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## FRANZ WERFEL'S *THE FORTY DAYS OF MUSA DAGH*, A PERPETUALLY PRESENT PRODUCTION RATHER THAN A PRODUCT<sup>i</sup>

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The article is a tribute to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Franz Werfel's renowned novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*.

Borrowing Roland Barthes' approach to texts – regarding their function and effects – and his explanation of writerly texts (*scriptible*), I see *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* as one such text that, according to Barthes, is not a product but a production perpetually present, continuing to force the reader to participate, ponder and find a meaning or meanings, an entrance, among the plurality of entrances, an opening into the text. Ninety years after the publication of Franz Werfel's literary masterpiece, there are still discussions ongoing and new insights being added.

In my presentation, I will open my own way into the metamorphic perception of this timeless artistic creation by Diasporan Armenians and the world and focus on its function as the embodiment of the Armenian spirit of resistance to injustice, as a tool against the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide – the Turkish hysteria against this novel and repression of European governments to denounce it is further proof of its power – its effect on the self-realization and reawakening of the generations of Armenians on the verge of assimilation.

I have often spoken and written about the impact of genocide literature on the understanding of the scope of the calamity and the universal truth that lies at the roots of factual writings and documents. *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* is the most expressive voice in the history of the Armenian Genocide, an unequivocal representation of the horrifying reality, the prototype of the crime against humanity, ultimately playing a major role in influencing and inspiring Rafael Lemkin to devise the word "genocide".

I will point to why and how about 312 passages totalling 1062 lines, that is 11% of the original was omitted in the first English translation and reinstated in the new,

<sup>i</sup> I had the privilege of presenting the second English translation of Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* to the Los Angeles Armenian community on May 4, 2012, and was later invited to present the Armenian perspective of Franz Werfel at the International Conference titled "Franz Werfel and Literature, Franz Werfel in the Armenian, Jewish, Turkish, and German Perspective," hosted by the Lepsiushaus in Potsdam, Germany, March 10-12, 2013. This paper is based on my research for these presentations with additional work done for the September 19-20, 2024, Yerevan Conference.

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2012 version. The ensuing enthusiastic salutation of this new publication is representative of Diasporan Armenians' continuing devotion to the book and the author.

**Keywords:** *Genocide literature, Turkish denial, Armenian Diaspora, assimilation, survival, filmic presentation, Jewish response.*

### Introduction

In my career as a genocide scholar, I have often written and spoken about the power of the pen, in other words the impact of genocide literature and to that effect, the Armenian Genocide literature, on the understanding of the calamity and the universal truth of the genocide that lies at the roots of factual writings and documents. It is genocide literature that brings the inconceivable realities down to the human perspective and facilitates the understanding of the complex concept of genocide. It is not possible to penetrate the world of the Armenian Genocide without reading the literature written in response. In my research I relied on the power of this literature, the literature of atrocity, to use Lawrence Langer's terminology, to understand and to convey the huge impact of the Armenian Genocide on the generations of survivors. By the analysis, explication, and presentation of this genre of literature, I strove to show the world the horrifying reality, the landscape of blood and tears, the ugly image of the prototype of the crime against humanity that played a major role in inspiring many in their outlook and action, among them Rafael Lemkin, the originator of the word "genocide."

Within this context, I find *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* to be the utmost expressive voice in the history of the Armenian Genocide literature, an explicit representation of the dire reality, even though it concerned a single case, a dot in the landscape of widespread atrocities. Indeed, by virtue of meticulous description of the people, places and events, historical personages, and formal communications, the novel draws closer to historical writing. The amount of research that has gone into describing the period—in terms of history, politics, geography, and the key personages who made history—work to make the novel a historically accurate source of knowledge and information. It is a testimony against Turkish atrocities that is impossible to reject and deny.

Now, where does this epic novel stand in the echelon or the hierarchy of artistic creations? Borrowing Roland Barthes' approach to the text, regarding its function and effect (Barthes, 1970), I see *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* as a writerly text (*scriptible*), which according to Barthes' explanation, is not a product but a production perpetually present, continuing to force the reader to participate, ponder upon it, and find a meaning or meanings, an entrance, among the plurality of entrances, an opening into the text. We as readers of this work are not consumers, but producers of the text. Barthes puts this text in contrast with the readerly texts (*lisible*) which do not require an effort reading them: clear meaning, no ambiguity, and no multiple ways to make the

text speak to the reader. Ninety years after the publication of Franz Werfel's literary masterpiece, I attempt to add new insight by opening my own way into the world and the word Werfel crafted and tracing the metamorphic perception of this timeless artistic creation by Diasporan Armenians and the world.

It is important to note that although I had read the book in Armenian as a teenager and its first English translation (Dunlop, tr. 1934) decades ago, I have built my analysis on the 2012 English translation which is believed to be one of the best and most comprehensive among multilanguage translations of the book over the years (Reidel, tr. 2012).

**The perpetual relationship between Armenians and Franz Werfel or  
reversibly, alternatively, Armenians and *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* -  
A brief survey**

Biographers and critics seem to agree that the impetus to write a novel about the Armenian massacres came to him when he was travelling in Syria as he stood witness to the wretched circumstances of Armenian orphans and other survivors with the story of a devastating trauma written on their foreheads and expressed by their frightened gazes. However, in her epilogue to Werfel's Armenian translation, referring to an interview that was republished in 1965 in *Lraber Tert* (No. 36), an Armenian periodical in New York, M. Piroumyan indicates that Werfel conceived the idea of writing about the suffering of the Armenian people and showing the world the inhuman brutalities against them after he read about the massacres during World War I in newspapers (Werfel, 1987, p. 899). Notwithstanding, Werfel's association with Armenians and Armenian culture dates back to 1912 when Armenians worldwide were celebrating the 1500<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the invention of the Armenian alphabet. Franz Werfel delivered a lecture dedicated to the merits of the fifth century Armenian translation of the Bible praising the ancient history of the Armenian culture.

