

Sacred Justice

*The Voices and Legacy of the
Armenian Operation Nemesis*



Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy

With a foreword by Gerard Libaridian

Sacred Justice

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Translations by Arsine Oshagan**

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To my beloved family—
grandparents Aaron and Eliza, Elizabeth and Garabed,
parents Arpena and William,
and my brother Bill,
who left us too soon.

And to the leaders of Nemesis:
Aaron Sachaklian
Armen Garo
Shahan Natalie
who risked all for their people.



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Foreword

In the early 1980s, the French journalist and author Jacques Derogy decided to write a book on Operation Nemesis, the project designed and implemented by the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF) or Tashnagtsutiune to assassinate the otherwise unpunished Young Turk leaders responsible for the massacres and deportations of the Ottoman Armenians during World War I. Derogy was inspired by the framework used by Gerard Chaliand—the French Armenian author, strategic thinker, and historian—to articulate the role of this project in Armenian and wider consciousness. Chaliand also facilitated the research on Derogy’s writing project.

With the kind permission of the ARF Bureau—the highest executive body of that political party—I was in a position to assist Derogy’s research in the central archives of the party in Boston; at the time, I was the director of these archives. The research interested me too. There was so little that was really known about the organizational aspects of Operation Nemesis. The ARF’s policy at the time of the trial of Soghomon Tehlirian, responsible for the most important of these assassinations, that of former Ottoman Prime Minister Talat Pasha in Berlin in 1921, had been to cover up any direct responsibility of the ARF for the assassination.

We all knew better. What was present in the ARF archives was sufficient to confirm the generally known picture: Tehlirian’s act was far more than what was argued by his defense attorneys in the German court where he was tried, that is, the act of a single survivor deeply and emotionally disturbed by the massacre of his family. While Tehlirian was indeed a traumatized survivor, his actions had been planned and supported by a group that provided financial and strategic assistance. Derogy was able to produce the first accounting of the operation in 1986, published by Fayard. The original French version was titled “Operation Nemesis. Les Vengeurs Arméniens.” The English version of the work was published by Transaction Publishers in New Jersey as

“Resistance and Revenge. The Armenian Assassination of the Turkish Leaders Responsible for the 1915 Massacres and Deportations,” with a foreword by Gerard Chaliand (1990). Archival evidence in Derogy’s work also indicated that the logistical base of the operation was in Boston, USA. We also learned there the name of Aaron Sachaklian as one who had played an important role in the finance committee that did much more than support the operation financially abroad.

Yet there was so little in the party archives on this project, considering the scope and significance of the operation. At that time, Derogy and I wondered whether the large amount of correspondence necessary for such an operation might have been destroyed for security reasons.

In this book by Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy, we have the answer to that puzzle: Aaron Sachaklian kept the absolute majority of his correspondence, accounting, and other material related to Operation Nemesis in his personal possession. For security reasons, he apparently cut off his family from his involvement in the project. He was concerned, most probably, with the security of involved individuals still alive then and that of his own family. But the boxes of papers did survive. Upon his death, one of Aaron Sachaklian’s daughters, Arpena Sachaklian Mesrobian, did a general inventory of the documents. But not much else was done with or to them; they remained hidden and unknown to the rest of the world.

It is when Arpena passes away that her daughter Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy, granddaughter of Aaron, now custodian of the papers, decided to bring to light the voices represented in this collection and, in the process, made both historical and familial discoveries. The result is this book.

The author introduces these never seen before documents in two contexts. One is what Operation Nemesis symbolizes in the history of her family, actually to the two sides of her Armenian heritage. The maternal side: fighting, resisting, avenging; the paternal side: accepting, fleeing, almost submissive to whatever fate brings to them, as long as they survive. This familial dichotomy—that has in some way been reproduced in the larger Armenian culture—provides challenges to creating a unified vision of its past, present, and future. The second context is the opening up of the story of Operation Nemesis to its last detail: from the internal party political debates surrounding the operation, to logistical dimensions, down to the accounting to the last cent of the funds raised for and expenditures of the operation. In addition to

being a grand strategist and a good judge of characters and situations, Aaron Sachaklian happened to be a certified public accountant.

This is a volume that bridges the gap between world historical events and those that are relevant to Armenian history; between Armenian history and Armenian communities and families; and between communities and families on the one hand and the development of second- and third-generation identities and their relations to larger events on the other.

No doubt, what this volume has to say about Operation Nemesis will have particular significance for historians. The personal and candid letters translated and reproduced here shed light not only on the operational aspects of the project but also on the premature end of the project. There was, we know, a very long list of culprits compiled by the ARF. Sachaklian seems to have focused on the list of one hundred; it is not certain who had developed it; there are some indications that it was the work of a member of the party, Manoog Hampartzumian, who later practiced law in California. Regardless, the list was prepared for the Ninth ARF World Congress in Yerevan in 1919. The Sachaklian archives have the advantage of containing photos of many on this list of criminals, mostly original cutouts from newspapers, almanacs, and other print outlets, as well as some official portraits of high ranking Ottoman officials, indicating that the Sachaklian committee might have also been responsible for the research that went into the project.

