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WOUNDS OF HISTORY: MEMOIR REFLECTIONS ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN ITALY

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This paper delves into the memoirs of Armenian Genocide survivors in Italy, examining how, despite the immense emotional toll, these individuals eventually found the strength to document their suffering. It explores the ways in which they navigated the silence surrounding their trauma, ultimately putting pen to paper to share the horrors they witnessed. These memoirs serve as crucial testimonies, offering the world invaluable insights into the atrocities of the genocide and ensuring that these stories, once buried in silence, are preserved for future generations. The paper also considers the cultural and psychological barriers that survivors faced, as well as the profound importance of memory in shaping historical understanding.

The idea of this article was born in me in connection with the 90th anniversary of the novel *The Forty Days of Mount Musa* by Franz Werfel, a great supporter of humanity and peace and an unwavering critic and rejecter of genocidal acts because the lessons conveyed to us by the survivors' memoirs are instructive and deserve attention.

Keywords: *the Armenian Genocide; Genocide survivors, Genocide memoir; Trauma and literature, Italian literature, reflections on identity, international awareness.*

Introduction

The representation of the Armenian Genocide in Italian literature encompasses a range of works that explore, reflect upon, and bear witness to the tragic events of 1915, when the Ottoman Empire carried out systematic massacres and deportations of the Armenian people. The Armenian survivors have approached the subject from various perspectives—cultural, political, and personal—often using the memoir genre to depict the horrors of the genocide and its long-lasting impact on the Armenian community and humanity at large. Moreover, the theme of the Armenian Genocide in Italian literature often intersects with broader reflections on identity, displacement, and trauma.

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In addition to the overwhelming emotional burden, survivors of the Armenian Genocide faced numerous practical challenges in recounting their experiences. A significant obstacle was the language barrier: many of these survivors had little or no familiarity with the Italian language or script, that made it difficult for them to communicate their traumatic past either in writing or in conversation. Even when they turned to their native Armenian, they found it challenging to fully articulate the depths of their suffering. As Altounian (2013) pointed out, the Armenian language had been severed from its original cultural and social context following the genocide, rendering it less meaningful or relevant to those who survived. For many, Armenian, fragmented and distorted by the weight of the unspoken trauma, had become a “delirious language”. The survivors felt as though the language itself had lost its power to convey the magnitude of the horrors they had endured. It was no longer capable of accurately capturing the atrocities, compounding their sense of isolation and disconnection from their past. This linguistic dislocation delayed the documentation of their stories for decades. Many survivors were well into their sixties, seventies, or even eighties by the time they finally wrote their memoirs. Often, they chose to write in Italian instead of Armenian, a reflection of the complex relationship they had developed with their native language after the genocide. Their narratives, shaped by the passage of time and the struggle to overcome linguistic and emotional barriers, reveal the profound weight of their trauma. The long delay in their testimony also underscores the arduous journey these survivors had to undertake before they could give voice to their memories. Their memoirs, written later in life, thus record historical events and testify to the enduring impact of trauma and the difficulty of finding a voice after years of silence. By engaging with this historical event, the survivors contribute to a global conversation about genocide, collective memory, and the responsibilities of future generations in confronting injustice.

In many diasporic Armenian communities, stories of the Armenian Genocide surfaced long after the traumatic events though there were notable exceptions where survivors testified shortly after the atrocities, such as the *The Blue Book* by James Bryce and Arnold Toynbee (1916). As Alan Whitehorn notes (2015, p.92), “*The Blue Book* remains, a century later, one of the primary evidentiary collections on the Armenian Genocide”, serving as a powerful counter to genocide denial.

In addition to formal documents and official reports, the personal experiences of Armenian Genocide survivors were often preserved through more intimate and informal means, such as letters and notes. Many of these were collected by humanitarian organizations that played a crucial role in reuniting scattered families and providing aid to survivors (Tōnapetian, 1922). These personal writings, often filled with pleas for information about missing relatives or descriptions of their suffering, offer a deeply human perspective on the tragedy, providing insight into the emotional and psychological toll the genocide took on individuals and communities.

