Genocide, identity and "Haratch"

Fourth in a Monthly Series

by Aram Kouyoumdjian

"Only in *Haratch* ... did Saroyan boldly state the facts of genocide he knew so well."

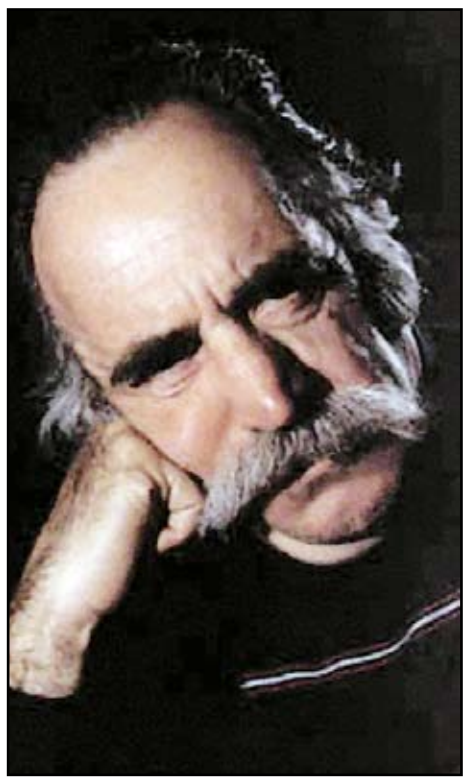
So concludes Prof. Dickran Kouymjian (no relation to me) in his Introduction to *William Saroyan: An Armenian Trilogy*. Saroyan makes indirect references to the Genocide in his earlier plays *Armenians* and *Bitlis* which, together with *Haratch*, comprise the trilogy. Yet only in a play that he wrote a mere two years before his death does Saroyan directly confront the campaign of extermination that began in 1915 and that continues in myriad ways to this day.

Turning my present attention to *Haratch* breaks the progression of my last two articles, which had been chronicling Saroyan's evolution as a playwright during the early decades of his career – the 1930s and 1940s. While I intend to resume that thread, this month of Genocide remembrance compels the digression to *Haratch*.

On the spectrum of Saroyan plays that lack plot or dramatic conflict, *Haratch* may possibly define an endpoint. Although it is written in the form of a conversation, one could argue that it is not a play at all. It features real-life Armenian figures, including Saroyan himself, as "characters." And, for the most part, it serves as a transcript of a meandering conversation that unfolds among them at the offices of *Haratch* (meaning "forward"), the Armenian-language newspaper in Paris. "Armenians are never so home as when they are in an editorial office and near printing presses," one of the characters observes.

Haratch takes pains to emphasize that the congregation is a "haphazard gathering," a "disorganized get-together," an "accidental and spontaneous meeting." Indeed, aside from someone new occasionally joining the conversation, no action transpires. As Kouymjian writes in his Introduction, the piece reads like Plato's *Symposium*. "What else is *Haratch* than a modern Socratic dialogue?" he asks, except he points out that "being Armenian" replaces "love" as its central concern.

"Being Armenian," however, is no simple matter, and *Haratch* quickly delves into a debate over identity. Over the course of 50 pages, characters including *Haratch* editor Arpik Missakian, poet Hrachia Hovannisyan, and professor Khachig Tölölyan probe questions of homeland, dispersion, assimilation, and repatriation, with specific focus on the Armenian Case and "what it is exactly that Armenians want."



Saroyan

Amidst this coterie of historical personages is the unnamed Old Man from Bitlis, who is pre-occupied with recording his memoirs and having them published in *Haratch*. "It is a very difficult thing to make sense of loss, and absence, and displacement, and destruction," he says, embodying both tragedy and survival.

"We do not forget the massacres because in not forgetting we rejoice in our survival against terrible odds," Hovannisyan posits, while Saroyan furthers this perception by suggesting that the mere fact of Armenian survival serves as revenge against Turkish atrocity.

"Who is it that suffers the greatest loss in a massacre, those who are massacred, or those who massacre them?" Saroyan wonders, as he segues to the issue of Genocide denial. "[O]ne by little one, human beings with their truths and secrets die, and their children take their places; if the killers deny that they killed, ... their children are burdened with a variety of diseases or self-deceptions or paralyzing unconfessed truths, while the children of the survivors ... are endowed from these truths, and the survival of themselves ... with great human qualities."