Operation Nemesis resulted in the execution of fewer than twenty. A tug of war had developed within the ARF between those who wanted to continue the project and others at the highest echelons of the ARF who thought that Operation Nemesis should be stopped. The ARF, responsible for the establishment of the Republic of Armenia in 1918, had lost power in the republic after less than three years when the latter was Sovietized at the end of 1920, and by 1922–1923, it appeared that Soviet power was securing its foothold there. Those who wanted to end the project believed that, at that juncture in Armenian history, it is the Soviet Union that should be seen as the main enemy; that the continuation of Operation Nemesis would be an obstacle to consolidating their struggle against Bolshevism and imperial Russia now masquerading as the Soviet Union; and that in this new struggle the continuation of Operation Nemesis would create problems with Turkey.

The volume introduces assessments of the dilemmas faced by the Armenians at various times during the period just before, during, and immediately after the Genocide, and internal battles by such central

figures in this drama as Shahan Natalie, the manager of the operation in Europe, operational mastermind in the field, and an ardent defender of the project to the end; Arshag Vramian, a major figure in ARF, Armenian, and Ottoman politics; and Armen Garo, whose entry in Armenian history begins with his participation in the ARF takeover of the Ottoman Bank in Istanbul in 1895 and ends as Ambassador of the first Republic of Armenia in Washington.

Moreover, we see in these letters the process of nation creation and nation building. Functioning without a state of their own before 1918, the ARF assumes as much of the attributes of a state as possible, trying to transform a people defined primarily as a religious community into a political entity capable of assuming agency in the making of its own history. And then, once an independent state is established in 1918 in a small part of historic Armenia, we see the new drama being played, concerns of those in charge of a fledgling republic and a diasporan mentality taking hold, a conflict that continued for a long time and one that was renewed following the establishment of the new, post-Soviet independent republic in 1991.

The newly released letters in this volume also humanize these same larger than life figures. For example, Shahan Natalie is very concerned about the children of major party figures marrying non-Armenians. Rather than a quirk of personality or taste, such tidbits complete the picture of a man almost obsessed with loss of people, whether culturally or physically, one disaster being accentuated by another threat. This volume is a testimony against obscuring the human being in the process of making and idolizing heroes. It is also a testimony to the evolution of identity over generations. Natalie's letters, on occasion so emotional because of his knowledge of and care for orphan survivors, explain his dogged dedication to the cause of Operation Nemesis. These may help to explain his ability to excel at his mission as well as his abrasiveness and impatience with those who were not as focused, efficient, and single-minded as he was.

Beyond all, this volume portrays the deep struggles that continue to play out at different levels of intensity and in so many different ways in the lives of peoples and individuals affected by such great calamities as genocide. The author's personal journey is indeed a family odyssey defined by and a testimony to history in its most calamitous and, at the same time, most revealing and redeeming aspects.

Aaron Sachaklian emerges in this volume from the humble and obscure role in which he had placed himself to that of a commanding

Foreword

position. He will now be seen not only as a central figure who calmed down nerves, absorbed the excesses and imbalances in the personalities of other players, and imposed discipline and steadiness, but also as the one the others turned to as their moral compass and one with good judgment whose devotion and dedication no one ever questioned.

One last comment before I conclude: I thank Marian Mesrobian MacCurdy for introducing to us and for bringing to life Eliza, Aaron's irrepressible wife and the author's grandmother. Eliza's character may explain more how most women negotiated history when not allowed to play the leading role and what history women can produce, given a little chance. Eliza is inspired and inspiring; fortunately, she was respected by her husband and by her family. Her voice dominates even when it is not heard.

It is possible that this is still not the last word on Operation Nemesis. But this is a volume whose contribution to our understanding of specific events resonating over space, time, and generations will be invaluable.

Gerard Libaridian
Cambridge, MA
January 2014



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I want to honor the memory of two exceptional writers—Leo Hamalian, editor extraordinaire of *Ararat*, whose encouragement of my stories about Eliza and company began the journey that led to this book, and our family’s beloved Vahe Oshagan, whose support for my writing gave me courage and whose advice to tell the truth no matter where it takes us I have never forgotten. But perhaps the person who had the most influence on this book was my mother, Arpena Sachaklian Mesrobian, who taught me the power of the word. Her many notes throughout the family files, her identifications on documents, her commitment to saving every scrap of paper with potential value, her signature achievement—her book *Like One Family*—and especially her deep love and reverence for her family and her heritage continue to guide my work and my life.

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Short sections of Chapter 5, were first published in my books *Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice* and *The Mind’s Eye: Image and Memory in Writing about Trauma* (2007), and sections of Chapters 1 and 5 and two of my poems were first published in the literary journal *Ararat*, as noted below. I thank the publishers for permission to use that material here.

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Introduction

*The flock moved on, majestic and wise . . . that it might
persist forever . . .*
—From Komitas, *The Shepherd Songs*

*“Soodh eh, soodh eh. Ahmen pahn soodh eh.” “It’s a lie!
It’s a lie! Everything is a lie!”*
—From Armenian Dance Song

I was born at the intersection of East and West, life and death, hope and despair. My grandparents’ job was to survive, my parents’ to anchor us all into another universe, and my generation’s job to remember. We all did our tasks imperfectly. Parts of us survived, even thrived; parts did not. Much of us is anchored to our adopted home; other parts are floating bodiless, without tether in the ether between Turkish Armenia and America, between the will to thrive and the guilt for doing so, of never being able to do enough to fix what cannot be fixed. There is no completion to these tasks. We are still attempting to survive, to anchor, and to remember.

