

Armenian Genocide and Translation

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Abstract: Over the course of the last five years my research has led me to conclude that the literary representation of a trauma is not the immediate step after the historical event and that there are other, intervening layers in between. First is the occurrence of the historical event. What then follows is the translation of that event in the minds of the survivors—that is, in their memory and interpretation of the event. Then, memory becomes the subject of oral history. This oral history enters the minds of the writers of memoir and fiction, where it becomes a literary translation. Finally, the filmmaker, if such a story makes it to this step, translates the text in order to render her interpretation of it as film. If we acknowledge that translation involves interpretation, then what exists here are different layers of translation. The aim of the paper is to analyze the different effects that each medium (literature, translation, cinema) may have on the experience of its readers and audience—what that medium is trying to cultivate, the limitations of each, and how all of them in different ways bring greater attention to the historical phenomenon of the Armenian Genocide.

Introduction

Thinking about the contribution of literature to raising awareness about the Armenian Genocide, I have asked myself whether literature is the immediate step after the historical event. My research has led me to think that it is not. In this paper, I will propose the following schema to chart the development in Genocide awareness from the historical event to its interpretation within an act of artistic representation. First is the occurrence of the historical event. What then follows is the translation of that event in the minds of the survivors—that is, in their memory and

interpretation of the event. Memory then becomes the subject of oral history, and this oral history enters the minds of the writers of memoir and fiction, where it becomes a literary translation. Finally, the filmmaker, if such a story makes it to this step, translates the text in order to render his or her interpretation of it as film. In effect, we have here different layers of translation upon translation—to use memoirist Günter Grass’s term, with this theory we are “peeling the onion” (Grass 2008).

With a focus on the renowned Italian–Armenian novelist Antonia Arslan’s Genocide narrative *La masseria delle allodole* (2004; English translation *Skylark Farm*, Arslan 2006), I’ll first discuss the literary genre as an instrument that brings greater attention to the historical memory of the Armenian Genocide.

Then the power of translation related to the Genocide as an instrument of cultural, historical, and linguistic interaction will be both explored and problematized. For example, why has this particular book been chosen for translation into sixteen languages?¹ In what ways have these translations contributed to the awareness of the Genocide in their given countries? Exploring the impacts these translations have had in their given countries, there will also be an examination of readers’ reactions following their respective publications in various languages by presenting interviews with some of the translators. Finally, I will focus on the theme of the Armenian Genocide in cinema and will deal with the dramatized version of the Genocide narrative *La masseria delle allodole* by the Italian directors the Taviani brothers (Taviani and Taviani 2007).²

The Armenian Genocide in Literature

In every trauma, in every situation, there are always at least two sides, two prevalent stories, and the power dynamics are strong. On the one hand, the side that “successfully” commits Genocide usually determines the way its history is written (or not written), as is the case of the Armenian Genocide, which is varied and has been contested for many years. Then there is the side of the

¹ So far, the book has been translated into Dutch, English (four editions), Eastern Armenian (two editions), Finnish, French, German (two editions), Greek, Hungarian, Japanese, Persian, Romanian, Russian, Western Armenian, Slovenian, Spanish, and Swedish.

² The present study springs directly from my experience in translating Armenian Genocide narratives and from the outcomes of the course I taught at California State University, Fresno—Armenian Genocide and Translation while being the 10th Henry S. Khanzadian Kazan Visiting Professor in Armenian Studies at CSUF.

people who have suffered the overwhelming trauma. This side, especially when *silenced* by the perpetrator, attempts to record any history of the event, albeit painful, and often, as we look over these testimonies, it is clear that any proper investigation or analysis of this traumatic event should be undertaken by someone with psychoanalytic and linguistic skills.

One of the consequences of the Armenian Genocide was the dispersal of those who survived into a global Diaspora. Traumatized and impoverished, involuntary exiles and immigrants in a new land, they struggled to survive. Part of their survival strategy was to write what they had experienced and witnessed. Survivor stories emerged painfully and with great difficulty. The obstacles were many: a fragmented, traumatized community with far too few resources. The challenges they faced included the fact that they were either forced to write in a language that few in their new lands understood or that they had to struggle to describe the indescribable in a foreign tongue. Despite all the trauma and difficulties, the immigrants decided to put pen to paper to document that which the world needs to better know and comprehend. Even though the potential audience and publishers were greatly limited, these important survivor memoirs emerged, often in isolation, in small print runs and sometimes as unpublished manuscripts. They emerged in a variety of locales and conditions that characterized the global Diaspora.

These Diaspora fragments disseminate Armenian culture and seeds across differing landscapes. In so doing, the Armenian identity has evolved and become more diverse and complex and has contributed to an emerging multiculturalism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The survivor memoirs provided and continue to constitute an invaluable research tool not only for researchers but also for Genocide fiction writers, who take their insights from those stories and, in thousands of literary flavors, offer the reader the historical dimension of the Armenian Genocide.

It is true that it is not possible to penetrate the world of the Armenian Genocide without reading the history. However, as Rubina Perroomian asserts (Perroomian 2012, 7), documents, statistics, and data do not provide the whole story. On the other hand, the extremely important memoirs and eye witness accounts alone often cannot express the unthinkable horror of the

Genocide as the blockages and psychological borders can impede the author's revealing the whole trauma. Hence the importance of historical fiction, which, by fusing historical fact and creative writing, can provide access to a larger readership in terms of global impact. An example of this phenomenon, with a particular symbolic and powerful radiation and with a priority function of meaning, is the Italian–Armenian novelist Antonia Arslan's Genocide novel *La masseria delle allodole* (Arslan 2004).

