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## Creating Ethnic Memory

### *Takuhi Tovmasyan's "Merry Meals"*

G Ö N Ü L P U L T A R

“There is a lot more to food than eating and cooking,” writes the food author Claudia Roden in her foreword to *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*. “Behind every dish lies a world, a culture, a history,” she explains. “Dishes have social meaning, they have emotional and symbolic significance. Food is about power. It is an expression of identity and ideology. It touches on issues of class, gender, race and ethnicity. It is a clue to history. It has a language.”<sup>1</sup> This chapter is devoted to a book titled *Sofranız Şen Olsun: Ninelerimin Mutfağından Damağımda, Aklımda Kalanlar*, published in 2004 in Turkey, that would be translated into English as “Merry Meals: What Has Remained in My Palate [and] My Mind from My Grannies’ Kitchen”<sup>2</sup> where “kitchen” denotes both the cuisine and the physical location where the food was prepared by the grannies. Just as Roden indicates, the food it focuses on has symbolic significance and is an expression of identity and ideology.

On the cover, the book is labeled as “cookbook-memoir.” Authored by Takuhi Tovmasyan, a woman of Armenian heritage born on the outskirts of Istanbul in 1952, it is an amalgam of the recollections of the life that Tovmasyan, the granddaughter of an Armenian restaurateur in Istanbul, led as a child in the Yedikule district and the recipes she learned while watching or, more often than not, helping her mother and various relatives, especially her two grannies. Let us add that her paternal grandmother, her namesake Takuhi *yaya* (granny), was a “professional” cook, as she was responsible for concocting the dishes her husband, Ğazaros Efendi, served in his restaurant. This was a neighborhood eatery, an open-air *gazino*, functioning as coffee house during the day and incorporating an enclosed section (probably a small hut) that became in the evening a *meyhane* where men would gather to drink raki.<sup>3</sup> It was pretty much a family affair since the sons, who worked

in different jobs in town during the day, would wait at tables in the evening. Each chapter of the book is titled with the name of a different dish, with the description and recipe of each one serving as occasion for the author to present her family's history through an anecdote connected with that dish or a reminiscence. Thus composed of twenty-six chapters and twenty-six recipes, this cookbook-memoir is at the same time a photo-biography of a family, as interspersed among the recipes are photographs of various family members, some of which were taken as early as 1920.

"Merry Meals" does what Maxine Hong Kingston did in the United States with *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts*.<sup>4</sup> But I would like to propose another analogy: Arab-American or more specifically Jordanian-American author Diana Abu-Jaber's autobiographical *The Language of Baklava*.<sup>5</sup> "There are memoirs, and there are cookbooks. A few authors have combined the two, but none that I've read have been so successful at it as Diana Abu-Jaber with her delightful *The Language of Baklava*," writes Gary Whitehouse.<sup>6</sup> I would like to add "Merry Meals" as another successful book of its kind. "Just like in other memoirs by authors of hyphenated identities, such as Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* for instance," writes Carol Fadda-Conrey,

the act of writing the self is often carried out through a concomitant writing of communal identity. For this reason, the snapshots that Diana Abu-Jaber offers of her life, whether set in Jordan or in the US, are peopled by an extended cast of . . . family members, friends, and neighbors, all brought to life by individualized and detailed depictions.<sup>7</sup>

In this chapter I first examine the major characteristics of the book, and then contextualize it and its publication within a framework of recent publications of cookbooks and other books by and about ethnic communities in Turkey. I argue that through the narration of the times and tribulations of the members of an extended family, the author creates ethnic memory for the Armenian community in Turkey that is not recriminatory or accusing, yet through the conciliatory attitude that recognizes the country as homeland, she succeeds in delineating a separate and distinct identity within it.