Whenever this association began, it lasted beyond Werfel's lifetime, marking a climax in the enthusiastic reception of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* as soon as it was first published in 1933 in its original German language. The International Conference in Yerevan dedicated to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this publication is evidence of the continuation of the Armenians' association with Franz Werfel.

Armenians embraced this epic novel as their own national epic. Attempts to translate it into Armenian as well as several articles published about the book attest to this. The first Armenian translation was published in 1935 by Yervand Ter-Andreassian, then in 1964 by Paruyr Mikayelyan, the latter in Soviet Armenia with a reprint in 1987, and in 1984 by Papgen Papazian (from the 1934 French translation by Hofer-Bury). In his foreword of Papazian's translation, Garegin II Sarkissian, Catholicos of the Holy See of Cilicia, writes: "An artistic rendering of an episode from the most fateful days of the Armenian people impresses upon human consciousness as an expression of Armenian-like human survival, embellished by sentiments and

principles of nationalism and self-esteem.... Many peoples' knowledge and impressions of Armenians have been shaped by *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*." As the previous two translations were out of print and unavailable, this new publication was specifically aimed toward the new generation Armenians. Catholicos Garegin II believed that the book with its multifaceted ideological and artistic dimensions could revive in the youth their Armenian identity and sense of belonging. Perhaps, this renewed focus on the power of *The Forty days of Musa Dagh* has been instrumental in buttressing with a new force the Armenian struggle against the ongoing Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide and the hampering of Armenian efforts in every possible way.

The English translation of the novel by Geoffrey Dunlop appeared in 1934 and was received with enthusiasm, especially by American-Armenians, but it was also scrutinized and criticized. A line-by-line comparison between the German original and this translation was done by Haigaz Kazarian, according to whom, 312 passages totaling 1062 lines (about 90 pages), that is 11% of the original, was omitted. Kazarian cited examples of these omissions, such as the Armenian achievements in history (Volume I, 87 of German original); the passage, "They had not fallen into the hands of an enemy country, so that the reciprocity of humane treatment as imposed by international law could have been respected. Alas, they had fallen into the hands of a ruthless, bloodthirsty foe, their own State—the Turkish government." (Volume I, 136); and the absence of discourse on the Armenian deportations (Volume I, 206). Kazarian also pointed to substitutions that changed the meaning and made the text softer and less harmful to Turkish sensitivity and the "reputation" of "good Turk" as Atatürk strove to publicize, such as "to set out" for "deportation" (Volume I, 135); "The exile was enforced to the last letter" (Volume II, 111) was translated as "The deportation law had already taken full effect" (Volume I, 541) which did not insinuate any kind of illegal treatment along the deportation route, as if everything went well and smooth according to the law. Edward Minasian refers to Kazarian's article, published in *Armenian Review* (16, 3, 1963), titled "The Forty Days of Musa Dagh and its English Translation" and quotes some examples of Dunlop's convenient substitutions (Minasian, 2007, 65-66). Kazarian's article is also cited in the second English translation of the book (Werfel, 2012, XXXVII-XXXVIII). James Reidel calls Dunlop's version "less German, less exotic, and less Werfel" (Werfel, 2012, XXXVIII).

James Reidel helps to shed light on the question of why the novel was abridged in its English translation, the subject of continued speculation in Armenian intellectual circles. Reidel points out that the publisher of the English version preferred to have the text condensed into one volume instead of the 2-volume, 900-page German original. This would make it easier and less expensive for handling and shipping. The abridgment was, however, left to the discretion of the translator (Werfel, 2012, p. XXXVIII). There was also most likely Turkish pressure forcing Dunlop to omit some

graphic scenes or substituting the harsher words and descriptions with bland and benign ones.

Did Werfel agree to this abridged translation? Reidel believes that like other European writers, Werfel did not render much importance to the translation of his work considering it as a channel to attain fame and income, while the original stood as art. Plus, Werfel needed money quickly to take care of his stepdaughter's medical bills, and objecting to the changes would delay the needed income. Parenthetically, Werfel was married to Alma Mahler, the widow of the famous composer Gustav Mahler; he was her third husband, and her daughter Manon was from her marriage to Walter Gropius, the famous architect. Reidel also indicates that because of the onset of the Nazi persecution of Jewish writers and burning their books, including Werfel's two novels before *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, the number of German readers of his works had decreased, and Werfel needed the English readership fast (Werfel, 2012, p. XXXVIII).

MGM's initiative to produce a motion picture based on the novel ignited an added dynamism among Armenian Americans and further popularized the novel and its author. But the obstacles were many, among them the Turkish government's adamant opposition. The Turks had learned their lesson after "Ravished Armenia," the unimaginable saga of Aurora Mardiganian, released in 1919, about how impactful and dangerous a filmic presentation of Turkish atrocities can be. The government-sponsored pressure began to work from the outset to halt the process, finally forcing MGM to cave in and drop the project. Minasian describes in detail the steps taken, the difficulties and especially the relentless pursuit of the Turkish government to thwart the project. As it has come on the April 16, 1969 issue of *Variety*, "This novel has become the most on-again-off-again motion picture production in Hollywood history."

Werfel's first contact with the Armenian community was when in November 1935 he and his wife, Alma Mahler, were invited to the United States to take part in the opening of Werfel's Broadway play, "The Eternal Road," in New York. The Armenian community honored him with banquets and speeches of praise, for "he had given the Armenian people a soul and shown the world what great crime was committed against this people. To this day, Werfel, a man so intrigued by saints and holy lives, is a virtual Armenian saint" (Werfel, 2012, p. X).