For the first six years of my life, my parents, my brother, and I lived in my maternal grandparents’ house in Syracuse, New York, where my mother grew up. We were—all six of us—crammed into a small early twentieth-century frame house with a front porch and tiny back study that served as my bedroom with an enticingly flat roof outside its window that looked onto our grape arbor, fruit trees, and beyond that the cliff overlooking Elmwood Park, a dark place full of ancient elms and the secret stories that unfold under them. It was on the swing sets in the park that I met my first attempt at a boyfriend, a budding juvenile delinquent whose mother loved me because she thought I could reform him in those prelapsarian conversations we had sitting on top of the cement bunker that held the park lavatories. We met after my girlfriends and I, standing on top of the cliff overlooking the park,

threw stones down on the three boys lurking on the swings, smoking their Marlboros. When the tall, skinny blond boy looked up at the barrage of weaponry I held in my small fist, I was smitten, but not for long; although an “unsuitable” friend is a requirement to begin the parental separation process of the early teens, I knew my grandfather would instantly reject such a friend for me, and that mattered even in my newly pubescent state.

I, the youngest of five grandchildren, was my grandfather’s favorite—or so Eliza, my grandmother, said. Aaron (in Armenian, Aharon), my grandfather, spent most of his days in the red leather chair near the wooden radio he listened to every day, silently smoking his Camels with shaking fingers, perhaps from undiagnosed Parkinson’s that would, years later, steal my mother’s smile and cause her shuffling gait. But when I was three, four, five, my *medz-hairig* (grandfather) bounced me on his foreleg, carried me through the doorways on his shoulders like a coronated queen, and took me outside at dusk to survey the peach, pear, and apple orchards and the grape arbor beyond our back door. This quiet man who wore a three-piece suit nearly every day of his life, who would have private sessions with countless visiting friends, dignitaries, and battle heroes such as General Dro (a military hero for the Armenian people), had said to his wife about baby Marian, “This one’s special,” when the main thing special about me then was his love for me. When my grandmother and I made our weekly trip to Abajian Cleaners three blocks down on South Avenue, I was the one to carry his wool coat, hugging it to my chest, saying, “I love my *medz-hairig*. I wish he would live forever.” My grandfather lived to eighty-four, the last few years in mental and visual darkness, his eyesight failing, his prodigious brain’s neurons deadened from a series of strokes. Thinking me his wife as a young woman, he called me Eliza, took my hand in his, stroked it, and held it to his cheek. The third time he left the house to be brought back by the police, confused and shaking, my grandmother decided she could not/would not become his warden, and he was sent to Marcy State hospital, where he died three days later, we were told of pneumonia—the “old man’s blessing”—but this diagnosis did not mention the large quantities of barbiturates given to calm and likely kill this confused and frightened old man. No one in our family knew until close to twenty-five years after his death that my grandfather was the bursar and logistical leader of the covert operation—known as Operation Nemesis—to assassinate the architects of the Armenian Genocide.

I come from survivors on all sides. Both sets of grandparents escaped the Turkish massacres of the Armenians, arriving in the United States with the weight of their history propelling virtually every thought, every action. The question—how did your family escape—is a common conversational thread that links virtually all Armenians. Both my grandmothers survived the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896 (named after Sultan Abdul Hamid II): my maternal grandmother, Eliza, hid on her roof at the age of three; then she flew off the roof under her mother’s arm, her brother under the other arm, to escape the Turks who had ravaged her family’s home in the city of Aintab. My paternal grandmother, Elizabeth, ran with her infant daughter to the American mission while her husband hid in the woods and then escaped on a freighter bound for the United States. They were separated for over ten years. My maternal grandfather, Aaron, had left his homeland at the age of sixteen to come to the United States. But in 1909, he went back to Turkish Armenia to visit his mother and met and married Eliza in Dörtöyl just as the Turks were amassing, as part of the Cilician massacres, a siege against the city that lasted two weeks. Aaron, now a citizen of the United States, got word to the US consulates at Alexandretta and Constantinople. The protest that ensued, along with that of other influential Americans, may have had an impact because the Turks stopped the siege, sparing the entire town, which saved Eliza and her family, allowing her a year later to marry, leave her homeland, and immigrate with her new husband to the United States. My grandmother never saw her mother again.

