THE ANNE FRANK OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Vartan Matiossian & Alan Whitehorn, National Post, 29 April 2014

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Amidst the mass deportations and killings of Armenians that began in April, 1915, some of the targeted civilian victims survived. One was a young orphan girl, Arshaluys Mardigian (1901-1994), who lived just north of the city of Harpout in the Ottoman Empire. While most of her family was killed, she managed to flee the massacres and eventually immigrated as a teenager to the United States, where she lived initially under the auspices of an official of the American Committee of Armenian and Syrian Relief (later to become the highly influential international aid organization Near East Relief).

Upon her arrival, the young orphan was interviewed by American reporters about her horrific experiences. Around this time, she changed her name to Aurora Mardiganian.

Her book-length account, initially titled “Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian — The Christian Girl Who Lived Through the Great Massacres,” was serialized in the Hearst newspapers and later published as a book in 1918. There were several editions, with over 300,000 copies eventually sold.

The strong public interest in Aurora’s life story attracted the interest of Hollywood, and the memoir was turned into a film script. The resulting historically-based 85-minute movie was a silent film (with sub-titles) that vividly portrayed the mass deportations, rapes and massacres of Armenians. It had a young attractive female lead character in Aurora Mardiganian, playing herself.

Surviving genocide and witnessing, as a young girl, the killing of most of her own family was horrific enough. But to be asked within a few short years to relive and re-enact those scenes as a teenage immigrant was additionally traumatic. Remarkably, the movie also featured the former U.S. Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, Henry Morgenthau, playing himself. The film was shot in California in 1918 with a large cast of thousands of extras.

Initially titled "Ravished Armenia," the movie was later renamed "Auction of Souls." It was, in all likelihood, the first major Hollywood picture to portray genocide. Either way, it was a pioneering film: To cast a genocide survivor as the lead actress was a rare deed. As a post-WW I film, it challenged conventional mores by containing themes of violence, rape, nudity and mass crucifixion. It also raised the issue of censorship based both on public morals and politics. Turkish opposition in later years reinforced the latter.

The U.S. film premieres took place in Los Angeles and New York in 1919. Leading American personalities and benefactors were present. The showing also was an opportunity for fund-raising. The Canadian and British premieres took place that same year, followed by Latin American premieres in 1920. Present at the London showing was Lord James Bryce, the author of the famous and still highly influential British Government Blue Book on the mass atrocities of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

Despite the moral aura surrounding the film, the production was for the most part a commercial venture. The young genocide survivor/actress strained under the pressure to attend many of the showings in order to promote the film and help raise humanitarian relief funds. In 1920, she collapsed from the ongoing ordeal. (The Hollywood publicity machine, however, did not rest, and hired a number of female look-alikes to play her in public.) Time would heal some wounds. Later in life, she married and became a suburban housewife. She died on February 6, 1994.

Over time, copies of the film were lost, destroyed or deteriorated — not an untypical fate for the films of that era. No known remaining full copy exists today. And the history books on the early silent-film era have mostly ignored "Ravished Armenia/Auction of Souls." What had been a pioneering movie attended by many influential persons is now mostly ignored. However, it has not fallen into total obscurity: Canadian-Armenian film-maker Atom Egoyan and Armenian Genocide scholars continue to search for missing footage of this landmark film.

While the complete film itself may be missing, the text of the sub-titles survives, along with some stills and fragments of the movie. The Armenian Genocide Museum in Yerevan, Armenia has an important section of its exhibition devoted to Aurora Mardiganian, her memoirs and the film.

For some, Aurora Mardiganian is the "Anne Frank of the Armenian Genocide." She is the Armenian personification of humanity's attempt to survive the scourge of genocide.

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