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**"FAR TOO HEAVY TO BEAR...":  
THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE IN CONTEMPORARY  
GERMAN-LANGUAGE POST-MIGRANT PROSE**

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The experience of genocide usually locks the mouths of the victims' descendants for two generations. It is usually communicated in the third or grandchildren's generation. The literary expression of this externalization is a prose that oscillates between fiction and factography, which emerged already decades ago in the large Armenian diaspora communities of the USA and France and is now very widespread. Peter Balakian's *Black Dogs of Fate* and Micheline Aharonian Marcom's genocide trilogy are probably the most internationally known examples.

In Germany, the evolution was considerably delayed. There is no quantitatively large Armenian diaspora here. The community of around 60,000 people is also heterogeneous in terms of their countries of origin. Most of them originally came from Turkey; in the meantime, numerous Armenians from the post-Soviet space have joined them.

The Young Turks' genocide of 1915/6 was first addressed in German by authors of Jewish origin, namely Franz Werfel and, after WW2, Edgar Hilsenrath. Since 2019, four novels by authors of Armenian descent have been published: Katerina Poladjan's *Hier sind Löwen* (2019), Laura Cwiertnia's *Auf der Straße heißen wir anders* (2022), Marc Sinan's *Gleißendes Licht* (2023) and Corinna Kulenkamp's *Aprikosenzeit, dunkel* (2023). With the exception of K. Poladjan's novel, these are all debut novels, which is at the same time indicative of the importance of the topic for the authors.

The genre hybridity of these works, which combine the features of family, coming-to-age and travel novels, is likewise characteristic. As a subgenre of German-language post-migrant prose, these novels are about the authors' or their protagonists' confrontation with their hybrid descent from Armenian-German or Turkish-Armenian homes, about identity and belonging, as well as the confrontation with the post-Soviet state of Armenia, which remains alien and incomprehensible to the authors or their protagonists, just as the acceptance of the genocide as an obligation to remember and a legacy seems difficult to bear.

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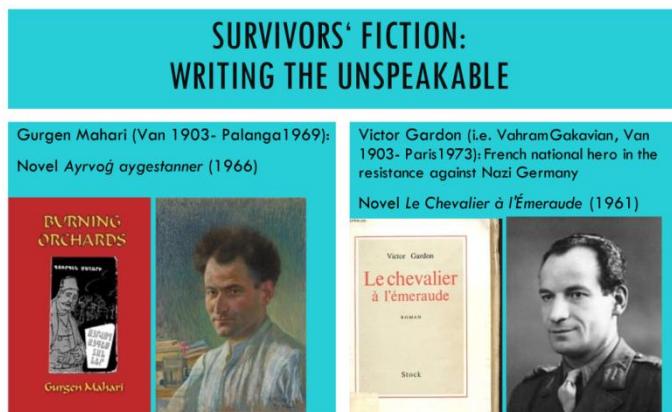
In this article, dedicated to the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the heroic novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, I intend to describe the peculiarities and weaknesses of the recent post-genocidal remembrance prose in the German language on the basis of the four novels mentioned above.

**Keywords:** Armenia; Germany; Genocide; fiction; family novel; travelogues; identity.

### Writing the unspeakable: Introduction

The experience of Genocide usually closes the mouths of the victims' descendants for two generations, out of survivor's guilt and to avoid burdening their descendants. However, there are exceptions. In the literature of Soviet Armenia, these remained remarkably limited, mainly due to the repressive circumstances. We remember Gurgen Mahari's only novel *Burning Orchards* (*Ayrvoğ aygestanner*). Its publication just one year after the 50th anniversary of the commemoration of the Genocide ran counter to the national pride of the Armenian diaspora and even more so of the Soviet Armenians. A defamation campaign culminated in 1967 in the public burning of the novel, a ban on its sale, death threats, deep insults and Mahari's expulsion from the Soviet Armenian Writers' Union. Readers, critics and officials felt offended by the fact that Mahari, "like a Turk", interpreted the massacres in the province of Van as the result of irresponsible interference by foreign national revolutionaries who had arrived from the Russian part of Armenia. Furthermore, Mahari portrayed people from real history, revered as national heroes, as the commissioners of robberies and reprisal killings. His renunciation of ethnic stereotypes and the usual narrative of "innocent Armenian victims" and bloodthirsty Turkish executioners met with vehement rejection.

