

BOOK REVIEW

Levon Ashpahyan, *Իմ կյանքի մասին* [About My Life], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide 6*. Editor, author of the preface and references Narine S. Hakobyan. Yerevan: AGMI, 2022, 248 pages.

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“May this book serve as a memorial, reminding my children of me as they read it.”¹ These were the words written by Levon Ashpahyan, a sixty-five-year-old man, on January 29, 1971 on the last page of his notebook. Levon Ashpahyan was one of the many Armenians who survived the horrors of the Armenian Genocide. On that day, he finally completed recording his life story, driven by a simple human desire to be remembered after his death.

After Levon Ashpahyan passed away, his family chose to donate his memoir to the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute (AGMI). In 2021, the AGMI had already prepared the memoir for publication. By publishing this book, the AGMI not only aims to contribute to the preservation and transmission of Ashpahyan’s story but also to help share this survivor’s experience beyond the confines of his family. Although honoring the memory of this survivor remains important to the AGMI, the primary objective of publishing this memoir is to contribute to research on the deportations and massacres of Armenians of Sebastia. Therefore, it is crucial to position this account within the broader context of the destruction of the Armenians of Sebastia, emphasizing its significance for scholars.

Historical Context: Sebastia during the Armenian Genocide

The deportations and massacres of Sebastia Armenians were one of the most important pages of the Armenian Genocide. By 1914, there were 204,472 Armenians living in the Sebastia Province, with 116,817 in Sebastia sanjak and 20,000 in Sebastia town. Well before the genocide, the appointment of Ahmed Muamar Bey as *vali* (governor) in 1913 led to a significant increase in anti-Armenian measures. The main events in 1915 began with several weeks of terrorizing Armenians, after which the Ottoman authorities proceeded with the physical destruction of the Armenians. Specifically, on June 16, 1915, they arrested approximately 3,000-3,500 men either at their workplaces or in their homes. Similarly, on June 23, another 1,000 men were arrested. Overall, around 5,000 Armenian men were arrested during that time.² Levon Ashpahyan writes:

1 Levon Ashpahyan, *Իմ կյանքի մասին* [About My Life], *Memoirs of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide 6*, editor, author of the preface and references Narine S. Hakobyan (Yerevan: AGMI, 2022), 247.

2 Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History* (London- New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 436.

Yes, I forgot to mention that all Armenian men were imprisoned, a fact unknown to their families at the time... People were desperately searching for their loved ones, making inquiries in hopes of finding them. As the search continued, it became apparent that every single man was imprisoned. This search left people feeling helpless and unsure of what steps to take next. The prison was overcrowded, with barely enough room for the men to stand... Women and children would come and go, bringing food and water to their imprisoned loved ones...³

Ashpahyan notes that nobody was allowed to talk to their family members. Eventually, one day, their families found the prison empty, not knowing where their relatives had been taken.⁴

The deportation of Armenians from Sebastia took place from July 5 to July 18, 2015. In total, 5,850 families were deported in 14 caravans, with an average of 400 families in each caravan. Approximately 4,000 men were placed in labor battalions and later became targets for the perpetrators.⁵ Levon Ashpahyan writes:

I no longer dared to leave the house. We stayed inside, anxiously awaiting the announcement of our departure order. It did not take long for the order to come, and we gathered our belongings and began to make our way to the designated gathering place. We walked sadly... and as we passed through the Turkish neighborhood, we noticed how happy they were, but at the same time they were looking at us with hatred.⁶

The deportation route passed through Sebastia, Tecirhan, Magara, Kangal, Alacahan, Kotu Han, Hasanchelebi, Hekimhan, Hasanbadrig, Aruzi Yazı, the Kirk Goz Bridge, Firincilar, Zeydag, and Gergerdag. It then continued towards Adiyaman and Samsat, crossed the Euphrates river and headed to Suruj, Urfa, Viranşehir, and Ras ul-Ayn, Mosul, Aleppo. Some survivors could reach Hama, Homs, while others reached Raqqa or Deir ez-Zor.⁷