Antonia Arslan, who was born and grew up in Italy and was professor of modern and contemporary Italian literature at the University of Padua, has published on Italian popular fiction and Italian women writers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, her most recent publications have focused on her Armenian heritage. Her first approach to her Armenian heritage was, surprisingly, through translation. With the help of two Armenians (as she doesn't know Armenian) she has translated/edited two volumes by Daniel Varujan, one of the most significant Armenian poets of the twentieth century, into Italian: *Il canto del pane* (Varujan 1992) and *Mari di grano* (Varujan 1995).³ Here is Antonia Arslan's testimony about her translation:

Poetry functions in an immediate and unexpected way. I discovered Daniel Varujan, his strength and his grace, when reading some of his poems in Italian and the entire *The Song of Bread* in French, translated by Vahé Godel. So it was that I concentrated on the text of his last work, which completely fascinated me. I already had a lot of experience translating poetry—from French, English and German—but my work with Varujan was a great adventure, also because of my collaboration with two young and enthusiastic scholars, C. H. Meghjian and A. H. Siraky. The Italian edition of *The Song of Bread* (Varujan 1992) became the seventh one, and it enjoyed much success within the Italian secondary schools. I further translated other pieces of Varujan's poetry; I published twenty of them in the volume *Seas of Wheat* (Varujan 1995) and the others in magazines. I also want to remind us that he was a great poet, one of the major ones since the beginning of the 1900s, equal to no one, but less known because he wrote in a minority language. (Haroutyunian 2012a)

Translating Varujan's poetry became part of the process of

³ In 1915 at the age of thirty-one, Daniel Varujan was on the verge of becoming an internationally renowned poet but he was brutally murdered by the government of the Young Turks, like other Armenian poets such as Siamanto, Grigor Zohrab, and so on.

discovery of her own Armenian identity.⁴ It brought her to the unknown path of her lost ancestry and the birth of her first novel, the best-seller *Skylark Farm*, in which, drawing on the history of her own ancestors, she tells of the attempts of the members of an Armenian family caught up in the Armenian Genocide to escape to Italy and join a relative who had been living there for forty years. This book won many prestigious awards in Italy and worldwide.⁵

Skylark Farm belongs to a genre that mixes autobiography and biography, history and fiction, documentary and memory. First of all, Arslan introduces her fifty-three-year-old grandfather Yerwant, an important physician living in his adopted Italian hometown of Padua in the months leading up to the Second World War.

[H]is mother, Iskuhi, the little princess, died at nineteen giving birth to him. My great-grandfather then remarried an “evil stepmother,” who bore him many other children; my grandfather couldn’t stand her, and so, at the age of thirteen, he requested and was granted permission to leave the little city and go to Venice, to study at Moorat-Raphael, the boarding school for Armenian children. (Arslan 2006, 17)

Yerwant never again returned home. Now, after forty years, he hopes to reunite with his brother Sempad, a successful pharmacist, who continued living in his little city in Anatolia.

In 1915, Yerwant enters his fiftieth year, and he is satisfied—and alone. . . “I am now a citizen of Italy; the Ottomans can’t touch me any more,” he thinks. (Arslan 2006, 45)

But World War I begins, and the ruling Young Turk party closes the border and when Italy enters the war on May 24, 1915, Yerwant’s dream vanishes. He will never be able to return to his country of origin in his red *Isotta Fraschini*, the doors of which were encrusted with the silver coat of arms that featured an intertwined *Y* and *A*, standing for *Yerwant Arslanian*. He will

⁴ She then went on to edit different works on the Armenian Genocide, including *Hushèr: la memoria. Voci italiane di sopravvissuti armeni* (Arslan, Pisanello, and Ohanian 2001); she has worked with Boghos Levon Zekiyán on the Italian version of Gérard Dédéyan’s *Histoire du peuple arménien* (Dédéyan 2002) and Vahakn Dadrian’s *Storia del genocidio armeno* (Dadrian 2003); and translated Claude Mutafian’s brief history of the Armenian genocide from the French (Mutafian 2001).

⁵ Arslan’s more recent publications include *Il libro di Mush* (2012), which is an account of the largest extant Armenian manuscript that was preserved in two halves by two separate women, each of whom took one half when escaping the city of Mush during the Armenian Genocide; *Il rumore delle perle di legno* (2015); and *Lettera a una ragazza in Turchia* (2016).

never see his family again as they will be exterminated almost entirely by the Young Turks.

From that moment on for Yerwant the distant Fatherland remained forever remote, and when his children got older Yerwant even changed their names. Antonia Arslan talks about a contradiction in the behavior of her grandfather: at first he did not want to deny his ancestry, and gave his children four Armenian names each—Yetward, Erwand, Armenak, and Vardan; Khayel, Anton, Aram, and Maryam—but later tried to erase their origin: “And in 1924, he will petition the Italian government to allow him to legally remove from his surname that embarrassing three-letter suffix, *-ian*, that exposes so plainly his Armenian origin” (Arslan 2006, 160).

