

Thea Halo, *Not Even My Name: From a Death March in Turkey to a New Home in America. A Young Girl's True Story of Genocide and Survival*.

(New York: Picador USA, 2000) 321 pp.

Reviewed by Gladys Warda

The title of this book is a summary of what it narrates. It must be added, though, that in this case the genocide is that of the Pontic Greeks. A map at the beginning and several explanations throughout the book, teach the reader that these are the Greeks of Ionia (also known as Asia Minor), who during three millennia occupied the Pontic Mountains, at the north of what nowadays is Turkey, on the southern coast of the Black Sea.

This map is also useful to follow the movements of the persons living out the drama, because it enables the reader to locate with ease all of the places mentioned in the book.

There are several aspects of the book worth noting, beyond the most obvious one of genocide.

A reader will first of all be seduced by the poetic language of the author as she describes not only the landscape but all the small details of everyday life in her Pontic home. The explanation found for this is that Halo is an artist and a painter.

But the literary value of the book does not reside only in its expressive vocabulary. The structure of the book and the way she manages to travel back and forth in time are amazing.

In every great book, it is said, there is a "central scene". All that happens before that scene is an anticipation of it, and what happens after it, is a consequence. The "central scene" in "*Not Even My Name*" is the chapter in which the Greek families in their towns receive the orders of exile.

The book has a symmetric structure the axis of which is that central scene. The narration begins in the first person, with Thea Halo telling about she and her mother going to Turkey to find the town where her mother, Themía (or Sano, as she was later called), lived until she was ten years old. Then her mother starts to tell her story in first person, beginning with the description of her family and their activities, going through their exile and ending, as the title of the book indicates, with her life in America. The symmetry winds up with Thea relating their arrival in the part of Turkey from where Themía left for exile.

Before even opening the book the picture on its cover will mesmerize the reader. It is the photo of Sano on her wedding day, when she was fifteen years old. Halo describes it saying (page 3): "*There is no grimace of pain, no knitted brows; only an unmistakable sorrow that seems to say, my flame is almost out.*" For this reviewer, it displays a tremendous inner strength, and the expression in Sano's eyes shows a barrier against anything that might inflict pain. At the end of the book, Halo says her mother has "*a profound wisdom*" (page 321) and to this reviewer, this is a more accurate description of the photo than the one given on page 3.

Although the title of the book itself tells the end of the story, and a reader knows from the beginning that Thea Halo and her mother will reach their destination, it is a book “difficult to put down.”

That literary craftsmanship is an excellent vehicle for the essential message of the book, that is, to tell the world about the genocide of the Pontic Greeks by the Turks, namely by the government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. In two *Historical Notations* Halo gives the reader the basic facts. On page 117, we read: “By 1915 a faction of the Young Turks took control of the government and began ordering the wholesale slaughter of the Greek, Armenian and Assyrian minorities, and the confiscation of their property.” Halo suggests that at one time “[...] oil interests [...]” (page 119) had to do with this policy. On page 124 she adds German Consul Kuchhoff’s words: “*Exile and extermination in Turkish are the same, for whoever is not murdered, will die from hunger or illness,*” and on page 125 we find Austrian Chancellor Hollweg’s report: “*Whatever was done to the Armenians is being repeated with the Greeks.*”

Halo also deplores the biased teaching of history (page 125): “*Numerous scandals have surfaced concerning Turkish government’s policy of paying American universities, such as Princeton, endowments to insure that a history is taught that is favorable to Turkey; one that excludes reference of the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian genocides.*”

What solution has Halo found then? To relate survivor’s testimonies, and that is what this book is about, the atrocities Themía suffered, that even provoked in her “war amenorrhea” since she didn’t begin to menstruate until after four months of living in America.

An interesting aspect is the psychological defense mechanisms Sano utilizes. These remind us of the enormous capacity of men and women finding themselves in seemingly impossible situations, as evidenced in a number of accounts about the Assyrian and Armenian ordeals.

During the Death March, Themía would sometimes be delirious, or her mind would be carried back to the good times in her hometown. We read, for example, on page 141: “*I felt as if I were floating above the surface of the ground [...]. I could hear children laughing and screaming with delight. I could even hear Grandfather’s voice as if he were beside me.*”

After her arrival in America, she would not speak Greek - to the point of forgetting it! - and she never told anyone her ordeals (“*It was too horrible to tell,*” she explains on page 34). Her children knew nothing about her past, until when, toward her eighties, she told her daughter, Thea the author, what is related in this book.

