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A Darfur native tells us in his own words what he's helped reporters tell in theirs.

Reviewed by David Chanoff
Sunday, March 23, 2008

THE TRANSLATOR

A Tribesman's Memoir of Darfur

By Daoud Hari. As told to Dennis Michael Burke and Megan M. McKenna

Random House. 204 pp. \$23

The Translator, by Daoud Hari, a native Darfurian, may be the biggest small book of this year, or any year. In roughly 200 pages of simple, lucid prose, it lays open the Darfur genocide more intimately and powerfully than do a dozen books by journalists or academic experts. Hari and his co-writers achieve this in a voice that is restrained, generous, gentle and -- astonishingly -- humorous. He is not an Elie Wiesel or a Simon Wiesenthal speaking the unspeakable in words so searing as to be practically unbearable. I, for one, am grateful for that. In these times, when news of carnage and atrocity comes at us so insistently, Hari's tone allows the vastness of Darfur's suffering to seep into the reader's consciousness in a way that a raw, more emotional telling might not.

From the beginning, the reader understands that Daoud Hari is different from the traditional Muslim camel herder that his origins suggest. As tension in Darfur escalated into war, his father sent him away from his Zaghawa tribal homeland to high school in the city of El Fasher. There he studied English, fell in love with novels and decided to see something of the world. He first found work as a waiter in Libya, then went to Egypt where wages were higher, then heard that in Israel waiters made still more and smuggled himself into Gaza and across the border, where he was immediately captured. "So I did get to Beersheba," he writes, "but only to prison there. It was actually very nice, with television and free international calls. I would recommend it even over many hotels I have known." The Israelis sent him back to Egypt, where he was imprisoned while awaiting deportation and certain execution in Sudan for embarrassing the Khartoum government. "It's too bad that you could not have

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Daoud Hari (Megan M. McKenna)

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stayed in jail in Israel," an old Egyptian jailer tells him. "Indeed," Hari answers, "it was a shame to leave."

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That gently ironic tone will have you smiling even through some hair-raising encounters. After being saved from deportation through the intervention of Human Rights Watch, which had been notified of his plight by Zaghawa tribal leaders, Hari eventually found himself among the refugees in Darfur and Chad, acting as a guide and translator (hence the book's title) for South African, British and American genocide investigators and journalists, including New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof. It was a danger-filled role that regularly put Hari

and his employers on the edge of capture, death or worse at the hands of Janjaweed militias, rogue rebels and government soldiers. (Kristof, by the way, comes across as a person badly in need of a refresher course in the meaning of fear. In one scene, Hari and the columnist speed toward a raging massacre, where Kristof gets out his notepad and calmly starts interviewing victims. With the Janjaweed closing in, Hari tells Kristof it's time to go. "Just a few more questions," Kristof says. "A very good time to leave," Hari says again. "One more quick one," Kristof replies.)

Hari can be lyrical about the deep colors of women's robes, about children's games, about the beauty of camels. The Sahara, he writes, is "a forever sea of sand . . . with the curled and weathered backbones of dead mountains, with the chalk threads of camel trails and dry streams tracing delicate currents around the dunes."

It's that same easy yet moving voice that initiates us into the horrors of what is happening in his homeland: the little girl bayoneted in front of her father, who was being tortured. (The Janjaweed let the father go after that. "What is a better" -- meaning, worse -- "torture than this?" the father asked Hari.) The woman with three children dead of hunger who has hanged herself by her shawl. The 81 boys and men found hacked to death at the edge of a burnt village. Even hardened journalists sometimes weep or pray over such scenes and look for "a handful of soil to lay on the body of a child" or "some cloth to cover the dead faces of a young family."

It isn't just these individual images that have haunted Hari -- and will haunt readers. It is the totality that these images convey, the "systematic murder," as he writes, "of the non-Arab traditional Africans of Darfur."

This is, make no mistake, an epic genocide. Some 2,600 villages have been destroyed, more than 200,000 people have died, and approximately 1.8 million have been displaced. For almost five years, the Khartoum government has carried out this mass atrocity by arming and inflaming Arab Sudanese against their non-Arab Sudanese neighbors to, in Hari's words, "remove political dissent, remove challenges to power, make way for unobstructed resource development, and turn an Arab minority into an Arab majority." "Can you do that in this century?" he asks. "Can you solve all your problems by killing everyone in your way?" So far, the answers seem to be yes, you can.

It strains belief, and yet is true, that this genocide pales in comparison to what the Khartoum government did in southern Sudan from 1983 through 2004, where nearly 2 million people died and 4.5 million were displaced, and where Khartoum today is threatening to renew its onslaught. Hari depicts the horror of this regime, but he leaves it to us to understand that Omar al-Bashir, its president, is a person responsible not for one but two genocides, the first against black Africans, the second against non-Arab Muslims. Which puts this man, whom the Chinese coddle and the West does little to stop, ahead of both Pol Pot and the Hutu genocidaires in the pantheon of recent monsters.

*

David Chanoff, who has written several books on the Vietnam War and the Holocaust, is academic advisor to the Sudanese Education Fund.

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