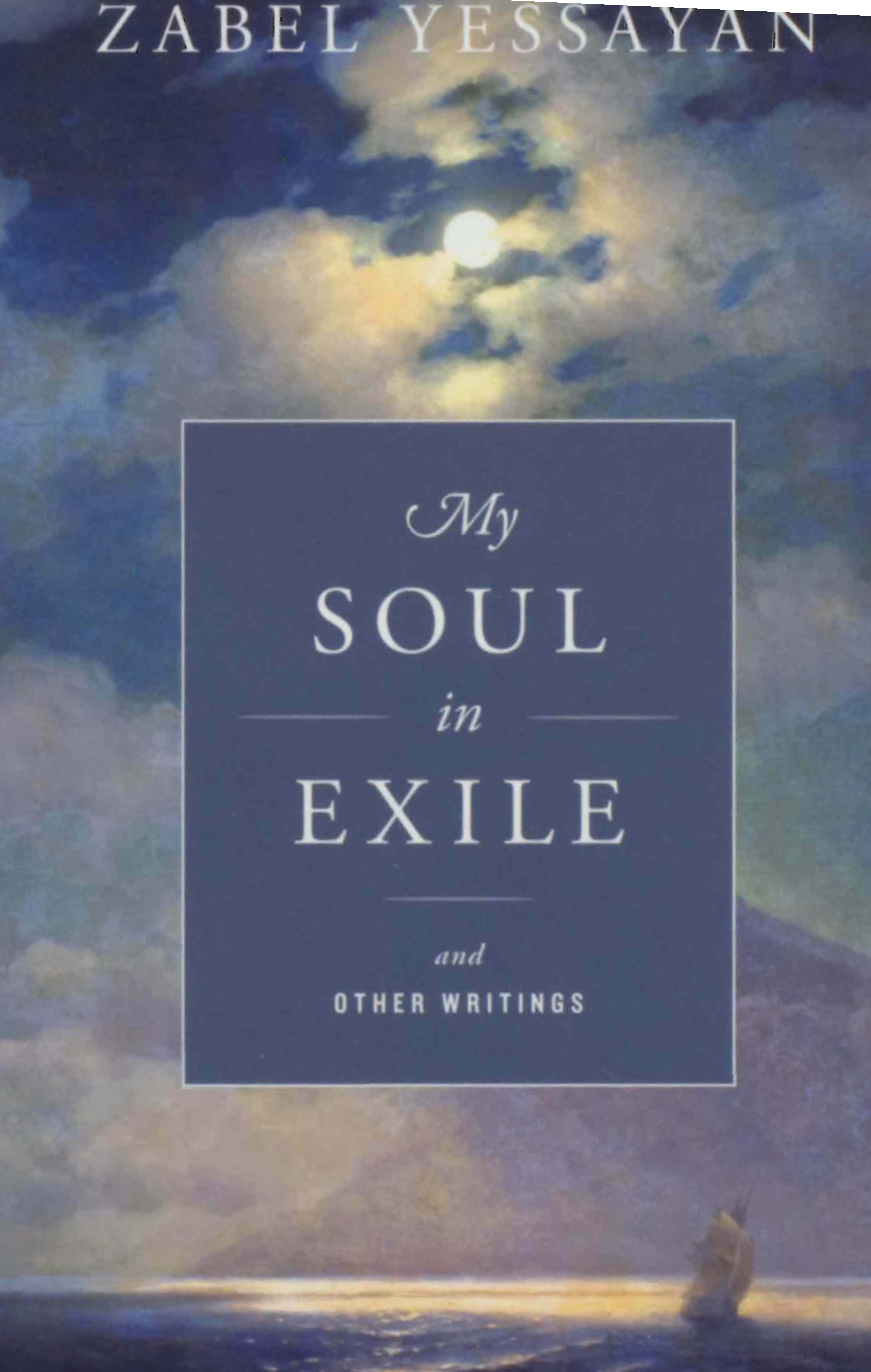


ZABEL YESSAYAN

My
SOUL
in
EXILE

and
OTHER WRITINGS



*My Soul
in
Exile*

and Other Writings

Edited by Barbara Merguerian

With Joy Renjilian-Burgy, Judith A. Saryan,
and Danila Jebejian Terpanjian



AIWA PRESS

Armenian International Women's Association
Boston, Massachusetts

Contents

Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan	vii
Preface	ix
<i>My Soul in Exile</i>	1
Postface, by Krikor Beledian	43
<i>Early Works</i>	
Ode to the Night	55
Feminine Souls	56
The Red Windmill	61
The Man	63
<i>Essays on Contemporary Issues</i>	
Our Women Teachers	78
The Newest Manifestation of the Women's Cause	82
The Armenian Woman after the Constitution	86
The Armenian Woman's Role in the Current Movement towards the Homeland	89
In the Ruins (Excerpt)	93
<i>Appendix</i>	
Remembering Zabel Yessayan, by Ruben Zaryan	105
Photographs	113
English-Language Sources	117
Treasury of Armenian Women's Literature	118

