SURVIVOR MEMOIRS OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Taderon Press

A version of chapter 2, "Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide as Cultural History," was first given as a paper at the Middle Eastern Studies Association Conference in Washington DC on December 8, 1995. Another version of it was published in *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide,* edited by Richard Hovannisian (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), pp. 292-309.

A version of chapter 3, "Photographs in Survivor Memoirs," first appeared as "Use of Photographs in Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide," in the *Journal of the Society of Armenian Studies* 6 (1992-1993): 147-152.

The author wishes to thank the survivors and their families who gave him permission to reprint the photographs from their memoirs. He also wishes to thank the *Armenian Review* for permission to reprint the photographs in their issue 45.1-2/177 (Spring-Summer 1992).

Published by Taderon Press, PO Box 2735, Reading, RG4 8GF

Printed in the United Kingdom

ISBN 0-9535191-4-7

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This work is dedicated to Mampre and Mariam Shirinian and Ardashes Mazmanian, my father, my mother, and my uncle, and to all Armenians who survived and to the countless numbers who did not. And to my sons Emmanuel and Benjamin so that they will never forget.

INTRODUCTION

When approaching a subject such as genocide, one is left wondering what causes rational humans of one group to try to eliminate all those belonging to another group, regardless of age or gender even when they are unable to offer any resistance.[1] At what point does rational discourse dictate that genocide is a viable option? Looking at human history, we should not be surprised to learn that this kind of behaviour has not been infrequent. As the psychiatrist R. D. Laing has written:

> We are all murderers and prostitutes—no matter to what culture, society, class, nation, we belong, no matter how normal, moral, or mature we take ourselves to be.... In the last fifty years, we human beings have slaughtered by our own hands coming on for one hundred million of our species. We all live under constant threat of our total annihilation. We seem to need death and destruction as much as life and happiness. We are as driven to kill and be killed as we are to let live and live.[2]

Despite the enormous loss of life in the genocidal act, there are those who survive and who bear witness to their tragedy, which ultimately is our tragedy, through telling, both in speaking and in writing texts. Terrence Des Pres tells us that there is a specific experience to survival and that surviving as a witness is one of its forms.[3] Reading survivor memoirs such as Primo Levi's *Survival in Auschwitz* forces us to reflect on the relationship between testimony and literary form, between the survivor as witness and the survivor as writer. Because this century has seen mass killing on an enormous scale, the literature of the generations since the end of World War I has seen the unfortunate rise of a new genre; namely, the literature of testimony, specifically survivor memoirs.

Survivor memoirs are composed of bits and fragments of memory but not of ordinary memory, for it has been assaulted

and overwhelmed by events that go beyond understanding. Daily acts in such moments of extreme trauma cannot be either conceived or constructed as knowledge; there is no human reference for the survivor to gauge what he or she has gone through. There is no system of knowledge, no exegesis to guide one through the horror. However, as a discursive practice, the literature of testimony does offer an individual account, an articulation, an attempt at making a statement. To testify, then, to vow to tell through one's own words, is a significant speech act in which the survivor confronts the difficulty of transforming his or her experience of genocide, that is personal knowledge, into telling by finding an appropriate narrative form.

The many survivor memoirs of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923, in which over 1,000,000 Armenians were killed, are texts through which Armenians reconstruct their past individually and collectively. Through this individual act of remembering, they are able to reconstruct themselves communally. For those who did not suffer the genocide, the past is retrieved for them in these reconstructions, and in this way, the memoirs are an essential modality of identity-making and -reaffirming. Thus, the survivor memoir is an instrument for returning the survivor to the world. Catastrophe demands uniformity. The systematic nature of the destruction and mass killing had the effect of reducing Armenians and their possessions to the lowest common denominator—they were all infidels. They experienced the same humiliation, degradation and death a million times over. In fact, one can say that the genocide was designed and structured to destroy the very notion of privacy and individualism. The immediate past of the survivor, therefore, was collective in nature as all survivors suffered a common tragedy. Yet through the very act of bearing witness, through their memoirs, the survivors search for redemption by offering their stories as a call to rectify the overwhelming force of evil that history has shown them. Often, the memoirs seem to show that the mind is helpless before the enormity of geno-

cide; such evil cannot be imagined or understood. At the same time, however, the memoir is an example of the triumph of the individual spirit. The story becomes a yearning for some kind of compensation for all the wrong committed, and in many cases, the memoir takes on the characteristic of being transcendent as a story having come through hell.

Some survivors of the genocide when faced with the daunting task of facing their personal and collective history have chosen silence, preferring to keep their memories to themselves. Others have felt compelled to bear witness, to place their testimony in the public sphere with the hope of teaching others. They are willing to face the deportations and massacres once again through confronting their memory in order to offer their texts as a warning to future generations. Still others feel it necessary to transform the events of the genocide into a fictional narrative, preferring the illusion of detachment from the pain, perhaps in the hope of becoming an *other*.[4] However, deciding to place the genocide narrative in the public consciousness is both significant and important because, as Paul Fussel reminds us, one remembers what has been coded in literature, for it is through social encoding that one remembers.[5] Survivor memoirs are a form of social encoding, not only for Armenians for whom they have become a repository of group memory, but for everyone, because we are not only the authors of our own stories; we are also the heirs to other stories that we share in human society.

In *The Holocaust Kingdom,* Alexander Donat relates what the historian Dr. Ignacy Schipper told him in the Maidanek extermination camp.

