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Suren M. Vetsigian's Lost Armenian Homeland and the Quest for new Spaces of Belonging in his *Autobiography. His Guiding Hand to Serve my People*

1. *Introduction. The Burden of the Genocide for Armenian Writers*

In this paper, I present the autobiography of Suren Mkhitar Vetsigian¹ (1905, Shabin Karahisar²-1961, Plovdiv), exploring its connections to questions of forced migration and traumatic memory in the Armenian diasporic context.

Vetsigian was born in a town in the current Turkish Giresun province, not far from the Black Sea coast, in the inland territory viewed by Armenians as 'Historic Armenia' (Karanian 2015; Ferrari 2016a) which came to embody for many a "lost homeland" (Payaslian 2010: 128) after the Genocide. Handwritten in English in 1947-1948 (Vetsigian 2014: 135)³, *Autobiography. His Guiding Hand to Serve My People* was translated into Bulgarian⁴ by his son Horen in the late 1990s and issued in Plovdiv in 2001 with limited circulation. The English edition, made available online in 2015 by the Armenian General Benevolent Union⁵, is dedicated to the 110th anniversary of Vetsigian's birth and to the first century since the beginning of the Armenian Genocide.

Written when the extent of the Holocaust against Jews was still largely unknown, Vetsigian's narrative has as its focal point "the greatest crime in history, the mass murder of a million and a half unarmed Armenian people" (Vetsigian 2014: 75), reconstructed from the perspective of the common Armenian destiny and history and from his personal life. It describes life in the town of Shabin Karahisar before the First World War, the vicissitudes faced by the author as a displaced and orphaned child, and the migratory experiences as a young man moving to Greece, Bulgaria, United States and then permanently to the city of Plovdiv, to fulfill his vocation of serving his people, that is the local Armenian community. The book, which contains analyses and comments on the events, often based on written

¹ I here use the English version of his name and surname, that would appear as *Suren Mxit'ar Vecigjan* in Armenian transliteration.

² I here use the English version of the name of the town, which in Armenian corresponds to Շապիհն Գարահիսար and in Turkish to Şebinkarahisar. Sometimes Vetsigian refers to it as Shabin Karahissar.

³ In 1948-1949, according to the edition's editor, Vetsigian's son Horen (Vetsigian 2014: 3).

⁴ With the title *Voden ot Boga v služba na naroda si*, lit. 'Led by God in service of my people'.

⁵ For more on this organization see Selvelli 2018 and 2019.

sources⁶, arrives to the year 1948, when the author is undergoing a difficult time because of his position as Armenian school director during the first year of overt communist rule, a condition that most likely availed him with time for introspection.

Vetsigian admits that for years he hesitated to write any autobiographical text, in the fear of contributing to foment the hatred between Armenians and Turks. However, the sense of responsibility he felt towards both his nation and truth itself, supported by his rejection of any war, prompted him to overcome such worries, “having the humble hope” to be able to “shed some new light on the recent history of the Near East” (Vetsigian 2014: 4) and to counteract the books written by the Turks on the subject.

Recurrent massacres, persecutions and displacement in Armenian history nurtured the need among survivors and their descendants to give meaning to the tragedy that destroyed their homeland and marked their lives indelibly. Therefore, unsurprisingly, “Armenian literature is a repository of echoes of these responses to catastrophe” (Peroomian 2003: 157).

Genocide is a specific *topos* within Armenian diaspora literature; no other event in Armenian history is comparable to the ‘Mec Ełern’⁷ (Kevorkian 2011, Akçam 2018) and has given rise to such a proliferation of texts: autobiographies, fictions, essays, unpublished memoirs (Lessersohn 2019: 566). Underneath the motivations to write about the wounds of the Genocide, we often find a desire to affirm and reinforce a sense of community, and to contribute to the cause of keeping historical memory alive (Holslag 2018: 35). An important exemption is the case of Soviet Armenia: there was a weaker need to reinforce a sense of community, and limited freedom to write about this topic, although there were still some significant examples, such as the work of Verjiné K. Svazlian (see Peroomian 2015: 234). From the distance of the diasporic condition, a “re-evaluation of self” (Grace 2007: 9) appears as a way to reconcile personal trauma and the quest for an externalized visibility of the Armenian suffering. The challenge seems achievable, since “eyewitness accounts of decisive events may be as valuable as official dispatches and reports. It is in such version especially that the human element becomes manifest, affording insights not to be found in documents” (Richard Hovannisian, cited in Totten and Parsons 2013: 6).

The Genocide is a symbol through which Armenians reach consciousness of themselves and feel the specific mission of convincing others of their existence as a nation: the literature of the diaspora is an expression of this need (Lorne Shirinian, cited in Peroomian 2003: 158) and, at the same time, an autotherapeutic means (Peroomian 2003: 160; cfr. Grace 2007: 62).

⁶ Among the quoted ones, we find: Johannes Lepsius, *Der Todesgang des armenischen Volkes: Bericht über das Schicksal des armenischen Volkes in der Türkei während des Weltkrieges* [The destiny of the Armenian Nation in Turkey during the World War], Potsdam 1919; Grigoris Palak‘yan, *Hay Golgot‘an* [Armenian Golgotha], Wien 1922; Henry Barby, *Au Pays de l’Épouvante, l’Arménie Martyre* [Country of Terror. Martyred Armenia], Paris 1917; Mustafa Nedim, *Hay ełernə ev im ukayowt‘youwnerə* [The Armenian Genocide. My Testimony], Sofija 1936.