Visual documentation was equally significant in capturing the horrors of the genocide. Western missionaries and aid workers, who witnessed the atrocities

firsthand, took numerous photographs, many of which became important pieces of evidence. The photographs of German medic Armin Theophil Wegner stand out as particularly vital. His images of Armenian refugees, deportations, and mass graves form a key visual archive that vividly illustrates the scale and brutality of the genocide (Balakian, 2003, pp. 258–259; AA.VV. 1996; Guaita, 2005). These images played an essential role in countering denial and giving future generations visual proof of the events, ensuring that the genocide was not forgotten.

Moreover, diplomatic reports also contributed to the historical record. U.S. Ambassador Henry Morgenthau's dispatches to Washington in 1915 and later publications, such as his memoir *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (1918), offered a detailed and authoritative account of the systematic extermination of Armenians by the Ottoman government. Morgenthau's reports further bolstered the evidence of genocide and helped to raise international awareness.

These varied forms of documentation – personal letters, photographs, and diplomatic reports – created a comprehensive and multi-layered historical record of the Armenian Genocide. They not only recorded the factual events but also provided a window into the emotional and human dimension of the tragedy, making it impossible to dismiss or deny the genocide's reality. These sources became essential tools for historians, advocates, and survivors in the ongoing effort to remember and seek justice for the victims.

However, while external observers could document these events, survivors often faced overwhelming psychological blocks that prevented them from recounting their experiences. Many endured immense trauma that rendered them unable to speak at length or in detail about their memories. Silence became a coping mechanism for many survivors, a way of shielding their children – who were seen as symbols of survival – from the horrors of their past. This protective silence, however, created a longing among the second generation to rediscover their roots and understand their family history. As Rubina Perroomian (2012, p. 7) has argued, psychological barriers were a primary reason why the first generation of Armenian Genocide survivors left behind relatively little in the way of a written literary legacy. Costan Zarian (1981, p. 20) a genocide survivor and writer, expressed the overwhelming sense of loss, writing, "Our loss is so enormous that it is impossible to write about it. We all have this great desire to forget. "The enormity of the tragedy, the burden of remembrance, and the emotional toll often left survivors unable to recount their experiences without reliving the trauma".

This silence was reflected in my own family's history. My great-grandparents, Mkrtych Atashian and Karmilè Paronikian, were survivors from Van. They never spoke of their survival or the massacres. When asked about their past, they would simply respond, "We left Van a year before those events". My great-grandfather would occasionally mention, "We buried a pot of gold under the pear tree. If you go there, you can take it". This cryptic remark was the closest they ever came to discussing their past. The relatives, too, refrained from probing further, not wanting to cause additional

trauma, especially during the Soviet regime when speaking about anything like that was fraught with fear (Haroutyunian, 2015a, pp.17-18).

It wasn't until the 1970s that scholars began to shift their focus from strictly historical documents and statistics to personal narratives, oral histories, and literary responses to the Genocide. Before that, academic efforts were largely concentrated on proving the factuality of the Genocide in the face of denial. Scholars like Richard Hovannisian and Verjine Svazlian played pioneering roles in preserving the testimonies of survivors through large-scale oral history projects. Hovannisian's efforts (1986, 1992, 1999) culminated in the digitization of 800 interviews in 2005, while Svazlian (2000, 2011), an ethnographer, spent over half a century recording testimonies and songs from Genocide survivors, safeguarding these memories from being lost to history.

Other figures, such as filmmaker Michael Hagopian and the Zoryan Institute, also contributed significantly to this work, collecting hundreds of survivor interviews and creating archives that would ensure future generations could bear witness to the Genocide through firsthand accounts. These initiatives were critical, as they began at a time when only a handful of survivors remained. Without these efforts, many of these stories would have vanished.

The next person was Rubina Perroomian (2003, 2008, 2012, 2015) who gave birth to the Armenian Genocide literary scholarship from the 1990s. With the publication of several books, she furnished a database of relevant literary responses and analyses of a number of texts.