One of the first steps taken by Muammer was to dispatch a special group to Kotu Han. This group consisted of *chetes* (irregular bands), whose objective was to identify the remaining men in caravans and force all deportees to give up their money and valuable belongings. The deportees, who were attempting to salvage some of their possessions to continue their journey, were subjected to threats, blackmail, and violence. In Kotu Han, the Turkish gendarmes were replaced by Kurdish ones. The destruction of the caravans

³ Ashpahyan, *About My Life*, 169.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁵ Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 438.

⁶ Ashpahyan, *About My Life*, 176.

⁷ Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 438. For more information, see Robert Sukiasyan, "Kotu Han: A Station On the Deportation Route of Sebastia," *Ts'eghaspanagitakan handes* 6, no. 1 (2018), 44-60:

began in Hasanchelebi, located in the northern part of the sanjak of Malatia. All caravans from Sebastia suffered a similar fate.⁸ Levon Ashpahyan's memoir contains important details about the atrocities, looting, robbery, and murder committed against Armenians in Hasanchelebi, Kirk Goz, and Firincilar stations.⁹

Levon Ashpahyan's Odyssey

In this memoir, individual stories coalesce into a national tragedy. Levon Ashpahyan was born in either 1904 or 1905 (the exact month and date are unknown) in Sebastia. He was the eldest of four children in his family, with two sisters and a brother. His father was conscripted into the Ottoman army and placed in labor battalions. In 1915, Levon, along with his mother and siblings, was deported from Sebastia and experienced all the horrors of the death march.

During the march, Levon lost his family. First, Levon's infant sister died when their caravan was close to Firincilar. It was at that point that Levon, following his mother's initiative, joined a few friends and managed to escape. Levon's mother hoped that at least he could survive. And indeed, Levon did survive. However, he was no longer able to find his family afterwards. As a result, he suffered from a constant sense of guilt throughout his remaining life, always plagued by thoughts of his lost family. This excerpt best exemplifies his feelings:

How many times have I regretted and how many tears have I cried, remembering my beloved sick mother whom I left behind. Whenever I think about it, my heart shatters into pieces. Oh, my cherished mother, why did you let me go? Why didn't you stop me? Why did you separate me from you? Why did you leave it to fate, an unknown fate and hope? Wouldn't it be better if we stayed together and died together? Now it has become worse: I am suffering and missing you in a foreign land. In the hands of strangers, my days have turned into years, and I am tormented by my deep thoughts and incurable wounds...¹⁰

Although Levon survived, he had to endure a nightmarish experience. Soon, he found himself in Malatia, where he was renamed "Ahmed." Then, in another place, he became Osman. Over the course of the following years, Levon was passed around various Muslim households, the majority of which exploited him. His days were filled with exhausting tasks such as cleaning houses, tending to livestock, and toiling in the fields. Unfortunately, along with the backbreaking work came relentless mistreatment. Frequently, he found

8 Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 438-441.

9 See, for example, Ashpahyan, *About My Life*, 186.

10 Ashpahyan, *About My Life*, 205-206.

himself homeless and starving, left to fend for himself on the streets. As if the physical and mental agony weren't enough, Levon also carried the burden of memories of his mother and other family members, which only intensified his suffering.

During that entire period, he found himself in different locations, including Albistan and Malatia. After enduring six years of hardship in Muslim households, he finally managed to escape and reappear in Sebastia. It was there that he discovered that his uncle had survived the deportations, only to tragically lose his life just fifteen days prior to Levon's arrival in Sebastia. This news left him utterly devastated, and he expresses his emotions in the following manner:

I am so unfortunate that I cannot find happiness in any way. After wandering for six years, facing numerous hardships and persecution, I was barely able to reach one of my relatives. However, I remained an orphan as I lost him without even getting a chance to meet him. My heart is broken, my joy has turned to mourning, and I am once again destitute and alone.¹¹

In Sebastia, he attempted to enter an orphanage, but his request for admission was denied. As a result, he was compelled to return to laborious physical work.

