

Muriel Mirak-Weissbach
Through the Wall of Fire

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Armenia – Iraq – Palestine
From Wrath to Reconciliation



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This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents and all those of their generation, in the Ottoman Empire or Europe, who were victimized by the geopolitical machinations of the Great Powers. May their will to survive and capacity for forgiveness shape the approach of today's political leaders in the search for justice.

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Introduction

Through the Wall of Fire

I am the daughter of two orphans, both victims of the 1915 Armenian genocide. Although I did not realize its implications until entering adulthood, this fact was to shape my outlook and work. The following pages are a reflection on some of that work and the process which led to it.

This is not intended to be yet another book which recounts the horrors, and seeks self-righteously to consign the perpetrators to an appropriate circle in Dante's *Inferno*. I have no doubt that those involved in such crimes have already met, or will eventually meet, their just reward or punishment in a realm in the afterworld over which I certainly have no immediate influence.

My intention is another: it is to recount the experience of ethnic cleansing, genocide, and war from the viewpoint of those who were children at the time, to communicate the nature of the trauma they suffered. It is only by grasping the deep psychological impact on the children that others may understand how prejudices, hatred, and the thirst for revenge can be passed on from

generation to generation, until it may appear that no solution is in sight.

I am convinced that solutions do exist, but that they can be sought only if there is adequate psychological insight into this subjective character of the problem. To presume, for example, that there could be a quick Palestinian-Israeli peace based on some internationally imposed formal treaty arrangements, especially in the wake of the infernal Gaza war, is at best naive. A fundamental revolution in thinking, a far-reaching shift in *moral* outlook, is required to pave the way to a possible peace, and cultural means, including great music and poetry, may have a role to play in this.

Here I have turned to my favorite poet Dante Alighieri for guidance. In his monumental *Divine Comedy*, Dante provided precious insight into the process through which such an emotional, moral shift may occur. At the end of Purgatory, the second canticle of his epic, the poet-pilgrim comes up against a Wall of Fire, which, he is told by his trusted guide Virgil and an attendant angel, he must pass through if he wants to enter Paradise. He is hopelessly gripped by fear, utterly immovable. The incandescent flames remind him only too graphically of the wretched souls he had encountered in Hell, who had been condemned to eternal torture by fire:

Over my clasped hands I stared aghast
Into the fire, picturing vividly
Human bodies I had seen aflame.

Virgil assures him he is not in any personal danger:

Here, son, there may be
Torment, but not death.

And he urges Dante to overcome his fears:

Put fear aside, lay all fear aside.
Turn this way, come, enter unafraid.

Dante knows all too well on a rational level that he must follow Virgil's advice, but he is nonetheless paralyzed. His mind tells him to move, but his limbs do not respond.

And I stood still, against my will.

It is only when Virgil tells him that Beatrice, his beloved, is on the other side of that Wall of Fire that he is emotionally freed from fear and the obsession with himself; now he is able to think of the *Other*, and can thus plunge confidently into the flames. And they do burn!

Once I had entered, I would have cast
My body into molten glass, to cool it:
Such was the fire without measure.

Virgil continues to provide him fatherly comfort, assuring him Beatrice is nigh:

Her eyes it seems I can already see.

Dante is thus enabled to brave the torment, and to join his celestial guide who will lead him into Paradise.

This episode is the turning point in the entire *Comedy*. I offer it as a fitting metaphor for the awesome emotional challenge posed to the parties in conflict treated in this book, be they in the Middle East, or in Armenia and Turkey. They, like the poet, are called upon to shed fears associated with the past, to overcome bestial emotions such as hatred, rage, arrogance, and desire for vendetta, and above all to transcend their petty provincialism. Dante challenges his compatriots to abandon the bell-tower mentality that defines them as Florentines, Romans, or Bolognese, and embrace identities as citizens of a nation.

Traversing the Wall of Fire means entering a qualitatively higher realm, in which utterly different laws govern. In Paradise, there is no longer the rule of irrationality that characterized Hell, where men are driven to violence through discord, murder, fraud, hypocrisy, and treachery. In Paradise, there is no longer the

rule of a merely formal morality, as in Purgatory, where men follow established codes of behavior imposed to keep them from tearing at each other's throats. There, in Paradise, a superior moral ordering prevails, founded on the concept of love, understood as the pursuit of development of the Other. Beatrice guides Dante on a voyage through the celestial spheres which unfolds as a conceptual dialogue in which he discovers the laws governing the universe, and, in so doing, realizes the powers of his own mind to comprehend them. In this process of scientific and self-discovery, Dante grasps what it means to be human. He learns how human society must be organized so as to establish justice as a reflection of the divine harmony. Paradise is the realm of just rulers, men of virtue who wield their political power in pursuit of the common good.

This entry into Paradise could never have occurred without the pilgrim's journey through Hell and Purgatory. The same holds true for the political antagonists treated here. They must hear the truth straight from those who suffered, in first-hand unadorned accounts. They must confront the brutal reality of the Hell that the Armenian orphans of 1915 went through, the deprivation and suffering that years of embargo and two wars visited on Iraq's children, and the raw injustice meted out to the Palestinians in 1948 and beyond.