Over recent years, my research has focused on the literary representation of trauma, particularly the Armenian Genocide. My experience translating Antonia Arslan's genocide narratives, such as *Skylark Farm*, and teaching a course at California State University on the Armenian Genocide in literature led me to develop the theory of "layered translation". According to this theory, the literary representation of trauma is not an immediate reaction to the event itself but a multi-layered process. The first layer involves the survivor's internal translation of the event into memory, followed by the expression of that memory through oral history, and ultimately its transformation into memoir or fiction. (Haroutyunian, 2015b, pp. 43-58))

This paper examines the memoirs of Armenian Genocide survivors who took refuge in Italy, focusing on how they navigated the immense emotional toll to give expression to the horrors they witnessed. By analyzing their published testimonies and oral histories, I intend to shed light on the process by which these survivors moved from silence to storytelling, and how their accounts have contributed to our broader understanding of the Genocide.

Armenian Genocide memoirs

A small number of Armenian Genocide survivors made their way to Italy shortly after enduring the horrific events of 1915. However, despite having escaped the immediate

physical dangers, they remained silent about their trauma for many years. This silence wasn't only due to the emotional and psychological weight of their experiences but also because they needed time to process and make sense of what had happened. The trauma they carried was profound, so overwhelming that it was often described as a "non-event" – an unspeakable tragedy that defied ordinary comprehension or expression. To share such an experience, they needed the distance that time could provide, a temporal gap that allowed them to face and articulate the horror they had lived through.

Raffaele Gianighian (1992), who was just nine years old during the Armenian Genocide, was forced to leave his home and endured four years of constant fear and loss. Over time, he saw his relatives perish one by one, and his sense of identity slowly eroded. He survived under the name "Abdullah" and underwent circumcision, but even this did not protect him from the brutality of his Kurdish companions. It was only through a series of difficult and fortunate events that he was able to escape to Italy, eventually settling in Cortina d'Ampezzo.

In his memoir, Raffaele recounts a pilgrimage he made at the age of 71 to his birthplace, Kisak, in the Khodorchur district of Erzerum province. His memory of the area was still vivid and precise, yet all signs of the Armenians who once lived there had been wiped away. The house he grew up in was gone, his neighbors' homes lay in ruins, and only three columns from his father's forge remained standing. Even the cemetery had been destroyed and turned into a field. As Raffaele describes it, it was as if an earthquake had wiped out every trace of the Armenian presence. Years later, Raffaele's son, Vartan, retraced his father's journey to Kisak and updated his memoir with additional commentary. Vartan's annotations provided a broader perspective, reflecting on the last century of Armenian and Turkish history, exploring the roles of both victims and perpetrators (Gianighian, 2014).

A close examination of these memoirs shows that the survivors, representing the first generation discussed here, faced an internal battle. They had to decide whether to retreat into their memories or try to forget them in order to move forward with their lives (Fossion et al., 2003, p. 521). Silence became the norm. The second generation, however, was somewhat left behind, with their primary focus being the challenges of learning the language and adapting to their new societies. For the first generation, the psychological barriers were too strong, making it difficult for them to open up about their trauma. As a result, they carried the weight of these experiences for many years and only began sharing their stories with their children and grandchildren much later. This is expressed by Coren Mirachian, a survivor born in 1904 in Ghemereg, in the introduction to his memoir *Da pastorello a medico*.

The first purpose of the book is to make my daughters and grandchildren aware of my past, so full of tormented events with struggles and sacrifices of all kinds, so that they learn to overcome the inevitable struggles of life; and to be useful to those

*discouraged, especially if young and somehow facing difficulties
[in order for them] to learn to overcome the adversities of life.
(Mirachian, 1986, p.7)*

In his book, Mirachian (1986) recounts the hardships of his childhood, living in servitude under various Turkish families and spending time in orphanages, where fear and hunger were his constant companions. After several relocations, he eventually arrived in Smyrna, where an Armenian family took him in as one of their own. However, his trauma was reignited when he lost this second set of adoptive parents during later massacres – people whose surname he would proudly bear for the rest of his life. He managed to escape by fleeing to Athens, then moved on to an orphanage in Corfu, before finally reaching Venice and enrolling at Moorat Raphael College.