Obviously these defense mechanisms helped her to cope at a time of great need, but they have also made of her an “American” who placed her ethnicity in the back recesses of her mind and transmitted it rather weakly to her descendants. As Halo herself expresses it (page 16), speaking of her adolescence: “[...] *I never once thought of myself as Greek*” and further on (page 16): “*For most of my life [...] such was my isolation from, and ignorance of, my heritage.*”

Although, as mentioned above, the title of the book tells the reader how it ends, an explanation must be given about the first part, “*Not Even My Name*.” At a certain moment during the “Death march,” Themía’s mother leaves her at a home in Tlaraz, a small Assyrian village in Southern Turkey, where presumably she will survive. It is here where Themía suffers the loss of her name. Her mistress, Ruth, among all the cruel actions to which she subjects Themía, changes her name to Sano, claiming she can’t pronounce her real name. Sad to say, heartless Ruth is Assyrian, as are the somewhat gentler members of her family.

Her marriage at fifteen was to Abraham Halo, an Assyrian from Mardin, three times her age, whom she meets the very day of her wedding.

It must be noted that there are only two Assyrians depicted to some extent in *Not Even My Name*, Sano’s heartless mistress in Tlaraz and, a few years later, Abraham, the man she marries. It is interesting to observe that neither one speaks Assyrian. Ruth speaks Arabic, while Abraham’s languages are Arabic and English. Therefore, Halo’s Assyrian heritage is not very strong either, a fact that is reinforced by Abraham’s unwillingness to speak of his past. In fact, Halo herself acknowledges the fact when she speaks of her weak Greek heritage, adding, on page 16: “*I hadn’t thought of myself as an Assyrian either.*”

However, Abraham embodies some of the characteristics of Assyrians that Madawi Al-Rasheed discusses in *Iraqi Assyrian Christians in London: The Construction of Ethnicity* (reviewed in JAAS Vol. XIV No. 1) like, for instance, helping relatives in their immigration to the country that received him.

In this reviewer’s opinion, Halo does not give a very good over-all impression of the Assyrians. First, as already mentioned, there is Ruth the dragon lady, an Assyrian. Second, some of Abraham’s traits are not the best. He hits his children and his wife, and it is difficult, if not impossible, to reason with him.

In fairness, it can’t be overlooked that Abraham too suffered exile and has his own experience relating to genocide. On page 284 Halo says: “*The story of the genocide of the Assyrians by the Turks and Kurds through the ages was a tragedy still untold,*” and on page 285 we read: “*In 1895, the year Abraham was sixteen years old, Kurdish soldiers slaughtered 13,000 Assyrian men, women and children in and around Urfa, a city not far from Mardin.*” Let it be noted, however, that there is precious little other than these occasional generalities to describe the ravages visited on the Assyrians. This is not said by way of criticism. After all, this is a book about a person of Pontic Greek heritage, not about an Assyrian.

As to the question of names, several matters come to mind. One of them is that Abraham continued to call his wife Sano. If he loved her, which in fact he did as Halo points out, why did he not at least return her name to her? Another point is the following. As an American, Sano was a frequent visitor of the movies. When her husband gave one of her children the name Nejmy, Sano says (page 258) “*Nejmy means morning star. It was a beautiful name, but it sounded so foreign, so I called her Mitzi after a famous movie star at the time.*” (This reviewer believes she refers to Mitzi Gaynor). But the point is, after her painful experience with her own name, she still changes someone else’s name?

Even though the gist of *Not Even My Name* is the Pontic Greeks and specifically Sano's deeply moving experience, Abraham is portrayed too, but through his wife's eyes and as a person, without any emphasis or awareness on her part of his Assyrian origin. It would seem, at least to this reviewer, that Sano did not sufficiently appreciate his love for her nor the fact that it was he who rescued her from what would have been a completely barren life, if life at all. It is only their children, towards the end, that make her understand how much he loved her.

And to end, an interesting detail. This reviewer always considered the "egg-breaking contest" at Easter as being an Assyrian game. Themía (she was Themía then and not Sano) relates it as occurring among the Pontic Greeks. Abraham also played it as an Assyrian. What is it? Greek or Assyrian? Or both?