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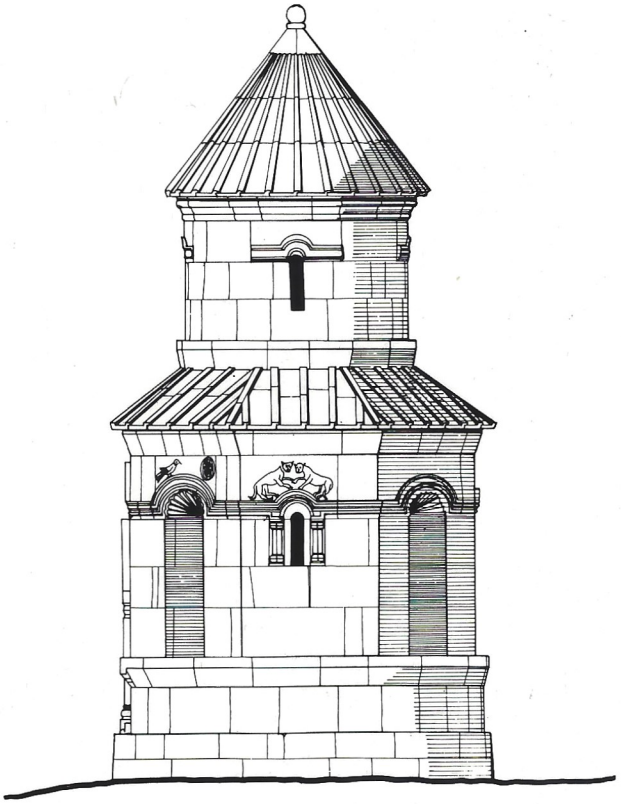

STINA KATCHADOURIAN. *Efronia: An Armenian Love Story*. Boston, MA: Northwestern University Press, 1994. Pp. 218.

By an interesting coincidence, a woman survivor's memoir, turned into a novel by a woman author, is being reviewed here by a woman critic: a triangle of women, one a survivor of the Armenian Genocide;

one her literary non-Armenian daughter-in-law; and one a woman scholar from the generations of survivors of the Armenian Genocide, with a keen interest in Genocide literature.

My first glance through the book convinced me that this was not just another testimony of suffering and survival but a complex literary work. Incongruent and often opposing cultural, social, and psychological factors had shaped the relationship of the two narrators (Efronia and Stina Katchadourian) and molded a work of art. The result is a "female piece of literature" (as Marilyn Yalom calls it in the foreword), and most importantly, a narrative from "an 'outsider's' perspective" (p. xvii), as the author intends.

Stina Katchadourian subtitles her novel "An Armenian Love Story," and, indeed, she sticks to that theme throughout the narrative. The dark shadow of Efronia's painful, unfulfilled love for Ramzi, a young Persian Muslim student envelops the entire story. In her memoir of some five hundred pages, which she wrote in Armenian and entrusted to her son, did Efronia herself treat this subject with such importance? I doubt it. But as an author, Katchadourian sculpted the raw material at hand as she saw fit. Perhaps this outlandish love affair between an Armenian girl and a Persian-Muslim boy, the shock resulting from the sudden unraveling of the secret, and, finally, the parallel with the novelist's own choice to marry "someone outside her own world" (p. 8) together triggered the birth of this literary work.

Katchadourian divides her novel into three parts, namely, "Efronia," "Ramzi," and "Darkness in Anatolia." She assumes the role of the narrator, interjecting her own knowledge of facts, places, and events, and also quoting directly from Efronia's writings that had been translated into English by Herant, Efronia's son and the author's husband. Efronia's confession of love appears on page 51 with Efronia's own formulation: "The First and Last Time in My Life That I Was in Love." From this point on Ramzi's shadow never leaves the narrative.

