

## TWO NATIONAL TRAGEDIES

by Gayane Merguerian

*LITERARY RESPONSES TO CATASTROPHE: A COMPARISON OF THE ARMENIAN AND THE JEWISH EXPERIENCE*, by Rubina Perroomian. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1993.

In this important work of literary history, Dr. Perroomian examines the responses of a number of Jewish and Armenian writers to the catastrophes which have befallen their communities throughout history. She concludes that despite their common legacy of oppression, the two groups of writers differ markedly in their literary responses to catastrophe, and that although this difference appears from the time of their theological and literary beginnings, it is most apparent in writings that focus specifically on the Holocaust and the 1915 Armenian Genocide.

The book opens with a comparison of literary responses to catastrophe before the nineteenth century. The sin/punishment/redemption paradigm, Perroomian argues, has a historical presence in the literature of both communities, although in the Jewish case it appears more often in religious than in literary texts. The theme of martyrdom is also present in both early traditions, but while the Armenian conception of martyrdom anticipates a heavenly reward for sufferings on earth, the Jewish tradition prefers to find the reward for martyrdom in righteousness. Significantly, Perroomian finds that feelings of shame and humiliation are found in pre-nineteenth-century Jewish writing about catastrophe, but not in its Armenian counterpart.

During the nineteenth century, European nationalism began to influence Armenian writing. The pre-nineteenth-century ideal of holy martyrdom came to be transformed into a glorification of martyrdom for the sake of "the nation." Nineteenth-century Jewish literature was similarly influenced by European nationalism, but took a more self-critical approach to catastrophic events. For example, many Jewish intellectuals blamed their own leadership for allowing Tsarist abuses to fall on Russian Jewish shtetls. Perroomian characterizes the Jewish response in the nineteenth century as *internal*, looking within the community for explanations of disaster, while the Armenian response is *external*, more likely to be focused on criticism of the enemy.

Perroomian's historical overview sets the stage for her analysis of literary responses to the catastrophes of the

late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, culminating in the Holocaust and the 1915 Armenian Genocide. She devotes a chapter each to Zapel Esayan, Suren Partevian, Aram Antonian, and Hakop Oshakan. Perroomian's strength is her familiarity with these twentieth-century Armenian writers, and in her close readings of their individual work she avoids the generalizations which sometimes detract from her analyses of earlier literary periods. Her observations are summed up in a powerful conclusion. The Armenian Genocide, like the Holocaust, was different from earlier catastrophes—so much so that the initial reaction, as with Jewish writers after the Holocaust, was shock and bewilderment, reflected in a relative quiet on the literary front (in the Armenian case until the 1930s, in the Jewish, until the 1960s), followed by an explosion of fiction and historical analysis.

However, in the Jewish literary community, this explosion resulted in the development of a diverse and sophisticated Holocaust literature that has come to serve both artistic and psychological needs within the community. In contrast, the Armenian literary response to the Genocide has failed to look beyond the ancient boundaries of lamentation and desire for revenge. One reason for the difference is rooted in the historical development of the two literatures briefly summarized above. Another is that after the Second World War the new state of Israel became an arena for discourse on the Final Solution. Attempts to understand and to cure the trauma of the Holocaust were deliberately made by the Israeli government (especially during and after the Eichmann trial). Nothing comparable happened after the Armenian Genocide. Any similar attempts in the Armenian S.S.R. to confront the Genocide in literary or psychological terms were carefully managed by the Soviet state, which viewed the independent definition of national identity within its borders as a threat.

Perroomian finds that the themes of anger, shame and guilt especially, along with the ongoing debate on how properly to mourn, are common in post-Holocaust literature, but rare in literary responses to the Armenian Genocide. She singles out Hakop Oshakan, who perceived the inadequacy of traditional Armenian literary devices to treat this event, and who understood the implications for the community and the future of its literature. And yet she concludes that the Armenian literary establishment has not yet taken up Oshakan's challenge, has not yet found a language in which to mourn.