Eventually, Levon made a surprising discovery - he found out that one of his distant relatives, his paternal granduncle's daughter, was not only alive but also married to the son of a certain Pambukhian. However, he also learned that this Pambukhian had been involved in the assassination of his uncle. Based on the incomplete information from Ashpahyan, it seems that there had been conflicts within their family regarding the division of property. As time went on, it became clear that Levon himself was in danger and could face the same fate as his uncle. This realization prompted Levon to leave Sebastia and seek safety elsewhere. Since the American missionaries were rescuing orphans from the Ottoman Empire, he decided to join them and depart for Greece.

Ashpahyan received support from American relief organizations in Greece and found employment in the tobacco industry. He initially settled in Serres, Drama but primarily resided in Kavala, where he purchased a house. He got married in 1931. In the 1930s, he made several attempts to move to Soviet Armenia, but could only do so in 1946. He settled initially in the Norashen village of the Shamshadin district, and later relocated to Yerevan, where he spent the rest of his life. He passed away in Yerevan on May 1, 1987.

Ashpahyan's Memoir as a Source

In order to evaluate Levon Ashpahyan's memoir as a source for historical research, it is important to consider various factors. These factors include the circumstances surrounding its recording, such as when, why, and how it was done. Additionally, one should consider

¹¹ Ibid., 158-159.

its potential contribution to and significance for the study of the Armenian Genocide.¹²

Ashpahyan wrote his memoirs in 1971, more than fifty years after the described events. His case is not unique; many survivors' testimonies were recorded decades later following the Armenian Genocide. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the process of "restoring" events that took place half a century ago cannot be perfect. One challenge is that survivors may unintentionally omit certain details from their recollections due to fading memory. For example, the reader may lack a comprehensive understanding of the property dispute that arose among Levon's relatives when he returned to Sebastia after six years of deportation. Additionally, sometimes it can be difficult to identify the location of a specific event described in the memoir. Another significant issue is that survivors' recollections of the past are inevitably influenced and shaped by books, movies, and other stories about the same event.

As mentioned before, Ashpahyan has a very personal motive for writing his memories. He explicitly expresses his desire for his relatives to remember him through this memoir. In other words, the memoir is not intended for a broader audience and does not seek justice. This fact, of course, increases its reliability and trustworthiness for researchers.

Ashpahyan's story combines his specific narrative, including his emotional reflections and remembered experiences, with autobiographical elements, particularly in terms of chronological order.¹³ Although the memoir is built around a personal narrative, it also provides factual information about the deportation route and specific historical figures, such as Karapet Gabikian. However, the main advantage of this memoir lies in the "liveness" of the material it contains. This allows readers to look at the tragic historical events from an individual's perspective, providing insights that cannot be found in official documents. As Richard Hovannissian noted, "Eyewitness accounts of decisive historical events may be as valuable as official dispatches and reports. It is in such versions especially that the human element becomes manifest, affording insights not to be found in documents."¹⁴

In order to understand the insights that this memoir can provide for researchers, one should consider the existing primary sources and scholarly literature on the topic. There are numerous primary and secondary sources available on the events in Sebastia.¹⁵ Karapet

12 For more information on the survivors' testimonies, see Narine Hakobyan, "Hamidian Massacres In The Eyewitnesses Testimonies," *Tsëghaspanagitakan handes* 5, no 1 (2017), 7-31.

13 For more information on this issue, see Lorne Shirinian, *Survivor Memoirs of the Armenian Genocide* (Reading, England: Taderon Press, 1999), 19:

14 Richard Hovannissian, "Introduction," in Stanley E. Kerr, *The Lions of Marash: Personal Experiences with American Near East Relief 1919-1922* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973), xxiii.

