ODYSSEY OF DEATH AND RESURRECTION

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Moris Farhi, Vice President of International PEN, November 2014

I am honoured to pen a few words to Agop J. Hacikyan's (co-auther Jean-Yves Soucy) unforgettable novel, ***A Summer Without Dawn***, now published, as a special edition, in commemoration of the Armenian genocide on its centenary anniversary.

As my original review, written some twelve years ago – and included below – states most affirmatively, ***A Summer Without Dawn***, is one of those rare books that will attain immortality and be considered by future generations as a witness of Biblical dimensions to the Armenian passion. It has already established itself as the best and most loved historical novel on the subject.

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There is also a very important reason for celebrating the publication of this special edition. We live in an era when man's inhumanity to man, despite the great advances in the sciences and the arts, not only maintains its rabid appeal, but has also reached such high levels that it has transmuted into an acceptable political practice by some autocratic states. Euphemistically called "ethic cleansing", it has also become common strategy for ultra-nationalists and religious fanatics. Indeed so daemonic are the promises that unleash persecution and extermination that the world's peoples – who, if left in peace, would demand nothing more than the humble pursuit of happiness – are either turned into lotus-eaters that see these atrocities as natural, or are brainwashed to participate personally in terror-fests.

Fortunately there are still voices in the wilderness. Most of them are in the ranks of the sciences and the arts. Agop Hacikyan is one of them. For those who choose to hear, the *cris de coeur* of these luminaries are heart-wrenching.

The question remains: can great discoveries, great books, great works of art change human nature? Can they bring the lotus-eaters out of their stupor and make them dethrone the false saviours, the phony prophets, the armoured people, the insatiable money-hunters and the kowtowing retinues that constitute their tails?

I don't know the answer. But my hopes rest with the Hacikyans in our midst. He continues to be

heard and will inspire the others.

Moris Farhi, MBE
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A Summer without Dawn by Agop J. Hacikyan & Jean-Yves Soucy, Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc., 2002, 540 pp., $29.95

Reviewed by Moris Farhi

Some historians tend to classify the Armenian passion of 1915-18 in Ottoman lands and the Holocaust visited upon, European Jews and Gypsies by Nazi Germany as an example of history repeating itself, as a desolation mimicking an earlier desolation. This is too simple an argument: at best a stale academic thesis; at worst, a rushed judgment reached with scant regard for the countless vagaries history throws at us at every juncture.

True, every grade of man's inhumanity has one common source, that irrational and primeval fear of "the other" and which, churning frenziedly deep in our consciousness, continually seeks an outlet to burst through. But the desolations that follow these eruptions have only generic similarities and untold leagues of differences. Nature, always an original creator, makes sure that no occurrence is ever the same. Thus, whilst the Armenian passion shares the same provenance with the Holocaust, other atrocities such as the wholesale slaughters in Cambodia, the genocide in Rwanda, the ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, South America, Congo, and the imperious butcheries in Iran and Iraq--to name but a few--carry their own particularly gruesome historic backgrounds and coloration.

The Armenian passion is particularly unique; though it was executed with the complicity of those who stood to gain by it--mainly Ottoman ultra-nationalists and adherents of Pan-Turkism--it never reflected the will of a whole nation, only the racist vision of an indoctrinated, empowered minority. In such circumstances desolation can only be elucidated with unbiased perception, extraordinary insight and profound grasp of the factors that define the past, the present and indeed, the fantasized future. Consequently, when it comes to such complexities, we are often better served by intuitive writers than by historians with inventorial skills.

All these premises make A Summer without Dawn by Agop J. Hacikyan and Jean-Yves Soucy an important and timely work. It seems incredible that whereas the Holocaust has elicited many novels, both from Jews, non-Jews and some Gypsies, the Armenian tragedy has been seriously neglected. There are some exceptions. Notably, Franz Werfel 's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, conceived in Damascus, when the author witnessed the plight of emaciated orphans who had survived the 1915 deportations from Anatolia; Nancy Kricorian's *Zabelle* and Michel Aharonian

Marcom's recent publication, *Three Apples Fall From Heaven*. There are also some memoirs, most importantly, *Passage to Ararat* by Michael Arlen and *Black Dog of Fate* by Peter Balakian. But these constitute a very meager crop. As a result *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* is elevated, in some circles to a putative scripture about the Armenians' indomitable spirit-- though Werfel himself was not an Armenian.

At the risk of breaking a taboo, I consider *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* a mediocre novel. Although written during Hitler's rise to power by a Jew who, within a few years, would suffer his own odyssean flight from persecution, it reads as if it were limned by the mind, not by the heart and guts, not by intimations that extermination of peoples was gaining acceptance as legitimate state strategy.