In some cases, survivors never lived to see their memoirs published. This was the fate of Varvar Tachdjian and Manug Khanbeghian. Born in 1909 in Svas, Varvar Tachdjian in her mid-seventies began writing her memoirs in French and Armenian and continued until her death. Her writings were discovered in 1990, and it wasn't until 2003 that they were published in Italian by her daughter Alice. In the book *Pietre sul Cuore (Stones on the Heart)*, Alice blended her mother's memories with her own reflections, enhancing the narrative with excerpts from their personal correspondence and conversations.

Manug Khanbeghian's memoir, *La croce e la mezzaluna (The Cross and the Crescent)*, was published in Milan in 2001, nearly two decades after his death. Khanbeghian, an otolaryngologist and a key figure in the Armenian community of Milan, was born in Trabzon in 1895. He survived the Armenian Genocide because, in 1915, he was studying at the Armenian Moorat-Raphael College in Venice. On the advice of his elder brother, a Mekhitarist monk, he stayed in Venice and did not return home, thus avoiding the tragic events firsthand. However, he later learned that his two sisters, rather than be captured by the Young Turks, had chosen to jump to their deaths from the window of their home. (Khanbeghian, 2001, p. 2)

According to Manoukian, “the intricate narrative that Khanbeghian worked on in his later years reflects the painful process of confronting the horrors of memory, distanced from the place of the tragedy” (2014, p. 248). In his memoir, through characters shaped by his imagination, he recounts the destruction of a village and a family wiped out by the massacres of 1915. The book also tells the story of resilient women who, despite being stripped of everything, found a way to survive with dignity, preserving their traditions and culture even in the face of unimaginable hardship.

The following memoir is by Vasken Pambakian, published in 2010. Pambakian was only two years old when his hometown of Smyrna was engulfed in the devastation of the Great Fire, which obliterated the Greek and Armenian neighborhoods of the city. His book, *Viaggiando nei miei ricordi (Traveling Through My Memories)*, weaves together not only his recollections but also those of his elder brother Hrant and uncle Harutiun, focusing on the early years and the painstaking process of survival that

followed. Pambakian's father, a pharmacist, was killed by Turkish forces, leaving his mother to flee with three young children to a refugee camp on the outskirts of Athens. Pambakian's memories begin in these impoverished slums, where his family spent two decades before eventually making the long journey to Italy. As Manoukian (2014, p. 251) observes, these harsh conditions shaped both the individual and collective resilience of the small refugee community, which managed to not only survive but also establish the basic structures necessary for educating their children and creating a semblance of community life:

It is here that in extreme narrowness of space and means the individual and collective prerogatives of initiative and will to resist can be outlined. These two elements will allow the small community of refugees not only to survive but to equip themselves with the basic facilities for the education of children and the formation of an essential community life. (Manoukian, 2014, p. 251)

In many memoirs of Armenian Genocide survivors, the focus is typically on childhood experiences, but the recollections of Father Cirillo Giovanni Zohrabian (Hovhannes Zohrabian Guregh) are from the perspective of an adult. A Capuchin friar, Father Cirillo published his two-volume memoir in 1965, detailing his missionary life in Anatolia (Zohrabian, 1965). Born in 1881 in Erzerum, he remained in Anatolia until 1923, when a court in Trabzon sentenced him to death by hanging. He was taken under armed guard to a prison in Constantinople, where he endured the horrific torture of the Turkish *palahán*: 60 strokes of the cane on the soles of his feet, repeated five times. Although his death sentence was eventually commuted to exile, Father Cirillo's harrowing experience marked a turning point.

