ForeWord Reviews

AUTOBIOGRAPHY & MEMOIR

Between the Two Rivers: A Story of the Armenian Genocide
Aida Kouyoumjian
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Most people familiar with the genocide of the Armenians recognize this 1939 quote attributed to Adolph Hitler: “I have given orders to my Death Units to exterminate without mercy or pity men, women, and children belonging to the Polish-speaking race. It is only in this manner that we can acquire the vital territory which we need. After all who today remembers the extermination of the Armenians?”

Remember that extermination, however, is precisely what Mannig, the main character of *Between the Two Rivers: A Story of the Armenian Genocide* does. Her “remembering” in this book is far more profound and complex than conceivably meant by Hitler in his statement; and thus, memory and its roles, with their various historical, cultural, and personal meanings, are the central themes of Aida Kouyoumjian’s book.

Through the author’s retelling of her mother Mannig’s remarkable story of survival and existence as an orphan in Iraq (between the Tigris and Euphraties rivers), readers become engrossed in the heartbreakingly tragic details of her early life. At the outset of the book, Mannig is a clever ten year old who, along with her sister, are the only family members to have survived the ethnic cleansing of her Armenian community from Adapazar, Turkey. Homeless and alone, she is left to search and scavenge the streets of Mosel, Iraq, in order to subsist at the most basic of levels. As fragments of her former life and self are revealed, how the young Mannig relates to them demonstrates the difficulty, confusion, and pain they cause her in this foreign place, where what she remembers of her language, life, and family have in many senses “no place.” However, once Mannig enters an orphanage set up specifically for Armenian children, she is safe; and there she’s able to remember, learn, relearn, share, and tell what is necessary for her as a survivor and a member of a community once again.

With this writing, Kouyoumjian joins authors Thea Halo and Peter Balakian, whose finely penned accounts of family members’ survival of the Ottoman atrocities are essential reads for the understanding of these genocides. And although history has shown that ethnic cleansing and genocide cannot be avoided by remembering and retelling alone, books like *Between the Two Rivers*

are necessary reminders of the humanity of individuals who live or perish amidst mass atrocities perpetrated by others, ultimately begging the simplest of questions: Why?

Elissa Mugianis