During the deportation, the women performed a crucial role not only by bravely making sacrifices to protect the children, but by persistently working to preserve memories of their land. These are a few stories, objects, and photographs, “relics or icons from a terrible shipwreck” (Arslan 2006, 19), and a few other items shipped from Sempad as a gift to his relatives in Italy. Thanks to this “act of memorial transmission,” the author can now see and touch objects and images belonging to her Armenian family and therefore be reunited with its indefinite past (Alù 2009, 369).

Here, as readers, we are made witness to familiar historical narratives—perhaps we share similar ones, perhaps we’ve read firsthand accounts in books. But what happens when a historical event penetrates literature? First of all, the literary genre is a powerful medium that is able to bring the historical phenomenon to the attention of the masses. By reconstructing her family history in the novel, Arslan is merging both historical research and imagination culled from collective memory; she also becomes the protector of her familial memory and historical archive.

Taking an input from Bella Brodzki’s idea that “[c]ulture’s necessarily overarching orientation toward the future only obtains by sharing its past” (Brodzki 2007, 113), I conducted an experiment on collective memory and testimony in an assignment I gave to my students at Fresno State. I set an assignment in which they were called to write the story of their ancestor’s survival. Most of them said to me, “I know something

about my great grandparents, but I'm missing a lot of details. What should I do?" This is exactly what I was hoping for, and advised them to fill in the gaps with their imaginations and to take advantage of their parents and grandparents and ask them questions. As evidenced by Brodzki, "[t]hinking both psychoanalytically and historically also means that while we harbor the dream of plenitude, we always begin with a gap" (Brodzki 2007, 113).

For their assignment, some of my students contacted their relatives living in other countries to inquire about their grandparents and, as the students shared some amazing stories in class.⁶ This assignment contributed to raising their personal awareness of their ancestors' voyages towards refuge.

Antonia Arslan has done the same in filling in the gaps of an unknown past. In the meantime the geography, the places, and the itineraries that she describes in her novel reveal not only significant moments of family history but also its inclusion in a determinate social space and national history (Alù 2009, 364).⁷ This is important because it gives the *historical* part to "historical fiction."

For yet another class assignment, based on the concept of Rushdie's "translated man," students worked together to write the names of the native cities and villages of their ancestors, as well as the places through which they passed on their long journeys of migration before arriving in the United States.⁸ We also included in the map the languages they had learnt along the way. This initial exercise helped the students to visualize, re-realize, and appreciate both their ancestors' geographical passages and the students' indelible connection to them. Further, the act of writing it on the board—taking pen in hand—implicated them as the bearers and continuers of their ancestral memories. I have always been obsessively diligent throughout my academic career to erase whatever is on the board after any given lesson. However, what

⁶ Some of these stories have already been published in the *Hye Sharzhoom* newspaper (Fresno 2013, 35/1, 2).

⁷ In her article, Alù refers to Anne Muxel who in her *Individu et mémoire familiale* explains how rediscovering familiar places and spaces can help us to recover a biographical path as well as the origin, progress, and decline of a social, individual, and collective destiny (Muxel 1996, 47).

⁸ In his book of essays *Imaginary Homelands*, Salman Rushdie asserts that "Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also be gained" (Rushdie 1992, 17).

was created on the board that day was an interwoven tapestry of names, places, times, and languages that neither my students nor myself even dared to erase. The memory seemed at once too fresh and validated yet again. So, we decided to leave it as it was. I took a picture before the next instructor could “erase our ancestors,” preserving this image at least through another medium—if not the word, the image. We were all excited and surprised to discover that among all our ancestors, they collectively spoke sixteen languages including Armenian, English, Arabic, French, Turkish, Spanish, Vai, Pele, Fula, Russian, German, Romanian, Bulgarian, Latin, Greek, and Kurdish.

In the same way, Antonia Arslan’s undertaking the mission of retelling the story continues the voyage of her ancestors. In one of her numerous public lectures Antonia said: “The idea of my past was bothering me for years, so one morning I decided to write: ‘Zio Sempad è solo una leggenda, per noi: ma una leggenda su cui abbiamo tutti pianto.’”⁹

This is the very first sentence of the novel, and Antonia once told me that, while many passages of the book have undergone editing, that sentence remained unchanged. What is interesting is that Antonia never mentions the name of her grandfather’s birthplace, calling it “little city.” “No one, patient reader, ever went back to the little city,” finishes Antonia Arslan in her book (Arslan 2006, 268). She does this intentionally—firstly because this is a novel and not a memoir and secondly because she doesn’t want to personify but rather render the idea more globally and not to give the reader the impression that the Armenians were persecuted in that specific place.

I’d like to share the last classroom example from my California State University experience, which dealt with the question of the story’s transmission. By using their part of the genealogical tapestry I spoke of before, each student illustrated the geographic and linguistic journeys of their ancestors. I asked the students, as an extension, to report their family history to one partner in the classroom. It was then the task of the *partner* to re-reflect the story and report it. After a series of retellings, the students eventually had to report these stories back to the class,

⁹ Uncle Sempad is only a legend, for us—but a legend that has made us all cry (Arslan 2006, 17).

thus directly engaging in the process of transmission and translation. Our aim was to internalize the process of a story's transmission and to show how feelings, details, chronology, and so forth are translated as they pass from one person to another. Thus, the story, especially the oral tale, is a shared substance between interlocutors, and simply does not exist without both the teller and the listener, the writer and the reader. So when we return to consider the gravity of Arslan's work in the telling of the Armenian Genocide from a very personal perspective, we come to the realization that, by sharing her own family history, we also become a responsible player of that story *as readers*. In this case, we are both called upon to consider and remember the Genocide and are also invited to enter its discourse. To consider Arslan's work on such a global scale, then, is of tantamount importance.