⁷ ‘Big Catastrophe’ in Armenian.

With respect to memory studies, French historian Pierre Nora's master work *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Nora 1984) defined the most consequential conceptualization of different types of "memory sites", corresponding to places where the tragedy of the past is remembered and expressed with a social perspective of sharedness. Among these, we observe so-called "functional places", consisting, among others, of testimonies, manuals, autobiographies (Linke 2005: 182).

In relation to this last category, Suren Vetsigian's memoir can be inscribed in the type of survivors' direct testimony that remained unpublished for a long time, comparable to Hagop S. Der-Garabedian's *Jail to jail: Autobiography of a Survivor of the 1915 Armenian Genocide* and Vahan Hamamdjian's *Vahan's Triumph: Autobiography of an Adolescent Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (both posthumously published in 2004)⁸ as well as John Minassian's *Surviving the Forgotten Genocide: An Armenian Memoir*, appeared in Spring 2020.

In what follows, I trace the role of Vetsigian's hometown and the thematization of his mother tongue in the narration, exploring his memoir as a specimen of literary work that alternates between direct testimony and detached narrative, thus recomposing the divide between personal and collective remembrance. I approach the issue of forced migration and identity in relation to the construction of complex patterns of non-exclusive, trans-national belonging⁹ (Levitt, Glick Schiller 2004: 1011), affirming the role of exilic-migratory narratives in the creation of a meaningful imaginary on the lost "homeland" (see Laycock 2012: 105 and Safran 1991: 84). I then analyze the unusual trajectory of Vetsigian's life with respect to his decision to go back to a country of the 'Orient' although having prospects for a career in the US. Lastly, I discuss the author's civic engagement in the Bulgarian setting and interpret it as a form of 'inner migration' within emigration, in which his personal political views had unfavorable consequences on his life and career; I relate the issue to the wider topic of genocide survivors' responsibility towards questions of human rights and reconciliation.

2. *The Native Town in Anatolia as a Recurrent Object of Non-Idealizing Recollection*

The hometown of Shabin Karahisar plays a major role in satiating Vetsigian's need of 'counteracting' personal memory with a wider perspective. This is made possible through the composition of the book: it starts as an impersonal narrative, now and then switching between quasi-fictional and overtly documentary and, after some point, between impersonal and personal narration. Furthermore, through a multi-layered description of the meaning of this place, the author gives life to a symbol of resistance that seems to embody the core of his message on civic engagement, becoming a metaphor of his own experience: we can detect a sort of identification between the destiny of his town and his own.

⁸ Both works have been translated into English by Aghop H. Der-Karabetian.

⁹ Conceived as the feeling of being part different spaces through a specific "diasporic dimension" of identity, that was for Vetsigian a recurrent challenge in the different countries he lived in.

Before the genocide, three nations coexisted in Shabin Karahisar: Armenians, Greeks and Turks (Vetsigian 2014: 7). Pages on local Armenian history and spirituality (6-9) mention historical figures such as Mekhitar of Sivas (*Mxit'ar Sebastac'i*) and highlight the role of his native territory in giving to the wider Armenian cultural world contributions of paramount importance¹⁰.

The subsequent chapter (the last in part one, *Shabin Karahissar*) describes the revolutionary movements among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire starting from late 18th century. The town is presented as one of the most important revolutionary centers on Ottoman territory (see on this also Hovannisian 1992: 289), which produced the greatest Armenian military leader, General Andranik¹¹ (Vetsigian 2014: 14), a fact that Vetsigian seems to connect to a sort of agency present in the place.

A chapter answering the question *Why did the 1915 Massacres Take Place* (Vetsigian 2014: 20-28) and one about *The Heroic Defense of Shabin Karahissar* (pp. 28-33) follow¹².

It is in this last one that, within the reconstruction of historical facts, the author suddenly introduces (at page 29) the first person in the narration. He describes his own participation as a 10-year old child in the Armenian uprising in the fortress of the town, which became historically known, as it lasted for almost the entire month of June. A bit later in the narration, Vetsigian's writing becomes very emotional, and we discover the details of how he was separated from his mother¹³:

While we also were pushing through the gate, a gendarme pulled away my headdress and discovered that I am a boy. I was pulled away rudely, got a knock on my back with the handle of a gun and was pushed into the ranks of the boys. [...] When I turned to see my mother, she had already disappeared. The onrushing crowd had carried her along. (Vetsigian 2014: 34)

Vetsigian and his brother meet their mother again, but she has already taken poison and is about to die: a misinformed woman told her that the boys had been massacred (as many other children, with their mothers subsequently taking poison). Now the boys are definitely separated from the group of Armenian women. Vetsigian falls sick with fever, and the younger brother (only eight years old) is left to take care of him. The scenes describing his mother's

¹⁰ As mentioned, the content of Vetsigian's memoir is quite multifaceted. A whole section (Vetsigian 2014: 10-14) describes the rituals, folklore and traditions related to special events such as weddings, and on holidays such as New Year, Christmas, Carnival, Easter.

¹¹ Andranik Ozanian (commonly referred to as Andranik) was born in this town in 1865. Interestingly, he is considered a hero also by Bulgarians, as he led some Armenian volunteers in Bulgaria against Ottoman army during the First Balkan War.

¹² For more on this topic, see Payaslian 2004.