Escaping the Nazis, Werfel lived the life of a fugitive in Europe and finally, in October 1940, made it to the United States and settled in Beverly Hills, California. From then on, his contact with American-Armenians continued until his death on August 26, 1945. He was buried in Rosedale Cemetery in Los Angeles. His funeral was a huge manifestation of Armenian sympathy, affection, and comradeship for that great humanist and literary giant. It was also a genuine expression of grief, mourning the death of a great Armenian hero. Hrand Armen, an Armenian historian attending the funeral notes, "In front of Werfel's casket, I felt that the ghosts of the victims of Musa Dagh are calling him to take him to the Armenian Pantheon" (Werfel, 1987, p. 892). In her analysis of the novel in the context of Werfel's literary legacy, Piroumyan writes,

“In terms of style, skill, and ideology, *The Forty days of Musa Dagh* was a natural continuation of Werfel’s literary creations in which humanitarianism and protest against violence and exploitation of the weak by the strong prevails. It stands among others as a monument against injustice, against cynical cover-up of the truth, but most of all it is a significant page of the history of the Armenian Genocide.” Piroumyan identifies the main characters, leaders of the defense in the novel, with real people, such as Yesayi Yaghubian, Tigran Andreassian, and Petros Dmlakian. However, curiously, but not surprisingly, she overlooks Movses Ter-Galustian, the prototype of Gabriel Bagratian, the main protagonist, because Ter-Galustian was known as a leader of the ARF (Armenian Revolutionary Federation, Dashnaktsutjun), an Armenian political party in opposition with the Soviet regime in Armenia. Mentioning his name would jeopardize her career.

The Armenian reverence for Franz Werfel continued. On October 16, 2010, *The Armenian Weekly* of Boston published French Armenian journalist Jean Eckian’s report about the unveiling ceremonies of a plaque, taken place the day before in Toulon, France, in honor of French sailors who saved the Armenians of Musa Dagh on their 53<sup>rd</sup> day of desperate defense against the Turkish army. The French Secretary of State, Hubert Falco, who attended the event, said in his speech, “They are the pride of our Navy, they are the honor of the French army, the honor of entire France.” “The heroic struggle of the people of Musa Dagh is immortalized in Franz Werfel’s celebrated novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*,” concludes the report.

Diaspora Armenians rejoiced and celebrated, as the second English translation of this novel was published in 2012 with a preface by Dr. Vartan Gregorian—then president of Carnegie Corporation of New York. This publication was also a testimony to the fact that the initiators and supporters of this huge project believed in the timeless value of that eighty-year-old novel and gave a renewed boost to its world recognition and reception. The new translation came to remedy Geoffrey Dunlop’s quick and expedient translation, but more importantly, to restore the omitted passages, some of which were especially important for Armenians. One such segment was the discussion of the problem of assimilation in the Diaspora, losing interest in one’s ethnic origin, growing indifferent toward religion and ethnic traditions exemplified in the persona of Gabriel Bagratian.

Some critics, Lionel Stelman among them, suggest that Werfel modeled the “fully assimilated” Gabriel Bagratian on himself. Stelman further notes that the book is “a document of the life of its author” (Werfel, 2012, pp. XXVI-XXVII). Reidel attests that the parallelism between the Young Turks and the National Socialists was obvious, and many German readers objected to that and found it defamatory for the Nazis. Ironically, Turkish writers deemed it as an insult to the Turkish nation (Werfel, 2012, pp. XXVI-XXVII).

The new translation, reviving the discussion of assimilation and loss of Armenian identity, was a timely boost in continuing the tremendous impact of the book that had marked a turning point in the life of some individuals.

### A few examples

Vahakn Dadrian relates (Dadrian, 1997) that growing up in Istanbul he did not know about the Armenian massacres. It was only when he was an engineering student in the University of Vienna that one of his professors, recognizing him as an Armenian, asked if he had read Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* and urged him to read it. Dadrian confesses that after reading the two volumes twice he realized that he belonged to a persecuted nation without consequences for the perpetrator. And that aroused a sense of rebellion, changed the trajectory of his life to become the unmatched scholar of the Armenian Genocide, the prolific author, the pioneer in many aspects of that field. Of course, he mentioned in that interview about a second book, Bishop Grigor Balakian's *Հայ Գողգոթան* [The Armenian Golgotha] that he read, which reinforced his decision to change course.

It was the continuing indebtedness of Armenians to Werfel's legacy and unwavering compassion for this great devotee of the Armenian cause that thirty years after his death, with the initiative of Vartan Gregorian, then a faculty member of the University of Pennsylvania, and with the collaboration of his colleague, Professor Adolf Klarmann, after months of negotiations and fighting against formalities and bureaucratic obstacles, Werfel's remains were exhumed and transferred to Vienna and buried in Zentralfriedhof in 1975. The project was sponsored by the American and Austrian-Armenian communities (Werfel, 2012, p. VIII).

Vartan Gregorian had read the Armenian translation of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* in his teen years in Iran, and its lasting impact drove him to reciprocate, although posthumously, the service that Werfel had rendered to Armenians. Franz Werfel's second funeral and the opening of the monument sculptured and dedicated to him by his stepdaughter Anna Mahler, was another opportunity to remind the world of the importance of this novelist's work in the Armenian struggle for justice, Werfel's outcry for justice for all oppressed. The Armenian Bishop of Vienna blessed Werfel's grave and the monument. The occasion was also celebrated by a series of events, among them a successful European literary conference dedicated to Franz Werfel's legacy (Ibid, p. IX).

Edward Minasian was one of these enthusiasts who embarked on a huge research project that was published in 2007 under the title *Musa Dagh*. The book was subtitled, "A chronicle of the Armenian Genocide factor in the subsequent suppression, by the intervention of the United States government, of the movie based on Franz Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*." Minasian writes in the preface of his book: "I revere Franz Werfel for reawakening in me the determination to understand and appreciate my ancestral heritage. His heroic novel recounting the indomitable spirit and resilience of the strong and self-reliant Armenian people restored my ethnic soul" (Minasian, 2007, p. xvii).