Virtually every diasporan Armenian American has a family history that harkens back to the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1896 when 80,000 to 300,000 people were slaughtered (in which sultan Abdul Hamid II sought to demonstrate to the Armenians that attempts for reform of oppressive laws would be squashed), the Adana massacre in 1909 in which 20,000 to 30,000 died, or what became termed the Armenian Genocide that began in 1915 and killed over one million and a half Armenians.¹ Of the approximately three million Armenians then living in the Ottoman Empire before World War I, fewer than 70,000 remain there today (Dennis Papazian 6). It should be known at the outset that I define “genocide” for the Armenians to mean the effect of murderous action, not necessarily its cause. While at different points along the historical timeline there may have been varying levels of conscious intent to rid the Ottoman Empire of its Armenians, with the Genocide being the most carefully planned and organized specifically

to rid the country of its Armenians, by 1921 at least two-thirds of the Armenian population in Ottoman Turkey, including a majority of those in western Armenia or the eastern provinces of that empire, had disappeared. My grandparents were lucky. They escaped after the massacres of 1894–1896 and 1909, but many family members were not so fortunate. Institutionalized discrimination, crippling taxes, and the massacres in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries culminated in the 1915–1918 Genocide and its aftermath, which was to be the “solution” to the Armenian Question that the Ottoman Turks had felt pressure to resolve for generations. The Ottoman state, led by a few key Turkish leaders, began the premeditated policy of extermination of the Armenians in April 1915 by rounding up and murdering Armenian intellectuals and community leaders and putting their heads on spikes. Then they moved on to other segments of the Armenian communities: villages and towns were emptied of Armenian inhabitants, their homes ransacked and taken over, their fruit trees destroyed, their churches confiscated, reduced to rubble, or allowed to decay, their men murdered, their women raped, and their children and old people and whoever was left thrown into the Euphrates or forced to march across the desert sands, to become food for the jackals. Many of those lucky enough to make it to the concentration camps were massacred subsequently or died of disease and starvation. The fragments of bones that lie just beneath the dust in the desert of Der Zor are testament to the truth of a genocide that Turkey denies to this day.

This was the first genocide of the twentieth century, but once World War I was over, it was ignored. This failure to remember did not go unnoticed by Hitler, who was beginning to mull over “the final solution” for Europe’s Jewish population. On August 22, 1939, he infamously proclaimed, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”

If denial is indeed the last stage of genocide, then the Armenian Genocide continues since the Turkish government has yet to acknowledge its crimes, and the US government, juggling its need not to offend the Turks, has vacillated over the years regarding its terminology. Whatever term we use, we either speak out full voice or we lose our voice. I remember old Armenian women wringing their hands and saying only “*vakh, vakh*” (a variant of “woe is me”) when asked about the Genocide. My grandmother told me that many of the Turks that raided their villages were neighbors or even friends, those whose families had known each other for generations. Suddenly, all that mattered

was Christian versus Muslim, Turk versus Armenian. This is hard to forget when the perpetrators insist on forgetting.

My grandmother, Eliza, told us about the apricots the size of plums and the peaches as big as oranges in her hometown in historic western Armenia. Even today in the Republic of Armenia, which is hundreds of miles east of my grandparents' homes in western Turkish Armenia, apricot jam is made and exported under the iconic Ararat label—that's how central to Armenian culture and cuisine is the apricot. (The binomial name for "apricot" is *Prunus armeniaca*.) Once, as I munched on the bright orange fruits that I had purchased at our local grocery, I absentmindedly looked at the label: "Dried apricots: Product of Turkey." I read on: "Mariani Premium Mediterranean Apricots are harvested in the hills of plentiful Mediterranean growing areas. These luscious plump beauties are hand selected, carefully sun-dried and specially prepared from the finest Malatya Apricots. Malatya Apricots are known throughout the world for being tender, sweet, and full of flavor."

Malatia is my grandfather's birthplace, once a city with an ancient and thriving Armenian population. These apricots are known throughout the world, but the people who grew them, whose land was stolen, whose families were murdered, the tragedies suffered by these people are not acknowledged by the perpetrators or even fully by the US government.

But this story is not about the facts of the Genocide or the massacres that came before. It is about the effects of these unacknowledged mass murders on the survivors, their children, and their children's children. The effects have entered our physical and psychological structures: we absorbed in perhaps equal measure elements of and reactions to victimhood and resistance, and therefore, this book offers narratives of both trauma and resilience. My father's family was forced to run and hide; my mother's resisted, and the resulting differences in my family between these two responses to trauma were palpable. This book investigates significant instances of resistance in my mother's family—focusing particularly on Operation Nemesis, the project to seek justice for the Armenians by killing the perpetrators of the Genocide—and looks also at the results of victimhood as it played out in my father's family and what he absorbed from his parents. The legacy of those responses to mass murder—resistance and victimhood—has been a part of Armenian history in general and my family history in particular. Using the methodologies of memoirists and historians, this project weaves together narrative, historical records, and personal letters to tell a story that has been either commandeered and hidden by silence

or ignored in spite of the victims' narratives. At a showing of excerpts of his film *The Dust Bowl* at Hampshire College on October 24, 2012, filmmaker Ken Burns, director of the Civil War film series, said, "The basic building block of human communication is story. Narrative is a way to reveal, even in a grain of dust." Armenians have known for close to one hundred years that the grains of dust in the desert of Der Zor hide the bones—and the spirits and tales—of the victims silenced in the Armenian Genocide. This is the story of the men who attempted to seek justice for those victims and the effect this resistance had on Aaron Sachaklian and his family.