¹³ His father had already been separated from the rest of the family in that moment, and had most likely been killed as soon as the first massacres began in May, although Vetsigian provides little information about his destiny.

death are the most tragic in the book. Furthermore, this loss is contemporary to the loss of the hometown: the two events mark the beginning of a permanent exile and of identity search.

Vetsigian's hometown emerged for his later intellectual activity as a paradigm of civic resistance, which can be deduced from a subsequent mention of his greatest unpublished work, *History of Shabin Karahisar*¹⁴. He recognizes the heroic value of the town's recent history as the motive prompting him to reconstruct it¹⁵ (Vetsigian 2014: 120).

At some point, Vetsigian includes excerpts from his diaries and letters from and to his former colleagues and students. The narrative structure still has his home town as its focal point: in a diary passage from 22 April, 1944, when Vetsigian and his family have escaped from Plovdiv to the village of Kričim because of the risk of bombardments, nostalgic memories awake in him:

April 22, 1944. [...] after seeing the beautiful orchards of Kritchim, its river, I began to think of the prosperous villages of Shabin Karahisar – Azbuder, Purk, Tamzara and others. [...] It was sad to think of it (Vetsigian 2014: 117).

In the course of the book, Shabin Karahisar becomes therefore almost a specific character acting with a distinctive force. Nonetheless, it is never shaped as an idyllic *topos*, contrarily to what happened to many Armenian native towns, idealized as a kind of “lost paradise” (Ferrari 2019: 27-28) by writers of the diaspora. Neither the dimension of childhood is a space of the mind he wants to go back to, as it was permeated by the tragedy of family loss and forced displacement:

Most men idealize their childhood and would like to return to it. [...] There is no period in my life that I would like to relive again. The whole past is terrible to me, full of suffering [...] As the years pass, and also by writing more books, I gain more self reliance, I grow happier [...] (Vetsigian 2014: 121; diary entry from 1944).

Approaching the end of the second part of the book, *The Destruction of a Nation*, we encounter an additive section, *The Destiny we had Escaped*, containing a story he has heard from Nartos Ernegian, a refugee who ended up living in Plovdiv. The Armenian lady was part of a women's caravan that was exterminated; she managed to survive having lost consciousness and been covered by the corpses of the murdered women.

[...] Of course, what she recalls is only a small fraction of all that they have suffered, which in its totality no memory can contain and no pen can describe. Only God could measure the dept [sic] of these sufferings (Vetsigian 2014: 43).

¹⁴ In Armenian *Shabin Karahisari patmowt'youwnə* [The History of Şebinkarahisar] written in 1943 but unpublished: a 400-pages volume compiled from oral and scattered sources.

¹⁵ Along with it he also wrote a smaller book, *The Cause of the Armenian Tragedy*, and a historical play, both based on Shabin Karahisar events.

The author cites from the testimony (article) of another survivor, Shabin Karahisar-born Aram Haigaz, then a boy older than him, hence creating a kind of narrative polyphony. This feature shared with other works about similar experiences, such as Peter Balakian's *Black Dog of Fate*, 1997 (Peroomian 2003: 163¹⁶ and Kasbarian 2017: 10), could have been aimed at addressing the collective reality of trauma, with possible therapeutic implications. Vetsigian's memoir attempts intersubjectivity and even "objectivity" through a mixture of styles and the continuous, dynamic succession of personal narration, diary excerpts, historical facts, and others' personal stories, which seems to confirm that there is "no proper genre for giving an artistic expression to the genocide. The novel comes closest but that too does not suffice" (Peroomian 2003: 159)¹⁷.

3. *The Question of Language as an Idealized Space of Belonging: Building a Home Within One's Own Self*

Part three of the book, more an autobiographical narration, bears the name *Surviver* [sic]¹⁸. It is focused on the journey in which he didn't give up hope for a better life despite surveillance, hunger, loneliness, malaria and extreme poverty, and that let him develop a 'chameleonic' talent that would repeatedly save his life and motivate him in never stop learning (being it agricultural skills, crafts such as carpentry, reading and writing, English language, philosophy, etc).

One example is the painful renouncement of his Armenian identity in the late summer of 1915, after having been taken home as a servant by a Turkish man in the village of Ghayi. Being recognized as a Christian child, thus as a 'giaour', posed then a serious danger, and as an Armenian a double risk. Suren and his little brother Horen had thus to renounce their faith and have their names changed. Consequently, the Armenian language too became a taboo. Horen "was afraid to speak Armenian, which soon already by common consent, we dropped altogether" (Vetsigian 2014: 49), whence their relationship lost much of its original intimacy: "we were afraid to talk to each other, for we were accused [sic] of talking Armenian" (50). This form of enslavement was common among younger Armenian survivors: in that moment, girls and boys "would be converted to Islam and either Kurdified or Turkified in language and custom" (Adalian 2013: 127).

The relationship with his mother tongue will become the most important part of his path of 'salvation', both external and inner, and the crucial element upon which his later identity will be founded. After the definite separation from his brother, who was

¹⁶ As Peroomian (2003: 163) claims, quoting the author: it is a "polyphonic, multilayered memoir" in which "personal discovery and history merge".

¹⁷ Quoting Leonardo Alishan.

