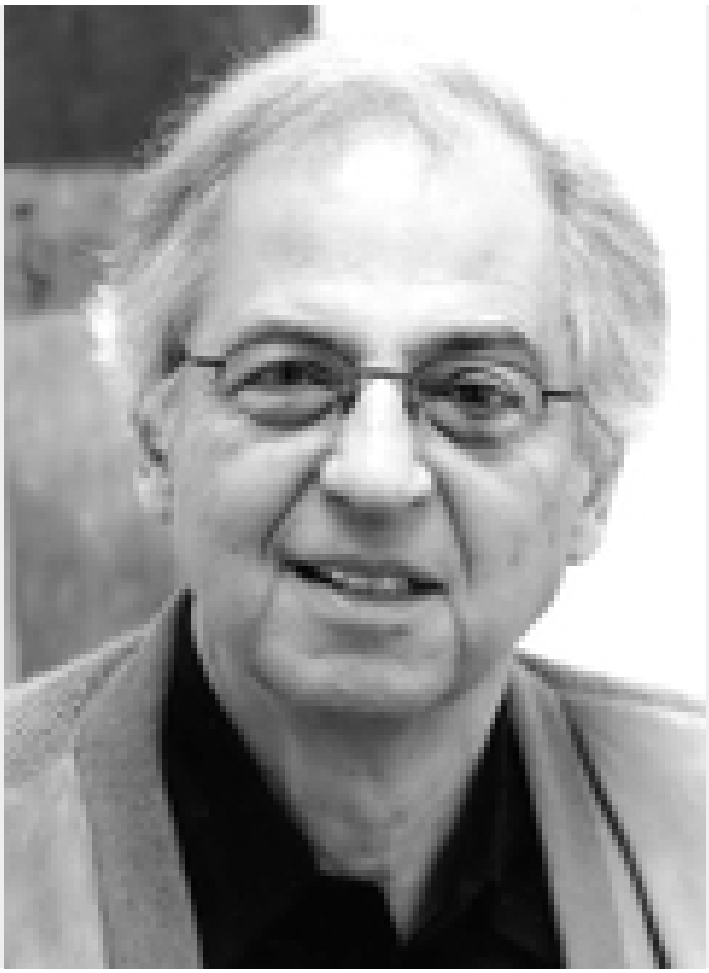
OF THE ARMENIAN PASSION

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Category: Opinions

Agop J. Hacikyan, Montreal, 19 March 2015

I'm seven years old. I live in Istanbul, where I attend the school run by the Armenian Mekhitarist Fathers. I leave home at eight in the morning and return at four in the afternoon. There's a war going on. People call it the Second World War. Turkey is not at war, they say. I don't know exactly what that means. I try to decipher the fancy headlines and I look at the nasty photos in the newspapers my father buys.

4: 20 p.m. I return home from school. I ring the bell twice. My mother knows it's me, so she answers the door without asking, "Who is it?"

"Oh you're here, *djanes*!" (my soul), she cries, welcoming me with a joyful smile.

"*Mayrig,* of course I'm here. Where else would I be?"

"For God's sake, you know what I mean."

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My mother is a genocide survivor. She's from Sivas. She was separated from her two brothers and parents during the Armenian deportation. Months and too many harrowing experiences later, they miraculously found each other.

She is another mother under chronic traumatic distress.

She is another stupefying story.

Every story like ours is a partial narrative, a loose page, a small episode in the totality of a cataclysm. Together, our stories blaze into a book, illuminating the hell of the Armenian nation.

Each time I rang the bell and mother opened the door, she made me believe she was just another

mother celebrating her son's safe return from school.

But she was a survivor; she was suspicious, fearful, and submissive. The genocide she had lived through had been tucked away in the constantly-jostled repository of her unconscious.

When she closed her eyes for the last time, I was not with her. I was in America. I hope that at her final moment of life she didn't imagine her little boy had been snatched by the Turks, as she had been taken away from her parents when she was a little girl. I recalled my last words to her: "America can never divide us, Mother"—but, of course, it did. The United States, France, Australia, Canada, the Middle East, the Netherlands, Scandinavia … they all opened their doors to the myriad Armenians, offering them a new, scattered country by the name of Diaspora.

The genocide our mothers went through was murderous, fiendish, unjust … as all genocides are. Many refused to talk about it. Instead they encapsulated it in five short words:

"Oh, you're here, my child!"

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Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew, coined the term "genocide" in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, published in 1944, and the term has been broadly employed and even exploited over the years. I prefer the term "The Armenian Passion" for the heinous nightmare my people endured in 1915 and beyond. For them, Christian people, the suffering was profound, entire, and, ultimately, spiritual, like that of Our Saviour in the hours before his crucifixion. They died for all of us, suffered for all Armenians, so that we, as a people, may strive to endure.

One hundred years have since gone by with the immediacy of seconds, leaving us with an interminable span of frustration, burdening us with a monumental task: to make the world hear loud and clear the wailing and the dissonance of that Saturday, the 24th of April in 1915, when the Ottoman government rounded up the Armenian intellectuals and community leaders in Constantinople, incarcerated them, and then perversely exiled and murdered them.

Who was listening then? Whose eyes were watching?

When mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and children were led to the ravenous mouth of the scorching desert, place of parched bones, of desiccated skulls, and buried with hushed supplications among strangled voices shrouded in speechless death?

When impalpable walls confined them, stifling their howls and sobs?