### "Simple Storytelling": Humor, Nostalgia, and a Haunting Memory

Tovmasyan explains at the end of the 160-page book that she has no "diploma" to speak of; she graduated from an Armenian junior high school

in Istanbul, and it is in all simplicity that she has written what she has witnessed and learned. In fact, she comes from a modest background, basically working class: her father was a jewelry repairman. “Presented in very simple story-telling language, without political propaganda or an overt effort to ‘convince,’” the book “capture[s its] readers by the power of simplicity and sincerity,” writes Ayşegül Altınay. For Altınay, what it does is “highlight the human factor.”<sup>8</sup> But simplicity does not mean artlessness: Tovmasyan conducts throughout the book a dialogue with the reader, addressing the reader as if he or she were there, in front of her, as she composes the text, with statements such as, “I know you are mad at me for listing such expensive ingredients nowadays difficult to obtain, and giving recipes even more difficult to follow.”<sup>9</sup> When she has started giving a recipe, she tells the reader, “now comes the most enjoyable part . . .” or “while you go on with the frying in the kitchen, let me tell you of my encounter with Can Yücel . . .” (a poet well-known for his rebellious stance). After she relates how the aged poet proffered obscenities, she ends that tale with

Why don’t we meet in a *meyhane* once a year, and commemorate Papa Can, that wonderful man? The pancreas *dolma* will be on me that day. Didn’t I tell you there is always some “soup” left in the bottom of the pot where the pancreas *dolma* is cooked; I will bring the pot along and we will warm the soup right there and eat it fuming hot. Shall I give you a secret? Cooking the pancreas *dolma* is worth it even if for just its soup. Don’t say I haven’t told you.<sup>10</sup>

Or she will say, “After you’ve fried the fish and laid them on a dish, do not forget to show your respect to them; bring wine to the table.”<sup>11</sup> She does not forget “ice-cold beer” whenever that will go well with a dish she has just described. It is a whole way of life she is presenting to the reader.

The first characteristic of the book is that it is humorous. She will say of her paternal grandfather, the one who owned the restaurant, that he was a very good husband and provided his family with everything they needed. In fact he was so kind-hearted that he *also* provided the family of a widowed woman living next door named Ersinya with everything *they* needed. He would come home late at night, showing every sign of having been to Ersinya’s home and eaten *her* food, which, Tovmasyan assures us, was delicious as well; the wife and son, Tovmasyan’s father, would put him to bed without the wife remonstrating in the least bit. Ersinya’s white bean *pilaki*<sup>12</sup> was exceptionally good, and Tovmasyan teases the reader by saying she won’t tell whether it is her grandmother’s or Ersinya’s recipe she is penning.<sup>13</sup>

A second characteristic is nostalgia. Most of the recipes are for food she saw prepared when there were no electrical gadgets, no pressure cooker, no frozen food, and so on. Everything had to be prepared from scratch, at the last minute and at home; all the ingredients are organic by default. What's more, the measurements are given not numerically but in the manner of many unlettered women who are nevertheless seasoned cooks: "cupful," "spoonful," and so forth. Rather than giving duration, she will write, "when you think it is soft enough," "brown enough," and so forth. The reader is introduced into a world of authenticity and cleanliness, an unpolluted, unsoiled world in opposition to the current availability of commercialized readymade food.

The most striking memory she has in this respect is of the so-called laundry days, when the women of the household would do nothing but the washing. The day before, the father grated the block of soap to make it easier for the women to make bubbles in the hot water, and the mother soaked the dirty laundry in water into which she added ashes. On the day itself, water would be pumped from the well (there was no running water) and everything would be washed by hand. That left no time for cooking, thus, a specific simple dish was prepared on those days, the reminiscence of which triggers the writing down of the recipe.

Tovmasyan's laundry days reminds one of those that another chronicler of life in the Levant, Edward Said (1935–2003), relates in his autobiographical *Out of Place*.<sup>14</sup> Though much older than Tovmasyan, and having had a considerably more affluent childhood than she did, Said's reminiscences of washing days in Egypt and Lebanon possess the same flavor of wonder and uniqueness.<sup>15</sup>

There is nostalgia also for the family as it was: the extended family setup that has ceased to exist, even in Turkey. The description of the family, the many picnics they had together, the weddings, the births, the celebrations, and the accompanying photographs and especially the dishes, are of course part of the book's nostalgia aspect. Tovmasyan's recollections go back generations; she describes weddings she could not have witnessed. I would argue that this is an act of collective memory building that should be seen as a separate element of the book.

Because the reader learns that the family is a harmonious one with loving members who will get together at the slightest occasion, religious holiday, christening, marriage, and will go swimming together in sunny Istanbul and eat the delicious food whose recipes the reader is presented with, the reader shares Tovmasyan's consternation that one uncle followed his son

to Canada when this cousin got it in his head to emigrate. This uncle dies there “alone,” without the extended family, its joys, its gatherings, its food, and, what’s more, in a cold climate. This is more than just the antithesis of the Mediterranean climate and mode of existence. One needs to be familiar with the *douceur de vivre* that is so distinctive of life in Istanbul to grasp the calamity that dying far away represents.

As the book progresses, we get to know more about the family and about graver problems it encountered. After World War II, declaring a massive financial deficit, the Turkish government resorted to levying a heavy one-time income tax, and Grandfather Ğazaros found himself compelled to sell his restaurant in order to pay it. Having announced she is writing *only* what she has learned from or witnessed in her family, the author is able not to elaborate on this event, but having to pay this tax was a trauma for many families at the time, whether among the wealthy Turkish or the so-called minorities (as specified by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, that is, the Jews, Greeks, and Armenians). Those who failed to pay were heavily penalized.<sup>16</sup> The grandfather was so shaken by having to sell his restaurant that, “with cholesterol and alcohol aiding,” as Tovmasyan puts it, he had a stroke and became paralyzed. Gone were not only the daily rush to the restaurant but also the visits to Ersinya’s home. The manner he was taken care of, which probably allowed him to stay at home with his family, was for the wife and one of the sons to bathe him every evening when the sons returned from work. Tovmasyan, who had been astonished her grandmother never complained about her husband’s visits to his mistress, writes that then, just when her husband felt most embarrassed and only then, would Takuhi *yaya* say, “Why don’t you call Ersinya and ask her to clean you?” In reply, relates Tovmasyan, two tears flowed from Ğazaros’s eyes. “I do not know what those tears meant to say,” she writes.<sup>17</sup>

### *Mardik’s Story*

It is through a recollection concerning one of the family members that Tovmasyan touches upon what is called *tehcir* in Turkish, from a word in Arabic literally meaning “forceful migration”; the term “relocation” is used in English. “Deportation” is frequently used in this context, but it is a misnomer as the groups were sent to another province within the country. “Trail of tears” seems to best describe what happened. “Some forgot what they lived through on the way to exile, some never talked, swallowed, or appeared to have swallowed it. My uncle Yeğya was never able to forget, never able

to swallow, and that is how he left this world,” writes Tovmasyan,<sup>18</sup> again brushing aside an explanation of what it is she is talking about, expecting the reader to be informed yet never accusing, judging, or condemning, letting once more the reader decide.<sup>19</sup> It is noteworthy that although she does use the word *tehcir* a few times, she never mentions “genocide.”

There were members of Tovmasyan’s extended family who had to undergo the *tehcir*. Some met in Der Zor, their destination (located in what is now Syria), got married, and came back to Turkey together later. One did not come back—the little Mardik—and it is with his story that I will end this discussion of the book, which, under a veneer of simplicity, joy of life, and an air of insouciance, remains a haunting work.