G. M. Goshgarian (*My Soul in Exile*, “In the Ruins”) was educated at Yale and UCLA and has translated twenty books and many shorter works from German, French, and Armenian into English. Most recently his English translation of part of the Armenian author Hagop Oshagan’s epic novel *Remnants* has been published by Gomidas Press. He is the author of a book on nineteenth-century American popular literature, *To Kiss the Chastening Rod* (Cornell University Press, 1992). His edition of the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser’s *Initiation à la philosophie pour non-philosophes* (Paris, Presses universitaires de France) is in press.

Jennifer Manoukian (several “Early Works” and “Essays”) is a translator, lecturer, and literary critic. Her scholarly research examines issues of cultural identity in Western Armenian literature. In addition to her translation of Zabel Yessayan’s memoir, *The Gardens of Silihdar*, Manoukian has published critical articles on Yessayan’s other works of fiction and nonfiction. A major in French literature and Middle Eastern studies, she is a graduate of Rutgers University.

Nanore Barsoumian (“Newest Manifestations of the Women’s Cause”) is assistant editor of the *Armenian Weekly*, where her writings focus on human rights, politics, poverty, and environmental and gender issues. She is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts (Boston) with a degree in Political Science and English.

Brief Biography of Zabel Yessayan

In the creative outburst that marked the Armenian renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women played an active role. The victory of the vernacular Western Armenian language in the struggle over classical texts resulted in the rapid growth of schools, periodicals, publishing houses, and social organizations of many kinds. Among the many facets of this renaissance was an emphasis on educating women and advancing their position in society. Educated women began writing and editing articles and books, entering teaching as a profession, and establishing humanitarian organizations.

It was during this vibrant period of Armenian culture that the writer and activist Zabel Yessayan established a reputation as a prominent Armenian intellectual. Her turbulent life, reflected in her writing, followed the vicissitudes of the Western Armenians of the period. Born Zabel Hovhannessian in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1878, Yessayan graduated from the Armenian Holy Cross secondary school, where she had excelled in her studies, especially literature. Her first works were published in 1895, the same year that she left for Paris and enrolled in the Sorbonne, thus becoming one of the first Ottoman women to study abroad.

In Paris she married the painter Dikran Yessayan, with whom she had two children, Sophie and Hrant. Her first novel, *The Waiting Room*, published in 1903, takes place in Paris and explores themes that were to become central to her work—exile and alienation.

Returning to Constantinople in 1902, she began writing articles

about contemporary issues; these appeared in various Armenian and French publications. In 1909 she was appointed to a delegation sent to Adana to provide aid to orphans and assess conditions in the aftermath of the bloody massacres of the Armenians that had taken place a few months earlier. Her classic account of this experience, published as *In the Ruins*, is widely regarded as one of her best works.

The only woman on the “black list” of the Armenian intellectuals to be arrested on the night of April 24, 1915, Yessayan was able to elude the police, and after spending several months in hiding managed to escape to Bulgaria. There she found only temporary refuge and was forced to flee again when Bulgaria entered the war as an ally of Ottoman Turkey. The following years found her busy at work in the Caucasus, writing and publishing interviews with survivors of the Armenian Genocide and also organizing the care and relocation of refugees and orphans. By 1922 she returned to Paris and resumed her writing, publishing the psychological novels *My Soul in Exile* in that year, followed by *Hours of Agony* and *The Last Cup*.

In the 1920s Yessayan visited Soviet Armenia, and in 1933 accepted an invitation to move there and teach literature at Yerevan State University. At the same time she continued her writing with the novel *Shirt of Fire* (1934) and *The Gardens of Silihdar* (1935). After years of wandering, it seemed that she had found a permanent, safe home. But this stable life was not to last. In the face of increasing criticism of creative artists by Communist government officials, Yessayan staunchly defended the works of such talented writers as Aksel Bakunts and Yeghishe Charents. Becoming along with them a victim of Stalin’s purges of Armenian intellectuals, she was arrested in 1937, imprisoned and tortured in exile in Baku, and died under unknown circumstances, probably in 1943. Left unwritten were several plays and projects, including a biographical novel based on the life of the poet Bedros Turian, the second and third volumes of her memoir *The Gardens of Silihdar*, and a major novel titled “The Dream of Shahabed.”