At times, Saroyan's celebration of these "human qualities" in decidedly universalist terms seems to run counter to the notion of nationalism. "I am both an American and an Armenian writer, and I am neither. I am only the writer that I am," he intones at some point. "I write Saroyan." Still, the powerful sequence that concludes *Haratch* – in which the characters announce their individual names and the places from where their ancestors hail – evidences a recognition of and affinity towards an identity that is undeniably Armenian.

Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting (*The Farewells*) and directing (*Three Hotels*). His latest work is *Velvet Revolution*.

Reflective moments

Morgenthau's 24 rules at age 14

by Kay Mouradian

Rajmohan Gandhi, a human rights activist and historian, is a visiting professor at the South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies Program at the University of Illinois. He recently spoke at the Pasadena City College (PCC), the first leg of a lecture tour pertaining to his new book, Gandhi: The Man, His People and the Empire, a monumental biography of his grandfather, Mahatma Gandhi. Rajmohan talked about the stature of his remarkable grandfather and how this ordinary man became a revolutionary who believed in the efficacy of non-violence, emerging as the Great Soul who liberated India from the yoke of Great Britain.

I was moved by Rajmohan's discourse about how his grandfather continued to live by the principle of non-violence even as he was beaten in South Africa by Whites, Blacks, and his own compatriots, South African Indians, who refused to embrace non-violence during South Africa's tyranny of apartheid. One of those beatings nearly took Gandhi's life. Perplexed, his eldest son asked, "Father, you always preach non-violence to us at home, but if I had been at this beating, what should I have done?" And Gandhi replied, "If you cannot immediately think of something to do that is non-violent, then hit him!" That statement surprised me.

PCC's Sexson Auditorium was filled to capacity, and I was fortunate to be sitting in the front row. I was charmed by the smile of a rugged-looking Latino man who, with camera in hand, sat next to me. He introduced himself and told me he was going to record Rajmohan's talk and post it on his Web site. Wearing a Che Guevara beret, he said he had recently filmed the Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus and we both agreed that Dr. Yunus, the small-loan banker from Bangladesh who is lifting the poorest of the poor out of poverty, was most likely today's Mahatma Gandhi.

That conversation triggered my thinking about how the very ordinary can become totally principled and never waver from their core, and how they can affect the lives of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands. And the image of Henry Morgenthau, Sr. came to my mind. He is a hero to many of us Armenians, but this principled man worked at developing his strengths by what he referred to as building his moral muscles.

At the tender age of 14, Morgenthau composed 24 rules he wished to live by. He made a chart and every night he marked the breaches of that day. He titled his chart Tabulating virtues to be acquired and vices to be avoided. His rules were as follows:

1. Do not use any profane words.
2. Do not eat much sweet food as it darkens the mind.
3. Always speak the truth.
4. Spend nothing unnecessarily, for if you save when young, you can spend when old.
5. Never be idle as it will cause you to think of wrong things.
6. Talk little, but think much.
7. Study daily, or else your knowledge will not improve.
8. Keep your own secrets, for if you do not keep them, no one will keep them for you.
9. Make few promises, but if you make any, fulfill them.
10. Never speak evil of anyone.
11. Work for your employer as though it was for yourself.
12. Deal fairly and honestly with your fellow clerks, but be not too intimate.
13. Be not inquisitive.
14. Neither borrow nor lend if avoidable.
15. Trust none too much, but be not distrustful.
16. Be not vain, for vanity is the destruction of men.
17. Be grateful for the smallest favor.
18. Never leave for tomorrow what can be done today.
19. Drink no kind of intoxicating liquor nor smoke any weed.
20. Never play at any game of chance.
21. Conquer temptation though it be ever so powerful.
22. Keep yourself clean, as cleanliness is next to godliness.
23. Wonder not at the construction of man, but use your time in improving yourself.
24. In deciding any doubts in the meaning of above maxims, let conscience decide.

These moral muscles, which he worked as a teenager, built within him an honest power that eventually led to the world's recognition of him as a wealthy entrepreneur, a diplomat extraordinaire, and a noble humanitarian.

connect:
aGiftInTheSunlight.com

Kay Mouradian is author of *Reflective Meditation* and *A Gift in the Sunlight: An Armenian Story*.