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**The Armenian Genocide: A review of Eve Makis's novel,  
*The Spice Box Letters*  
(Dingwall, Scotland: Sandstone Press, 2015, 260 pp.,  
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Looking recently at the popular Goodreads.com page on the Internet, I discovered that the web-site includes a section headed "Armenian Genocide Books". Although obviously very selective and undoubtedly incomplete, the page lists some 50 relevant titles, including histories and memoirs, and also at least 16 works of fiction, not all of them originally published in English. For perhaps understandable reasons, most of the works listed have been published since the 1990s, although one, *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, the celebrated novel by Franz Werfel, originally appeared in German in 1933 and was somewhat poorly translated into English in the following year – a new and much improved version appeared as recently as in 2012 (Wikipedia "*The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*").

The incompleteness of the Goodreads page devoted to the Armenian Genocide is also evidenced by the absence of a novel published in 2015, the centenary year of the Genocide. *The Spice Box Letters*, by the Anglo-Cypriot writer Eve Makis (her Greek Cypriot parents migrated to the UK in the 1960s), took Makis (as she readily acknowledges) some years to complete – as early as in 2009 she admitted that "This book is tough going as I am writing about a culture that is not my own and one I knew very little about before I started writing." In her previous three novels she had been concerned with exploring the lives of her characters in relation to the communities making up the divided island of Cyprus, emphasizing in the same interview that "The role of history [...] is absolutely vital. I don't think you can understand the characters fully without knowing their history". This, then, was no less the case when she decided, by

chance rather than as a long-considered idea, to focus her fourth novel on the lives of individuals in one of the smaller Cypriot communities, that of the Armenians who found shelter there in diaspora in the wake of the Armenian Genocide and the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire during the first world war. As she has said in interview, the Cypriot Armenian community was unknown to her, and hence she spent considerable time talking to individuals and learning about the past of the Armenian Cypriots who now share Cyprus with other ethnic communities.

*The Spice Box Letters* can be read on several levels. In its quest to explore the otherwise unarticulated links between individuals and their families, its settings range across the seventy years between 1915 and the present time of 1985, and across places as diverse as eastern Turkey, Lebanon, Cyprus, England, and the USA. Its short, pithy chapters lend themselves to a story narrated in several different voices that emanate, it soon becomes clear, from different moments in the twentieth century. The earliest part presents an ethnically Armenian family domiciled in Caesaria, in eastern Turkey, that in 1915 is swiftly uprooted and torn apart by ethnic conflict inspired by the Ottoman régime in Constantinople. This part of the story of Armenian diaspora is told through the modern translation (into English) of the Armenian-language diaries and letters, stored in an old Armenian spice box, of Mariam Arakelian, in essence a re-sounding of a life lived some seventy years prior to the present time of the novel itself. Mariam's life is retold to her English granddaughter Katerina, who while holidaying in Cyprus encounters a young Armenian Cypriot, Ara, a sculptor working in Cypriot stone, and it is through his – male – voice translating Mariam's journals and letters that Katerina's recently deceased grandmother is figuratively restored to life. Thus we learn that Mariam's childhood game played in the early 1920s with her Armenian step-brother Levon in their adoptive English home is properly fulfilled only after more than sixty years of recurrent grieving and healing:

[Levon:] “We can go there [to Armenia] right now, if you want.”

[Mariam:] “What are you talking about?”

[Levon:] “Up here [in the attic of their English home], we can be wherever we want.”

Levon suggests to Mariam that she should imagine her father, a doctor, his friend Baladian, a poet, and their friend Carabetian, as they would have been if there had been no Genocide and they had lived on into the present time of the 1920s. Mariam records in her diary that “I loved this game” – until she recalls that “the lawyer had the soles of his feet sliced off and the poet had his tongue cut out”, while her father was hanged before her eyes in the town-square of Caesaria (pp. 142-43).

In other parts of that process of dispossession, the story traverses the boundaries imposed by time, history, place – the inevitable outcome of a diaspora provoked by the inter-communal violence of the past – but at the same time the story is also subtly transformed by gendered voices, female and male, that swiftly add the novelistic pleasures of emotion, sexuality, romance, and hope for the future.

Given the novel’s emphasis on the continuity and restoration of a fractured historical Armenian culture, the narrative uses a number of familiar strategies, notably an emphasis on food: its ingredients and aromas, and their power to evoke memories. As the mother of the present-day Katerina says of her own mother, Mariam, who has recently died: “I should have written down her recipes while she was alive, but I never did and now I’ll never have the chance” (13) – thus providing Katerina with a new, unspoken task of rediscovering such evocative recipes by contact with a living Armenian culture, which she finds in Cyprus. With Levon, however, in the 1920s, Mariam has re-created a recipe for halva that is redolent of their past life in Caesaria but they are obliged to make use of ingredients that the youngsters discover in their English home, and the resultant luxury sweetstuff eventually provides Levon with both his future livelihood in New York and also yet another link with his communal and familial past.

The second major character in the narrative is Gabriel, Mariam's brother, who has also survived the 1915 Genocide but in the process has lost contact with his sister and her life. In old age, along with his devoted wife Marta, he still lives on in Larnaca, Cyprus, his senescent irascibility nicely typified by his whisky-enhanced language. In the course of living in Cyprus he has developed multilingually, still speaking the Armenian and Turkish of his youth, and also the English of that other empire. Gabriel is imagined as a tragicomic character, mourning his unresolved memories of his fractured family. Thus, in 1919, once he has made his way to the safety of Cyprus, he joins the family of Nareg, an uncle, whose wife Lena gives birth to Varvar: "My connection to Varvar was instant as were my feelings of protection and love. She was a reason to rejoice, swelling the ranks of our small clan, a fresh green shoot on a ravaged family tree" (p. 121). Gabriel's survival into old age despite the pain of his memories is ensured by his Armenian wife Marta: "She strokes my scalp with nimble fingers absorbing pain twisted into the coils of my DNA, as ingrained as the colours that run through granite rock. I want to weep for the comfort of Marta's touch" (pp. 127-28).

*The Spice Box Letters* is, then, at once a romance and an almost relentless history of communal and familial suffering that endures across three generations of the twentieth century – but there are eventually several gratifying resolutions that are tellingly motivated through the agency of individuals who are outsiders to the Armenian community in Cyprus. On one level, this might even be labelled a "feel-good" fable, since, although it is grounded in the cruelty of historical reality, its message is one of hope. As a modern paperback novel, *The Spice Box Letters* has been translated and published in a number of European languages – Greek, Italian, Polish, and Czech – but not, as yet, in Armenian. Given its message of hopefulness and regeneration, perhaps one should also dare to imagine that, one day, it might even appear in Turkish.

**General References**

I am grateful to my old student and colleague, Professor Jopi Nyman, of the University of Eastern Finland at Joensuu, for bringing Eve Makis's novel to my attention. His far more scholarly study of the novel (which I avoided consulting while writing this review!) is due to appear as the following:

Nyman, Jopi. "Writing the Armenian Genocide in Eve Makis's *The Spice Box Letters*: Trauma, Diaspora, Community." Forthcoming: *Brno Studies in English* 47.1 (2021).

In writing this review, I have consulted a few other sources for support:

"Eve Makis Tells the Story of an Ordinary Armenian Family", *The Armenian Mirror-Spectator* (USA), 1 Sept. 2016, online.  
"The Spice Box Letters – Review", 26 Sept. 2016, online.  
Petra Tourney-Theodofou, "An Interview with Eve Makis". *The European English Messenger* 18.2 (2009): pp. 46-50.

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