Preface

Almost forgotten today, Zabel Yessayan is the subject of a documentary film, *Finding Zabel Yesayan*, prepared in 2011 by Talin Suciyan and Lara Aharonian and widely shown in the Armenian diaspora. Inspired by the presentation of the film in the Boston area, a group of women, members of the Armenian International Women's Association (AIWA), began to develop a plan to translate into English and publish some of Yessayan's works. The first task, to choose the works to be published, became a challenge when we realized the vast output of her novels, short stories, poetry, and articles on many subjects published across a span of decades in publications appearing throughout Armenia and the Armenian diaspora, many of them difficult to locate today.

After much thought and discussion, it was decided to publish two volumes, one—the companion to this book—containing the complete text of *The Gardens of Silihdar*, Yessayan's thinly veiled memoir of her early years growing up in Constantinople, a work that has been available in English up to this time only in an out-of-print abridged edition translated and edited by Ara Baliozian.

This volume contains Yessayan's short but revealing novel, *My Soul in Exile*, published in 1922 in Vienna by the Mekhitarist Press. Yessayan's first major work written after the Armenian Genocide, the novel is set in Constantinople during the critical period following the 1909 Adana massacres and preceding the 1914 outbreak of World War I. The complete text is followed by an analysis of this many-layered novel by the literary critic Krikor Beledian. Also included in this volume are selections of Yessayan's early works, some of her articles dealing with contemporary issues, and a brief reminiscence by one of her students at Yerevan State University, Ruben Zaryan. We hope that these selec-

tions will provide the reader with a useful introduction to the life and accomplishments of this remarkable author.

Thanks are due to many individuals who have contributed in various ways to this publication, especially the translators (chiefly Jennifer Manoukian and G. M. Goshgarian), who provided an English text as close as possible to the Armenian original. Lara Aharonian of the Women's Resource Center in Yerevan helped to obtain material from the Museum of Literature and Art in Armenia. Many pleasant and stimulating hours were spent with co-editors Joy Renjilian-Burgy, Judith A. Saryan, Danila Jebejian Terpanjian, and occasionally others, as we searched to find material, shape the publications, and especially as we steeped ourselves into the life and works of this talented author. Special appreciation is due to Victoria Rowe, whose groundbreaking study, *A History of Armenian Women's Writing, 1880-1922*, has done much to attract attention to the pioneering authors of the period.

We are grateful to the Dolores Zohrab Liebmann Fund, for a generous publication grant, and to the Board of Directors of the Armenian International Women's Association, for their constant support.

This is one in a series of English-language translations published by AIWA and devoted to the works of Armenian women writers and editors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is a rich treasury available, waiting to be tapped, important for those interested in the role of women in the late Ottoman Empire and in the far-reaching effects of World War I. More broadly, while dated in some respects, the literature of this period has surprising relevance to current issues, not only those surrounding the position of women in society, but also to larger questions such as ethnic identity, alienation, and social justice. If our modest volumes serve to inspire others to delve more deeply into the lives and writings of Zabel Yessayan and her contemporaries, then our hopes will have been realized.

—*Barbara Merguerian*

I returned to Constantinople today. It is spring, and the April night with its sultry, fragrant atmosphere fills me with sweet emotion. Standing in my father's nearly deserted house in Bağlarbaşı at the open window all alone, I have been lost in thought for a long time. But I am not really thinking, of course; nor am I dreaming. Rather, abandoning my soul to a fleeting, undefinable emotion, I silently steep myself in the beauty of nature and, by degrees, enter into communion with it.

It is neither night nor day. A starry white, iridescent tremolo of light makes everything vacillate, even the profile of the mountain range in the distance. Quivering streaks of light incessantly flame up and then melt away in the valley in which the soil, agitated by the labor of its fecundation, exhales a humid, heady fragrance. Waves of balmy wind ripple through the air, but they do not gradually mix with the coolness of the evening and temper it. That, no doubt, is why the sudden buffets of cold make me shiver, despite the feverish heat searing my forehead.