A novel to supersede *Forty days of Musa Dagh* has at last been written. *A Summer Without Dawn* by Agop J. Hacikyan and Jean Yves Soucy is an epic which, assiduously faithful to history, shows that events will always create their own momentum, that atrocities, even if brushed under the carpet and condemned to oblivion, will invariably surface and cry out.

Briefly, it relates the story of the Balian family, pillars of the multi-ethnic community of Sivas, a prosperous town in central northeast Anatolia, during the First World War. Though the brutal repression of the Armenians by Abdulhamid II in 1894-6 and again the peremptory massacre of 1909 in Cilicia are still fresh in memory, the community in Sivas--and in most parts of Eastern Anatolia--continue to nurture hopes of peaceful coexistence with their Turkish and Kurdish neighbours. Thus, they are unprepared for the sudden decree, masterminded by the Ottoman xenophobes, Talaat and Enver Pashas, respectively, the Minister for Interior Affairs and the Minister for War, which orders their "relocation"--ostensibly to facilitate the deployment of Ottoman troops facing the Tsarist forces at the Eastern Front to Syria and Mesopotamia.

As the decree is swiftly carried out, Vartan Balian, writer, pharmacist, a major in the Ottoman Army and an eminent community leader, is arrested and faces execution. Simultaneously, his wife, Maro, his young son, Tomas, his mother-in-law and a number of close friends are deported, along with streams of Armenians from the region. Vartan Balian escapes the gallows through the intervention of his great friend, the gallant Turkish officer, Ibrahim Aiizade. (The latter is then brutally murdered by government agents.) Vartan sets out to find his wife and family. But the deportations have turned into a death march; most of the deportees die either of hunger or exposure or are executed for their valuables or for sport. Maro and Tomas, on the verge of death too, are rescued by Riza Bey, the governor of the southern city of Ayntap, who, struck by Maro's spirit and beauty, takes them into his household.

In the ensuing months and years Vartan continues his search for his family. During this odyssey he enters into a tender relationship with Aroussiag, a young Armenian woman who, posing as a Turk, tries to save orphaned children. The authorities, informed of their attachment, descend on her house. She resists their savage interrogation and dies without revealing Vartan's whereabouts and his

assumed identity. Meanwhile, Maro, believing that Vartan has been killed, becomes reconciled to Riza Bey who, having fallen desperately in love with her, has been treating her with great sensitivity. She becomes his unofficial fourth wife. Tomas, still a boy, adjudging this association a betrayal of his father, runs away from Riza Bey's mansion and disappears. When the war ends in 1918, Vartan, who, through his secret reports to the world media on the sufferings of the Armenians, has achieved considerable fame, learns that his wife lives in Riza Bey's harem. He kidnaps Riza Bey and offers to barter him for Maro. The exchange takes place. But Maro, still bereft by Tomas's disappearance and having had to leave behind another son, Nourhan, fathered by Riza Bey, remains inconsolable. Only when Tomas is miraculously found in an orphanage in Switzerland does life begin anew for the Balians.

This is a novel Homeric in conception; and, like The Odyssey itself, it is both a passionate story of indestructible love and a chronicle of endurance against unrelenting and almost insurmountable adversity. The characters are masterfully drawn and elicit immense empathy from the reader; when they love, they love truly; when they weep, the tears are tangible; when they collapse, they cry out for a Simon of Cyrene; and when they bleed, their blood drips from the page. This is true even of those characters who have chosen a life of intolerance and brutality or who, like Riza Bey, sacrifice their consciences at the altar of expediency.

Perhaps what gratifies the reader most is that the authors, coming from cultures that are not only different, but also separated by continents, have achieved a unique voice. The *couleur locale* which seeps from every sentence appears to be innate to both of them.

Agop J. Hacikyan, an Armenian who was born in Turkey and whose grandparents survived the deportations of 1915--and who settled in Canada in his twenties--knows intimately both his history and the Anatolia where the events of the novel take place. (In fact, Hacikyan's grandfather, just like Vartan Balian in the novel, was saved from summary execution by a friendly Turkish officer.) Consequently and, given the ongoing Armenian-Turkish argument on how to classify the Armenian passion, Hacikyan, refreshingly, maintains exemplary objectivity. Asked at an interview whether the novel was anti-Turkish, he insisted that the blame for the atrocities should fall, first of all, on such fanatics as Talaat and Enver Pashas and their willing followers.

Praise must also be directed at Jean-Yves Soucy, the distinguished Canadian writer. His embrace of the finer points of this epic is impeccable. His remarkable ingestion of Armenian history must surely qualify him as an honorary Armenian.

*Moris Farhi is the author of **The Pleasure of Your Death** (1972), **The Last Days** (1983), **Journey Through Wilderness** (1989), **The Children of the Rainbow** (1999), **Young Turk** (2003) and **A Designated Man** (2009). He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and Vice-President of International PEN. In 2001 he was appointed as MBE (Member of the British Empire) in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for his services to literature.*