In focusing on well-known literary figures, however,

Peroomian overlooks the presence of writings about guilt, remorse and anger elsewhere, and particularly in the memoir literature of the diaspora. In defiance of Peroomian's assertion that there is no "guilt" theme in Armenian letters, for example, Naomi Topalian's *Dust to Destiny* discusses a family's unresolved guilt for the sacrifice of one of its members to save the others. The most recent English-language memoir of the Genocide, *Out of Turkey*, is a minefield of thinly-disguised shame, anger, guilt, and family dysfunction, all clearly originating in events surrounding the 1915 catastrophe. As for the second generation, Michael Arlen, in his widely-read *Passage to Ararat*, openly admits to his anger with his father and his impatience with the Armenian community's self-righteous "chauvinism of misfortune." Arlene Avakian describes *Passage to Ararat* as a catalyst in her exploration of her own Armenian identity in *Lion Woman's Legacy*, and Avakian's work has in turn given rise to a long-overdue discussion, some of which has taken place in the pages of this review, on the Genocide and gender identity in the Armenian community. Finally, Diana Der Hovanessian's autobiographical poetry ("How to Choose Your Past," "For the Unsaid," "Osmosis") responds to Oshakan's challenge by exploring the parameters of language's power and impotence in the face of genocide.

Peroomian is correct, however, in stating that Armenian prose literature, even including the English-language memoirs, rarely comes directly to terms with the emotional effects of the Genocide. Armenian writers may express in moving language their overwhelming sense of loss for people, places and a way of life. But perhaps the literary community fears that to write openly about anger or survivor guilt would be to break ranks, to betray the memory of that lost Eden that our grandparents told us was pre-1915 Armenia. And the Turkish government's ongoing and aggressive denial of the Genocide's occurrence makes "breaking ranks" seem even more perilous than it otherwise might be.

Peroomian says, "After more than seventy years, Armenian literature is unable to confront the Genocide of 1915; artistic expressions of that event still bear the imprint of an enigma, an unencountered terminus" (p. 223). Perhaps it would be closer to the truth to say that such a confrontation is in its nascent stages. Peroomian courageously calls for a more honest exploration of our national tragedy in literary works themselves as well as in literary criticism of those works. Such an exploration would promote a better understanding of the meaning of genocide both within and outside the Armenian community. It would also, according to Peroomian, spark a revival of our national literature. Finally, en-

countering issues of anger and guilt through literature and literary analysis would contribute to a community-wide process of healing, and to a mourning that would be able to admit to the difficulty—and the necessity—of transforming anger into love.

## A HERO OF HER TIMES

by Sonia Ketchian

*LIVES IN LETTERS: PRINCESS ZINAIDA VOLKONSKAYA AND HER CORRESPONDENCE* by Bayara Aroutunova, Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1994, 204 pp., \$24.95.

Princess Zinaida Belozerskaya was born in Dresden on 3 December 1789 where her erudite and cultured father Prince Alexander Beloselsky-Belozersky served as envoy extraordinary to the King of Saxony. Theirs was the deep rose-colored palatial mansion in the heart of St. Petersburg at which visitors marvel, with its mighty Sampsons holding up cornices where Nevsky Prospekt intersects the Fontanka. Here stand the four famous horsetaming statues of Anichkov Bridge.

Bayara Aroutunova of Harvard University is a specialist in Russian of Armenian extraction who embarked on studying Zinaida Volkonskaya's impressive archive housed in Harvard's Houghton Library through the encouragement of her mentor, the famous linguist Roman Jakobson. All but three of the letters to Zinaida, dating from 1812-38, are in French. They mirror the growing might of Imperial Russia through the Napoleonic wars and the telescoping of Russia's literature to engender the Golden Age of Russian letters dominated by the genius of Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837).

The beautiful Zinaida sang divinely, was sparkingly intelligent, and wrote poems in French. Soon after her debut in 1808 she and Alexander I became romantically involved. Her arranged marriage to the very wealthy Prince Nikita Volkonsky (1791-1844) was ill-fated from the start. Alexander I became godfather to her son Alexander. Their romance can be deduced from his mostly unpublished fifteen letters covered thirteen years, all in his own hand. The destruction of most of Alexander's personal papers in the Imperial Archive heightens the significance of these fifteen letters.

The first six letters exude emotions, describe battles, and illumine the political situation. In wartime when Alexander had no time to read dispatches or to respond to inquiries from his chancellor N.P. Rumyantsev, he gladly penned long letters to Zinaida. The Tsar uses