After his exile, Father Cirillo first relocated to Greece in 1923, where he served as the chaplain for Armenians in Corfu and later as a spiritual leader for the entire Armenian population in Greece. In 1938, he was appointed Patriarchal Vicar in Upper Gezira, Syria, by Patriarch Agagianian. During his tenure (1938–1953), he was dedicated to the clergy, established schools, supported the education of young Armenians, and carried out daily charitable work. Even in his late years, after being called to Rome at nearly 80 years old, Father Cirillo continued to serve the Church through special missions and visits to Armenian communities across Europe and Latin America. He passed away in 1972 and was buried in the Capuchin Church in Palermo. Following his death, the process for his beatification was initiated in 1983 by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints.

Father Cirillo's memoir, first written in French in 1924 and later expanded, was never intended for publication at the time due to his desire to avoid provoking the Turkish government, which had ordered the extermination of Christian populations and

might have retaliated against Catholic missionaries in Anatolia. Despite this, his memoir provides a powerful testimony of survival and resilience.

In addition to these writings, other voices of Armenian Genocide survivors have been preserved in various publications. One notable collection is the volume *Hushèr* (“memory” in Armenian), which was published in 2001 by editors Arslan and Pisanello. This book contains a compilation of testimonies from survivors who had settled in Italy, as well as the memories of their children, who inherited and preserved the painful legacies of their parents. *Hushèr* serves as a tribute to the memories of a past that cannot and will not be erased or denied.

One noteworthy example of survivor testimony is the diary of Isabella Kuyumgian Sirinian (Arslan & Pisanello, 2001, pp. 31-57), a member of a wealthy family with aristocratic roots. In her recollections, life before the events of 1915 is depicted as rich and full, filled with comfort and security. However, this sense of stability is shattered after August 1915, when death, deportation to Syria, and the complete loss of their possessions marked a radical transformation in their lives. Despite the overwhelming tragedy, Isabella and her family held on to hope as they made their way from Damascus to Constantinople, seeking to rebuild their lives. Unfortunately, upon their arrival, all their aspirations for a fresh start dissipated.

Isabella eventually married, but her joy was short-lived, as she soon found herself widowed and tasked with raising her young son, Dicran. In 1943, a new chapter began when her relatives living in Milan, offered to take in Dicran so he could pursue a university education. This pivotal moment would establish Dicran as a key figure in the Italian-Armenian diaspora, embodying the resilience and perseverance of his family.

In addition to Isabella's poignant story, the collection *Hushèr* features the testimonies of other survivors, including Mekhitarist Father Ignatios Adamian, Anahit Besdikian, Garnik Nalbandian, Hripsime Condakgian, Ovsanna Keuleyan, and Hrant Pambakian. Many of these individuals were young children at the time of the Genocide, grappling with incomprehensible events that unfolded around them. Despite their youth, their accounts reveal extraordinary courage and a deep appreciation for life. A particularly striking element of their narratives is their ability to differentiate between the malicious intent of political leaders and the kindness of ordinary people. Many survivors acknowledge that without the brave actions of these everyday heroes, their survival would not have been possible, which allowed them to maintain their faith in humanity and in life itself.

These memoirs of survival serve as an invaluable resource not only for academic research but also for authors crafting fictional narratives about the Armenian Genocide. One such example is the work of Italian-Armenian novelist Antonia Arslan, whose novel *La Masseria delle Allodole* (*Skylark Farm*) has gained significant recognition (Arslan, 2004). With 36 editions published in Italy and over 600,000 copies sold, it has introduced a large Italian audience, many of whom were previously unaware of the Armenian Genocide, to this harrowing chapter of history. The book's influence extends beyond Italy, having been translated into more than fifteen languages (Arslan, 2007,

2012). This widespread dissemination has helped raise global awareness of the Genocide and has contributed to its “afterlife” – a term used by Walter Benjamin (1923, 2000) to describe how history continues to resonate – while also paving the way for cinematic adaptations that bring the story to an even broader audience.

