The memory of the massacres is alive among second- and third-generation Armenian American writers. The pain of a wound that refuses to heal persists. One way or another, the entire nation bears the effects of victimization. An Armenian is a child of Der El-Zor (Der Zor) irrespective of any family connection to those who perished. For Diana Der-Hovanessian, all Armenians are survivors of genocide. It does not matter whether or not one has lost family members in the death marches, "We are children of Der Zor," she writes. (Der Zor was the most notorious of the last concentration camps in the Syrian desert where the deportees, the remnants of survivors reaching there were liquidated.)

Leonardo Alishan remained a child of Der Zor never able to transcend the tragedy that was his grandmother's and became his fate at the age of nine. "I try to be a spectator of that tragedy which culminated in a London hospital room in 1978 where Granny saw Turkish horsemen around her bed before she died. But, alas, I am not the spectator. I am a character caught in that play which never, never, never reaches its equilibrium."

Harold Bond's poem, "Postscript: Marash" (1969), speaks of the burden of the past on the present. The topoi associated with the genocide appear as

fragmented images imposing themselves upon everyday life in the New World. Many of Peter Balakian's poems in *Sad Days of Light* (1983) illustrate this duality. Through a commingling of images past and present, Balakian registers the replay of the tragedy of 1915 in his grandmother's mind.

In Search of an Identity (Ethnic?)

The quest for self-identity takes Armenian American imaginative literature along different paths; yet the genocide and the reconstruction of the memory of it remain at the core as the leitmotif. Peter Najarian's *Voyages* (1971) is the site of the painful conflict and attempted reconciliation between the past and the present. There is little reference to the genocide, but it is the ever-present past constantly pressuring the present, defeating the efforts of the characters to rise above the unhappiness, to find their identity and adjust to their adopted country. Najarian's *Daughters of Memory* (1986) is again a search for identity and a quest to revive and perpetuate the memory of the genocide. The conversations and reminiscences among a group of old Armenian women who experienced the genocide in their youth provide the background and trace the history of the Armenian genocide.

Michael Arlen Jr.'s journey to Armenia to rediscover for himself what it meant to be Armenian makes his renowned narrative *Passage to Ararat* (1975) a classic in the search for ethnic identity. Renounced by the father and rediscovered by the son, Armenia, the Armenian culture and heritage, and the Armenian past—the genocide—interfuse to impose their presence as elements of Michael Arlen's identity.

Alicia Ghiragossian, who, being born in South America and living in the United States, writes poetry in Spanish and English, believes that all Armenians have the obsession to tell the world how hard it is to survive when the memories of a lost family and a lost homeland are still fresh. She explains what it means "To be an Armenian" (1998).

Helene Pilibosian tries to capture the life of her parents in their native village in Kharbert. *Carvings from an Heirloom: Oral History Poems* (1983) clearly defines the source by which the author identifies herself.

Peter Balakian's *The Black Dog of Fate* (1998) is another example in which the Armenian component is gradually extracted from a nebulous memory hole to become an important dimension in the diaspora Armenians' self-identity.

The emigrant writers from Middle Eastern countries write in Armenian, but they too portray the painful transition, the make-up of the new diaspora Armenian. The memory of the dead family continues as a part of the Armenian heritage and is leaving an indelible mark on the makeup of an Armenian's identity. With such complex givens of this persisting past, can this be simply called ethnic identity?

Vahé Oshagan (1922–2000), born in Jerusalem, portrays the assimilated, alienated generation in America against a backdrop of national traditions

deriving from the past, the roots of this past calling the generation back, demanding action, be it in the most unconventional way, for example, by staging shockingly scandalous scenes or by alluding to generally unacceptable political violence. Oshagan's literature delineates a constant effort to move from the predicament of the victim's psychology toward a complete and free human being. He tries to reach a new synthesis in the new diaspora Armenian with cognition of the past, dedication in the present, and a reinterpretation of Armenianness for the future, that is, one that could carry the strength of the nation and withstand obstruction. His published works of prose and poetry are: *Patuhan* (Window, 1963), *Kaghak* (City, 1963), *Karughi* (Crossroad, 1971), and *Ahazang* (Alarm Bell, 1980) to *Taparakane* (The Wanderer, 1988), *Arvardzanner* (Suburbs, 1990), and *Serundner* (Generations, 1995).

The pain and frustration resulting from the struggle to adjust to one's dual identity and the search for an ideal image of the diaspora Armenian echo in almost the entire literary output of Hakob Karapents (1925-94), a native of Tabriz, Iran. His characters are ordinary Armenians in the New World struggling to sustain moral integrity and psychological stability. His novels and short stories were published in nine volumes, *Antsanot Hoginer* (Stranger Souls, 1970) to *Mi Mard Ou Mi Erkir* (A Man and a Country, 1994).

Noubar Agishian (1934-), born in Iskandarun, develops an array of diaspora Armenian characters caught in the turmoil of dual identity. They denounce their ethnic heritage and assimilate, or they live a life of hopelessness and frustration: "we are exiles, expelled from earth and heaven, expelled even from life. There is something alien in our existence, something temporary. We wander from one country to another, but we cannot put down roots, strong, deep, and permanent" (*Marde Hoghin Vra* [1987, The Man on the Soil]).

Vehanoush Tekian, (1948-), born in Beirut, on the other hand, struggles to transcend the psychology of a massacred nation and to stand upright despite her grandfather's sad stories of the Armenian past. In her case the awareness of the Armenian past is transformed into resolution to fight for national goals.

Boghos Kupelian (1936-), born in Iskenderun, brings the experience and the worldview of an Armenian wandering from Africa to the Middle East and America to the Armenian American literature. His own quest for an Armenian identity reconciled with a variety of favorable and alien environments gives his characters their idiosyncrasies and puts their sufferings and the burden of history they carry on their shoulders in the context of world suffering.

The literature discussed here in this brief inquiry is only a schematic representation of Armenian American literature. Many names have been omitted; many important aspects of that literature have remained unattended. The Armenian American literature as a body bears all the attributes and effects of a diaspora. It is part and parcel of the Armenian diaspora literature. But it is also a component of the American ethnic literature, for the

bare reason that it is produced by an ethnic minority in America. Is this a valid categorization? Where does the ethnicity come into play? In the case of the Armenian American literature in English, it is the flavor of Armenian-ness, which is made of the Armenian past and the American present. Or as William Saroyan has characterized, it is "the English tongue, the American soil, and the Armenian spirit."

Further Reading

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