When invisible cages sealed their dismal sighs and halted their flight?

When they were overwhelmed with suffocating anguish and terror?

When their remains were denied burial and left to dissipate over countless rocks and grains of sand,

turning them into petrified testaments for the future to unearth?

The United States of America watched them, Europe observed them, and the rest of humankind turned away. Those who did look saw only with eyeless stares. And so the interminable expanse of the desert swallowed them, stretching out like a boundless breakfast table bearing a feast for barbarians, "for the most unspeakable appetites: for sweet barbarians, there was that hunger which was not for food — but an eye at the navel the appetite round with visions of some fabulous sandwich, the brain's golden breakfast eaten with beasts."

Those who had faith prayed; those who were faithless turned faithful; those who had voices roared; those who had rifles fought; and those who had pens wrote.

Armenians shall keep on scrawling, arguing, and denouncing until America and the United Kingdom and all the other plaster saints atone for their hypocrisy; until Turkey recognizes its crime and stops vindicating the slaughter of its kin through denial, revisionist history, and whitewashing doublespeak.

Armenians will keep on guarding their real history, ensuring its deserved perpetuity—with pride, with discourse and wrangle, with dissension, politics, diplomacy, and the law; with poetry, historical accounts, and documentaries; with stories, plays, and novels. Every genre, every diatribe, every polemic and rant will contribute its share to the never-ending polyphonic cantata—and will escalate its single intention, JUSTICE, to a fortissimo which will asphyxiate the century-old repudiation with its song.

Script and print are still the primary means of preserving memory, disseminating information, inculcating ideologies, distributing wealth, and exercising power. The book has always been the foundation of Armenian theology, Armenian culture, and Armenian survival.

This phenomenon totally contradicts the great social critical theorist Theodor Adorno's statement that there should be no poetry after Auschwitz, that only silence would prevail. His statement has its own truth and has created a fundamental dilemma for artists. And yet their activities and expressions have not ceased; on the contrary, they have multiplied. The American Jewish novelist Cynthia Ozick has said of the Holocaust: "I write about it. I can't not. But I don't think I ought to… we ought to absorb the documents, the endless, endless data, the endless, endless what-happened… I don't want to tamper or invent or imagine. And yet I have done it. I can't not do it. It comes, it invades.

It is evident that the truth of any genocide can be perfectly understood only by those who died and those who survived. Its truth is hidden in the remains, in the ashes, and in the aborted dreams of the corpses, of the victims and of the martyrs. Even a historian who may prove that the genocide happened can never know better than the victims and the survivors themselves.

As for the creative writer, she can only imagine as acutely as possible what these people have gone through, what they have felt and suffered, what they thought was happening to them at that moment of final reality, the moment of dying. The writer has to be painstakingly careful—even more

careful than a documentarian—in order to respect and reveal, with reverence, the emotions, feelings, fears, disappointments, and hatreds of those to whom she is giving a voice. Her vicarious feelings must flow from the power of imagination, yes, but equally from knowledge gathered from readings, from documents, from eye-witnesses. Her act of creation must be a moral as well as a literary endeavour.

The Armenian writer has a moral obligation to speak out against acrimony, bigotry, falsification… Our collective memory is a storehouse of wounds and scars. As children and grandchildren of beatified survivors, and as the inheritors of their traumatic experiences, we shall continue to write—in all languages, in all literary genres—and, we can hope, to provide a clamorous counterpoint to the voices of the deniers until their minds are finally rid of their false rectitude and covert dread.

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April is the month of remembrance of our dead, and 2015 is the year that commemorates the hundredth anniversary of the Armenian Passion. We shall remember those who perished in Anatolia in the Caucasus between 1914 and 1923. We shall remember those who perished on death marches into the Syrian Desert. We shall remember those who died for simply being born Armenians—and we shall celebrate the Armenians' fortitude, spirit, courage, and astonishing will to survive. To them, we say: We shall bring the JUSTICE you all deserve!

Postscript. I had the exceptional opportunity to get to know Professor George Steiner, one of the great minds of the literary world, while teaching at the University of Geneva in 1975. In his 1971 book *In Bluebeard's Castle*, Steiner writes, "whoever can grasp, in Dante's Canto 33 of the *Inferno*, the full meaning of the line 'The very weeping there forbids to weep…' will, I believe, have grasped the ontological form of the camp world. Steiner here refers to the line "*lo pianto stesso li pianger non lascia*":

"The very weeping there forbids to weep

"And grief finding eyes blocked with tears

"Turns inward to make agony greater."

Agop J. Acikyan of Montreal was born in Istanbul and moved to Canada in 1957. A professor Emeritus of Literary Studies at the Royal Military College, he is the author of numerous books on literature and linguistics as well as seven novels, including A Summer without Dawn, an international best seller. He has edited and translated the work of major Armenian writers.

Gwendolyn MacEwen, "A Breakfast for Barbarians" from *Magic Animals: Selected Poems Old and New*. Copyright © 1974 by David MacKinnon. Reprinted by permission of David MacKinnon.

Source: *The New Oxford Book of Canadian Verse* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

Interview by Tom Teicholts with Cynthia Ozick. *The Paris Review v. 102* (The Art of Fiction 95). Spring 1987.

George Steiner. *In Bluebird's Castle: Some Notes Towards the Redefinition of Culture* (Yale Ubiversity Press. 19710. P.54.