After the Young Turks restored the Ottoman Constitution in 1908, many Armenians were seduced by the promise of a new regime now that the sultan had been overthrown. The Armenians, they promised, would be beneficiaries of that new world, rather than the third-class citizens they were as Christians in a Muslim world. Eliza's brother Mihran was suspicious of these claims of a new order. He, of course, was proved right when, in 1909, the Turks resumed their persecutions of the Armenians. The Ottoman Empire was dissolving and the Turks needed scapegoats to blame for the dissolution of their power and money and resources to build Turkey for the Turks. Fears that Armenians would join the Russians against Turkey fueled the murderous flames. The Turks convinced themselves that they were justified in attempting to purge the Armenians, who had previously been considered their neighbors, in some cases even their friends, from what the Turks considered their land, which was at one time historic Armenia.

In the face of massive disappointment and fear, the Armenians broke into several political factions, one of which is the *Hai Heghapoghagan Tashnagtsutiune*, which in English is the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF). The ARF believed resistance was necessary to survive; others had differing responses to the current threat.² These disputes contributed to creating a schism in the Armenian population that is still felt to this day. In the face of unaccountable tragedy, we still look for reasons to make sense of what happened, even when there are none, and in the process, we become the dragon that bites its own tail.

The Armenians were looking for salvation: what could protect them, save them, from the ongoing persecution and ultimate destruction at the hands of a population that had been their neighbors, their patients, their teachers, their students, their craftsmen, their friends? As it turned out, there was no salvation for many of the Armenians in Turkey during

that period, but I could see in the psychology of the survivors in my family a significant difference in their methods of adjustment to their lives that a will to survive forced on them. My mother's family fought the Turks in 1909 and beyond. My father's family was forced to run. The resulting differences to them and to their children rippled through the generations.

When my father's parents, Elizabeth Mesrobian and Garabed Fer-
manian, left Turkey, they took with them a very few objects, among
them a small collection of Armenian Bibles and prayer books. In her
family Bible, Elizabeth, the daughter of a priest, wrote the death dates
of her parents and her marriage date—her mother died on December
10, 1883, her father died on April 10, 1894, and her marriage date
was December 18, 1891. She also included the date she arrived in
America—November 25, 1908—and added these words, “May God
be willing for us to return to our homeland. In 1910 we must return.”
They never returned.

Elizabeth and her husband survived the massacres of 1894–1896.
She used to echo for her son the high-pitched wailing screams of the
Turks as they charged through the ancient Armenian town of Kharpert
with their swords and scimitars. Elizabeth died before I was born, but I
can still hear those chilling sounds my father relayed to me. The effects
on the family are just as clear; my father's family was forced into the
role of victims: they became fearful and anxious. We have no stories
of familial resistance to the Turks here. Survival was enough to ask of
them. They were penniless immigrants in Detroit, Michigan, where
my grandfather, Garabed, went to work on the Ford Motor Company
assembly line. Everyone non-Armenian was an “odar” (foreigner), which
meant nearly everyone else in their adoptive country where they were
the actual foreigners. They lived in a poor neighborhood in Highland
Park, Michigan. The alley behind my father's childhood home was a
romantic, hidden spot to me as a child, a place where teenage lovers
hid from their parents at night, where milkmen brought glass bottles
of milk to place in milk boxes before families arose in the morning. But
to William, my father (called Willy by his mother), the alley was where
the neighborhood kids beat him up. He had to contribute to the family
coffers, beginning as a small boy. At the age of eight, he went door to
door with his little red wagon selling ice chips to the housewives too
poor to be able to afford the large blocks sold in more wealthy neigh-
borhoods. My father's motto was, “There are only two things in life
you have to do: die and pay your taxes.” The concept of “fun” was as

foreign to my father as those blocks of ice were to the poor women of Highland Park.

Elizabeth, my father's mother, was a tiny, thin woman, the educated daughter of a priest. Given the unsettled political situation (that would soon erupt into the massacres), her family decided that she would be safer as a married woman, so she was forced to marry an orphan, a man who had been taken in by a wealthy family and adopted their name. Elizabeth refused to take her husband's name: "Why should I adopt the name of this orphan who does not even have his own name?" My name, Mesrobian, is therefore, matrilineal. My father told me that Elizabeth was considered wise and kind by the Armenians in their community. They sought her out for advice or guidance. My father called her "an angel." But my mother insisted that Elizabeth saw Willy, not Garabed, her husband, as the man in the family, leading to the ice chips in that little red wagon. I have often wondered who she was, this tiny woman tough enough to insist on her own name in a patriarchal culture and to have survived the massacres with her infant daughter in her arms. Other than her Bible notations, I have no records, writing, or stories directly from her. Other than that one chilling Turkish yell she mimicked for my father, she remained silent, her resistance evidenced only by her survival.

My mother's family, on the other hand, resisted in a big way, given my grandfather's role in Operation Nemesis. Aaron Sachakian, one of the first certified public accountants in Connecticut, was a quiet, self-controlled intellectual whose cognitive faculties guided most of his decisions. Although he and his wife had little money, their home was filled with books and people, since they were the center of a small but active Armenian community in Syracuse. He was also a leader of the Tashnags (ARF), founded in 1890, that first sought reforms for Armenians living in Ottoman Turkey and later was dedicated to the goal of an independent Armenia.