> ...everything depends on who transmits our testament to future generations, on who writes the history of his period. History is usually written by the victor. What we know about murdered peoples is only what their murderers vaingloriously cared to say about them. Should our murderers be victorious, should *they* write the

> history of this war, our destruction will be presented as one of the most beautiful pages of world history, and future generations will pay tribute to them as dauntless crusaders. Their every word will be taken for gospel. Or they may wipe out our memory altogether, as if we had never existed, as if there had never been a Polish Jewry, a Ghetto in Warsaw, a Maidanek. Not even a dog will howl for us.
>
> But if *we* write the history of this period of blood and tear—and I firmly believe we will—who will believe us? Nobody will want to believe us, because our disaster is the disaster of the entire civilized world....We'll have the thankless job of proving to a reluctant world that we are Abel, the murdered brother....[6]

In light of the current trend towards historical revisionism by certain academics and genocide denial by Turkish officials, Schipper's words resonate only too clearly today.[7] In 1915 during one of his many meetings with Talaat Pasha, one of the triumverate of the Committee of Union and Progress, who controlled the Turkish state and one of the architects of the Armenian Genocide, American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau says that Talaat asked him: "Why are you so interested in the Armenians, anyway?.... You are a Jew; these people are Christians. The Mohammedans and the Jews always get on harmoniously. We are treating the Jews here all right. What have you to complain of? Why can't you let us do with these Christians as we please?"[8] Ironically, Morgenthau relates that Talaat was somewhat reluctant to speak about these matters because the embassy interpreter was an Armenian. Later, Morgenthau writes that after many attempts to get him to stop his actions against the Armenians, Talaat told him, "It is no use for you to argue...we have already disposed of three quarters of the Armenians; there are none at all left in Bitlis, Van and Erzerum. The hatred between the Turks and the Armenians is now

so intense that we have got to finish with them. If we don't, they will plan their revenge."[9]

In 1970, Stanford Shaw in his book, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*, reduces the population figures of Armenians in the Empire to no more than 1,300,000, which has the effect of reducing the number of Armenians that could have been deported or killed. Furthermore, he turns the nature of the tragedy around by naming the Armenians as the aggressors.[10]

> Specific instructions were issued for the army to protect the Armenians against nomadic attacks and to provide them with sufficient food and other supplies to meet their needs during the march and after they were settled. Warnings were sent to the Ottoman military commanders to make certain that neither the Kurds nor any other Muslims used the situation to gain vengeance for the long years of Armenian terrorism. The Armenians were to be protected and cared for until they returned to their homes after the war. A supplementary law established a special commission to record the properties of some deportees and sell them at auction at fair prices, with the revenues being held in trust until their return. Muslims wishing to occupy abandoned buildings could do so only as renters, with the revenues paid to the trust funds, and with the understanding that they would have to leave when the original owners returned. The deportees and their possessions were to be guarded by the army while in transit as well as in Iraq and in Syria, and the government would provide for their return once the crisis was over.[11]

Despite the mass of evidence to the contrary, Shaw would like one to believe that the Turkish government showed benign concern for its Armenian citizens. It is difficult to match this with what Talaat told Morgenthau. As a monumental act of cynicism, Talaat in learning that Armenians had done business

with the New York Life Insurance Company and with Equitable Life in New York asked Morgenthau the following:

> 'I wish,' Talaat now said, 'that you would get the American life insurance companies to send us a complete list of their Armenian policy holders. They are practically all dead now and have left no heirs to collect the money. It of course all escheats to the State. The Government is the beneficiary now. Will you do so?'[12]

Outraged, Morgenthau, of course, refused.

The contemporary apologists for the Young Turk government are faced with a credibility gap in their denial of responsibility for the genocide. For example, in a speech delivered by Hasan Fehmi Bey in the secret session of the first parliament of the young Turkish Republic on October 17, 1920, he said the following:

> You know that the problem of [Armenian] deportations threw the world in an uproar and all of us were labeled murderers. We knew before this was done that world opinion would not be favorable and this would bring loathing and hatred upon us. Why have we resigned ourselves to being called murderers? Those are things that have only happened in order to secure something that is more holy and valuable than our own lives—the future of the fatherland.[13]

What Hasan Fehmi Bey was saying, in effect, is that the modern Turkish republic was born from the genocide of its Armenian population. In other words, genocide became acceptable state policy as it served the government's purposes and ends. Part of the ongoing tragedy is that Armenians have had to prove to the world that they were Abel, the murdered brother, and they still do to this day.

These examples of genocide denial before the weight of historical evidence to the contrary remind us once again that what is remembered of the genocide depends on how it is

remembered, and this in turn is dependent to a large degree on the textual or verbal form of remembering. Historical knowledge, therefore, rests on the way we understand it. A study of survivor memoirs is a way of seeing how this knowledge has been understood and (re)constructed in such narratives. History can be constructed through discourse, but as the above has indicated, it can also be deconstructed—unwritten.

I begin this study with a brief look at the genocide in order to provide a context for the analysis of the memoirs and photographs that follow. I will then focus in chapter two on the world described in the memoirs, the survivors' responses to the genocide and their responses to their survival. Each survivor has a different story to tell, and even though the memoirs share many similarities in that catastrophe demands uniformity, what is important is the way each survivor understood his or her experience and related it. The memoir, thus, particularizes and individualizes each survivor and permits a re-entry into history and the world and creates the possibility for individual redemption. Following this, in chapter three, I analyze photographs taken at the time of the genocide as well as those of the survivors taken after, which are found in their memoirs. Finally, I conclude by offering a context for understanding these texts and photographs of the genocide.