Ĝazaros Tovmasyan and his wife Sofik had three children, one girl and two boys (one of whom would be Tovmasyan’s father), but Sofik died young of tuberculosis. Ĝazaros looked for a new wife to take care of his three young children but no Armenian girl of marriageable age wanted to take on such a responsibility. Finally, after much seeking and many rejections, a girl by the name of Takuhi Sarmisaklıyan from Çorlu, in eastern Thrace, where he had started looking, decided to take up the challenge—because they had told her there were only two children involved. When right after the marriage ceremony she learned she had been duped, she was so mad she said she would abide by her promise and would not bring up of more than two. Little Mardik, the youngest, was sent packing to Çorlu, the small town where his maternal grandparents lived. Before they knew it, he was made part of the *tehcir*—and was never heard of again. Takuhi was so conscience-stricken that she devoted the rest of her life to searching for him—always in vain. Tovmasyan’s father, then Tovmasyan herself inherited the burden of searching for him, to no avail so far. “Even if nothing happened to him before, he must have died by now,” ponders Tovmasyan, wanting to put an end to this quest that proves to be as fruitless and futile as it is unceasing, to bury the ghost of her girlhood. As Kingston gave an existence to her aunt whom no one will speak of in the family in the “No Name Woman” chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Tovmasyan rewrites “Uncle Mardik” into her story and history. Each year, she writes, as she prepares the *helva*<sup>20</sup> to commemorate the dead, even as she gives the reader the recipe, it is his loss she laments more than that of anyone whom she has known and learned to love, Mardik whom she has never seen who will always remain the small boy sent away by a selfish stepmother. She laments at the same time the disappearance of a mode of living, while laying the foundation of a collective memory that includes and subsumes that

of Mardik. As it has often been said, narrative and collective memory go together for ethnic communities.

### Communal Representation in Ethnic Cookbooks

“The food is a pretext,” rightly finds the author of the introduction, Oşin Cilingir.<sup>21</sup> Tovmasyan herself accepts that she does not know whether the dishes whose recipes she gives are Armenian or Greek, or Albanian or Turkish or Circassian or Roma.<sup>22</sup> “Merry Meals” is one of many volumes to come out of Aras Publishers, who have published texts by Armenian authors of Turkey since 1993, whether as translations from texts written in Armenian or those such as “Merry Meals” written in Turkish. They provide a contemporary “window into Armenian literature,” and see themselves as the “representative and current bearer of a long-standing Armenian publishing legacy in Turkey,” as they put on their website.<sup>23</sup>

As such, the publication of “Merry Meals” functions naturally as another tool for “community imagining” (after Benedict Anderson), that aims at (re) negotiating the ethnic community’s position within a society that is busy reshaping itself according to EU norms while at the same time adjusting to the realities of the new millenium. Simultaneously, the community is faced with an Armenian diasporic discourse that decries a “genocide.” It is noteworthy that when there was interest in translating into Turkish a book on fish and fishing in Turkey by Karekin Deveciyan, a high-ranking Armenian official of the fisheries of Turkey, his heir granted permission on the condition that Aras Publishers published it.<sup>24</sup>

Such cookbook-memoirs have come from other ethnic groups as well. Istanbul journalist Deniz Alphan published in 2005 *Dina'nın Mutfağı: Türk Sefarad Yemekleri* (Dina’s Kitchen: Turkish Sephardic Dishes)<sup>25</sup> that is a collection of her Sephardic mother’s recipes and the recollection of a Sephardic childhood in Istanbul. In 2001, Esin Eden published *Annemin Yemek Defteri: Selanik, Münih, Brüksel, İstanbul* (My Mother’s Cookbook: Thessaloniki, Munich, Brussels, Istanbul); she also co-wrote with Nicholas Stavroulakis the English-language *Salonika: A Family Cookbook. Cherished Recipes from the Ma'min, Ottoman Muslims with Jewish Descendents Who Lived in What Is Now Greece and Turkey*.<sup>26</sup> Sula Bozic published in 2000 *İstanbul Lezzeti: İstanbullu Rumların Mutfak Kültürü* (Istanbul Taste: The Food Culture of the Istanbul Rum [the Greeks of Turkey]), then followed this with *Kapadokya Lezzeti: Kapadokyalı Rumların Yemek Kültürü* (Cappadocia Taste: Food Culture of the Cappadocia Rums).<sup>27</sup> İlhan Eksen published

in 2005 *Çokkültürlü İstanbul Mutfağı: Rumlar, Ermeniler, Museviler, Türkler, Yemek Kültürleri, Tanıklıklar, ve Tarifler* (The Multicultural Istanbul Cuisine: Greeks, Armenians, Jews, Turks, Food Cultures, Testimonies, and Recipes).<sup>28</sup>