Through the pen of the writer Antonia Arslan, the Armenian Genocide is thus carried beyond its historical limits, slipping from the desks of historians and entering the minds and imaginations of ordinary people. Of course, when a historical event becomes literature it is enriched with new shades and colors. New heroes are born who are given names and are assigned identities. Families are born belonging to one nationality or to another who are placed in this or that social class. This is where literary fiction comes into play. And she weaves the plot. Through a love story, a common conversation in the home, or between neighbors, and through a description of a relationship between two individuals of two different nationalities (such as the Armenian and Turkish) or minorities (Armenians and Greeks), Antonia Arslan introduces the historical dimension to the story.

A sentence from the prologue that was also used for the blurb on the book cover reads:

My aunt always used to say: When I've finally had it with you, when you get too mean, I'm leaving. I'll go stay with Arussiag in Beirut, with Uncle Zareh in Aleppo, with Philip and Mildred in Boston, with my sister Nevert in Fresno, with Ani in NY, or even with Cousin Michel in Copacabana—him last, though, because he married an Assyrian. (Arslan 2006, 5)

With this sentence, the author introduces the complex phenomenon of the Armenian Diaspora created by the Armenian

Genocide. When a non-Armenian reader, completely ignorant of not only the essence but also the existence of the Armenian Genocide, buys the book for its literary value, while reading this sentence, asks herself: How can a single person, Antonia's aunt, have so many relatives around the world? The answer will come on reading the book.

Before writing her Genocide narrative, Antonia Arslan consulted many history books. But the plot also came to her through saved photographs. As Daniel Sherman has it: "Sight is the only sense powerful enough to bridge the gap between those who hold a memory rooted in bodily experience and those who, lacking such experience, nonetheless seek to share the memory" (Sherman 1999, 14).

Thus the picture becomes a complicated form of self-portrait that reveals the ego of the writer that is necessarily relational and at the same time fragmentary. Similarly, descriptions of group photographs in *Skylark Farm* are used by Antonia Arslan to recover the bonds with her dispersed Armenian relatives (Alù 2009, 373):

Arussiag, Henriette, and Nubar, two girls and a little boy dressed as a girl. Along with Nevert they are the numb survivors who will, after escaping Aleppo, come to the West. These children now look out at me from a snapshot taken in Aleppo in 1916, one year after their rescue, just before they embarked for Italy: their grave, childish eyes are turned mysteriously inward, opaque and glacial, having accepted—after too many unanswered questions—the blind selection that has allowed them to survive. They are wearing decent orphan clothes, but they seem dressed in uniforms of rags, and at a quick glance the eye sees prison stripes. Their dark Eastern eyes, with their thick brows tracing a single line across their foreheads, repeat four times, wordlessly, the fear of a future that will be inexorable and the hidden nucleus of a secret guilt. (Arslan 2006, 23)

Transforming and translating the protagonists of the pictures into the characters of the book, Antonia is linking herself through a bridge towards her ancestors:

But it will be Zareh the skeptic, the European, who will save the family legacy, the children, and the photographs: the four little malnourished bodies curled together like dying birds, their small skulls all eyes, and the precious packet of family portraits, sewn up along with Gregory of Narek's

prayer book inside a velvet rag and passed from hand to hand from the dying to the survivors. Parched, dried skeletons—memorials of a life that had been cordial and boisterous, with plenty of water, plenty of hospitality and mirth. (Arslan 2006, 29)

These images, along with a few objects protected by the women during the massacre and deportation, become relics of which the author becomes the possessor through the acts of postmemory. In addition, the images included or only described in *Skylark Farm*, along with the text, are the subject of memory and commemoration as well as collective pain, the *lieux de mémoire* that stop time, block forgetfulness, immortalize death and materialize the immaterial (Alù 2009; Nora 1989).

In her 2007 book *Can These Bones Live*, Bella Brodzki directs her

attention to processes of intergenerational transmission, conceived as acts of translation, to how the value of memory or remembrance as an instrument of historical consciousness is inscribed in a culture [. . .] What connects and divides two generations and their respective cultural narratives, where are the borderlines of a life and text, what are the ways in which processes of translation perform as well as disrupt the work of cultural memory? (Brodzki 2007, 111–112).

In the case of Antonia Arslan, the intergenerational transmission took place through her beloved grandfather who entrusted her with the task of retelling his trauma and memories

for a country that no longer exists, for the columns of deportees, for a family dying beneath a poisonous sun, for the unmarked graves along the dusty roads and paths of Anatolia; and for everything that disappeared with them, everything alive and fragrant, exhausted and joyous, painful and consoling: the country's soul. (Arslan 2006, 40)

The Armenian Genocide in Translation

When we talk about Genocide and translation in a global sense, we inevitably enter a discourse about memory. Let's think for a moment of the psychological state of the trauma victim: they are pained, they block things out, sometimes repress the memories that are too painful. The Armenian

Genocide survivors' silence was also due to the fact that they were over-protective of their children considering them a representation of survival and treating them as substitutes for the relatives who perished and communities that had been wiped out. Thus with the aim to ensure their protection, the parents often refused to share the trauma with the second generation.¹⁰