Picture 1



Publicly reprimanded by both the Communist Party of Armenia and the Writers' Union, the broken author gave in and shortly before his death, but against his innermost convictions, delivered a "patriotic" supplemented or revised version, on the basis of which a version by Mahari's son Grigor Ačemyan was published posthumously

in 1979. It was not until 1993, on the occasion of the author's 90th birthday, that the Writers' Union of Armenia distanced itself from the book burning. The recognition of the anti-heroic work, which the Armenian literary critic Marc Nichanian praised in 2002 as the most important Eastern Armenian novel of the 20th century, came very late. An English translation based on the original version was first published in London in 2007. Remarkably, Victor Gardon (i. e. Vahram Gakavian, 1903-1973), a compatriot of Mahari, came to similar political conclusions in his slightly earlier novel *Le Chevalier à l'Émeraude* (1961; German edition: Fountain of the Past, 1964<sup>1</sup>), which forms the first part of Gardon's French written trilogy *Vanetsi*. The novels of Gardon and Mahari form a literary memorial to the Armenian Van, its unique beauty and culture, its heroic self-defense and the thinking of its Armenian inhabitants.

Picture 2

## EXTERNALIZATION OF GENOCIDE EXPERIENCE: THE GENERATION OF GRANDCHILDREN



In general, however, the post-genocidal silence is only broken from the third generation onwards, the generation of the grandchildren. The literary expression of this externalization is a prose that oscillates between fiction and factography, which emerged decades ago in the large Armenian diaspora communities of the USA and France and is very prevalent today. Peter Balakian's memoir *Black Dog of Fate* (1997) and the Genocide trilogy by Micheline Aharonian Marcom (2001, 2004, 2008) are probably the most internationally renowned examples.

### The Genocide against Ottoman Armenians in German fiction

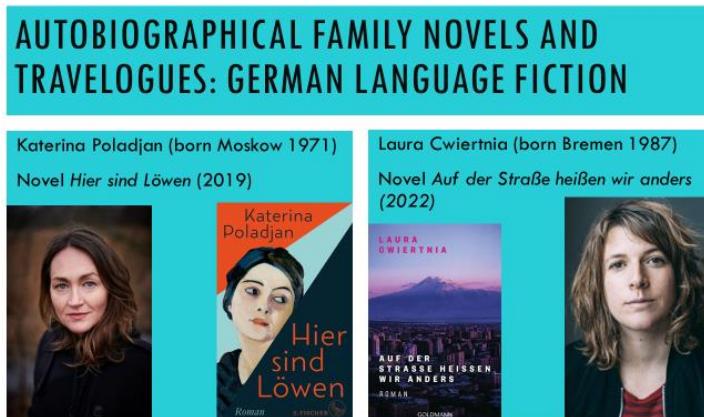
In Germany, this development has been significantly delayed. There is no quantitatively large Armenian diaspora here. Furthermore, the community of around 60,000 people is heterogeneous in terms of their countries of origin. Most of them originated from Turkey; in the meantime, numerous Armenians from the post-Soviet space have joined them.

Picture 3



The Genocide by the Young Turks of 1915/6 was first addressed in German by authors of Jewish origin, namely Franz Werfel (1890-1945) (1933) and Edgar Hilsenrath<sup>2</sup> (1926-2018) (1989). It was not until thirty years later, since 2019, that four novels by authors of Armenian descent were published in the German language: *Hier sind Löwen* (Here are Lions) by Katerina Poladjan (2019), *Auf der Straße heißen wir anders* (We have a different name on the street) by Laura Cwiertnia (2022)<sup>3</sup>, *Gleißendes Licht* (Glittering light) by Marc Sinan (2023) and *Aprikosenzeit, dunkel* (Apricot Time, dark) by Corinna Kulenkamp (2023). With the exception of K. Poladjan's novel, these are all debut novels, that illustrate the importance of the topic for the authors.

Picture 4



The genre hybridity of these works, which combine the characteristics of family, coming-to-age and travel novels, represents another specific feature. As a subgenre of German-language post-migrant prose, these novels are about the authors' or their

protagonists' self-discovery and confrontation with their Armenian-German or Turkish-Armenian-German origins, about identity and belonging, as well as the confrontation with the post-Soviet state of Armenia, which remains alien and incomprehensible to the authors and their protagonists, just as the acceptance of the Genocide as a duty of remembrance and legacy seems difficult for them to bear.

### Remember or forget? Heirlooms

Heirlooms play a major role in family novels. These heirlooms are often presented at funerals. Laura Cwiertnia's protagonist Karla receives a gold bangle at her Armenian grandmother's funeral, Marc Sinan's protagonist Kaan a jade dagger and Katerina Poladjan's protagonist Helen is confronted with an Armenian family Bible during her internship at the Yerevan manuscript museum Matenadaran. These objects trigger journeys for Karla and Helen. Helen travels to Ordu, where the original owners of the Bible she has restored came from. In the former Armenian quarter of the town, she meets the aged sisters Seda and Melek, whose father lost the book in the turmoil of his life and Genocide survival. The daughters argue about whether their father was Armenian or Turkish. Karla flies to Armenia with her Armenian father Avedis to find an ancestor for whom the gold bangle was originally intended. Father Avedis advises Karla not to accept her Armenian heritage herself: "Much too heavy to bear!"

Picture 5



Kaan, on the other hand, reaches for his inherited dagger to take revenge as he learned that his Armenian grandmother Ani had been forced into a marriage with the Turk Hüseyin in her early youth. Hüseyin had also taken possession of the wealth of Ani's father – a common practice of appropriating the inheritance of Armenian girls and women in the wake of the Genocide. At the *iftar* celebration (breaking of the fast; first meal after sunset during the Islamic month of Ramadan) in the Turkish president's garden, Kaan, as his grandmother's avenger, wants to pounce on this very president with his dagger. The novel's contrast between revenge and forgiveness is a false

alternative, because revenge four or more generations after the crime is just as absurd as forgiveness is impossible in view of the ongoing official Turkish denial.

Author Sinan seems to have recognized this. In the book, he has Kaan's Armenian grandmother Ani/Vahide appeal to her grandson to look for a third way: "Choose a path other than that of cruelty" (p. 186). His Turkish grandfather Hüseyin recommends therapeutic writing instead of revenge: "Finally write down the story, Kaan. Write so that you can forget it. Because forgetting is the only way to survive" (p. 115).

In the end, Kaan has to realize that his hope of triggering a nationwide revolution with an assassination and thus a lasting improvement in the treatment of minorities must fail, because "the paranoia is too strong". Kaan concludes: It will take another thousand years to overcome mistrust, fear and prejudice.

The authors Poladjan, Cwiertnia and Kulenkamp, who also live in Germany, have no Turkish ancestors. They pose the question of identity in connection with Armenia, which their protagonists, however, perceive as foreign or reject as a permanent country of residence. These novels emphasize that there is no permanent return to Armenia from the diaspora.

Corinna Kulenkamp's novel *Apricot Time, Dark* (2023) follows in the footsteps of her predecessors Laura Cwiertnia and above all K. Poladjan: A protagonist of German-Armenian origin goes in search of her identity to the post-Soviet republic of Armenia, entirely unknown to her, where she falls in love with a married Armenian and ends the affair and her journey of self-discovery by returning to Germany. Poladjan's and Kulenkamp's stories are told on three time levels: that of the Genocide of their protagonists' ancestors in the First World War, the present of the protagonists before their voyage to Armenia and their experiences in Armenia. Linking the first with the other two levels of action and defining the significance of the Genocide for subsequent generations is one of the greatest challenges of this literary genre. But in difference to her three colleagues, in Kulenkamp's novel, a direct link between the protagonist of the fourth generation and the destiny of her ancestors no longer exists.

### **Unique selling point: criticism of oligarchs by Corinna Kulenkamp**

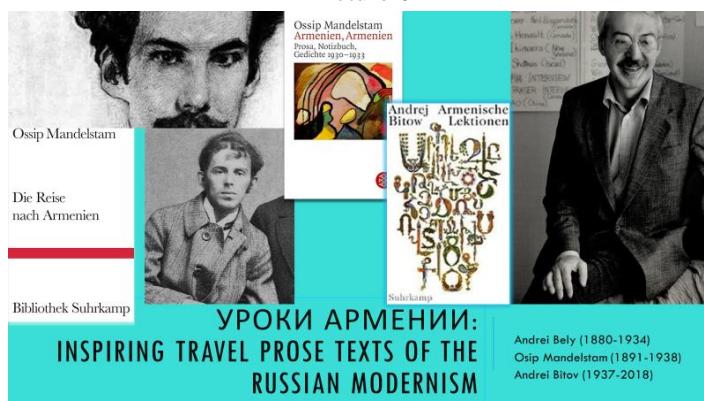
After her studies and a failed love affair in Munich, Kulenkamp's protagonist Karine travels in search of meaning and belonging to Yerevan, where she has applied for a job with a non-governmental organization. The country Kulenkamp describes is apparently the Armenia before Pashinyan's "velvet revolution" in 2018. It is a repulsive environment: Yerevan consists of "encrusted gray buildings". The stairwell of Karine's apartment building stinks of excrement and her apartment is infested with cockroaches. Karine is shocked by a poster in a subway station calling on Armenians to marry only Armenian women. The patriarchal customs of Armenia are also disconcerting, including a faked bridal ceremony with an equally faked hymen examination, the latter of which has only recently become a punishable offense in Armenia. Karine does not get beyond a feeling of love-hate relationship to this country.

The title of the novel refers to a story by Karine's Yerevan colleague and friend Gohar about the "dark years" during the First Karabakh War. *Apricot Time...*, on the other hand, stands for the hope of a better future, which, however, does not materialize in the novel or is described as being in jeopardy. Gohar's friend Vahan, who launches the "Young Movement Against Corruption", is shot dead by Yervant, the son of a communist, at Vahan's first mass rally. Yervant is acting on behalf of the oligarch Bashtonian. Kulenkamp reduces the complex reality of post-Soviet Armenia to oligarchy, with ties to "the West" presented as the only safe way out. The very fact that in 1989 and 1993 it was not the oligarchs or even Russia, but Azerbaijan and Turkey that cut off Armenia's energy, imposed transport embargoes and were responsible for the "dark years" is ignored, as is the tragedy of Artsakh/Karabakh. The only Karabakhian who appears in the novel is a lousy character who harasses Vahan in military service.

### In the tradition of Russian-language travelogues: Katerina Poladjan

The travelogue by Katerina Poladjan, born in Moscow in 1971, follows in the tradition of Russian-language travel prose about Armenia. The poets Andrei Bely (1880-1934), Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) and the prose writer Andrei Bitov (1937-2018) were fascinated by the South Caucasian country (Sippl, 1997), which replaced the ancient Mediterranean cultures of Italy and Greece for Soviet intellectuals, due to the lack of freedom to travel. Their travelogues deal with the discovery of the foreign and the sought-after confrontation with the hitherto unknown. The title of Poladjan's novel already points to this: "Here are lions - hic sunt leones" is the usual paraphrase of medieval maps for *terra incognita*. Poladjan's narrative style is reminiscent of Bitov's *Lessons of Armenia* (Uroki Armenii, 1989, 2002). A foreigner presents Armenia, its culture and history from the perspective of a foreigner. Bitov and Poladjan do this in a light, vignette-like, discreet manner, and, for long stretches, fortunately not a very instructive style, with humor and unmistakable sympathy for a haunted people.

Picture 6



Similar to A. Bitov and A. Bely, Poladjan's Helen arrives as a stranger in an Armenia she does not know, and like Bitov and Bely, she meets a local. In Helen's case, it is Evelina, her superior at the Matenadaran, who introduces her to the secrets of Armenian book art. Evelina explains to Helen the Armenian fixation on the past and the veneration of books and the highly developed book art as the result of centuries of persecution: "You are German. You know Heinrich Heine, you will know what Heine wrote about books as a portable homeland. It was always about protection and defense (...) This people has always been afraid of disappearing (...). We still live in history, not in the here and not in the now. In the books, perhaps in the face of death, eternity revealed itself" (p. 62).

### **Foreign and familiar homelands: Laura Cwiertnia and Marc Sinan**

From chapter 7 onwards, Cwiertnia's post-migrant family novel also resembles a travel novel. The author emphasizes that Armenia is not a substitute for home for the Armenians who fled Turkey. Father Avedis initially opposes the trip: "... it's not good to deal with these old things!" Based on this conviction, he refuses to visit the Yerevan Genocide Museum. His relationship to Armenia and its history remains ambivalent until the end of the novel. Due to his Turkish experiences, he sees belonging to Armenia and the Armenian nation as a source of danger. This triggers his daughter's reflections on the concept of home: "How can you find a home in a place you've never been to?" Karla realizes that the true, familiar home of her ancestors is in Istanbul: "Istanbul was the first place I looked for the fragments of history that my father wants to blur".

But Istanbul turns out to be a hostile homeland. Living as an Armenian in Turkey after 1915 meant invisibility. Camouflage or at least outward conformity were the consequences of the racist discrimination against the Armenian survivors of the Genocide, the "remnants of the sword" (cf. Peroomian, 2008, p. 214f.), as they were contemptuously called. The camouflage began with their Christian first names: Maryam is called Meryem outside her home, her husband Hagop became Hüseyin. Cwiertnia describes how during the "Septembriana", the anti-Greek pogrom in Istanbul in 1955, the homes of Armenians were also marked with a cross, including Karla's grandfather's shoemaker's shop. Karla's family spent the night in fear of their lives.

The consequence of such experiences in republican Turkey is alienation and isolation. Above all, authors of Armenian descent from Turkey are driven by their hybrid identity, even in Germany. In an article in the weekly newspaper DIE ZEIT, Marc Sinan tried to explain the sadness and anger that, in his opinion, form the soundtrack of Turkey: "In every family in Turkey there is a history of poverty, injury, oppression, flight, expulsion or annihilation. If not in the present, then in the past. There is no place, no hearing, no understanding, no empathy, not even an awareness for these self-experienced or inherited traumas (...). This experience does not unite, it fragments. That is why no one can speak for anyone else. I don't speak for anyone

either. Nobody wants to hear what I have to say, I am neither a real Turk, nor a real Armenian, nor a real German, nor a real migrant, nor a real injured person, nor a real privileged person, neither poor nor rich" (p. 51).

### Summary and conclusion

Numerous more or less auto-fictional novels about the experiences of authors from so-called migrant families, many of them of Turkish descent, have appeared in German-language literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> century under the heading of post-migrant prose. Their protagonists deal with issues of discrimination by the German majority society, but also with questions of identity and belonging.

Post-genocidal memoir prose can be seen as a subgenre of post-migrant prose. Its authors Katerina Poladjan, Laura Cwiertnia, Marc Sinan and Corinna Kulenkamp come from bi-cultural or tri-cultural families and each have one Armenian parent or grandparent.

As the ultimate crime, Genocide is almost impossible to narrate, especially for its survivors. The article touches on the rare Armenian exceptions. They were written by the Van-born authors Victor Gardon (France) and Gurgen Mahari (Soviet Armenia); the latter's autobio-graphical novel *Ayrvoğ aygestanner* met with rejection and fierce criticism, which was only surmounted at the end of the Soviet era.

The fictional treatment of the Ottoman Genocide against the Armenians in German was initially not by Armenian but by Jewish authors. Franz Werfel understood the Young Turk Genocide as a warning of the danger of National Socialism for European Jews. Against the backdrop of the crimes already committed, Edgar Hilsenrath drew retrospective conclusions from the two world war Genocides in his *Story of the Last Thought*, originally conceived as a radio play.

The novels by authors of Armenian descent that have been published in German since 2019 are characterized by genre hybridity (Basseler et al., 2013).<sup>4</sup> They belong to the currently globally successful genre of family novels as well as coming-of-age and travel novels. The Genocide of 1915/6 does not appear as an integral biographical component of today's protagonists, but as a distant prehistory that is only loosely linked to them or as an independent, parallel plot. As in all post-migrant prose, questions of identity and belonging are at the forefront because they determine the protagonists' present.

In this context, the question arises as to whether today's post-Soviet Armenia can be home at all for the protagonists. For various reasons, the answer is negative. Helen, Katerina Poladjan's protagonist, replies casually to the question posed to her in Armenia as to whether she has Armenian roots: "I'm not a tree". Corinna Kulenkamp's protagonist Karine feels repelled by oligarchic Armenia, and for Laura Cwiertnia's protagonist Karla, Istanbul and not Armenia is her home, albeit a hostile one. Marc Sinan's Turkish-Armenian-German alter ego Kaan, whose direct ancestors include victims and perpetrators, achieves the greatest coherence between the genocidal past

and the present search for identity. On the other hand, the fact that three of the four authors analyzed here made the C.U.P. Genocide the subject of their debut novels speaks for the continuing significance of the Genocide in the lives of authors of Armenian descent today.

### Notes

1. For actual German edition see: Gardon, Victor, *Brunnen der Vergangenheit*. Zürich: Unionsverlag, 2016.
2. The English edition of Hilsenrath's book *The Story of the Last Thought* was released in 1990, while the Armenian translation occurred in 2006.
3. Both the Italian and the Armenian editions of Laura Cwiertnia's book *Auf der Straße heißen wir anders* were released in 2024.
4. About hybridization cf. Michael Basseler, Ansgar Nünning and Christine Schwancke (eds.): *The Cultural Dynamics of Generic Change in Contemporary Armenian Lektionen: eine Reise in ein kleines Land* Fiction: Theoretical Frameworks, Genres and Model Interpretations. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2013

### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflict of interests in this research.

### Ethical standards

The author affirms this research does not involve human subjects.

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**«ԶԱՓԱԶՄԱՑ ԾԱՄՐ՝ ԴԻՄՄԱՆԱԼՈՒ ՀԱՄՄԱՐ ...».**  
**ՀԱՅՈՑ ՑԵՂԱՄՊԱՆՈՒԹՅԱՆ ԹԵՄԱՆԱ ԳԱՂԹՔ ՀԵՏՈ ՍՏԵՂԾՎԱԾ**  
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**Թեսա Հոգման**

Ցեղասպանության զոհերի և ականատեսների ժառանգների շուրջ երկու սերունդ, որպես կանոն, լրակյաց են տարել այդ իրողությունը: Այդ լրությունը խախտել են երրորդ սերնդի ներկայացուցիչները, որոնց գրական արձակն, ըստ էռորյան, գեղարվեստականության ու փաստագրության յուրօինակ խառնուրդ է: Այս արձակը տասնամյակներ առաջ սկզբնավորվել է ԱՄՆ-ի և Ֆրանսիայի սփյուռքահայ մեծ համայնքներում և այժմ էլ լայն տարածում ունի: Միջազգային ասպարեզում հատկապես հայտնի են ցեղասպանությունը լուսաբանող Փիթեր Բալաբյանի «Ճակատագրի սեւ շները» և Միշելին Սիհարոնյան Մարկոսի եռազգրությունը:

Գերմանիայում այս արձակը զգալիորեն ուշ տարածում գտավ: Քանակական առումով Գերմանիայում հայերը քիչ են, ուստի չկար հայկական սփյուռք: Շուրջ 60 հազարանոց հայկական համայնքը չափազանց տարածել էր ու տարբեր երկրներից մեծ մասը Թուրքիայից և հետխորհրդային Հայաստանից:

1915 – 1916 թվականների երիտրուքտերի իրագործած ցեղասպանությանը առաջին անգամ գերմաններնով անդրադարձել է ծագումով հրեա Ֆրանց Վերֆելը, իսկ Երկրորդ համաշխարհային պատերազմից հետո՝ Էդգար Շիլտենբարթը: 2019 թվականից ի վեր Գերմանիայում հրատարակվել է հայերի հեղինակած չորս վեպ՝ Կատերինա Փոլաջանի «Hier sind Löwen» [Այստեղ առյուծներ կան] (2019), Լաուրա Կվիերտնիայի «Auf der Straße heißen wir anders» [Փողոցում մեզ տարբեր բաներ են ասում] (2022), Մարկ Սիհանյի «Gleißendes Licht» [Փայլող լուս] (2023) և Կորիննա Կուլենկամպի «Aprikosenzeit, Dunkel» [Ծիրանին սեղոն, մութ] (2023): Ի տարբերություն Կ. Փոլաջանի վեպի, բոլոր վերոնշյալ գործերը առանցին անգամ են ներկա-

յացվել հանրությանը, ինչը միաժամանակ վկայում է հեղինակների համար այդ թեմայի առանցքային լինելու փաստը:

Հատկանշական է, որ այս ստեղծագործությունները հանդես են զալիս որպես ժանրային հիբրիդներ, որտեղ միավորվում են ընտանեկան, տարիքային և ուղեգրության ժանրային առանձնահատկությունները: Հանդես զալով որպես գերմանալեզու «հետզաղթային» արձակի ենթաժանրային նմուշներ՝ այս ստեղծագործությունները ակնհայտորեն ներկայացնում են հեղինակների կամ հերոսների առձակատումն իրենց հիբրիդային ծագման, ինքնության և պատկանելության հետ: Հետխորհրդային Հայաստանը նույնպես խորթ է հեղինակների կամ իրենց ստեղծած գրական հերոսների համար ցեղասպանությորնն ընդունելու, հիշելու, այդ պարտավորությունը ստանձնելու և այդ անասելի ժառանգությունը տանելու առումով:

Սույն հոդվածում, որը նվիրվում է ՌՍուսա լեռան քարասուն օրը հերոսապատումի 90-ամյակին, նպատակադրված եմ նկարագրելու հետցեղասպանական հիշողություններ ներկայացնող վերը նշված գերամանալեզու չորս վեպերի յուրահատկություններն ու թույլ կողմերը:

**Բանալի բառեր՝ Հայաստան, Գերմանիա, Յեղասպանություն, գեղարվեստական արձակ, ընտանեկան վեպ, ուղեգրություններ; ինքնություն:**