

Critics' Forum

Literature

The Path Not Taken: *My Brother's Road*

By Hovig Tchalian

The recently published biography by Markar Melkonian, *My Brother's Road: An American's Fateful Journey to Armenia*, begins with an interesting premise—what kind of a man was the subject of the book and the author's brother, Monte "Avo" Melkonian?

As its subtitle suggests, the book attempts to answer the question by tracing the life of an ordinary kid who grew up to become a freedom fighter in Armenia. Monte's life led him from his birthplace—the quiet, unassuming farming village of Visalia, California, "the Walnut Capital of the World"—to the ranks of the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, and on to heroics and a legendary reputation in the battle for Nagorno-Karabagh.

Along the way, we learn about Monte's prowess as a little league baseball pitcher. We discover his first encounters with "otherness" in the schoolyard, when American schoolchildren ask him where he is born. We learn about his interest in Armenian history and, eventually, the "Armenian Question." We also read about occasionally amusing encounters, such as the one between Monte and a childhood teacher who recognizes him unexpectedly on an airplane, just as he is preparing to assassinate a Turkish official. Melkonian's book tries to walk the fine line between telling a good story and deriving a larger meaning from a series of interesting events.

In essence, the book asks the opposite question posed by a novel Ara Oshagan and I discussed several weeks ago, Micheline Aharonian Marcom's *The Daydreaming Boy*. In it, Marcom asks how—or whether—it is possible to understand a historical event like the Genocide from within the fictional form of the novel. Melkonian seems to ask instead whether it is possible to tell the fantastic exploits of a man become legend from within the non-fictional form of biography.

The book's Prologue seems to address just this dilemma, as the author recounts the day of his brother's burial, at the young age of thirty-five. As thousands of mourners gather around the coffin as it winds its way through the streets of Yerevan, the author tells us that "a Russian general told a television interviewer, quite inaccurately, that they had first met when Monte had been a slayer of Soviets in Afghanistan. A one-legged woman claimed that Monte had rescued her from a minefield. The child of a peasant recalled his 'amazing simplicity.' And yet so much remained uncertain, obscure." The characters Melkonian singles out could just as easily populate a mystery novel or a book of fables.

In the book's final chapter, Melkonian returns to this burial scene, after recounting his brother's death by shrapnel in a roadside confrontation. But now, Melkonian says simply that "the rumors and conspiracy theories continue to proliferate. But for my part, I'm convinced that Monte and Saribeg [a fellow soldier] died in a chance encounter with Azeri fighters." This seems to echo the author's earlier claim in the Prologue—that "as the

rumors have proliferated over the years, my need to separate fable from creditable report has only grown.” The statement is entirely fair and pragmatic. But it comes on the heels of a series of other puzzling questions about Monte—“Was he temperate or was he a vodka guzzler? A communist to his dying day, or a reborn nationalist? A defender of captives or a slitter of throats?”—puzzling more for being posed at all than for their insight or interpretive value.

Unfortunately for the book and its readers, this apparent discord between the marvelous and the mundane is never resolved or properly addressed. As such, the questions Melkonian poses and attempts to answer ultimately hold little enduring philosophical or historical value. The reviews on the book’s cover uniformly depict an author with a curious, intellectual interest in his material. That may very well be true. The careful reader will also suspect, however, that the author is ultimately less interested in the apparent dilemma of Monte Melkonian’s life than in telling the story of his ‘kid brother’ turned folk hero. The result is a book that too often comes off as trite more than philosophical, sentimental more than serious.

The book’s real value is in telling a good story, which it does well, and its genuine warmth and honesty. There are also moments of some lyrical beauty, ironically often in descriptions of battle and warfare. In chapter eight, for instance, the author powerfully evokes a scene of war from Monte’s time in Lebanon: “Israeli tanks squealed over the hills in the medium distance and Israeli helicopters hovered low overhead, dropping phosphor flares that threw flickering blue shadows over the boulders and brush around Monte’s earthen bunker.”

Just a few lines later, however, Melkonian reverts to his more usual ‘personal’ narrative voice to describe his little brother: “putting his math skills together with his military training, he radioed enemy coordinates to Palestinian rocket launchers” The nuanced description of battle quickly gives way to what sounds like a line from a hastily prepared resume. Later in the book, Melkonian will muse about his brother, who is spending time in Italy: “he strolled to a park near the Coliseum, absorbed in thoughts about architecture and the morals of various nations.”

The book ultimately—and quite explicitly—poses its own dilemma of the personality that lies behind a myth, the ‘truth’ concealed within fiction. When a French journalist interviews Monte, the author suggests that she “had been surprised to discover that the fearsome terrorist leader was in fact attentive, funny, and smart—a far cry from the bellicose fanatic she had expected.” The line encapsulates well the book’s interest in the ‘human’ side of Monte Melkonian’s story. But it suggests equally that the implicit emphasis on the personal story is the book’s real undoing.

In *My Brother’s Road*, any ambitions of exploring the paradox of personality are resolved finally in the private conversation between a man and his brother—and more generally, two Armenians in communion with each other. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that the pervasiveness of this too comfortable paradigm of community is

precisely the obstacle that diasporan Armenian writing must overcome on its way to something greater.

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