15 Most of the works on the Armenian Genocide reflect on the events in Sebastia. See, for example, Mkrtich Nersisyan and Ruben Sahakyan, *Геноцид армян: Сборник документов и материалов* [The Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Collection of Documents and Materials] (Yerevan: Hayastan, 1966); Wolfgang Gust, *The Armenian Genocide: Evidence from the German Foreign Office Archives, 1915-1916* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2014); Ara Sarafian, *United States Official Documents on the Armenian Genocide / I The Lower Euphrates* (Watertown, MA: Armenian Review, 1994); James Bryce, *The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-1916 : Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon* (London: Authority of

Gabikian’s *Yeghernapatum* and Arakel Patrik’s *History of the Armenians of Sebastia and Neighboring Villages* contain significant primary source information.¹⁶ Among scholarly works, Richard Hovannisian’s *Armenian Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia* is perhaps the most significant.¹⁷ In *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*, Raymond Kevorkian devoted a chapter to the events in Sebastia during the Genocide.¹⁸ Robert Sukiasyan’s dissertation offers further insight into the deportation process of Sebastia Armenians.¹⁹ Verjine Svazlian’s *The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors*, as well as the third volume of the *Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey: The Account of Survivors* published by the Armenian National Archives, include many stories of survivors from Sebastia.²⁰

This extensive, although incomplete, list of primary sources and scholarly literature provides comprehensive information about the tragedy. In this regard, the events and people described in Ashpahyan’s memoir are confirmed when compared with the aforementioned sources. However, Ashpahyan’s memoir is interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it presents the deportation and massacres of 1.5 million people through the perspective of one individual, without oversimplifying the complex story. Secondly, the memoir reflects the personal and emotional experiences of the victim/survivor, providing a deeper understanding of the events. As a result, researchers studying the Genocide from the perspectives of psychology, literary studies, and sociology will find the memoir particularly interesting. Additionally, given Ashpahyan’s age during the Genocide, it may also be relevant to those studying the fate of Armenian orphans.

His Majesty’s Stationery Office by Sir Joseph Causton and Sons, Ltd., 1916); Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1995); Ronald Grigor Suny, *“They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else”: A History of the Armenian Genocide* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015); Taner Akcam, *The Young Turks’ Crime against Humanity: The Armenian Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

16 Karapet Gabikian, *Եղեռնասպասում. Փոքուն հայոց և նորին մեծի մայրաքաղաքին Արշաստիոյ* [Yeghernapatum (history of genocide) of Armenia Minor and its Great Capital Sebastia] (Boston: Hairenik, 1924); Arakel Patrik, *Պատմագիրք յուշանատեսն Արշաստիոյ և զաւարի հայրյեսնն* [History of the Armenians of Sebastia and Neighboring Villages], vol. 1 (Beirut: Meshag Press, 1974).

17 Richard Hovannisian, *Armenian Sebastia/Sivas and Lesser Armenia* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2004).

18 Raymond Kevorkian, *The Armenian Genocide*, 429-468.

19 Robert Sukiasyan, “Methods and the Process of Deportations of Armenian Population In the Ottoman Empire (Based On the Case of the Sebastia Province)” (PhD diss., Yerevan: Armenian Genocide Museum Institute, 2019).

20 Verjine Svazlian, *Հայոց ցեղասպանություն. ակնատես վերապրողների վկայություններ* [The Armenian Genocide: Testimonies of the Eyewitness Survivors] (Yerevan: Gitutyun, 2011); Amatuni Virabyan, ed., *Հայոց ցեղասպանությունը օսմանյան Թուրքիայում. Վերապրածների վկայություններ: Փաստաթղթերի ժողովածու, Հատոր 3-րդ.* [Armenian Genocide in Ottoman Turkey: The Testimony of Survivors], vol. 3 (Yerevan: Armenian National Archives, 2012).