¹⁸ In this context, it is important to remind the fundamental oral history work *Survivors. An Oral History Of The Armenian Genocide*, by Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller.

given to another family, and whom he would never see again¹⁹, his odyssey takes him to the village of Geosman as a servant (working in the fields), then in Kaya Dibi, from which he escapes thanks to the encounter with a Greek refugee of his same age to the city of Sivas. Here, having no lodging and no food secured, he has to learn to survive on his own. Reflecting on the state of his mind as an orphaned and refugee child, the author concludes:

Poverty, sickness and even death are not so terrible in themselves, if we do not reflect on them. [...] Sufficient for me were the daily worries of finding something to eat. The future? Well, that simply did not bother me. (Vetsigian 2014: 66)

Vetsigian affirms that whilst inhabiting such anti-Eden condition of a nearly inhuman existence he was not yet acknowledging the presence of “an almighty Father”, although, from the perspective of the present in which he is writing the book, he could claim that God was already watching over him to give him better days. Such spiritual presence became manifest a bit later, through the sound of Armenian speech. After time spent in Sivas, Vetsigian is taken to the Surp (Saint) Nshan Monastery nearby, a famous site from the eleventh century, particularly significant for Armenians as it preserved a throne, crown and other precious items of the kings of the ancient Armenian Arcruni (Artsruni) dynasty. The author mentions the regret felt at that point in finding out that the treasures had been robbed by the governor of Sivas, the monastery plundered, and all valuable crosses, icons and rugs stolen. This was one of the countless examples of destruction of Armenian cultural heritage²⁰ that took place during the years of the Genocide (Ferrari 2016, 2016a and 2019: 20). To desolation, the author opposes the strength of Armenian language, which he discovers again while being hosted in that monastery. He hears some of the young nurses speaking it among themselves: “I would listen to their conversation in Armenian and understand all, but I did not reveal my nationality” (Vetsigian 2014: 67). Later, he sees an Armenian priest entering the orphanage and is extremely surprised by hearing him openly speak in his mother tongue. That moment is experienced by Vetsigian as a kind of a second coming to life:

During the First World War for four years I lived with the notion that there were no more Armenians in the world, that they are either killed, or Mohammedanized, that I have to resign to my lot as a Moslem peasant. God's grace showed his wonders. I fell among Armenians, received high education and attained some importance (Vetsigian 2014: 134).

¹⁹ As Vetsigian found out many years later from a cousin, his brother died shortly after, drowning while trying to cross a river.

²⁰ See more on such examples (which include churches and other buildings, family archives, *xac'k'ar*) in Adalian 2013: 133.

Subsequently, all Armenians are called to join the priest in a room, and the author is caught up in an inner struggle, afraid to reveal his real identity. But the choice is soon made:

Without saying anything or looking at anybody, I began to climb the stairs with trembling knees. I had hardly climbed a few steepes [sic], when I heard shouting in amazement: “Where are you going, Husein, are you also a giaour?” (Vetsigian 2014: 68).

All this happens in winter 1919, after the signing of the armistice: as Vetsigian would have soon found out, he was in an Armenian Near East Relief orphanage. This was one of the many institutions founded thanks to the donations collected in the United States to provide food and housing to the Armenian refugees in the Middle East²¹.

He learns to read and write in Armenian and soon becomes one of the best pupils, coming into contact with Armenian literature through the library’s books. Later, he starts studying English and reading in it. His competence in the native tongue soon becomes extremely high, and through love and devotion for it Vetsigian seems to be able to sublimate the loss of his family and hometown, finding an inner dimension of belonging.

The focus on and the spiritualization of the mother tongue is common among Armenians who have been separated from their native territories (Aghanian 2007: 172, Oshagan 1986: 224)²². Vetsigian’s praise of it is found already in the first chapter of the book; he describes the teachings held at the Armenian Church School in Shabin Karahisar and high levels of literacy reached by his community in the area, contrary to the one of the Turkish inhabitants (Vetsigian 2014: 7). In relation to this aspect, it is important to remark that the Armenian cultural environment is permeated with theological spirit (Zekiyan 2000: 199) and reverence for the written word. In the dominant rhetoric of Armenian diaspora institutions worldwide, the Armenian tongue, including its unique alphabet (see Selvelli 2015), has been and is still viewed one of the key pillars for the maintenance of a common affiliation and for the affirmation of a sense of continuity and cultural prestige.

According to Vetsigian, during the period 1908-1915, when the possibility arose, Armenians in his home territory experienced great cultural advancement, that led them to open cultural clubs and to publish a number of books. In the entire Ottoman Empire the number of students during the year 1915 is of 242 thousand, and the small Armenian population alone had 120 thousand.

Despite such advancements, restoring the bond with the native tongue remained an issue. The author repeatedly expresses regret towards his co-ethnics who do not know their

²¹ Hundreds of thousands received some sort of aid, be it food, clothing, shelter, employment, resettlement, or emigration to the United States and elsewhere, as it was the case for Vetsigian (see Adalian 2013: 133).

²² Cfr.: “Having served as the major instrument of national survival across the centuries, language has become the object of a cult, has been sanctified by the Church and has virtually symbolized the national identity” (Oshagan 1986: 224).

language at all, or not well enough, or refuse to use it. Moreover, he describes his lack of religiosity in the years of the orphanage as grounded in language-related causes:

Religion wasn't presented to us in a rational and aesthetic manner. The translation of the Bible in modern Armenian, done by missionaries, had been done badly. Its style has none of the beauty possessed by the ancient translation. [...] [Some of t]he speakers in church or chapel exercises [...] didn't know enough Armenian [...]. Even though a child, I was very critical toward all speakers. Especially mistakes of style or language used to annoy me (Vetsigian 2014: 74).