The novel opens with Efronia's experience in war-torn Lebanon and her flight to the U.S. to join her only son and his family in Palo Alto, California. Years later, at the behest of her daughter-in-law, Efronia writes the story of her life, a life in which, she says, ". . . there has been enough happening to fill up many books" (p. 5). She was born into a prosperous family in Aintab but grew up an orphan in abject poverty. Her father was butchered in the massacres of 1895 when she was only two months old. Efronia belonged to the Armenian Evangelical Church and graduated from the church high school. Her disdain for the non-evangelical Armenian community is reflected in her memoir. In one instance she writes, ". . . I did not like the atmosphere in the Armenian

community; knowing her [Nouriyeh Hanem, a Turkish woman] would give me a pleasant way to pass my time . . ." (p. 55). This attitude is transmitted to Katchadourian, who presents the Protestant missionaries as the only saviors and enlighteners of the Armenian people: "[M]ost of the Ottoman Armenians," she claims, "were peasants . . . concerned with little else than how to put bread on the table. It was into this world that the Protestant missionaries arrived" (p. 116).

Efronia and her family escaped deportation, partly because of connections with the government and partly because of the government's leniency toward the Protestant community. Thus, unlike many other eyewitness accounts of the Genocide, there are no gruesome depictions of murder, rape, and plunder in the novel. Yet a sense of terror hovers over Efronia's life. Before the evacuation of Armenians, Aintab was a temporary station for refugee convoys on their way to Deir Zor, and Efronia witnessed the desperate situation of the deportees: "They had left their homes only a few days before, but they were already in so pitiful a state that it is impossible to describe" (p. 125), she writes. Efronia stayed on in Aintab, but she had to hide "two long months in the attic all by herself," to evade the abductors' eyes, presumably because she was "too beautiful to be seen" (p. 147).

The Armenian Genocide, while not the leitmotif of the novel, is the source of conflict and tension in the love story. Efronia knows that her love affair with Ramzi is a dangerous game she plays. Marriage to a Muslim boy, albeit a non-Turk, is implausible. Her loyal Evangelical family had turned down many suitors because they were "from the wrong Church" (p. 33), that is Armenian Apostolic or Armenian Catholic, let alone a non-Christian. Moreover, the renewed Turkish persecutions, deportations, and massacres affecting Efronia's own extended family made even considering such a match utter madness. The result is a human tragedy that consumes two young souls, culminating in Ramzi's fatal accident. The love affair is over, but its impact on Efronia's life lingers, shaping her future and her outlook.

Regardless of the central theme of love in this novel, I regard it as an achievement in the artistic representation of the Armenian Genocide. The author has woven her tale with the richest colors of Armenian customs, traditions, and beliefs, while providing subtle documentation of the deportations and massacres and important historical background in a skillful literary rendering. The history of the Genocide, as "a distant catastrophe that had befallen the Armenian people" (p. 24), slowly unfolds as awareness begins to crystalize for the author. The novel form she has chosen and the historical competence she has attained lend themselves well to the conceptualization of the Armenian Genocide. Free from scholarly con-

straints, the novelist depicts daily life colorfully yet realistically and paints a vivid portrait of the hell that was consuming the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire.

The scholarly detachment in research studies, necessary to make the argument convincing and the impact effective, is achieved in this novel with no extra effort. The author's non-Armenian background as well as her lack of initial interest in the subject of Armenian history and the Genocide are major contributing factors. This detachment is also manifested in the author's occasional scornful remarks on Armenian customs and community life. Still, Katchadourian's attitude is far from one of indifference or contempt. She sympathizes with her mother-in-law's fate and relates it to her own life: "The First World War had shattered Efronia's youth," she writes; "the Second World War cast its shadow over mine" (p. xiv). Or, "I wanted to tell her I finally understood why she had so readily accepted me, a foreigner, to be her son's wife" (p. 8).

Katchadourian succeeds in memorializing Efronia's life into a story of universal appeal: a story of love, hardship, and suffering that repeats with each Genocide survivor, yet remains new and unique. How many stories like Efronia's with their painful realities and shocking revelations remain untold? Armenians need more talented and dedicated Stina Katchadourians to take up their brushes and paint that unfathomable world of Armenian suffering until the landscape is complete and the hideousness of the entire picture is revealed.

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