A newly bloomed flower perfumes the air, a shooting star traces its luminous furrow across the sky, and frogs croak in the pools of the vegetable gardens: a protracted, stubborn, monotonous sound. How penetrating, moving, and deep that eternal song of the frogs is! It reminds me of other springs and, with surprising force, arouses a

sad homesickness in me. . . . All I want now is to lie down, rest, and think about everything I have to do tomorrow; but I am glued to the spot by those humble animals' lovesick spring song. It is as if I were still far from Constantinople and my father's house in Scutari; it is as if I were only remembering that croaking, as if a tender emotion were disarming my soul.

In the recesses of my memory, closed doors are opening and past moments are reawakening. A word, a forgotten gesture, a look of my father's, or even details of everyday existence long since past and forgotten, are coming back to life. I do not remember them so much as they once again communicate to me the sorrow or joy they contain.

A long, very long series of notes of the same pitch, seemingly emitted with breathless haste, melts into another series, louder or softer, and so on without end . . . without end. I must nevertheless shut the window and rest. Tomorrow I will have to spend the entire day in the customhouse trying to wrest my paintings from the customs officers' grip.

That dread operation was accomplished with an ease I had not at all been expecting; no questions were asked and everything was returned to me. Constitutional Turkey¹ has a particularly friendly, warm attitude toward us. This is a country that confronts you with utterly unpredictable situations. It seems there is no transition between one state of affairs and the next: things are either very good or very bad.

I've already hung my pictures on the walls of the big room, covered with Ottoman-style murals painted by my talented grandfather. The artfulness of those arabesques is now hidden beneath the serried frames of my paintings. I spend entire days penned up in that room. Sometimes I regard my work with the critic's severe eye, now

despondently, at other times with admiration. I would have liked to produce something else, and surely there was something else in my soul. Inside me was light, gaiety, and life, yet all my paintings are shrouded in mist. My native land's luminous sun has yet to rise in my work, but I feel certain that the mist will be dispelled in future works and that my day will dawn.

It is difficult to explain the train of thought that has brought me to this conclusion. It is as if my yearning and longing for a homeland were themselves that mist and that sadness, as if they have set their seal on my character as well. I have been searching for myself interminably and have suffered deeply in the process, and that wrenching spiritual effort has left its mark on my work.

Will I ever be understood? Or simply, will anyone ever appear who can appreciate or assess my work at its true value? Will people understand this much at least: that my defects do not stem from carelessness or chance, but are, rather, the consequence of a certain irrepressible inclination?

This morning, when the sun rose brightly, flooding everything in its light, my paintings seemed pale and devoid of the emotion that, in my friends' estimation, communicates itself so easily to others. In the pinkish evening mist, however, they seemed to be of value again, and I remained sitting in front of them for a long time, thinking and dreaming. I felt relieved then; I begin to look at my work confidently and even, gradually, to admire it. This evening my soul is in accord with the states of mind that gave birth to those pictures. I am, perhaps, adding my particular mood to their real merits, filling them out in my imagination, making good their defects, and gradually I begin to feel excited.

I nevertheless sense that, in a certain way, I have not yet found a way of expressing myself forthrightly. Perhaps my palette should have been different. I should perhaps have looked for another way

of apprehending my subject. No, no! There's no point in wandering down those blind alleys again. . . .

The fact of the matter is that this genre doesn't correspond to my inner inclination. I'm not really a painter. My teacher characterized me accurately, putting his finger on the sore spot when he said, "You, Madam, create music with colors and lines."

"You couldn't have hoped for higher praise," my friends told me.

From a certain standpoint, that's true. To transcend the boundaries of one art and cross over into the domain of another is the kind of feat that always amazes people, and amazement is the better part of admiration. But I don't want to approach this problem in terms of success or failure.

At this very moment, I'm invaded by doubt again. I want to examine myself and come to know my turbulent inner world.

It's true that inspiration comes to me not visually, but as music. It's a kind of mute, intimate, profoundly mysterious symphony that whispers and then thunders in my soul. It doesn't sound like any known musical instrument or human voice. It has the broad, serene rhythm of the sea, of the wind or the woods, and sometimes of a murmuring brook. Where does this inner harmony come from? What is its source? What external causes are capable of bringing it into being? I cannot clearly say.

It seems that the connections between the outside world and my inner self are often broken or become imperceptible to me, and that I draw my inspiration from the depths of my soul, as if from an un-hoped-for, unknown treasure-trove. But how different is what I see with my soul's eyes from what I put before the public eye! I seem to thrust my hand, in the dark, into a bag bursting with gold, to hold the treasure tightly in my grip, and cautiously withdrawing my hand, to sense, physically, that the gold is really there—yet, when I open my hand in the broad light of day, nothing is left in it, so that I have

to examine it attentively to find the merest trace of gold dust in the imperceptible pores of my skin. There, that's the right comparison.