When in Greece²³ as a student of the Anatolia College, an American institution, he gains the respect of his Armenian teachers by virtue of his 'matchless' language. He had learned much of Armenian history and memorized long poems, which he would proudly declaim during public events. He would write "serious and nice compositions, which occasionally would call public praise". He also starts a movement among his circle of friends for using pure Armenian, "with no mixture of Turkish or English words" (*ibidem*: 91)²⁴.

Later, as a student at the School of Religion in Athens, he feels disappointment and anger after realizing that Armenian students speak mainly in Turkish, or prefer to concentrate only on English: "I subscribed to a[n Armenian] political magazine simply for the language" (*ibidem*: 95). His love towards the mother tongue gradually becomes a passion for writing, alongside reading, and the first newspaper published in the college is an Armenian one, handwritten, thanks to his initiative. His articles become very popular among Armenian students.

In the refugee camps he visits in Athens that hosted many Armenians who had escaped genocide (Hassiotis 2002: 100), all of them speak Turkish instead of their mother tongue, a fact he finds "repulsive":

How they did not have enough national pride or self-respect to discard the language of people, who had inflicted so much suffering on them? That was beyond my comprehension (Vetsigian 2014: 95).

When Vetsigian moved to the United States in order to pursue university studies at Yale, his biggest regret was always that of not encountering Armenians who speak Armenian. He had found a new homeland precisely in the language, and there where this was spoken, as witnessed by a fragment of his diary reported in the book to be from November 1931:

O, God, there isn't a single Armenian with whom I might exchange a few words in Armenian. [...] Sometimes I read my Gospels in the classic Armenian, but [...] I must talk with myself, no other way. Sometimes it seems to me, that I shall forget the language

²³ He arrived to Greece with a ship from Samsun, Turkey.

²⁴ Vetsigian adds at the same page: "This habit is so deeply set in me, that I have even had conflicts at home, with my wife and daughter".

before I leave this country. [...] There are nominally Armenians who either don't know Armenian, or don't want to use it. Only once I saw two young women talking Armenian. [...] If they were not young women, I would go to talk to them (Vetsigian 2014: 100).

What is perhaps most striking in the lingual situation of Vetsigian is that his memoir has originally not been written in Armenian. We can speculate that he chose English precisely in order to be able to reach a wider audience as many other authors did (see Haroutyunian 2015:43), and bearing in mind that important friends he had in the US, many of whom not Armenians, had encouraged him to write²⁵.

The creation of Armenian literary works in a foreign language was an issue among the diaspora writers and intellectuals, in particular for the survivors of the Genocide (Oshagan 1986: 225). Multilingualism is a reality for diaspora Armenians (*ibidem*); the languages Vetsigian mastered were Armenian, English, Turkish, Bulgarian and most likely some Greek²⁶.

Turkish always remained for him only an oral language, learnt while still in his hometown in the Ottoman Empire, and became most likely associated with painful memories and emotions; he never chose to write anything in it.

In the first 15 years of Bulgarian life, he published almost 200 articles, mainly in Armenian, on different (including educational, political, historical and religious) subjects. He also managed to write several books, some of which were published, others not: *History of the Armenian school of Plovdiv* and *History of Armenian literature*; textbooks for the Armenian school on Armenian literature, religion, Armenian history; an Armenian grammar; etc.

When diaspora is related to experience (direct or as “post-memory”, see Hirsch 2008) of genocide and exile, writers need to face some particular questions, such as traumatic memory, sense of guilt, presence of God. Furthermore, in diaspora and migrant writing,

access to deeper and more profound levels of consciousness – which in turn allow access to more refined levels of language – is necessary [...] to discover the nature of home in the only place possible – that is to say, within his-or her-self (Grace 2007: 13).

In the Armenian case, memory and language remain the sole means for this introspection: return to the sacred homeland, to realize a “symbolic journey to the source” (Grace 2007: 13)²⁷ is impossible, as ancient Armenia as it was is lost forever, deprived of its cultural landmarks and most of its inhabitants (see Ferrari 2019: 20 ff).

The veneration of Armenian language “can create all sorts of difficulties for poets and writers for whom linguistic freedom is paramount” (Oshagan 1986: 224), so that they of-

²⁵ “So I have kept Prof. Macintosh’s advice to write, although I have written mostly in Armenian” (Vetsigian 2014: 121).

²⁶ The text does not provide us with much information about Vetsigian’s knowledge of Greek.

²⁷ Here the author quotes Stuart Hall.

ten feel inadequate to use it for literary creations. In Vetsigian's case, this did not seem to be a problem.

Vetsigian's connection with the Armenian language since his parting from Anatolia²⁸ stands out as a reading key that allows us to interpret his personal story as a continuous search for a form of spirituality in the Armenian culture itself. Indeed, the survival of the nation and the preservation of its culture can be seen as both political and spiritual ideals for Armenian intellectuals in the diaspora (Peroomian 2003: 171).

In his case, this emotional perspective is aimed at serving a "higher mission". What is lost can partly be restored through literature, viewed as one of the main elements fostering mutual awareness and unification. Such process allows also for an externalization of individual memory, and for sharing it (Lessersohn 2019: 568).

