



ZORYAN INSTITUTE OF CANADA, INC.

255 Duncan Mill Rd., Suite 310

Toronto, ON, Canada M3B 3H9

Tel: 416-250-9807 Fax: 416-512-1736 E-mail: zoryan@idirect.ca

www.zoryaninstitute.org

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: George Shirinian

DATE: December 19, 2002

Tel: 416-250-9807

**DR. USSHER'S GRANDSON PARTICIPATES IN ZORYAN INSTITUTE PANEL
DISCUSSION ON ARARAT FILM**

Toronto, Canada – A panel of experts met to discuss issues considered vital to contemporary Armenians at a colloquium held at York University's Glendon campus on December 14. Five panelists analyzed such topics as history and remembrance, identity, denial, and continuing trauma for the survivors of the Armenian Genocide and their descendents. The panelists approached these subjects from cinematic, biographical, historical, sociological and psychological perspectives. These themes are at the core of Atom Egoyan's film *Ararat*.

The President of the Zoryan Institute, Kourken Sarkissian, remarked, "We are very pleased to see such a distinguished panel of experts gathered together to focus on and help deepen our understanding of the many compelling themes raised in *Ararat*. This film has been able to encapsulate in an artistic manner the impact of the Armenian Genocide, particularly its denial, on the social, cultural, and psychological reality of Armenians today. The Zoryan Institute has been conducting research producing scholarly publications on these issues for the past twenty years. We are especially delighted to meet David and Douglas Baker, the grandsons of Dr. Clarence D. Ussher, who is featured in the film, and whose book, *An American Physician in Turkey*, was used as a source for *Ararat*. They provide a vivid link with the characters in the movie and with the people who actually lived during that period."

David R. Baker described the life and work of the missionary Dr. Clarence D. Ussher in Van and presented a moving account of his mother's escape from that city in 1915. This was all the more immediate, as a brief excerpt of an interview with his late mother, Eleanor Ussher-Baker, conducted by the Zoryan Institute in 1984 as part of its Oral History Project, was shown just before the presentation. The 300-strong misty-eyed members of the audience sat entranced throughout the presentation and rose to a standing ovation at the conclusion, partly in response to Baker's presentation, partly out of respect for the work of Dr. Ussher, and partly out of emotion at the escape of Baker's mother and the memento of that escape he held up for all to see.

Lisa Siraganian analyzed the theme of genocide and its impact on Diaspora Armenians as it appears in several of Egoyan's films. Her explication of the opening scene of *Ararat* and her analysis of various elements of the film demonstrated a total command of her subject. With every page of her talk, she opened the eyes of the audience to the many subtleties of the film and meaning of many symbols and their impact. The appreciative audience was astounded again and again at her insights and gave her, too, a standing ovation. After her presentation, many in the audience stated that despite having seen the film already, they wanted to see it again with the ideas she presented in mind.

Taner Akçam, a Turkish scholar, discussed how history was used in the film and emphasized the differences between the past and history. "History is not really what happened in the past, but how we reconstruct it today," he said. "Turkish-Armenian history is not more important than Turkish-Armenian relations today, but today's relations are completely subservient to that history," he added. He stressed the need to distinguish the individual from the collective, the past from the present, and the importance of not stereotyping the "other." "Each side has a very negative, monolithic image of the other, to which it constantly refers, which becomes a major obstacle to dialogue," he continued. He suggested Armenians and Turks have to develop a new language and a differentiated view of the other side. Taner Akçam is among the few Turkish scholars who acknowledge that a genocide was perpetrated against the Armenian population in Turkey and has been a strong advocate of the need for dialogue between the two peoples.

Anny Bakalian, author of *Armenian Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian*, examined the role of the Genocide in the formation of identity in Armenians living in the North American Diaspora. She presented a statistical study, which demonstrated that the Armenian reaction to the Genocide was strong. Generally, the Armenians manifest their identity less through memorial services with succeeding generations, and more through political activism, but this varies depending on where the respondents came from, to which generation they belonged, and how long they had been in the US.

Louis Najarian is a psychiatrist specializing in post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and has worked in Armenia treating survivors, particularly children, after the 1988 earthquake. He presented a wide-ranging discussion on the psychological impact of the Armenian Genocide on the survivors and their descendents. He described how post-traumatic stress disorder manifests itself, and related that to the way this issue is represented in *Ararat*. He explained that each succeeding generation becomes more complex in its handling of PTSD, and that events like this colloquium themselves serve as an outlet for dealing with it. He related several scenes in *Ararat* to his thesis, demonstrating it clearly for the audience.

Following the presentations, Prof. George Bournoutian, Prof. of East European and Middle Eastern History at Iona College in New York, who served as moderator and commentator, recapped each of the presentations. He said that

his grandfather had similar experiences to Eleanor Ussher when he fled Van to Russia. He then added that in seeking dialogue, Dr. Akçam should remember that the Turkish government continues to deny the Genocide and thus does not permit the Armenians to mourn, grieve, and have closure. The film *Ararat* is, in Bournoutian's opinion, primarily about denial. Akçam responded that one must distinguish the Turkish government from Turkish civil society, which is trying to come to terms with its history as a necessary part of its democratization.

The numerous and heartfelt questions from the audience clearly indicated the need for discussion of these issues. "The film clips we saw, the analysis given in such thought-provoking presentations by the panelists, and the fact that the papers complemented each other so well struck a chord with the audience," said Prof. Bournoutian. In closing, he stated that, "The Zoryan Institute is to be commended in presenting such a well-planned and well-timed event, and it is hoped that the Toronto community will remember this as a great day. I wish that Zoryan would repeat this colloquium in other cities."

The Zoryan Institute is the first diasporan center devoted to the research and documentation of contemporary issues related to the history, politics, society, and culture of Armenia, the Diaspora and the Armenian Genocide, with offices in Cambridge, MA and Toronto, Canada.

Pictures

- 002 From the left, Taner Akçam, Lisa Siraganian, George Bournoutian
- 009 Louis Najarian and Kourken Sarkissian, Pres. Of Zoryan
- 010 Lisa Siraganian
- 011 David R. Baker with Mig Migirdicyan of the Zoryan Board of Directors
- 012 Anny Bakalian