Edward Minasian believed that the MGM initiative, if materialized, would magnify the impact of Werfel's novel. It would compensate against the indifference of

the world toward the Armenian Genocide, labeled as the forgotten genocide. “At last, the Armenians were to have their ‘day in court’ through the medium of film” (Ibid, p. xix), he wrote in a comprehensive research and coverage of the entire process, from 1933, MGM’s initial attempt to make the movie, until later endeavors to revive the project. His book details the Turkish mobilization of its people and all governmental agencies to protest and pressure the United States, MGM, France, England, and even Greece, threatening them with boycotting their movies and goods and severing diplomatic and economic ties. The Armenian campaign was too insignificant with limited means in terms of money and manpower to counter the huge propaganda. The MGM movie did not materialize. That too was denied to Armenians.

At a point in the 1970s John Kurkjian, a well-to-do Armenian, managed to buy the rights from MGM with a time limitation. But he was not able to procure the huge amount of money needed. American investors turned him down. Rich Armenians did not trust the project to invest in it, and the Armenian community could not raise the necessary funds.

Edwin Avanness, an Iranian Armenian filmmaker in California, relates that simply by reading the book and realizing the importance of its content in the Armenian struggle against the ongoing Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide, he embarked on a difficult project, a documentary film, he would name *Epic Denial: Depriving “The Forty Days of Musa Dagh.”* The *Armenian Weekly* reported in October 2012 that the film would be about the bumpy and eventually unsuccessful attempts of Hollywood to produce the film. The objective, as put by Avanness, was to reveal “the unprecedented political maneuverings by foreign forces to halt the production of the motion picture. The documentary was to explore the complicity, conspiracy, and blatant censorship in the context of Hollywood history, as well as the infringement of the First Amendment by a foreign power” (Torosian, 2012). The project did not receive adequate financial support.

All this speaks of the fact that Franz Werfel and his epic novel is in the heart of every Armenian who still has some spark of ethnic pride and sense of belonging to the nation. The Armenian resistance to genocide in Musa Dagh too, Armenians believe, would have probably slid into oblivion, at least for the world, like other heroic resistances in Urfa, Van, Shapin Garahisar, and Zeitun without a guardian, a gatekeeper like Franz Werfel.

### **The novel’s stand against denialism**

The Turkish denialists did not waste a single occasion from the time the novel was published to express their hostility against Werfel and his novel. They campaigned against the novel and the movie that MGM was in the process of making. The book was banned in Turkey through a decree by Prime Minister Ismet Inonu in January 1935. The Turkish government coerced the Armenian community in Istanbul to denounce the book. Ceremonies to burn copies of the book and Franz Werfel’s pictures



were organized in the churchyard in the same model as the Nazi book burnings a year before. *The New York Times* reported on 29 December 1935 that “Turks Protest on Film: ‘The Forty Days of Musa Dagh’ Displeases Armenians Also (Werfel, 2012, p. XLI). The Istanbul Jewish community was also forced to renounce Werfel as a Jew.

The unyielding Turkish campaign at every possible level to disparage and vilify Franz Werfel and to kill the film project is compelling evidence of Turkish denialism. Communications between Ankara, the Turkish Embassy in Washington, the United States Department of State, the American Embassy in Turkey, and the MGM offices in Hollywood and New York show the intensity of the pursuit.

In February 1934, with a strong pressure from the Turkish government, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was banned in the Third Reich. In regard to this harsh step taken by the Nazi government, Robert Fisk attests that *Das Schwarze Korps*, the official newspaper of the SS, presented Werfel as an agent who created the “alleged Turkish horrors perpetrated against the Armenians” and also denounced “America’s Armenians and Jews for promoting in the U.S.A. the sale of Werfel’s book” (Fisk, 2006, p. 331).

The campaigns against Sylvester Stallone and Mel Gibson, both contemplating movie versions of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, are salient examples of the Turkish strategy of attacking governments, institutions, and individuals if they dared side with the Armenian cause. The Turkish hysteria against this novel as a tool against the Turkish denial of the Armenian Genocide is further proof of its power.

### Werfel’s blueprint of Turkish-Armenian relationship

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* presents a realistic analysis and portrayal of the Turkish-Armenian relationship. It is a microcosm of Armenian life in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, not only in terms of internal dynamics—culture, religion, tradition, even the wailing women accompanying the dead and the superstitions governing their thoughts—but also Armenian relationship with the Turks, the government, the Turkish neighbor, or the Turkish treatment of Armenians and the Armenian Question. Franz Werfel has drawn a blueprint that has not faded in one hundred years, and it works today if Armenians take heed.

Pastor Aram Tomassian’s observation, in this epic novel, in response to Bagratian’s unrealistic plan to raid and take Turkish officers hostage reveals his knowledge of or, for that matter, Franz Werfel’s familiarity with Turkish deceitful games and the politics of denial played out from day one as the orders of deportation were sent out for immediate implementation. Pastor Tomassian was sure that taking the Turkish officers hostage or even killing them would not bring the Turkish government to the negotiating table with Armenians. On the contrary, “The death of a general or a *kaimakam* at the hands of Armenian rebels is just what they want. It puts them completely in the right in every foreign country; it’s the fullest justification of their deportation policy.... What do you people in Yoghonoluk [Gabriel Bagratian’s native village, one of the 7 villages of Hatay Province] know about it? I was in Zeitun”

(Werfel, 2012, p. 774). Pastor Tomassian refers to the Armenian resistance against the orders of deportation put up in Zeitun in March of 1915. The unsuccessful defense was immediately labeled as a rebellion against the Ottoman government that needed to be suppressed.

Werfel has covered all the details that can be classified under the Turkish-Armenian relationship both in times of peace and during the years of deportations and massacres. He portrays the Turkish society to be entirely varied and non-homogeneous, comprising, for example, of the religious fanatic who is aroused and ready to kill the non-Muslim, the Sufi dervish who disdains the Westernized leadership and dislikes Western interventions in the country, the righteous Turk who does not approve of the government's treatment of innocent Armenians, all of which are reflections of today's Turkish society. The novel skillfully covers the different mentalities prevalent among Armenians as well. He does not shun showing the negative – the cowardice, disunity, betrayal – again, a reflection of the Armenian reality today.