4. *Thorn Between the Promises of the West and the Calling of the East*

The experience of being an Armenian in the United States occurred to be for the author an ambivalent one. On the one hand, he adapted quite well to the context without renouncing his Armenian identity, and actually reinforced his sense of "Armenianness"²⁹ (Aghanian 2007: 4) through the contact with yet another foreign context. On the other, he realized that this was not the case for other Armenians living in the country, as he witnessed a high pressure to assimilate³⁰. Such threat of assimilation was, according to his view, making any prospective of staying there vain for the mission of preserving Armenian identity among local diasporic communities³¹. This awareness led him to recognize that his place was closer to people he could help, in a socio-cultural environment that preserved some traits of his Anatolian home town in terms of "Oriental" (Vetsigian 2014: 104) coexistence of faiths, ethnicities and cultures.

Vetsigian arrived in Yale in the autumn of 1931 with a Nansen passport³² after almost a decade spent in Greece³³ and a year teaching at the Armenian College Melkonian in Sofia³⁴.

²⁸ Seen as an endangered element that becomes increasingly dispersed in the host countries.

²⁹ "*Haykakanowt 'yown*" in Armenian.

³⁰ He writes about this risk: "What a melting pot this country is! Whoever falls in it loses his identity within a short time" (Vetsigian 2014: 100). And then: "Armenians in the USA do not need me – already individual nations have no chance to perpetuate their existence there" (Vetsigian 2014: 129).

³¹ This appears to be in contrast to the cases of many Armenians who devoted themselves to cultural actions there (see Oshagan 1986: 225).

³² These passports, designed by the great explorer Nansen, were issued by states member of the League of Nations to Russian and Armenian refugees.

³³ Having first arrived in Aedipsos as a refugee during the exchange of population in 1922, he worked in Kavala and in the village of Chatalja (Choristi) as a carpenter; later he was enrolled at the Anatolian College in Salonica, and afterwards at the School of Religion in Athens.

³⁴ For the history of the Armenian Community in Bulgaria, see Miceva 2001, Miceva, Papazian 1998.

In the narration, we can detect a sort of “attachment” for an “Oriental” world he misses deeply, and a parallel disinterest for American culture, which, as noted (Oshagan 1986: 228), is typical of Armenian diaspora writers in that country.

Vetsigian writes about his initial experience in the US: “I had not formed yet friendships, and though I was a homeless refuge [sic], a man without a country, I felt homesick” (Vetsigian 2014: 99). The place of belonging he missed was the contact with fellow Armenians who had become for him a “new family” in all the phases of the journey since his arrival at the orphanage in 1919.

Homesickness makes Vetsigian more critical of his new host country, the United States, and its urban centers. Criticism is directed at Jazz music, the movies, the low level of education in general etc. (191). What stroke him the most was the absence of community sense, the slums, the homeless people sleeping on benches, and the racism he directly observed towards people with darker skin, as was the case with one of his friends from Sri Lanka who was refused to have his hair cut at a barber’s. Vetsigian opposes to the lack of solidarity for the poor in American society the positive example coming from the East:

In the orient if someone loses his job, there are many other possibilities for earning a living. He can sell lemonade or pumpkin seeds in the streets [...]. In America, when one falls, he falls indeed. Real prosperity and real poverty exist side by side. Woe to him who falls (Vetsigian 2014: 104).

The misery in an American slum area is unique and terrible. Nothing like it can be seen in the Near East. I was terrified (*ibidem*).

In this context of loose social bonds, feeling a mission towards the poorer strata of society, Vetsigian, who has become a fervent Christian, paradoxically, starts to cultivate sympathies for Communism, hoping somehow for its world victory (Vetsigian 2014: 102), and formulating a further idea: “if they were not to reject me in their boundaries because of my religious convictions, I would like to go and live in Soviet Armenia” (*ibidem*). In the course of the narration on his vicissitudes in Anatolia, he nearly praises the coexistence of ethnicities typical of those territories, as in reference to life at the orphanage in the Armenian monastery near Sivas: “the members of the gang, about eight in number, used to sleep in that one bed in excellent fellowship. Like brothers – Turks, Kurds, Greeks, and an Armenian” (Vetsigian 2014: 67).

What encourages Vetsigian to carry on during his university studies at Yale is the interest shown by professors towards the destiny of the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire and the support for the pursue of a Doctoral Degree in the country. Nevertheless, Vetsigian falls into a deep crisis, thorn between the perspective of a career in the West that would imply self-improvement and the spiritual mission of serving his people in the East.

O, God, what struggles in my soul! What a high opinion they have of my ability. Maybe I could really become a professor in some college. What awaits me in Bulgaria? Suffering. But how can I remain here and call myself a Christian? (Vetsigian 2014: 106).

Vetsigian soon comes to reaffirm what his mission is, which provides him a teleological sense of his existence and survival:

The chief reason for my return was that I could never forget the suffering of my people. I felt my duty to serve the remnants of my nation. Otherwise I couldn't explain why God should have saved my life (Vetsigian 2014: 106).

I live for my martyred nation, whose sufferings I have shared. After this I can say "I am the Armenian nation" (*ibidem*).

In addition to this, his fiancée, a Bulgarian woman, is waiting for him in Plovdiv, and he rejects the perspective of her coming to the States or going to a third country, as he does not want her to abandon her country (Vetsigian 2014: 109). After graduating from the Divinity School at Yale, the author thus neglects the opportunity of enrolling to a PhD Program and settles in Plovdiv. Vetsigian becomes a prominent member of the Armenian community, occupying the position of Armenian School director from 1933 to 1949, and being active in journalism (especially in the newspapers "Meghow", "Balkanyan Ma'mul" and "P'aros", issued until the mid-1940s) and writing. He uses his experience as a survivor and migrant by trying to foster the social cohesion of the local diaspora through educational and intellectual actions aimed at different ages, managing to overcome the sense of 'estrangement' he had been suffering from while in the US, despite starting from scratch:

I arrived in Plovdiv (Philippopolis) in July 1933. I had absolutely no friends or acquaintances, except my fiancée. Had I gone to a different country, I would again be without relatives, for I have only two cousins in the whole world. In Syria, Greece or Egypt, however, I might have found some of my friends. In Bulgaria I was alone, and I did not know one word of Bulgarian (Vetsigian 2014: 109).