Thus I have not yet succeeded in expressing or capturing on canvas my soul's music, my inner storms and moments of peace. Will I ever succeed in lifting a corner of the mysterious veil? Will I ever succeed in plunging to the very bottom of my inner depths and reemerging, triumphantly, with clear-eyed consciousness?

I am curious about myself. At any rate, I can say with certainty that what people see in my works is that veil itself, not what lies behind it. It is the very mist that encumbers my soul and makes me a stranger to myself. It is the very sadness that arises from my yearning, my desire, my inadequacy.

I can also say with certainty that I have not succeeded in making music with painting; my brush has, unconsciously perhaps, followed my inner rhythm. My songs and my soul's symphony have remained mute; not a single note of that music has yet sounded. My pictures correspond to the periods of my soul's silence, as if a dancing band of spirits had traversed my inner world and moved on, and everything had turned to stone in their absence. Those are the kind of days when one feels empty and busies oneself by summoning memories to fill the void.

Thus my paintings reflect recollected emotions and are born of such periods of silence. That is why they are lifeless without me: I give them breath, I infuse them with warmth, and only my eyes can appreciate them, because only I know the value of the sadness or serenity they contain.

What can others see in all this? A vague emotion or simply the physical subject of the painting—that is, its more or less pleasing skeleton.

Yet this vague emotion is that surplus, that absolute, which artists consider to be their greatest success. It is my ambition, however, to

want still more. Inside me is the effervescence of a wonderful expectation: I feel that my soul is in exile and eagerly awaiting its emancipation. What and who will loosen its chains? At every moment, one can feel hope or despair.

But when that moment comes and my soul knows that exultation, I want to pull a jet of flame from that crackling fire, a fountain of beauty and emotion from that raging storm. At the sight of that miraculous revelation, people can, I know, writhe in agony or joy.



Walking back and forth in front of my paintings the whole day long, thinking, dreaming, and deeply moved, I had become so weak that I was feverish that evening. This fever is my constant companion; it is, perhaps, a consequence of my overwrought state of mind. One of my friends, a kindly, gentle old artist, often used to tell me, quite rightly: "You think too much and that's not good. Surrender to your instincts, the artist's best guide. Be as naive as a child, re-discover the miraculous capacity for amazement and wonder you had in your youngest years. When you do, an insignificant pebble skipping down the road will become a fairy tale for you; the world will be inhabited by spirits, miracles, and wonders; and you will be able to weep or smile. People incapable of seeing those miracles with their own eyes will weep or smile with you. There you have it: that's what art is."

That, perhaps, is the truth, I've often told myself—that I should surrender to my instincts. Yet there are people who have irrevocably lost their childhood because they have heard the announcement of their destiny in the secret depths of their being. How can you smile or gently weep when you feel your fettered soul's wings beating against an invisible threshold?

It must also be said that I have long since turned my back on the easy success that comes by chance. I don't want to be beholden to

blind accident for anything. When my brush isn't conducted by my will and my will alone, and produces a harmonious combination of colors or a felicitous outline by accident, I immediately wipe those colors or lines off the canvas.



This is brain fever, but it is also Constantinople fever, a sort of physical agitation inseparable from the city's spring nights. There are so many stirring scents in the air, so much humidity, and at the same time the balmy waves of the southerly wind, and above all, that unstable, constantly shifting, intense emotion that resembles endless death and rebirth. Lights flicker and go out, while an imperceptible murmur, a sort of trembling in the atmosphere, agitates the air and sometimes makes it stifling. It seems as if, from time to time, an invisible bird flies by: the lights are snuffed out by its shadow, and the whispering of the trees ceases. Everything becomes a dream, wild emotion, or nightmare. People roam through the streets, staggering as if drunk. Everything—the natural scene, human emotion, the urban skyline, the soaring poplars, the muezzin's call—everything is not only carried to a feverish pitch of excitement, but also mingles with everything else. I remember that, from a very early age, I felt all this, vaguely: curled up in my bed under rose-scented sheets, I would pull the comforter all the way up to my feverish forehead and shiver, just as I am shivering tonight.

In no other city in the world, perhaps, does the unrest of spring invade people's inner being in this supremely subtle, unhealthy way.



At sundown, seated at my desk, I was leafing through a pile of newspapers. I was reading with amusement the empty flattery written about me when Sebuhan came calling with an old teacher of mine, Hrant Cherkezian. Hardly had Sebuhan greeted me than, throwing the shock of hair that had fallen over his forehead back