Werfel's depiction of the last days of resistance in terms of these leanings is most powerful. The gradual weakening of the camp, the demise of heroes, the wounded, the dead, the fire consuming the precious food supply, the sight of their erstwhile happy homes in the village with Muslims pouring into the valley occupying the empty houses. The result: despair and disappointment, the spread of disunity among the leaders, the breach of the will to resist, the criminal act of setting the altar on fire which left Gabriel Bagratian and Ter-Haygasun, the priest, wounded and wreaked havoc in the camp, the state of panic and incredulity depicted as in something outside reality, outside consciousness. And meanwhile, the Turkish guns are roaring, the army is approaching, and the proud Turkish *yuzbashi* is reporting to the Turkish general, "We've taken the mountain" (Werfel, 2012, p. 819).

Characteristically, there exists a tendency in many critics to depict the novel and its locus only as a vehicle for Franz Werfel to describe the situation at hand in Europe in the shadow of Hitler's rise to power. It will be out of the scope of this paper to speak about the implications or forebodings of Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* for the coming Holocaust, written 6-7 years before the Holocaust of the Jews. Clearly, it was only during and after the Nazi genocide that Werfel's intent to warn Europe of another Enver or Talaat who would murder and exterminate for the sake of a twisted concept of race supremacy sank in and the cataclysm was rendered as the archetype of the *Shoah*. Werfel's quoting an authentic conversation between Enver and Dr. Johannes Lepsius – another hero of the Armenian nation – where reference is made to the German treatment of its own minorities, leaves no doubt about Werfel's awareness of the imminent disaster. Furthermore, and significantly, Werfel chose this passage in his book to read in different venues where he was invited to present the book. Of course, he was familiar with Lepsius' work and used it as a source. For all intents and purposes this tacit parallelism speaks of Werfel's clear judgment and deep knowledge of the recent past, his political savviness of the present, and clairvoyance to see the imminent future.

### The international impact

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* in its German original was an instant success in the literary world. Its several reprints and multitude of translations attest to that. Franz Werfel was an internationally known and revered writer, and *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* played a definite role in that fame. In fact, Lore Barbara Foltin, his biographer, writes, “Werfel’s truly international success came in 1933 with the publication of *Die vierzig Tage des Musa Dagh* which deals with the cruel treatment of the inhabitants of several Armenian villages received at the hands of the Turks” (Foltin, 1961, p. 4). Over time, the number of reprints exceeded one million copies. The novel received a multitude of positive reviews. Essays, research articles, and even entire books were devoted to its analysis and explication.

For many, the novel was their first introduction to the Armenian nation’s history of constant suffering in their struggle against years of oppression and persecution at the hands of the Turks and, as Catholicos Garegin II stated, was instrumental in the shaping of the Armenian image and showing the “Armenian-like human survival.”

The impact of this tale of resistance and courage was widespread. Yair Auron, a Jewish Holocaust scholar, notes that this novel was popular reading in the Vilna Ghetto during W.W. II. “The ghetto of Bialystok found itself in a similar situation as Musa Dagh in February 1943.” This is Mordecai Tannenbaum addressing the inmates. “Only one thing remains for us: to organize collective resistance in the ghetto, at any cost; to consider the ghetto our ‘Musa Dagh’, to write a proud chapter of Jewish Bialystok and our movement into history.” Copies of the novel were said to have been “passed from hand to hand” among the ghetto’s defenders (Auron, 1999, pp. 147-164).

In addition to Bialystok in 1942, many Jews in Palestine, expecting Nazi invasion, were thinking of a defense plan that would be called “Carmel,” “Massad” or “Musa Dagh.” Meri Batz, a leader of the Jewish militias who had read Werfel’s novel, expressed the community’s wish to “turn Carmel into the Musa Dagh of Palestinian Jewry.... We put our faith in the power of the Jewish ‘Musa Dagh’ and were determined to hold out for at least three to four months” (Auron, 2000, p. 300).

With his immortal work Werfel has touched upon the universal issue of minorities under an oppressive regime. Rachel Kirby discusses the historicity of Franz Werfel’s novel, also quoting Hans Christoph Buch, who wrote, “One must read Werfel’s novel in order to regain a concept of what a genocide is” (Kirby, 1999, p. 171).

On February 17, 2012, a report in *Asbarez*, a daily newspaper published in Los Angeles, detailed the issuance of a Franz Werfel stamp in Israel. The communiqué on the initiative of the International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation stated, “*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* detailed the mass murder and expulsion of Armenians from eastern Anatolia in 1915 and received much attention in the United States. It stood as a warning against future acts of mass murder and won lasting respect from Armenian communities throughout the world.”

The impact of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* goes beyond the Jewish reality with parallel circumstances and similar fate. With the reminiscence about learning of the Armenian Genocide from Franz Werfel, William A. Schabas, director of the Irish Centre for Human Rights at the National University of Ireland, Galway, noted during an Armenian Genocide commemoration event in 2005 in Armenia, “*The Forty days of Musa Dagh* was probably the book that first provoked my interest in genocide” (Werfel, 2012, p. VII).

### Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Story of the Last Thought*

Within the context of the impact of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, Edgar Hilsenrath’s *The Story of the Last Thought* is an outstanding testament that cannot be overlooked in this paper. The Armenian Genocide literature is indebted to Franz Werfel not only for his creation of an unmatched artistic representation of the Genocide, but also for inspiring another masterpiece, *The Story of the Last Thought* by Edgar Hilsenrath, another German Jew. “I had read Werfel’s great novel and thought that someone should write a modern novel on this subject completely differently than Werfel,” Hilsenrath said. “That was in 1970. I did some research in the New York Public Library but gave up because the topic was too difficult” (quoted in Makino, 1998, p. 4). Hilsenrath eventually achieved his goal, the Armenian Genocide fictionalized. However, despite the fictitious and often fantastic he created and the element of fiction in the narrative, his delineation of historical events and personages remains close to the recorded history of the time. With the generations of the survivors of a historical catastrophe, the overall portrait and the indelible impression of that catastrophe are shaped not so much by hard facts but with the strokes of the artist’s brush fictionalizing the event. From this point of view, Edgar Hilsenrath’s novel is a unique addition to Armenian Genocide literature. The writing on the dust jacket of the English translation explains the approach.