The emotional and intellectual nourishment of the Genocide survivors in Plovdiv was for him a sort of religious calling. Armenians represented one of the oldest immigrant communities in Bulgaria (Selvelli 2015), since the Byzantine Emperor John I Tziskes (969-976), decided to deport them in great numbers in Philippopolis (Hamilton *et al.* 1998: 114) for military defense purposes, and above all with the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees in the city since the end of the 19th century due to Ottoman persecutions (Selvelli 2018).

This minority, on the one side already well integrated (Papazian-Tanielian 2016: 194) and on the other still attached to its specific cultural values, expressed the ability to combine resources from multiple (trans-national) positions, a concept defined by Zekyan (1997b and 2000: 141) in reference with the Armenian communities with the term of "polyvalent identity". Plovdiv was a truly multiethnic city (Wagenstein 2002) where Armenians could confront themselves not only with the Bulgarian majority but also with the Turkish, Greek, Roma, Jewish, Albanian, Pomak, Tatar minorities.

For what concerns its relevance for the Armenian diaspora, no city in the Balkans had a school equal to the Armenian School Tiutiundjian he was director of: all the other

schools put together had hardly as many Armenian children as it. The Armenian minority of the city was “a conglomeration of refugees from all parts of Turkey plus some natives” (p. 109)³⁵. Thus Vetsigian managed to find “his own diaspora”, among the many possible ones in the world, that is a definite sublimation of his lost motherland through a spiritual and emotional connection with a community of people, accepting what Robin Cohen defines as “an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (Cohen 2008: IX).

Even so, the dream of going back to the ancient homeland does not abandon him, as we read in an excerpt from his diary dating back to 1932:

Armenia now belongs to Turkey, with all the Armenians dead or scattered abroad. But God will do us justice. No nation will enjoy the spoils got in unjust way. [...] I hope, before I die, to see the day when the boundaries that divide the nations have disappeared, as it happened in Soviet Russia. That in the near future Armenians will be able to go back to their fatherland, I have no doubt about it (Vetsigian 2014: 102).

5. *His Civic Engagement and Pacifism Against any Form of Nationalism: ‘Inner Migrant’ Within the New Home*

The main role of memoirs and books written by Genocide survivors scattered all over the world is that of keeping alive the memory of the ‘ultimate injustice’ perpetrated against their people (see also Haroutyunian 2015: 44). An important battle is done through writing and civic engagement: that for truth and justice, carried out on many different levels of confrontation with history and reality. At a point in his narration, Vetsigian remembers something an American Professor at Yale told him, which proved to be so true. “I have been long among Armenians. Whether you become a pastor or remain a teacher, you will have to carry a heavy cross” (Vetsigian 2014: 98).

The experience of Genocide makes Vetsigian, similarly to other Armenian genocide and Holocaust survivors, particularly sensitive to any injustice and to the cause of the oppressed ones³⁶. Such utilization of memory represents what has been defined by Tzvetan Todorov (Nissim 1998: 14) as an “exemplary” one, as it allows us to look at the past with a gaze open on the present. In times of rise of nationalism and fascism in Europe, Vetsigian comes to wonder: “How can we condemn our own persecutors and justify the persecutors of other nations?” (Vetsigian 2014: 115). Thus Vetsigian’s morale prompts him to stand out against any form of chauvinism, militarism and fanaticism. Notwithstanding unfavorable

³⁵ Some of the “natives” were descendants of refugees from the “Hamidian massacres” of 1894-1896.

³⁶ For example, Edgar Hilsenrath, a Holocaust survivor, who wrote the novel *Märchen vom letzten Gedanken*, [History of the last thought in English], Berlin 2014, describing the Armenian Genocide.

conditions in Bulgaria after the 1934 coup, his aim is that of speaking out against totalitarian ideologies that threaten the fundamental rights of people:

Since we are a nation that has been wronged [...], for the peace of the soul of our millions of martyrs, [...] we are always with the wronged ones (Vetsigian 2014: 114).

Because of the very low salary he receives as Armenian School Director, Vetsigian and his family live in miserable conditions. He tries to make ends meet by giving private lessons of English, mainly to Jews, and the contact with members of this community most likely represent an important element of his life in years of increasing discrimination towards them in Europe. When Second World War breaks out, Vetsigian takes a definite stance against Hitler and Mussolini. As a member of The Fellowship of Reconciliation in the United States, an interfaith organization aimed at promoting ideals of justice and non-violence, he always advocated against the use of force, by defending values of brotherhood and peace.

Vetsigian's stance against any form of chauvinism (defined as "the Moloch that caused the destruction of more than half our nation", Vetsigian 2014: 113) causes him not little trouble even among the Armenians in Plovdiv. The Communists did not like him, because he was Christian³⁷. Wealthy people disliked him, as he would cooperate with the Communists to help Soviet Armenia. Nationalists (including Armenian priests) couldn't forgive him the fact that he did not "preach unlimited revenge against the 'Turks'" (Vetsigian 2014: 112). He thus became a kind of outsider, for no social-political-intellectual niche accommodated him.