Genocide trauma is translated by the very person who experienced it by the *memory* they retain of the event. What about when a trauma is translated into artistic literature? Are we obliged to then preoccupy ourselves with less important “factual” matters—was it *really* fifty days that the woman walked through the desert, or thirty? Historical fiction is a genre that fuses a historical fact with creative writing. Thus, as a fiction, we are ultimately obliged as readers to be less preoccupied with the precision of less important facts, but rather occupy ourselves with the rendering of feeling and narrative form within a historical space. And it is in this moment of not being preoccupied with the fact or fiction of memoir, biography, or a historical text that we are able to immerse ourselves in the heart of the matter. How do we *feel* about this situation? How can we relate to it? How do we interpret it ourselves? Certainly a lot of truth also comes out through creative writing and not only through memoir or biography or other forms of factual writing where the blockages and psychological borders stop the author from revealing the whole trauma.

Every book has its birth story, and analogously every

¹⁰ While exploring the impact of World War II on the second-generation Armenian–American identity, Aftandilian (2009) noticed that the war brought the memory of the Armenian Genocide to the forefront within Armenian–American families, as survivors of the Genocide had to send their sons off to war. Aftandilian interviewed World War II Armenian–American veterans and found that the topic of returning home was more emotional than the topic of their combat experience. His research on the children of survivors found that many children were named after the murdered relatives. These children felt special, because an obligation was placed on them, directly or indirectly, to bear the hopes and aspirations of the survivors not only for the family, but also for the Armenian people as a whole. One of my students at California State University, A. Pilavian, wrote in her final paper: “I never really knew the details about how my family began or how much they sacrificed to live a better life. I used to get angry with my family when they wouldn’t tell me things that I wanted to know from their past experiences. What I came to realize is that when people don’t speak of something tragic that has happened in their life, it actually eats at them more. The reason they feel that it’s better to keep quiet is so that they don’t disrupt the peace in their life that they finally have now.”

translation has its birth story. Most of the translations of Antonia Arslan's *Skylark Farm* have been executed according to the standard ways when a publisher decides to commission a book's translation. However, there is something immediately striking about the book's Hungarian edition. The Hungarian translation was published in Romania, and not in Hungary (Arslan 2008).

Here is the explanation given by the book dealer Kinga Kali:

As you perhaps know Hungary still does not recognize the Armenian Genocide—and there is not much knowledge about it in the Hungarian book publishing. The publishers I contacted simply did not respond to my proposal—to publish the Hungarian translation of *Skylark Farm*. I had the idea to go to Mentor, a Hungarian publishing house in Transylvania, Romania. I also offered a complete plan for advertising the book in Hungary. They accepted the proposal.

Mentor publishers in Romania took all the risks in dealing with a theme intentionally kept from public view in Hungary. This is why Antonia was able to go and give her book tour in both Hungary and Romania.

The circulation of Antonia's Genocide novel, thanks to its Hungarian translation, among common Hungarians is extremely important because Hungary has yet to recognize the Armenian Genocide.¹¹

After the publication of *Skylark Farm* in Romania, the book dealer together with the publishing house managed to organize several book presentations in Budapest and in a few Transylvanian towns in Romania with a Hungarian majority.

While I was in Budapest for a conference, I met the dealer and asked her about the impact of the translation and its contribution to raising awareness in Hungary. She replied that

The majority of the people I gave the book [to] as a present and [who]

¹¹ Hungary was the country where, in 2004, Ramil Safarov, a lieutenant of the Azerbaijani army, used an axe to hack the twenty-six-year-old Armenian lieutenant Gurgen Margaryan to death in his sleep. Both were participating in an English language training course within the framework of the NATO-sponsored Partnership for Peace initiative in Budapest. Ramil Safarov was imprisoned in Budapest for the murder until he was extradited to Azerbaijan in 2012. To the shock of many, Azerbaijan promoted him and made a hero of the murderer. In reaction, Armenia formally suspended ties with Hungary.

shared it with their friends said that by reading it for the first time, they were able to understand what the Armenian Genocide meant. They usually had knowledge about the Jewish Holocaust, but not about the Armenian one—at least, the younger generation did not know anything about it. The mother of a friend of mine was revolted, and cried, “why are people in Hungary not informed about all of this, and why is this not included in the history classes at the school?”

Here we see a Hungarian girl dreaming of bringing knowledge to her people about the historical event of the Armenian Genocide, by translating the Genocide narrative *Skylark Farm*:

When I met Antonia Arslan in 2004 during her book presentation, I decided to let my Hungarian nation learn about this book, and my dream came true within four years. In June 2008, the book was released and presented for the very first time at the Budapest Book Fest.

Narrative and translation therefore once more prove themselves valid tools in the raising of awareness about the historical event.

Later I had the chance to contact Kinga Júlia Király, the Hungarian translator of the novel.

Antonia Arslan’s *Skylark Farm* was the most shocking translation I’ve ever made, *she said*. When I got the book from Italy and I started reading it for the first time, I couldn’t even imagine that such a horrible national destiny does exist. After reading one fourth of the novel I had to buy a new armchair, which I still call my “Skylarkfarmchair”: I needed a new position, a new posture for my body in order not to be absorbed by the novel, not to read as a whatsoever fiction, but keep my awareness till the end of it. As I have Armenian origins, too, since my family came to Transylvania in the seventeenth century, the novel had awakened in me, somewhere deep inside, a never felt receptivity toward suffering and misery. And I struggled for good amidst with my shamefacedness which [incapacitated] me in my translation. How should I translate those terrifying events, bring the best close to the reader, what Sempad’s family had endured? How should I repaint the “Armenian blood-flowers” on the walls (Arslan 2006, 118)? Am I allowed to do such things? Is this reasserting, recommitting a Genocide? It was much more than [a] matter of ethics or aesthetics. More than literature, as well.