*According to ancient Armenian tradition, a man’s last thought before he dies can take flight wherever it will, forward or backward in time. Old Thovma Khatisian’s last thought flies back to the date of his birth. Led by the story-teller Meddah, he is guided through the mists that have shrouded the best-forgotten time of the century: the holocaust of the Armenian people by the Turks in 1915. It was the first organized genocide of the century, the definitive answer to the problem of Armenian independence.* (Hilsenrath, 1990).

This radically abstract work of fiction manifests a singular approach to the Armenian Genocide. With a detached stand of an “outsider,” the author succeeds in building up the inner reality of the genocide and its impact upon the victims and the victimizers. The novel materialized not as a challenge to Werfel’s *The Forty Days of*

*Musa Dagh* but as a modern post-Holocaust conceptualization of the history of genocide. Rachel Kirby writes, “Hilsenrath counters Werfel’s realism with folkloric fantasy, his solemnity with bawdiness and dark humor, and his message of hope with confrontational denunciation and pessimism. His *Story*, in short, does justice both to Werfel, as its literary progenitor, and to the sensibilities of post-Holocaust readers” (Kirby, 1999, p. 180).

Unlike Franz Werfel, Edgar Hilsenrath portrays a more promising future for the suffering nation whose history he immortalized in his novel. Werfel kills his protagonist, a deliberate deviation from the live model he followed throughout the novel. In a fateful moment of uncertainty, by a sudden spark of acumen, Gabriel Bagratian decides not to join the survivors sailing away in the French ship. He will stay in that mountain, the symbol of Armenian resistance and determination and die instead of living the humiliating life of a refugee in foreign lands. Hilsenrath’s imagination, on the other hand, constructs the reversal of the fate of the murdered nation. Here are Thovma’s parents (Hilsenrath, 1990, p. 447), Vartan and Anahit (“the mother of Armenia”), and Thovma’s name is changed to Hayk “Like the first of the Armenians”. “Hayk will be fruitful and have many descendants.... And the children of Hayk and their children’s children, will people this land which was always meant for them” (p. 448), Armenian deliverance from Turks under the strokes of artist’s brush. Then, he takes the next step in the novel’s “Epilogue” (pp. 449-450). Thovma Khatisian knows that his “last thought will fly back onto the gaps of Turkish history books.” And his imaginary interlocutor, the Turkish minister is upset. Hilsenrath alludes to the necessary revision and correction of distorted history. He portrays the rebirth of Armenia and Armenians in the ever-spreading whispers of dead Armenians, “all the last thoughts of all the dead Armenians in the land of Hayastan,” and the minister is terrified “because whispering is infectious .... It will be a great whispering if everybody in the world that’s been persecuted suddenly began to whisper their complaints....Where should we go from there? That mustn’t happen.” With this image, Hilsenrath transcends the particularity of the Armenian Genocide and embraces the universal issue of the cause of the persecuted.

### **A quick glance into the life of *The Forty days of Musa Dagh* in Soviet and post-Soviet Armenia**

In this small republic whose population at its inception mostly consisted of refugees, survivors of the Genocide, the Turkish atrocities and the episode of the defense of Musa Dagh would have struck a familiar chord. But the book was banned in Soviet Armenia, perhaps because of Soviet-Turkish friendship and consideration for Turkish sensitivity to the subject, among other factors. Then again, one would think unlikely that Soviet leaders would object to Werfel’s ideology, so close to Marxism, and his all-out war against fascism; therefore, it was not his literature per se and the message it carried but the locus and the vehicle he had chosen. Soviet Armenians as a small nation

soon to be integrated into the amalgam of nations of the Soviet Union, under that unyielding iron fist of forging the makeup of the Soviet citizen, could not be allowed to read a book in praise of their ancestors' patriotic struggle against Ottoman repression and barbarism.

Despite all the restrictions and censorship, however, the 1935 the Armenian translation of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, like many other books, was secretly smuggled into Soviet Armenia but of course not easily available to all. The repatriation in 1947 of a large number of former inhabitants of Musa Dagh from Anjar, Lebanon finally brought the heroic story of the defense of Musa Dagh to Soviet Armenia (Shemmassian, 2012; Minasian, 2007, pp. 23-26). These groups of repatriates established a village in the province of Armavir near Yerevan, named it *Musaler* (ler meaning mountain in Armenian), and in the 1960s initiated the construction of a huge monument to the memory of the Musa Dagh self-defense. Every year in September largescale festivities are organized at the monument to celebrate the Musa Dagh victory.

The formal introduction of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* in Soviet Armenia coincided with the dissident movement during the relative respite of the Khrushchev era. *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was translated and published in Soviet Armenia in 1964 and was widely read. The book was republished in 1987 with the Armenian translations of the Preface by M. Doudin and the Epilogue by M. Piroumyan that had appeared in the 1984 Russian translation of the book.

The favorable atmosphere in Soviet Armenia prompted John Kurkjian, after his failed attempts in the United States, to turn to Soviet Armenia to pursue his goal of making a movie based on *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*. He was able to stir emotions and mobilize the film professionals. He even met the people of Musaler, who were enthusiastic to help. But the final decision had to come from Moscow, and it was rejected because U.S – Soviet relations had already gone sour, and a joint-venture film was not possible. Kurkjian had purchased the rights to the movie adaptation until 1981. He made the hasty decision to make the film anyway, even with the small capital he had, a low budget film with a less professional cast and direction. The outcome was mediocre, unworthy of the value of the grand epic story Franz Werfel had created.