Furthermore, when emotionally facing the facts of such historical tragedies, they must identify those responsible, and name the names as Dante did. Was it, as certain biased literature would

have us believe, “the Turks” who killed 1.5 million Armenians in 1915? Was it “the Americans” who nearly wiped Iraq off the map? Was it “the Jews” or “the Israelis” who sought to annihilate the Palestinians, and all other Arabs? Anyone who swallows these all-too-accommodating, facile explanations is ignoring the much more complex and differentiated historical record. As I present in detail in Part One, my Armenian parents were deprived of their families by the massacres, but they, as children, were saved by Turks – not government officials or humanitarian aid organizations, but simply everyday Turks – people who saw what was happening, and intervened on a strictly personal level, even risking punishment to come to the aid of their fellow man, in this case Armenian orphans. By the same token, in the vicious war against Iraq in 1991, it was also Americans who defied their government to organize humanitarian aid for the victimized children of that war and launch political campaigns to denounce the Bush regime for war crimes. Even in the most recent Israeli aggression against Gaza, there were Israelis and groups of Jewish intellectuals abroad, who had the courage to speak out and denounce the Israeli government for exploiting the Holocaust as a justification for massacres against Palestinians.

In short, there is no such thing as “collective guilt.” Genocidal policies, as we have witnessed in the 20th century, have been conceived, organized, and implemented by clearly identifiable groups of political forces, who have had their just-as-clearly-identifiable financial and political backers. Here, I have tried to

document who did what to whom, after reviewing source material from all sides.

In the course of this research, one comes back again and again to that watershed in modern history which was the First World War, dubbed by its protagonists as the “Great War.” Its only grandeur, in my view, lies in its having cemented into the political process the predominance of geopolitical strategic thinking and manipulation associated earlier with the “Great Game” between the British Empire and Russia. Otherwise, the only thing that was “great” about World War I was the toll it took on human life and relations among peoples. It was an unmitigated disaster, which led not only to the slaughter of entire peoples, but also to the establishment of puppet states in the Middle East, as foreseen by the British-French Sykes-Picot Treaty, and the perpetuation of conflict. Iraq was one such puppet state, Jordan, another. The Ottoman Empire was dismantled by that war, and the genocide of the Armenians was woven into the process. The fate of Palestine was to become part and parcel of this imperial poker game set up by London and Paris. The actual perpetrators of the disasters of the First World War, and of the enduring festering sores they would create, were the British geopolitical scenario-spinners, the likes of Halford MacKinder, Lord (Alfred) Milner, Bertrand Russell, H.G. Wells, Cecil Rhodes, and their colleagues in the Round Table.

The guilty party is the *geopolitical mind*, a mode of thinking which disposes of peoples and nations as mere objects. This fact

seems to me to be of utmost relevance in seeking reconciliation and durable peace among nations and peoples who have been pitted against each other in artificially orchestrated conflicts. If those treated like puppets can be made to see who the puppet-masters are, and read the script cast for them, they may be enabled to reach up and cut the strings which have been moving their limbs. In this light, recent developments in Turkey, indicating a desire on the part of the Turkish population to face up to the historical record and be freed of the burden of collective guilt for what the Young Turk government did in 1915, are to be welcomed. I firmly believe that, if the Turkish-Armenian issue were to be solved politically to the satisfaction of both sides, it could provide a powerful impetus for dealing with similar conflicts. The same is to be said of recent interventions by Israeli intellectuals to force an open debate on the deeper implications of the events of 1948. Ongoing exposés of Anglo-American machinations to prepare two wars against Iraq fulfill a similar function. Working through the historical record and redefining the adversary relationship demands precisely that bold step into and through the Wall of Fire.

A last word should be said on the very definite limitations of this book. I do not pretend to deal with genocide, war, or ethnic cleansing as such, and have deliberately restricted the scope of this work to these three cases of aggression. The Armenian genocide was the first of the 20th century, but, unfortunately, not the last. After that came the “final solution” to the Jewish

question by the Nazis (Hitler in 1939 asked rhetorically, “Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?”), the extermination of entire peoples by the Soviets in Eastern Europe, the more recent cases of Cambodia under Pol Pot, the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, just to name a few. If these horrendous cases of mass murder have not been treated in this book, it is not out of negligence, or disinterest, or disrespect, but simply because I do not have the first-hand material or the in-depth knowledge of events required to present an honest account. My aim has been to use my personal experience with these three seminal examples – Armenia, Iraq and Palestine – in order to argue the case for reconciliation. If I can convince my reader to rethink his or her previous assumptions about these historical tragedies, I will be grateful. I want to lead the reader up to that Wall of Fire, and hope he or she will muster the emotional strength to enter it.

Finally, if I have had recourse to poetic license, it has been exclusively in the pursuit of poetic justice.