I still remember the deep impact which Nevart’s death in the thunderbolt made on me (Arslan 2006, 175). When I had to read a sequence from the

book for the first time in front of an audience, I [chose] Nevart's death. But I could not do it. I felt such discomposure, such sorrow, such mourning, that I started to cry. That was too much for me as translating is an intimate act while sharing Genocide, in fact, [. . .] is a reaction.

I owe this translation a brand new life, since I became wide open for suffering. *Skylark farm* – in a sacred sense – had made my life.

Further, I also interviewed Hillary Creek, who translated into English a section of Antonia Arslan's second novel *A Road to Smyrna*, which has now been entirely translated into Armenian (Arslan 2012):

I am a historian (economic and social), *she said*, with a special interest in the Middle East from 1890 on, as my research has in some part been on petroleum politics in the area. As a social historian I am obviously interested in the life of ordinary people and find a rich source in the literature, drama, art, and music of the period. I researched [the] bare facts, chronological history of the time, movements, and main characters, before starting translating. But I was born into postwar London when the city was in large part rubble, rationing didn't stop till I was six. The war was still very close, my mother (a teacher) had spent the Blitz finding and taking care of young kids who escaped from evacuations and returned to find nothing. So I had her memories. Then I have many friends who have had to flee from political persecutions and I have long been interested and involved in human rights questions. So if anything it was not one event, but rather a combination of first, second and third hand tales and memories that were my points of reference.

Now, some of my personal thoughts about the Genocide novel as an Armenian experience and the Armenian translator of Antonia Arslan's Genocide narratives.

In 2004, when I read *Skylark Farm* all in one sitting, I could not imagine that three years later I would have the honor of being the Armenian translator of this best-seller.

It all began in the fall of 2005, when a Festival of Friendship between Armenia and Italy was organized in Yerevan and there were many events held both on academic (conferences, round tables) and popular (Italian opera or cinema evenings) topics. At that time I was in Armenia participating in a conference at the Academy of Sciences with a paper on

Dante's Armenian translations (Haroutyunian 2006, 2012b). Of course, among the events, I could not miss the presentation of *Skylark Farm*, which had just been published in Italy and was already proving to be very successful. At the event, the author and the directors Paolo and Vittorio Taviani were supposed to be there to present the book and forthcoming film.

Antonia suggested that I translate the three most moving episodes of the book so they could be read at the presentation. It was after this that Antonia asked me about going forward with the translation. But the deadlines were very precise. The Armenian translation had to be ready for the release of the film by the Taviani Brothers. There was very little time, and the responsibility was huge. The heroes of the story were talking to me, just as Antonia says in her acknowledgments:

I must first thank those who spoke to me: Sempad and Shushanig, Ismene and Isaac, Nazim the beggar, and Yerwant, with his neat Pirandello goatee. And then Azniv and Veron, the great aunts I never knew; funny, tiny Henriette, who spoiled me; Zareh and Rupen, my legendary great uncles. I thank my audacious, whimsical mother, who raised me unleniently; Khayel, my serious, sly father, who worried about everything; my uncle Yetwart, and my cousins Yerwant, Ermanno, and Teresa; my little brother Carlo . . . (Arslan 2006, 271)

I was too emotionally involved in the story. I was feeling a kind of duty to make their story available to Armenians. I often skipped lunch. I was so immersed in the book and its characters that I was almost ashamed to take a break to eat while they were walking along the dusty roads of Anatolia, hungry and exhausted, destroyed by deportation. It seemed that they were beckoning me to tell their story because they desperately wanted to be heard.

When I go to the episode that tells of the horrific massacre at the Farm, I was completely blocked as it was too hard to switch off emotionally and think about the *word order* of the sentence or make a choice of *adjectives* when the plot was describing the murder of the little boys in front of their mother:

Garó lies placidly with his handsome smile, holding his little hands over his open belly. Leslie, scurrying on all fours, tries to hide beneath the sideboard sparkling with crystal, but he's dragged out by his feet and flung against the wall, where his small round head smashes like a ripe coconut, spraying

blood and brain across the delicate floral design. Thus are flowers born from the blood of the Armenian Calvary. (Arslan 2006, 118)

After a while, emotionally drained, I decided to skip those passages and return to them once I'd completed the book.

I finally managed to keep my promise, finishing the book before the screening of the film, which took place July 10, 2007, at the opening of the Golden Apricot Film Festival in Yerevan (Arslan 2007).

In the translation I have maintained the foreign expressions in Turkish, French, and English used by the author in the Italian text, because it was worth reviving those expressive nuances in Armenian, especially taking into account that these terms not only precisely characterized the cultural environment of that generation during the Genocide, but were also a part of the characters' everyday lives. So I precisely preserved foreign words in transliteration, inserting notes to facilitate comprehension and reading.