In relation to his refusal to demonize the entire Turkish nation, he affirmed: "Every Armenian, who was saved from the massacres, owes his rescue to at least one Turk" (Vetsigian 2014: 21). Vetsigian employs sources coming from Dr. Lepsius (1919) to remind that in many places the Turkish population was not in favour of the the deportation and massacres: in Erzerum, Alashgerd and Van, influential Turks telegraphed to the central government to announce disapproval of the measures taken (Vetsigian 2014: 22). Other examples include towns and villages where the population tried to resist the order of deportation; and that of a town on the European mainland, where the Turkish population managed to save their Armenians, as it happened in Dersim where it was the Kurdish tribes who saved many families (*ibidem*). Vetsigian viewed such facts as a ground against any form of nationalist hatred directed towards the Turks conceived as a guilty whole.

During Second World War, Vetsigian comes very near to imprisonment for outspoken sympathies for the Communists and is taken twice into labor camps to build military highways. On 9 September 1944, he is among those who rejoice for the establishment of the Communists-controlled Fatherland Front government. However, soon after, restric-

³⁷ Although he expressed very clearly his sympathies towards Communism on different occasions.

tions are imposed on minorities, first of all through a law (in October 1946) by which all minority schools were to be nationalized:

The law provided that the director should be of the same nation, be a Bulgarian citizen and politically desirable. I could not fulfill the last two requirements (Vetsigian 2014: 127).

This is the beginning of Vetsigian's descending path towards humiliation and exclusion from any institutional role within the Armenian community of Plovdiv.

Due to both economic and 'idealist' reasons, many local Armenians start immigrating to Soviet Armenia, and the number of students enrolled in the school drops substantially: from 800 in the previous years to 400 in 1946-1947 (Vetsigian 2014: 130). Migration perspectives open up for Vetsigian too: on the one hand, the dream of moving to Soviet Armenia, on the other, the opportunity of going back to the United States thanks to a committee securing funds for him and his family. He makes again an 'in between' choice, convinced that his mission is that of staying where he is most needed, while following a spiritual and civic calling. He cannot break a crucial community bond he has been able to establish after so many years of displacement and exile. For better or for worse, Plovdiv has become his new home.

In January 1949, Vetsigian is dismissed from school (Vetsigian 2014: 134), and soon after all freedom to speak and write publicly is taken away from him (Vetsigian 2014: 128). For some time unemployed, he starts a new job as an ordinary construction worker, then for the rest of his life he is a store supervisor at a woodwork factory in Plovdiv (Vetsigian 2014: 2).

7. Conclusion

The core value of Vetsigian's autobiographical work lies in inciting the reader to reflect on issues of memory and responsibility. The book provides a series of insights which can be useful for anthropological investigation, and through which we can capture specific elements related to the traumatic experience not only of persecution (aimed at physical or psychological extermination) but also of migration, displacement and being a refugee. It transforms personal experiences into a multi-layered memoir filled with information on the socio-political context of the time before, during and after the genocide, which makes it valuable from the standpoint of historical analysis. Its writing style displays substantial variation from section to section and its hybrid genre combines personal narration and documentation³⁸. The feature is shared by other works of Armenian Genocide survivors (see Lessersohn 2019 and Kasbarian 2017: 11), a fact indicative not only of a common need of transmitting the experience of genocide intergenerationally (Kasbarian 2017: 4), but also of mediating between personal and collective memory.

³⁸ In the Bulgarian version of the book we also find relevant pictures, demographic data, and other information.

Vetsigian's intense existence seems to be characterized by a constant, deep journey through consciousness that moves from the imposed renouncement of his Armenian identity to the acquisition and maintenance of an inalienable sense of belonging through self-imposed sacrifices. As it has been noticed, the potential energy generated by the deep feelings, tensions and contradictions within the migratory condition are a "gift to a creative mind" (Grace 2007: 8). Undoubtedly, the challenge of exile proved extremely fruitful for Vetsigian as man and writer.

His condition as an exilant and as a genocide survivor made him develop a sense of responsibility not only towards the victims of his same nation but also towards all the oppressed ones in every context he found himself in. Similarly to the defense of his beloved home town of Shabin Karahisar, that was "the most desperate and therefore the most heroic" (Vetsigian 2014: 33), his struggle for truth and justice was borne by him bravely and proudly until the end, making him one of the most desperate and heroic among the survivors who became intellectuals.

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Abstract

Giustina Selvelli

Suren M. Vetsigian's Lost Armenian Homeland and the Quest for New Forms of Belonging in His Autobiography: His Guiding Hand to Serve my People

This paper analyses the Bulgarian-Armenian writer Suren Vetsigian's autobiographical writing, published posthumously in 2001. The story in the book reflects the author's memory of the Armenian genocide and his life in exile abroad in different countries. I shall argue that while on the one side Vetsigian's life choices are an emblematic example of the diasporic writers' commitment to their language and culture as a way to reaffirm national identity, on the other hand they typify an act of self-sacrifice: the author renounces career opportunities in a Western country to sacrifice himself to an inward vision and the work of a mission for his own people, which he intended to fulfil in Bulgaria, an Eastern country.

Keywords

Armenian Genocide; Genocide Memoirs; Armenian Literature; Historic Armenia; Suren Vetsigian; Armenian Diaspora; Plovdiv; Bulgaria.