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* is a classic for the generation growing up in the independent Republic of Armenia. In 1996, a Wall of Honor was added to the Monument of the Armenian Genocide on the hills of Tsitsernakabert, Yerevan, displaying memorial plaques of the great humanitarians and intellectuals who spoke out against the Genocide of Armenians. Franz Werfel is among them.

In January 2012, "The Forty days of Musa Dagh" was staged in Yerevan with Armen Elbakyan's dramatization of the novel for stage and under his direction. The well-received, very modern stage production was a tribute to Franz Werfel whose name and literature were banned in the tougher times of the Soviet era.

Official representatives of the Republic of Armenia have joined in all activities and commemorations of Franz Werfel organized by Diasporan Armenians in the

Diaspora. On October 9, 1998, for example, a memorial dedicated to Franz Werfel was unveiled at Vienna's Shiller Square. As reported in *Asbarez* (Staff writer reporting, 1998), the monument was made possible through the efforts of the Austria-Armenian Friendship Society and was created in Armenia. A high-ranking delegation from Armenia, including the foreign minister, along with the mayor of Vienna, foreign diplomatic representatives, the Austrian-Armenian community, a delegation representing the Hungarian-Armenian community attended the ceremony. Rose Marie Isop, the executive editor of the Austrian National Radio-Television, spoke about Werfel's *The Forty Days of Mousa Dagħ*, stressing that with his work the author created a permanent reminder and a memorial to the Armenian people's tragedies and heroic triumphs. "And today—in appreciation and gratitude the Armenian people erect a memorial in Werfel's honor," stated Isop. An excerpt from *Forty Days of Mousa Dagħ*, not surprisingly, the scene representing the meeting between Johannes Lepsius and Enver Pasha was read.

Diplomatic representatives of the Republic of Armenia were also present and participated in the conference held in Prague, June 18-20, 2012, titled "Mountains of Moses: Revolt, Resistance and Rescuing of the Victims of Mass Extermination in the 20th Century." According to *Asbarez* (Staff writer reporting, 2012), this was the first International Conference on Genocide Studies in the Czech Republic. Significantly, the presentations on genocidal acts around the world evolved around the theme of Armenian resistance against the Ottoman massacres and deportations, immortalized by Franz Werfel. Turkish officials were there to object to the proceedings.

Most recently, a 40-hour and 20-minute audiobook has been produced in Armenia, in which Hayk Petrosyan reads Paruyr Mikayelyan's Armenian translation of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagħ*. A timely project to bolster self-realization and resistance against injustice.

### Conclusion

Joining my beloved friend, the late Vartan Gregorian, I would like to conclude,

*The Forty Days of Musa Dagħ* was meant as a memorial set against a new historical phenomenon that had been described as "the murder of a nation," "the extermination of a race," and "the assassination of Armenia.... **The Forty Days of Musa Dagħ** saved the Armenian genocide from benign neglect and gave a literary symbol of survival and renewal to the Armenians. For Armenians, Franz Werfel still embodies the conscience of European literature and its commitment to universal justice and the dignity of man. (Werfel, 2012, VIII)

Yes, we Armenians owe it to Franz Werfel for this classic masterpiece of the Armenian Genocide literature. It is up to us to put it to use at its fullest potential as a

testimony and as the truth of the Armenian Genocide. The tale of Werfel's *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, a tale of resistance, gallantry, and love, is timeless, and continues to impress and inspire generations of Armenians. Werfel constructed the process of the making of a leader, an unlikely character rising from the circumstances. The threat of death had forced Gabriel Bagratian's gift of military leadership to surface. The fateful circumstances had brought about a transformation in him. He heeded the call to lead the uncivilized, ungovernable mob. Werfel immortalized one of the many incidents threatening the nation's mere existence in the course of the turbulent history of the Armenian people when extreme moments of history gave birth to gallant men leading the nation toward salvation and deliverance. Do we hear the perpetual message of *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*?

In today's portentous circumstances endangering our nation and our State, do we see the road map to deliverance Werfel so clearly and masterfully drew on?

### Notes

1. Franz Werfel admits: "In order to write this book [The Forty Days of Musa Dagh], I have read hundreds of books in the Mkhitarist library in Vienna and have worked day and night for 8 months. I have done fundamental editing once and proofread it 3 times." See M. Piroumyan, "Franz Werfeli u nra vepi masin"[On Franz Werfel and his novel], an epilogue published in the Armenian translation of the novel, titled "Musa Leran qarasun ore" pp. 886-910, quotation from p. 900. Piroumyan's piece was a translation from the 1984 Russian original. (All quotations from her piece are my translations from Armenian).

2. Examples are,

pp. 98-99 – old version – "His Excellency [Wali Djelal Bey] in Aleppo was a dead man in this respect for he had shown too much leniency to the Armenian race..."

p. 101 – new version – "Armenians could expect no protection .... They had fallen into the hands of a far more terrible, unfettered enemy – their own country."

p. 135 old version – Young girls and women are literally forced into prostitution...

p. 140 new version – Young girls and women are literally being raped and abducted by force...

In volume I p. 546 of the original, Werfel speaks of the Turk who "only robs, kills, steals and rapes." In English translation the same passage on p. 380 reads "loots."

3. Reidel cites the title of Kazarian's article as "A Corrupt translation, 'The Forty Days of Musa Dagh' and its English Translation," and mentions *Hairenik* Monthly (June, 1951), as the source of the original in Armenian.

4. These critics believe that Werfel meant to describe the mindsets of identifiable intellectuals and political figures in Europe of the time and convey his message that was a warning of a dangerous power shift in Europe. According to these critics,



Armenians and their resistance was a convenient carrier for the message Werfel aimed to convey.

5. *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* was translated into many languages. Its French translation by Paule Hofer-Bury appeared in 1934 and was republished in 1986 with a preface by Elie Wiesel who titled his article "The Crime of Forgetting."

6. Uwe Makino, "'Die Wahrheit anders erzählen'. Zu Edgar Hilsenraths Armenien-Roman," *Doitsu Buuka*, 3 (1998): 4 ["'To Tell the Truth Differently': About Edgar Hilsenrath's Armenian Novel"]. I am grateful to Prof. Karine Doerr of Concordia University for translating the article for me.