An independent but precarious Republic of Armenia was declared in May of 1918, but it lasted only two and one half years, given the powerhouse neighbors—Turkey and Russia—who fought with Armenia over who would rule the disputed territory a fraction of the size of historic Armenia. Other injustices were visited on the Armenians. On the night of November 1, 1918, anticipating the imminent defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the war, the Turkish leaders responsible for the Armenian Genocide escaped Istanbul before the arrival of British and French troops by slipping in the dead of night onto a ship entering

the Black Sea, heading for Odessa. On July 5, 1919, five judges of the special court-martial established in Istanbul by an Allied-supported Ottoman government found four of the accused fugitives (Talaat Pasha, former grand vizier and minister of the interior; Djemal Pasha, former Navy minister; Enver Pasha, former war minister; and Dr. Nazim, former minister of education) guilty “of centrally organized mass murder—genocide in today’s terminology. . .” (Dadrian and Akcam 83), and sentenced them to death. Ancillary verdicts in other trials found guilty Dr. Behaeddin Shakir and governors of key provinces responsible for the “massacre and destruction of the Armenians and the plunder and looting of their goods and belongings . . .” (quoted in Dadrian 332). They were sentenced to death in absentia as well. These leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) were among those directly responsible for the devastation visited upon the Armenians in Turkey between 1915 and 1918. However, the Istanbul government and the Allies did not attempt to seek extradition of the fugitives who were now living in Berlin and other parts of Europe and the Middle East where they had created a pan-Islamic organization, the Union of Revolutionaries for Islam. Rear Admiral and British Acting High Commissioner at Istanbul, Richard Webb, noted, “It is interesting to see . . . the manner in which the sentences have been apportioned among the absent and the present so as to effect a minimum of real bloodshed” (quoted in Dadrian 333).

Since the primary perpetrators had escaped and no extradition was forthcoming, in October of 1919 at the ARF’s General Congress, the party decided to ensure justice by searching for and killing the architects of the Armenian Genocide. Three leaders of this mission were appointed to plan and execute the assassinations of these Turkish officials and Armenian traitors who had escaped with their money to Europe and Central Asia. It was not until after the publication of a book in France in 1986 titled *Operation Nemesis* that our family discovered that Aaron Sachaklian, my maternal grandfather, was one of the three planners of the operation. He was the bursar of the organization, led the fundraising efforts, was in charge of getting money to the agents on the ground, and was responsible for logistics, training, and finance, including being charged with financing the operation to assassinate Talaat Pasha in Berlin. They called their work *Hadug Kordz* (Special Project or Special Mission). My grandfather died in 1964, and he took his secret to the grave. If my grandmother knew, she did not let on. The other leaders were Armen Garo (born Karekin Pastermadjian), an

active participant in the struggle against Ottoman oppression, later a member of the Ottoman Parliament, and finally ambassador of the Republic of Armenia to the United States; and Shahan Natalie (born Hagop Der Hagopian), who had served as editor of the *Hairenik*, an Armenian affairs newspaper based in Boston, from 1912 to 1915), and who was in charge of the coordination of Nemesis operations in Europe. General Sebouh (born Arshak Nersessian) was appointed by Garo to replace himself when he became ill. Each of these men had lost family and friends during the massacres and deportations in which the Armenians were nearly annihilated. Shahan Natalie in his letter of March 19, 1921, written to his *ungers* back in the States, describes the assassination of Talaat Pasha that had occurred four days earlier as a “sacred work of justice.”

After my grandmother’s death in 1990, my mother found a set of original, unpublished letters and notes in my grandfather’s private files pertaining to Operation Nemesis. These letters, including those from fellow Nemesis leaders Armen Garo and Shahan Natalie as well as from Talaat’s killer, Soghomon Tehlirian and others, demonstrate the dedication, fear, and anguish that they lived with every day, as well as the planning and expertise required to do this work. These letters received by my grandfather and/or his compatriots as they planned the assassinations of the former CUP leaders responsible for the Genocide form the historical, intellectual, and emotional core of this book. While this Special Project (*Hadug Kordz*) exacted a toll on these men and on their families, it provided the only justice the Armenians have yet experienced. Although it may be that resistance may allow the only dignity possible even when all is lost, ultimately, this book does not judge; it examines the nature of the accomplishments of the men dedicated to Nemesis and the price they and their families paid for them in the context of the victimhood and its legacy that many Ottoman Armenians were forced to experience. Most importantly, after nearly one hundred years, it offers the voices of these men of Nemesis to allow them to tell their own stories of trauma, hope, love, resistance, dedication, and retribution—their master resistance narratives.

Since this book uses both historical and personal narratives as evidence for its argument that resistance and victimhood produced very different responses to the Genocide, the book’s prose reflects the needs of those two writing genres: (1) historical information provides context for the Nemesis letters; (2) documentation anchors that information in scholarship; and (3) personal narrative/memoir demonstrates how

these two divergent responses of resistance and victimhood played out in the same family.

Chapter 1 uses personal narrative and memoir to provide key information about Eliza, my maternal grandmother and Aaron's wife—her upbringing, her personality, her marriage, and her capacity for resistance and sacrifice encouraged by the models her ARF brothers provided and her experiences in the Hamidian and Adana massacres. Also investigated in the chapter is the price of these sacrifices, demonstrated with sections from Eliza's memoir that offer first-hand accounts of the Hamidian massacres of 1894–1895 that uprooted her from her childhood home, the siege of Dörtyol of 1909 when her family participated in the salvation of the town, and her experience as an immigrant in the United States. This memoir shows clearly that the Armenians at Dörtyol were attempting to defend themselves, not revolt, the latter of which has been the Turks' primary rationalization for the Genocide. Chapter 1 also introduces us to Aaron and his family members, who will play a key role in the chapters to come.