From Text to Reel: Cinematic Translation of Arslan's *Skylark Farm* to the Taviani brothers' film *The Lark Farm*

There is always the matter of fidelity of the film to the novel, generally expressed as a function of adequacy and acceptability, whereby the former is more or less what we mean by equivalence, and the latter is more or less what we mean by audience believability. For example, many readers usually watch movies based on the books they've read and end up being disappointed. Why? Because so many parts of the story are cut out. So we as readers look for mistakes and sometimes disregard whether the movie was well directed, produced, and so on. I think we should never compare them, but rather consider them separately.

When a book is translated into a movie, questions inevitably arise. One of the first is to ask about the film genre (documentary, drama, historical narrative, etc.) that the filmmaker has chosen since each film genre creates a different kind of viewing experience for the audience.

The famous Italian film directors and screenwriters the Taviani brothers' *Lark Farm* is based on a historical novel, so the goal is to awaken curiosity, interest, even engagement in a historical event; the limitations and strengths of a film translation

are evident in the selection of passages from the novel, the filmic treatment of those passages, the omission of passages, and so on.

The Taviani brothers announced right away that the film would be “liberally” based on *Skylark Farm*—that is, the plot would be relatively the same but the directors had the right to change things or make additions, and in fact they editorialized and accessorized the film and inserted fictional material in the movie such as love interests and so on. This is quite normal because, even if it originates in a novel, the filmmaker translates her or his perception/translation of the fiction into film.

This reflection leads into the relationship of the source (novel) and the target (film) and opens up such questions as what other source modeling material is evident in the film. In fact, the Tavianis have not only cut episodes from the novel but they have also added some.

There is an episode in the film that recalls a passage from another Genocide narrative by Alice Tachdjian, *Pietre sul cuore* (Stones on the heart), published in Italy in 2003. In the book there is a scene where two women are forced to dispose of the child by suffocating him between them as they sit back to back (Tachdjian 2003):

We were terrorized by the Turks’ cruelty, writes Tachdjian in her memoir. We understood that they were trying to annihilate us all, but before they found joy in killing the children in front of their mothers, who were going mad throwing themselves from the cliffs. The Turks were opening the wombs of pregnant women with *yatağan*, they were stabbing children and then drowning [them] in the rivers. They even took [the] clothes from the dead, to resell them afterwards. [. . .] Our two-month-old baby was crying because he was hungry, there was no milk in Hripsimé’s breasts, the grass that she ate on the streets caused terrible stomachache for the child. However the poor creature [was] destined to die of hunger, diarrhea, or by the sword. To avoid being discovered by his cries, our mother and sister suffocated the baby in the middle of their backs, one against the other, without looking at him. He [was] extinguished like a candle . . .¹²

When the Taviani brothers asked Antonia Arslan to dramatize *Skylark Farm*, there was also much interest from

¹² Tachdjian’s book hasn’t been translated into English yet. We translated this piece of a memoir as a class assignment during my Armenian Genocide course at Fresno State as I wanted my students to experience what Genocide translation meant. Since the memoir was in Italian, the process of translation took place with me providing the initial translation into English, and then working collectively with the students.

Hollywood in acquiring the movie rights. But Arslan was aware that in the past the several attempts to produce a Hollywood film about the Armenian Genocide were blocked. She knew that prominent directors and actors throughout the decades had attempted to produce a film based on Franz Werfel's novel *Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, but without success.¹³ Antonia Arslan therefore agreed to the Taviani brothers' suggestion.

The film is a Spanish coproduction and the Spanish actress Paz Vega is a central character in the movie. Even the Spanish translation of the movie *Skylark Farm* is entitled *El Destino di Nunik* as she interprets Nunik's role.¹⁴

In fact when the film had just come out some Armenians were concerned by the fact that the filmmaker had inserted a double love story for Nunik with two Turkish officers played by two actors, the Italian actor Alessandro Preziosi and the German Moritz Bleibtreu. In her novel Antonia has only one love story.

A change I dislike in the film is Nunik's second romance with a Turkish soldier, one who is helping lead a caravan of Armenian women to their death in Syria, wrote one of my students at California State University Fresno in his final paper. I feel like Nunik must have a very deep case of Stockholm Syndrome, as she seems to only fall in love with Turkish soldiers. Besides catering to fans of romance movies I can't understand why this change was made. It almost seems to pander to a Turkish audience by showing a sympathetic Turkish participant in the Genocide, who we're meant to feel sorry for because he doesn't really want to be there. Was he added to make any Turk watching feel less guilty? Obviously, the Turkish audience for this movie would be small if not nonexistent, so the addition of this character is puzzling. The two characters are both serving the same purpose as a sympathetic perpetrator and love interest, so it would make a lot more sense to merge them together, from a storytelling perspective. As it is the second Turkish soldier is redundant at best, and raises a lot of unfortunate implications.¹⁵

During the "film vs novel" discussion with cinema critic Dr. Artsvi Bakhchinyan from Armenia, he confessed:

¹³ According to *Variety* magazine, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* has become "the most on-again and off-again motion picture production in Hollywood history" (Torosyan 2012).

¹⁴ This character is *Azniv* in the book, and unlike the film is not a central character in the volume.

¹⁵ An excerpt from the final paper by Suren Oganessian.