7. For the analysis of this novel, see Perroomian, R. "The Truth of the Armenian Genocide in Edgar Hilsenrath's Fiction" in *Journal of Genocide Research* (2003, pp. 281-292). See also Perroomian, R. "Problematic Aspects of Reading Genocide Literature, A Search for a Guideline or a Canon" in *Remembrance and Denial, The Case of the Armenian Genocide*, ed. R.G. Hovannisian, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1999, pp. 175-186).

8. As a settlement after the war, Turkey relinquished the Sanjak of Alexandretta to the French. Armenian refugees of Musa Dagh and the surrounding areas gradually left the refugee camps in Port Said, where the French battleship had taken them. Some went to Syria and Lebanon others returned to their lands in Sanjak. The French evacuation of Hatay in 1939 proved disastrous for Armenian inhabitants, almost 25.000 in 1936. Today there is only one village by the name of Vakef in the Musa Dag area where a few Armenian families live and maintain their Armenian identity.

9. Others are Armin Wegner, Hedvig Bull, Henry Morgenthau, Johannes Lepsius, James Bryce, Anatol France, Giacomo Gorrini, Pope Benedict XV, Fritjof Nansen, Fayez El Husseyn, Jakob Künzler, Maria Jacobsen, Alma Johansson, Clara Barton, Karen Jeppe, and Bodil Biørn.

10. The conference was organized by the Archaeology of Evil Research Centre (AERC) as part of the NINE GATES Festival that annually promotes Jewish culture in the Czech Republic and elsewhere in Europe. The conference enjoyed the patronage of the President of the Czech Parliament, the Prime Minister, a number of ministries, and the embassies of China, Spain, and Sweden. See "Musa Dagh General Theme of Prague Conference on Genocide Studies," in *Asbarez* (Staff writer reporting, 2012).

### **Conflict of Interests**

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

### **Ethical standards**

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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## ՖՐԱՆՑ ՎԵՐՖԵԼԻ «ՄՈՒՍԱ ԼԵՌԱՆ ՔԱՌԱՍՈՒՆ ՕՐԸ». ՀԱՎԵՐՈՒ ԱՐԴԻԱԿԱՆ ՍՏԵՂԾԱԳՈՐԾՈՒԹՅՈՒՆ

Ռուբինա Փիրումյան

Հոդվածը հարգանքի տուրք է Ֆրանց Վերֆելի «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» հայտնի վեպի 90-ամյակին:

Եթե ելնենք տեքստի, ավելի ճիշտ՝ տեքստի գործառույթի, ազդեցության ու իմաստի մեկնաբանության՝ Ռոլանդ Բարթի մոտեցումից, կտեսնենք, որ «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» սոսկ ավարտուն գործ չէ, այլ այնպիսի մի

գործ, որը երբեք չի դադարում մեզ հետ լինել, ստեղծագործություն, որը ընթերցողին պարտադրում է մտածել, բացահայտել նորանոր իմաստներ ու մասնակից դառնալ ստեղծագործության իմաստի կայացման գործին ու թափանցել դրա խորքերը: Այս գլուխգործոցի լույս աշխարհ գալուց իննսուն տարի անց էլ, դրա շուրջ քննարկումները չեն դադարում: Ավելին՝ ամեն ընթերցում ի հայտ է բերում իմաստային նորանոր ծալքեր:

Սույն աշխատանքում ես փորձում եմ յուրովի ներկայացնել այս հավերժ արդիական հերոսապատումի՝ սփյուռքաբնակ հայերի ու այլազգիների ընկալումը: Գործը դիտարկում եմ որպես անարդարության նկատմամբ ընդվզող հայ ոգու մարմնավորում և Հայոց ցեղասպանության թուրքական ժխտողական քաղաքականության դեմ պայքարի միջոց: Վեպի նկատմամբ թուրքական հիստերիան ու նրա բանեցրած ճնշումը եվրոպական կառավարությունների վրա՝ այն մեծելու վկայում են ստեղծագործության այդ իմաստին եւ ուժին: Փորձում եմ նաև բացահայտել այս ստեղծագործության ներգործումը ձուլման եզրին գտնվող հայ սերունդների ինքնաճանաչողության և ազգային գիտակցության զարթոնքի բնագավառում:

Ցեղասպանության մասին գրականությունը օգնում է ընկալել ու հասկանալ այս ողբերգության իրական ծավալներն ու դրա հիմքում ընկած բացարձակ ճշմարտությունը: «Մուսա լեռան քառասուն օրը» պատմավեպը Հայոց ցեղասպանության մասին ամենաազդեցիկ ստեղծագործությունն է, ամենաբարձր ճիշդ, սարսափազդու իրականության ամենաիրական վերարտադրությունը, որը, ներկայացնելով մարդկության դեմ կատարված ահավոր հանցագործության նախատիպը, պիտի դրդեր Ռաֆայել Լեմկինին ստեղծել «ցեղասպանություն» տերմինը:

Նոդվաճս անդրադառնում է նաև այն հարցին, թե ինչու և ինչպես պատահեց, որ բնագրի շուրջ 312 հատված (ընդհանուր առմամբ 1062 տող, այսինքն՝ բնագրի 11%-ը) դուրս մնաց գրքի առաջին անգլերեն թարգմանության տեքստից և վերականգնվեց միայն 2012 թ. թարգմանական տարբերակում: Սփյուռքահայերի՝ այս նոր տարբերակի հրատարակությունը մեծ խանդավառությամբ ողջունելու փաստը գրքի ու հեղինակի հանդեպ նրանց ունեցած նվիրումի վկայությունն է:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** *Ցեղասպանության մասին գրականություն, թուրքական ժխտողական քաղաքականություն, հայկական սփյուռք. ձուլում, գոյատևում, էկրանավորում, հրեական արձագանք:*