Chapter 2 gives Aaron's story as a resistor, who he was, what he did, and why. Letters written by and to him during this period from Arshak Vramian, Shahan Natalie, his wife, and others show his focus and dedication, as well as the resulting challenges that arose from his chosen path.

Chapter 3 presents the voices of *Hadug Kordz*, including some of the operational, logistical, political, and emotional details of their mission that demonstrate their methodologies, their commitment to their cause, and the grief and fear they lived with every day. These letters (translated from the original Armenian) show how, what, and why these men did what they did, along with a discussion of the historical context in which they were written. This chapter's documentation anchors the information in the letters to the historical record. The letters also provide some financial information about *Hadug Kordz*, including a financial accounting of the defense in the Tehlirian trial.

Chapter 4 offers letters between my parents, Arpena and William, that demonstrate how resistance and victimhood played out in the second generation and how that affected their relationships and their parenting of the next generation. Here is where we begin to see the legacy their parents have left them and that they themselves left to their own children.

Chapter 5, Part I investigates other methods of resistance, including speech and writing, and their utility for trauma survivors to

demonstrate what may mediate the effects of trauma. Part II investigates the prices we pay for resistance and victimhood, the relationship between resistance and resilience, the glue we have that holds a culture together, and what could come next.

Many books have been written on this period in Armenian history, although few about Operation Nemesis. It is still a taboo subject in a divided diasporan Armenian community. A United Nations Human Rights Sub Commission report in 1985 recognized the Armenian deaths of 1915–1918 as genocide; however, given the strategic importance of Turkey to American interests, our government is still in thrall to the Turkish government and its acolytes who deny the truth of their actions. This leaves the Armenian community in a bizarre psychological limbo: a country that took in many Armenian Genocide survivors does not want to fully recognize the reason they are here. In addition, since the Turks have not acknowledged their crimes as the Germans did, full justice has not been possible for the Armenians, leaving the actions of the ARF open to interpretations of retribution, even terrorism, further dividing a divided people.

The political divisions in the Armenian community are echoed by the psychological differences between victimhood and resistance. I am myself in conflict regarding the decision to assassinate the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. While I can fully understand the need for justice, even retribution, it is difficult to imagine my gentle grandfather, the man who never raised his voice, taking on this work. I remember him as a dignified man whose only sign of anger was a furrowed brow and tense fingers squeezing my arm. It is hard to imagine him negotiating with his soul the decision to participate in the effort to wrench justice for the forgotten Armenians—and never speaking of it. I remember the many visitors to our house and wonder now what roles they may have played in Operation Nemesis.

Resistors need an immense level of focus and control to proceed, and that has had implications for the rest of the family. Soon after my maternal grandparents first came to the United States, my grandfather became the general manager of the *Hairenik*. He spent days and nights there, even after their first child was born in 1912, undoubtedly working on crucial political matters as well as those pertaining to the *Hairenik*, which served as the most important publishing house of Armenian books at that time. One day, my grandmother, who spoke little English at that time, became worried when her husband did not return home for two days. She bundled her infant daughter up against the winter

cold, and after taking several trolleys and trains in the strange city of Boston arrived at her husband's work place, only to be scolded and told by him to leave—and quickly. As she wrote in her memoir, “So this is marriage. With my hands and feet frozen, and in tears, I reached home.” I suspect my grandfather was deep into political activities since the *Hairenik* was a publication of the ARF and their leadership overlapped, but no explanation was given to Eliza. The welfare of the Armenian people took precedence even over family. The Aaron I knew never spoke sharply to me, regardless of whatever my curious, at times stubborn, spirit might have gotten me into. As a very old, nearly blind man, he had to be locked in the house lest he wander away into a world he no longer recognized. But as a young man with a mission, he was relentless, even with his young wife who had just left her family forever.

My grandmother Eliza loaded guns during the siege of Dörtöyol. She left her homeland at seventeen. She had four children before she was thirty. She ran her household virtually on her own because her husband was often out of town on either his accounting business or dealing with Armenian political affairs. Her fourth child died in infancy; she seldom spoke of this, only saying once when I asked her about it, that the child died of pneumonia because the doctor didn't keep the baby covered during an exam. “Three children are enough,” she said. She taught in the Armenian community center; she helped raise her grandchildren. She did what she had to do. One summer, she had what she termed a “nervous breakdown.” Even the sound of the newspaper pages being turned could not be tolerated. Her husband sent her on a vacation to the Connecticut shore—with all three children.

Her husband was known for his self-control. A former staff member of the *Hairenik*, Armen Bardizian, wrote a letter to Eliza recalling a time during an ARF convention when Armen became very heated, making intemperate, angry remarks. Word came to Armen that he was wanted outside the door. He left the meeting and found Aaron waiting for him. Aaron said not a word, nor did he. Both stood there for many minutes without speaking. After a long time, Aaron said, “All right, now we can go back in.” Throughout the Armenian community, he was called in to adjudicate issues, as he did in his family. When my mother, Arpena Sachaklian Mesrobian, the youngest of three, was blindfolded by her older siblings and placed on the top of a cement wall to “walk the plank,” and predictably fell, she ran to her father for justice. He collected all three children and conducted what amounted to a trial that resulted only in stern words, leaving my mother unsatisfied. No extra emotion

need be used. When my mother was elderly and ill and looking back on her life, she said, “I regret not hugging my parents more.” But she forgot that it wasn’t their way or hers. Once I asked whether her parents ever told her they loved her. She looked at me as if this question had never occurred to her and said, “No, but I knew they loved me.” I have no doubt she was right.

When my mother died in 2008, her house was full of artifacts: the sash soaked in the dried blood of her murdered uncle Mihran, her mother’s brother, the hero of the resistance who saved his family from certain death; the fireplace bellows and a mortar and pestle, among the only objects Eliza, my grandmother, was able to take with her when she left her home; the lace handwork Eliza’s mother sent to her daughter from the old country that my great-grandmother sold to help support her family after the massacres destroyed her husband’s import business; and Eliza’s diary, her accounting of her life as a transplanted survivor. These relics live in a walnut desk that belonged to my great uncle. My mother, a writer and editor, worked at this desk for all the years I knew her. She was a historian, the keeper of tales.

My mother, like her father, was supremely controlled, to good purpose. She became the revered director of Syracuse University Press, a position she was ideally suited for even though at the time few directors were women: she loved books and the knowledge they contained, and she enjoyed being instrumental in the process of getting that knowledge out to the world. She was a gifted editor and administrator, two skills that do not often coexist. Her professional life was a joy to her; she earned many awards, and wrote a book, *Like One Family*, that investigates the growth and demise of the Syracuse Armenian community. She was a dedicated mother—it was she who appeared at school parent nights, she who drove her children to school and church events, she who packed school lunches for the next day. My mother was the supreme manager: she managed at work; she managed at home. Even my father’s emotional outbursts did not break her sense of internal control. After my brother died, a devastating loss, my mother’s doctor suggested antidepressants because she wasn’t eating or sleeping well. She was surprised at his diagnosis. “I don’t feel depressed,” she said. When life is about acting, being in control, there is little room left for expressing emotions—to ourselves or to anyone else. Yet, the second epigram that begins this book came from my mother. In her old age, the sadness of outliving her son broke through my mother’s stoicism. While she remained ever the lady with the brilliant, diamond-bright

mind, in spite of Parkinson's and a cruel last illness, her world had been shattered by my brother's death, and there was no recovery from that.

I never met my father's parents, but my parents spoke of them. Where my mother's father had first come to the United States at sixteen looking for a better life than the repressive Turks would allow, my father's family escaped to the United States to preserve theirs. Their lives were defined by the loss of their home and country—they spoke of the old country as where they belonged. The peaches were sweeter; the sun was brighter. They lived in fear of the streets of Detroit, the strangeness of the country they were forced to adopt—not to mention the trauma they carried from the massacres—and they communicated that fear to their son. His house was in an African American neighborhood, and the two cultures then did not mix. The only interaction my father ever spoke of was the day when a couple of the black teenagers in his neighborhood asked him when he was about eleven to steal with them. He was afraid to say no and did not want to say yes, so he ran away. My father was a sweet soul who hated cruelty of any kind, who was proud of me when, at the age of eight, I argued with my uncle that hunting was unfair since the animals cannot carry guns. But for him most odars (non-Armenians) had to prove they could be trusted before he welcomed them into his world. But then for children of genocide survivors perhaps nothing in life is to be trusted. When I was old enough to drive and asked to use the family car, my father's perennial response was, "Why? Do you have to go out?"

"No, Dad, I don't have to. I want to."

"Well, if you go out, something bad could happen to you. If you stay home, nothing bad will."

Who can argue with such impeccable logic? It became clear to me as a child that I was oscillating between the two poles of resistance and victimhood—the injunction to use mental discipline to resist the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" or the necessity to duck those slings and arrows for fear one might pierce a vital artery. These world views were operationalized by my mother who believed that self-control and fulfilling expectations were the answers to "life's persistent questions" and my father who believed that there were no answers, that all you can do is keep your head down, stay safe, and stick with the family.

These are the products of unacknowledged genocide—Armenians when I grew up lived in a country that did not know or care how they got there. A million and a half Armenians were simply swallowed by the glaze of denial and time. When I grew up, no one had heard

of Armenia. The media blitz that occurred during World War I that referred to the “starving Armenians” ended as quickly as it had begun. I have been asked if I am Jewish, Italian, Spanish, east Indian, native American, Lebanese, even Irish. When I told people I am Armenian, I often heard, “Is that somewhere near Romania?” When Armenians first immigrated to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century, they were told to check “oriental” or “other” when asked for their race. I still check the “other” box. I suspect the men of Nemesis would have too.

Notes

1. Number estimates vary, but most scholars settle on these estimates. Some consider the Genocide to extend to 1923 given the deportations and murders that took place after the war in Cilicia.
2. Since the Armenians in this volume came from Turkish Armenia, spellings reflect Western Armenian rather than Eastern Armenian usage—for example, Tashnag, rather than Dashnak.

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