

Hampartzoum Mardiros Chitjian, *A Hair's Breadth from Death*, London and Reading: Taderon Press, 2003; Astrid Katcharyan, *Affinity with Night Skies*, London and Reading: Taderon Press, 2003; Kay Mouradian, *A Gift in the Sunlight*, London and Reading: Taderon Press, 2005; Haig Tahta, *April 1915*, London and Reading: Taderon Press, 2005.

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Four recent books published by the London-based Gomidas Institute's Taderon Press have as their central point of reference the Armenian Genocide and its impact-psychologically and intergenerationally.

Hampartzoum Mardiros Chitjian's *A Hair's Breadth from Death* is an account written by a survivor of the Armenian Genocide. Born in 1901 and raised in Perri, a small village near Kharpert, the author, Chitjian, meticulously remembers and commemorates both his family and a lost way of life. The latter point is very important to Chitjian's narrative. His memoir is not simply a remembrance of his family, although it is that, but is also a commemoration of the village of Perri. The memoir, written largely when Chitjian was in his 70s and 80s (he lived to the age of 102), contains detailed descriptions and the author's own drawings of the type of clothing worn, household implements, women's household labour, and the tools of his father's trade of hand dying designs and colours on cloth. In addition to such extensive rendering of the material world of Perri prior to 1915, Chitjian also introduces the inhabitants of his family and the village. Published in this book are his drawings of the floor plan of his family home, complete with the location of furniture, as well as neighbourhood maps in which he identified where each family lived. He provides a comprehensive list of the names of all his classmates when he attended Perri's Armenian school. Not only does Chitjian provide valuable information on the town of Perri and its Armenian inhabitants, *A Hair's Breadth from Death* offers crucial insight into his experience as a young man trapped within a genocidal state. Unlike many Armenian Genocide survivor accounts written in English, Chitjian's memoir was written by someone who was an adolescent, not a child, in 1915 and who was not deported from Perri because his father brought his four sons to the Turkish orphanage before being deported, but actually murdered, with the women of his family, outside of Perri. The author, who escaped being killed in the orphanage, because at 14 years of age, he was considered too old to be Islamized, spent the next six years, until 1921 when he

fled over the border into Iran, working on farms, trying to stave off starvation, and struggling to keep himself alive. Chitjian's narrative covers an important aspect of Armenian history—the experience of the tens of thousands of Armenians who remained within the Kharpert region between 1915-1923 but who struggled desperately to not be caught by the authorities and to stay alive. Chitjian's account of his lived experience is of enormous value because of his ability to articulate his innermost emotions. Chitjian does not hold back from describing his terror, his grief, and his sense of loss, emotions which dogged him his entire life. The text includes his poems and his drawings which are his attempts, even at the age of 102, to come to terms with the loss of his father and the manner in which he and his father were separated. For most of his life Chitjian believed that his father left his four sons at the door of the Turkish orphanage without a word of explanation, and only when he was an elderly man did he learn from his brother that their father gave a partial explanation for his actions. However, it is clear that for an emotional and verbal person such as Chitjian his father's reticence on that final, terrible day was a reality he struggled to comprehend his entire life.

Whereas *A Hair's Breadth from Death* attests to the long-term psychological trauma of the Armenian Genocide on a survivor, Astrid Katcharyan's *Affinity with Night Skies* and Kay Mouradian's *A Gift in the Sunlight* written by two descendants of their mother's and grandmother's experiences during the Armenian Genocide demonstrate how the life histories of survivors continue to haunt and influence their children and grandchildren. Katcharyan's and Mouradian's accounts seem to represent a new subgenre in narratives of the Armenian Genocide in that they are written by children or grandchildren of a mother or grandmother's real experience but in a semi-fictional form in which the writer imagines her mother's and grandmother's emotions and recreates conversations in a novelistic style. The stories they tell are interesting. Both women in these two narratives were young women who prior to the Genocide were able to avail themselves of the educational opportunities that had increased for Ottoman Armenian women since the nineteenth century. Astrid Katcharyan's *Affinity with Night Skies* tells the story of her grandmother, Astra Sabondjian, a young educated woman in Smyrna who wrote for Armenian newspapers and who was a advocate of women's education and new roles for women in Armenian society, while Kay Mouradian's mother, Flora, attended the American missionary school in Hadjin and even spent a summer studying in Constantinople prior to 1915. In *Affinity with Night Skies* Astrid Katcharyan narrates her grandmother's eventful life from Erzeroum to Smyrna to Konya to Smyrna to Athens to Vienna to Venice through the Armenian Genocide and two world wars. Astra Sabondjian was imprisoned in 1915 when the authorities came to arrest her husband, Setrag Tokadjian, a journalist and editor who wrote for the Hairenik Daily and his own newspaper, Ashkhadank, and she refused to tell them where he was. After his arrest she was released but ordered to be deported with her two small children, stopping in Konya

she applied to work as an army seamstress thus saving herself and her children from the death march. While in Konya, her husband, whom she had been told was dead, reappeared and she hid him for the next three years. At the end of the war the family returned to Smyrna where her husband was killed, and she was forced to flee during the burning of the city. As I was reading this account of Astra Sabondjian's life, I could imagine it as a movie and think the story lends itself to cinematic representation.

Kay Mouradian's *A Gift in the Sunlight* addresses the transmission of trauma through the generations in the preface in which Mouradian writes that her mother was an angry, self-pitying woman who underwent a miraculous change at the end of her life when Mouradian describes her as becoming filled with unconditional love. It is clear that by discovering and writing her mother's tale Kay Mouradian is better able to understand her mother's behaviour throughout her life and her transformation at the end.

Haig Tahta's *April 1915* departs from these works in that it is entirely fictional. Tahta's novel recounts the lives of several Armenians living in Constantinople, Caesaria and Van in the fateful month of April 1915. The idea of the novel, to follow these characters lives in the month of April, is a clever one and the characters described represent a wide variety of people in the Ottoman Empire: Armenian, Turkish, young, old, rural, urban. Tahta clearly aims to represent the multiplicity of Armenian experience and the multi-ethnic composition of the Ottoman Empire, however; the novel would have been improved by adherence to one of the first principles of creative writing—the author should show not tell—as sometimes Tahta interjects into the text in order to lecture to the reader. The novel would have been improved by having such authorial inclusions edited out or retold. Nevertheless, the novel is a good read and the characters are engaging.