The list can be extended. These are the titles that have attracted the greatest attention so far. Although “Merry Meals” can be read as a simple yet haunting story that goes beyond mere recipe sharing, it also needs to be situated alongside the efforts of the authors of these books. The latter on the one hand bemoan the death of a certain way of living, and wish to reclaim the past and break pacts of forgetting and established conventions of silence. On the other hand, they are also attempting to forge, reshape, or renegotiate an identity, which may need to be transnational as in the case of Eden, within a nation-state coping with the demands of the EU as well as the dynamics of present-day globalization, during which it attempts to secure itself a niche as an emerging market economy. This is a nation-state that, having forgotten that its *millet* system was a *sui generis* multiculturalism, is confronting the requirements of an American-style multiculturalism that has been declared defunct on European soil by both German chancellor Angela Merkel and British prime minister David Cameron.<sup>29</sup>

### Conclusion

Discussing evolving eating habits in Istanbul, Holly Chase writes in “The Meyhane or McDonald’s? Changes in Eating Habits and the Evolution of Fast Food in Istanbul” that “there is evidence that the presence of establishments like McDonald’s may actually be contributing to a revival of old-fashioned foods which have been in danger of disappearing.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, that seems to be one aim of author Tovmasyan in “Merry Meals,” whether what is being revived is the Istanbul cuisine as a whole or merely the Armenian component of it, which has traditionally been a major component. Tovmasyan’s endeavor is one of many such efforts to preserve traditional culinary tastes in Turkey and in her Armenian community in the face of globalization and such phenomena as fusion cuisine, not to mention the ubiquitous fast food.

This life writing, this “marriage of food and words,” is tinged with a sense of nostalgia that not only looks to the past but also forward, functioning as a culture-building tool. Tovmasyan is passing on to the next generation, albeit within the parameters of cooking, what she learned from her *yayas* so as to enable this generation to reproduce their wisdom and learning and pass it on.



Yet this narrative of a family history is also more. On the one hand, as an ethnic writer in Turkey, the Armenian Tovmasyan shares the concern of members of other “minorities” who wish to secure for their communities places in this new Turkey. This takes place during a process that is labeled formally as “candidacy to the EU,” but that certain groups both within and outside of the country wish to exploit as a period of “de-Kemalization” that would unhinge the fixed boundaries and hierarchies entrenched by the so-called Jacobean founding fathers of the Turkish Republic—which may mean, axiomatically, unsettling the formal position of the three communities, thus that of the Armenian community. The fact is that the three minorities acknowledged during the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 find themselves, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, superseded almost by groups who claim their existence was wrongly ignored at the founding and who now wish to remedy the situation: Kurds, Syrians, the Laz, and so forth. Kurds especially have been loud about it (thanks to the connivance of outside agencies, believe most Turks), and some of them murderously so through acts of terrorism; the Alewites, as Shi’ites in Turkey are called, surprisingly are considered a separate minority by EU officials—who will probably have the last word, if the stance adopted by the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan government is not discontinued. Thus, whether Turkey enters the EU or not (and the prediction at the end of the first decade of the new millennium is that it won’t), it is important not to be left behind in the new Turkey that is being “imagined” during the process of negotiation, as whatever agreement that is reached finds itself reflected in the legislation. What’s more, the country is working hard to elevate itself to the level of an emerging power and more. Consolidating the position of their communities within the country becomes all the more important for all three minorities as their numbers have dwindled considerably since the republic was founded.

On the other hand, Tovmasyan’s book is an attempt to provide a human face to an issue that too often has been debated in impersonal terms as statistics, figures, state archives, and formal correspondence of statesmen, and that is no small feat. “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it,” Hannah Arendt is reputed to have said.<sup>31</sup> The creation of Armenian ethnic memory in “Merry Meals” through the narration of the Tovmasyan family’s collective memory proves her right.