Like from any artistic display of the Armenian Genocide, Armenians had great expectations from the Tavianis' film, and as a general rule these expectations were unjustified. Of course, we should be grateful to the great masters of cinema for being able to bring the pain of our people to the public at large, which was not sufficiently informed of the history of this tragedy. However, in my humble opinion as a film critic, the extremely classical shape, style, and language in which the story was presented was at least half a century late. The same cannot be said about the book. The presented motivations for the film as a tragedy remain almost undiscovered. According to the film, one perceives the false notion that those motivations were purely economic. From historical and psychological points of view, the behavior of the main heroine of the film is not characteristic of an Armenian woman at the beginning of the twentieth century and gives the wrong idea that the Armenian women, like Nunik, were throwing themselves into the arms of the Turks. In fact, the opposite occurred. The fictional part of the film suffers due to the dialogues that are not characteristic of everyday home speech. Perhaps the film's small budget caused some "artistisms" inappropriate to present-day cinematography (for example, in the deportation scene, the clothes the deportees are wearing are not convincing).

From my perspective, the film works especially well for an audience with little or no knowledge about the Armenian Genocide. By contrast, Armenians, more aware of the Genocide, have more mixed sensations, either of gratitude towards the filmmakers or of disappointment due to the dubious accuracy of some aspects, as we saw above. A completely unaware person however would begin to learn about the historical phenomenon of the Armenian Genocide.

The filmmakers managed to put together an excellent cast. They stated in one of their interviews that the actors were not only involved professionally but also emotionally. According to the directors, after watching the whole film for the first time the Turkish-born Greek–Jewish actor Tchéky Karyo burst into tears and when he calmed down he said that he had not only watched the tragedy that they had played, but he had also seen his Jewish uncle and grandfather. So in the imagination of the actor Karyo the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust all of a sudden were superimposed.¹⁶

¹⁶ Il genocidio dimenticato: intervista ai Fratelli Taviani [Parte 1]
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Pnyzq4kROA>.

When we ask about the effect of a film, we are dealing with the rhetorical and artistic purposes of the film—that is, we are probing into the film’s *skopos* or purpose with regard to the audience. A novel would have similar artistic and rhetorical purposes, but executed along different lines since the experience of reading a novel is stretched out over several hours if not days while the experience of viewing a film is usually contained in under two hours. And this is a very important point as movies usually reach an even larger audience, and sometimes viewing a massacre with your own eyes might prove more powerful than reading about it. The grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of film create meaning in their own right but also invite the viewers to make meaning out of the viewing experience. Film has the potential to be an excellent tool in raising awareness about a historical event in less than two hours to an audience of hundreds of thousands.¹⁷

When in 2006 the Taviani brothers were shooting the film, their intention was to raise awareness about the Armenian Genocide and show the world the need to stop such crimes against humanity from reoccurring. Their desire also was to see their movie circulating in the schools. Today their goal has been fulfilled as the film is shown in many Italian schools mainly to eighth-graders who are learning about World War I and students doing their last year of high school.

This film has two major advantages: it stimulates reflection on a story known only by a few, in part because few film makers have brought this Genocide onto the screens before. Secondly, this film shows that good and evil are not at all on one side or the other.

Conclusion

In his *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Nora asserts that

In fact, memory has never known more than two forms of legitimacy: historical and literary. These have run parallel to each other but until now always separately. At present, the boundary between the two is blurring; following closely upon the successive deaths of memory–history and memory–fiction, a new kind of history has been born, which owes its

¹⁷ For audiovisual translation, among others see Zatlin 2005; Díaz-Cintas 2009; Cronin 2009; and the collection of essays by Agost, Orero, and di Giovanni 2012.

prestige and legitimacy to the new relation it maintains to the past [. . .] History has become the deep reference of a period that has been wrenched from its depths, a realistic novel in a period in which there are no real novels. Memory has been promoted to the center of history: such is the spectacular bereavement of literature. (Nora 1989, 24)

In the novel, by reconstructing her family history Arslan is merging both historical research and the imagination from a collective memory. Historical research and imagination that have both been brought together by a *collective* memory are very important even independently, and the merging of them all is quite fascinating, especially with regards to the *collective*. And the consequence of the novel is a sort of catharsis for Arslan and her family as she becomes both receptacle and protector. Here we can also call into question the very genre of art and literature, depending on the author's intention. For example, "art for art's sake" or art for a social cause, or testimony for catharsis. Literature and testimony are different, and then there is the literature of testimony, which is another genre altogether. Why is the "literature of testimony" an actual genre? And, further, even if it is not exactly Arslan's testimony but a retelling of a retelling, Arslan's text is a literature of testimony. Collecting personal and public memories affords coherence and integrity to interrupted stories that have been fragmented or compromised by loss, dislocation, and division. In our case, the journey into Arslan's family's past transcends the silence and fills the gaps in a personal history. Family history, personal history, and national history are, in fact, interrelated and at times one.

Finally, in *Skylark Farm*, through the research of original documents and acts of postmemory, the author unites her present to the lost world of her family, and in this way strengthens her roots and anchors her identity. With the memory what is past returns to be actual. The memory is not only an act of remembering, but it can become a living entity, can become a vibrant emotion.

Antonia Arslan's Genocide narrative with its thirty-six reprints in Italy alone, where the Armenian community only has 2,000 members, has sold over 500,000 copies to an Italian readership for the most part previously unaware of the

Armenian Genocide. However, it is through the power of translation into fifteen languages that *Skylark Farm* has surpassed the borders of Italy, taking the knowledge of the Armenian Genocide throughout the globe and thereby contributing to its “afterlife”—to use the word of Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1999)—as well as its cinematic rendering to a global audience.

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