Concluding remarks

In conclusion, the testimonies of Armenian genocide survivors, as illustrated by the diaries and memoirs of individuals like Isabella Kuyumgian Sirinian and others, provide profound insights into the resilience of the human spirit amidst unimaginable suffering. These narratives not only document the historical reality of the Genocide but also reflect the complex emotional landscapes navigated by survivors as they sought to rebuild their lives and preserve their cultural heritage.

The shared experiences of the survivors highlight the duality of loss and hope. While they faced overwhelming challenges, their courage and determination to survive resonate through generations. Their stories, whether of personal tragedy or acts of kindness from ordinary people, challenge us to recognize the humanity in all individuals, even in the darkest of times.

Furthermore, the contributions of these memoirs extend beyond historical documentation; they serve as vital resources for researchers and writers, inspiring new generations to engage with the legacy of the Armenian Genocide. Novels like Antonia Arslan’s *La Masseria delle Allodole (Skylark Farm)* not only raise awareness but also ensure that the narratives of the past continue to inform contemporary discourse, fostering empathy and understanding across cultures.

As we reflect on these narratives, it is imperative to honor the memory of those who suffered and to actively confront the lessons of history. The resilience of the survivors reminds us of the enduring strength of the human spirit and the importance of bearing witness to stories that might otherwise be forgotten. In doing so, we contribute to the ongoing struggle for recognition, justice, and healing for those affected by the Genocide, ensuring that the past is never erased, but instead serves as a foundation for a more compassionate and informed future.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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**ՊԱՏՄՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՎԵՐՔԵՐ. ՀԱՅՈՑ ՑԵՂԱՍՊԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ
ԱՆԴՐԱԴԱՐՁՆԵՐԸ ԻՏԱԼԻԱՅՈՒՄ**

Մոնա Հարությունյան

Հոդվածն անդրադառնում է Բուալիայում հրատարակված Հայոց ցեղասպանության վերապրյալների հուշերին, դիտարկելով մշակութային և հոգեբանական խոչընդոտները: Աշխարհի չորս ծագերը սփռված, Մեծ Եղեռնի բովով անցած, թուրքի յաթաղանից մազապուրծ հայերի գոյատևման ռազմավարություններից մեկը եղավ թղթին հանձնել այն, ինչին նրանք ականատես էին եղել: Սփյուռքի շատ համայնքներում Հայոց Ցեղասպանության հուշագրություններն ի հայտ եկան 1915 թ. ողբերգությունից բավականին ուշ, երբ վերապրյալներից շատերը որոշեցին հաղթահարել հոգեբանական ճնշվածությունը և թղթին հանձնել այն, ինչի մասին պետք է աշխարհն իմանար: Վերապրածների հուշերն ի հայտ եկան մեծ դժվարությամբ, հաճախ մեկուսացման մեջ, փոքր տպաքանակով: Դրանք աշխարհ եկան տարբեր պայմաններում և վայրերում, որոնք այսօր բնութագրում են համայն Սփյուռքը: Սփյուռքի այս բեկորները հայկական մշակույթը տարածեցին ամենատարբեր վայրերում՝ դրանով իսկ զարգացնելով հայկական ինքնությունը, որը դարձավ է՛լ ավելի տարաբնույթ ու բարդ՝ իր հերթին նպաստելով 20-21-րդ դարերում սկզբնավորվող բազմամշակութայնությանը:

Այս հոդվածի գաղափարն իմ մեջ ծնվեց մարդասիրության և խաղաղության մեծ ջատագով և ցեղասպանական գործողությունների անվարան քննադատ ու մերժող Ֆրանց Վերֆելի «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» վեպի 90-ամյակի հետ կապված, քանզի վերապրյալների հուշերով մեզ փոխանցվող դասերը ուսանելի են և ուշադրության արժանի:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Հայոց ցեղասպանություն, Ցեղասպանությունը վերապրածներ, Ցեղասպանության հուշագրություն, ողբերգություն և գրականություն, իտալական գրականություն, ինքնության մասին մտորումներ, միջազգային իրազեկում: