

Soviet writer Vasily Grossman's final work, *An Armenian Sketchbook*

Fred Mazelis
7 October 2021

An Armenian Sketchbook, translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, New York Review Books, 133 pages.

Vasily Grossman (1905-1964), the Soviet journalist and writer, is known above all for his two massive novels, *Stalingrad* (1952) and *Life and Fate* (1960), dealing with the Second World War on the Eastern Front. He was also an outstanding war journalist, documenting the Nazi genocide of the Eastern European Jews, as well as all the major battles of the Red Army, which played the decisive role in defeating fascism.

The recent translation of *Stalingrad* into English for the first time recalls another work of Grossman's that only became available to an English-speaking audience in 2013. *An Armenian Sketchbook*, dating from 1962, is a very different sort of book than the earlier war novels. As the title suggests, this slim volume consists of an informal and at times humorous and almost light-hearted account of Grossman's trip to the small Soviet republic in 1961, where he was tasked with translating a lengthy Armenian war novel. There is much here that puts a smile on the reader's face.

But the book is also, in its slighter fashion, as deeply moving as Grossman's previous work. In 12 brief chapters, while objectively and with great affection detailing aspects of Armenian life, the author artfully and naturally interweaves profound insights deeply bound up with the Russian Revolution, the unprecedented struggle of the Soviet people against Nazi barbarism and the bitter experiences of Stalinist terror and dictatorship.

There is also a connection between this remembrance of Armenia and the destiny of *Life and Fate*. As translator Robert Chandler explains in his introduction, the Soviet authorities had refused to allow his monumental sequel to *Stalingrad* to appear in print when he submitted it for publication in 1960. More than that, the manuscript was confiscated, and the regime went so far as to remove carbon paper and typewriter ribbons. Grossman was shattered by what he called "the arrest" of the work to which he had devoted years of struggle. *Life and Fate* was not to appear until its publication in Switzerland in 1980, long after the author's death. An English translation followed, in 1985.

In the second half of 1961, perhaps in an effort to soften the blow of the censorship of his novel and to "buy him off" with another assignment, literary officials suggested that Grossman undertake the trip to Armenia. Even though he knew no Armenian, he was asked to edit ("translate," as that term was generally used during this period) a literal translation of a lengthy novel.

The arduous work of retranslating had to be carried out in

Armenia so that Grossman could consult both with the author of the book as well as its original translator. This occupied him for some months.

In the first half of 1962, after his translation work had been completed, Grossman finished writing his reminiscences of the trip. Once again he faced official pressure and censorship. Literary bureaucrats were particularly concerned by a chapter that dealt with the role of Stalin. Grossman, by this time angry over many years of harassment and tangling with the bureaucracy, refused to allow the book's publication. *An Armenian Sketchbook* did not appear in the USSR until 1965, some eight months after the author's death, and whole chapters were omitted.

It should be kept in mind that this period of the early 1960s was the height of the Thaw, under Stalinist leader Nikita Khrushchev, who gave the "Secret Speech" in February 1956 exposing some of Stalin's monstrous crimes. Political prisoners were released from labor camps, and censorship was somewhat eased. Millions of workers and intellectuals sought an explanation for the Stalinist terror, many raising the slogan "Back to Lenin." Grossman's little book reflects the spirit of these times. Even then, of course, the parasitic Stalinist bureaucracy enforced strict limits on what could be said or written, as was revealed by Grossman's own treatment.

The complete English translation of *An Armenian Sketchbook*, with missing passages and chapters restored, is a small gem. Grossman's descriptions of his experiences are no less effective for their brevity. He depicts Armenian villages, austere mountains, the view of Mount Ararat in extreme eastern Turkey and the customs—religious and otherwise—of the people. A few extracts can hardly do justice to the beauty and perceptiveness of Grossman's prose.

"In Yerevan [the capital] and in towns and villages in the mountains and on the plains," he writes, "I met people of all kinds. I met scientists, doctors, engineers, builders, artists, journalists, party activists, and old revolutionaries. ...I saw plowmen, vintners, and shepherds; I saw masons; I saw murderers, fashionable young 'mods,' sportsmen, earnest leftists, and cunning opportunists; I saw helpless fools, army colonels, and Lake Sevan fishermen."

Grossman feels very close to the Armenian people. He closely and concretely observes, not content to view from afar. His sentiments are not vague and pacifistic. He is close to the masses, with a feeling for their suffering combined with an optimism about humanity's potential.

He writes, for instance, about meeting "a sweet, asthmatic old

man by the name of Sarkisyan. ... When he was young, he was an important figure in the Party; during his years as an émigré, he knew Lenin. And then he was denounced as a Turkish spy, beaten almost to death, and sent to a camp in Siberia, where he remained for 19 years.

“And then he returned home, not embittered but convinced that people are essentially good, glad to have enriched his heart through conversations in camp barracks, north of the Arctic Circle, with ordinary Russian peasants and workers, glad to have enriched his mind through conversations with Russian scientists and intellectuals.”

Grossman writes frequently in these pages on the issue of nationalism in the 20th century. The profound impact of the October Revolution can be seen and felt in his prose. His comments on narrow nationalism of course apply today as much as in the previous century.

“Now, after Hitler, it has become more important than ever to look at the question of nationalism—of nationalistic contempt and nationalistic arrogance,” he writes.

“Imagine our Russian intellectuals, the kind, merry, perceptive old women in our villages, our elderly workers, our young lads, our little girls being free to enter the melting pot of ordinary human intercourse with the people of North and South America, of China, France, India, Britain and the Congo.

“What a rich variety of customs, fashion, cuisine, and labor would then be revealed! ... And the beggarliness, blindness, and inhumanity of narrow nationalism and hostility between states would be clearly demonstrated.”

“When a large and strong nation,” he continues, “with huge armies and powerful weapons, proclaims its superiority, it threatens other nations with war and enslavement. The nationalistic excesses of small oppressed nations, on the other hand, spring from the need to defend their dignity and freedom. And yet, for all their differences, the nationalism of the aggressors and the nationalism of the oppressed have much in common.”

The influence of Marxism finds expression in the way Grossman approaches a variety of subjects, despite the awful perversions of the Stalinist regime, which falsely claimed to represent socialism and turned Marxism into its opposite, a defense of nationalism and bureaucracy.

On a visit to the world-famous Lake Sevan, for instance, he writes with profound understanding of the relationship between the object and subject. He describes “a little cloud lit by a quiet sunset” and a “summer rain or a young moon reflected in the pockmarked surface of a forest stream in April.” He continues: “For a particular scene to enter into a person and become part of their soul, it is evidently not enough that the scene be beautiful. The person also has to have something clear and beautiful present inside them. It is like a moment of shared love, of communion, of true meeting between a human being and the outer world.”

A similar grasp of Marxism is suggested by the following digression on art, which savagely depicts the monstrosity of “socialist realism,” the only work approved by the Stalinist regime: “... there is, surprisingly, more true realism in the craziest picture of the most abstract subjectivist, in the silliest concoction of lines, dots, and spots, than in all the harmonious worlds

commissioned by bureaucrats. A strange, silly, crazy picture is, after all, a true expression of at least one living human soul. But whose living soul can we sense in this harmonious, officially sanctioned world so full of apparently naturalistic detail, so dense with ripe ears of wheat and fine forests of oak? Nobody’s—there is no soul in a government office.”

In the final chapter, Grossman gives a detailed account of an Armenian wedding to which he has been invited. After hours of celebration, a collective-farm carpenter addresses Grossman directly. His words are translated for the Russian Jewish guest.

“The carpenter was talking about the Jews, saying that when he was taken prisoner during the war he had seen all the Jews being taken away somewhere separate. All his Jewish comrades had been killed. He spoke of the compassion and love he felt for the Jewish women and children who had perished in the gas chambers of Auschwitz. He said how he had read articles of mine about the war, with portrayals of Armenians, and had thought how this man writing about Armenians was from a nation that had also suffered a great deal. ... Long, thunderous applause confirmed that the Armenian peasantry did indeed feel compassion for the Jewish nation.”

Discussing anti-Semitism, Grossman obliquely but firmly indicts the regime for tolerating, even promoting anti-Semitism: “I have more than once heard Russians—both intellectuals and simple people—speak with compassion of the horrors that befell the Jews during the Nazi occupation.

“But I have also encountered the vicious mentality of the Black Hundreds. I have felt this hatred on my own skin. From drunks on buses, from people eating in canteens or standing in queues, I have heard black words about the nation martyred by Hitler. And it has always pained me that our Soviet lecturers, propagandists, and ideological workers do not speak out against anti-Semitism—as did Korolenko, as did Gorky, as did Lenin.”

The lasting impact of the October Revolution on the best sections of the Soviet intelligentsia and working class can be seen in these lines and throughout the small volume. This occurred despite the horrors of Stalinism, and even the participants’ own lack of understanding. Grossman himself became somewhat discouraged and disoriented in the face of the degeneration of the Revolution, but he never abandoned a profound belief in human progress. This, in the face of all that he had witnessed, has an enormous objective significance. Almost 60 years after the writing of this book, the cause of socialism remains thoroughly alive.

Grossman’s concluding lines underscore the fact that, although this particular visit had deeply affected him, he was writing not only about Armenia:

“Though mountains be reduced to mere skeletons, may mankind endure forever. ... Probably I have said much that is clumsy and wrong. But all I have said, clumsy or not, I have said with love.

“Barev dzez—All good to you, Armenians and non-Armenians!”



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact