

14 September 2006

Talking With Turks and Armenians about the Genocide

By Line Abrahamian

“My Journey From Hate to Hope” in the October issue of Reader’s Digest is my attempt to deal with the hatred I’ve felt for Turks because of the 1915 Armenian Genocide that killed 1.5 million men, women and children. Here, I speak with some Turks and some well-known Armenians about the Genocide.

In 2005 the first conference on the 1915 killings of Armenians by Ottoman Turks took place in Istanbul. However, just as these voices were being raised, others were trying to silence them. “This conference was first postponed because there were threats against us, and when it did finally happen, people accused us of being traitors and threw eggs,” says novelist Elif Shafak. “But the fact that it even took place is a sign that things are changing in Turkey in a positive direction. But the bigger the change, the deeper the panic of those who want to preserve status quo. That’s why the Turkish judiciary is bringing us to court one by one.

“There are four approaches among Turks regarding the 1915 atrocities,” Shafak explains. “The most common is ignorance and collective amnesia. The second is deliberate rejection and denial. That viewpoint is shared by a smaller group, but their voices are louder because they’re in influential positions. The third is shared by Turkish youth, who say: ‘Whatever happened is in the past. Why am I being held responsible for something my grandfather did, if he did it?’ The fourth is shared by intellectuals and open-minded people like myself. We need to face our past, because the past lives within the present. Only then can our society become democratic. If we had brought to justice those guilty of the massacres and atrocities in the past, it would’ve been harder for the state to oppress other minorities and critical voices.”

There are now about 60 writers and publishers before the Turkish courts. Most recently Shafak, for her book *The Bastard of Istanbul*, which refers to the massacres. Why does Turkey have a hard time acknowledging the Genocide? “They believe you can’t slander the Turkish nation by putting it on the same level as the Nazis,” explains Taner Akçam, visiting professor of history at the University of Minnesota. “There’s also a fear of consequences—that Turkey will have to pay compensation in land and money. But I think their primary fear is psychological. Armenians are a constant reminder of Turkey’s most traumatic historical event—the collapse of their empire. The Turks think of themselves as the phoenix rising from the ashes of the Armenians. Some of the founders of the Turkish state were members of the party who organized the Genocide. And the Turks have glorified them as heroes. If you call them murderers or thieves, you question the very existence of the state and identity.

“But Turkish society wants to know what really happened in 1915. And for the first time in history, it’s breaking its silence to challenge the official state rhetoric.” This may be due to the books circulating in Turkey about the Genocide. The man responsible for publishing many of them: Ragıp Zarakolu. He now stands on trial for publishing two books on the massacres.

“I learned about the Genocide through my mother,” recalls Zarakolu. “In 1915 Turkish soldiers collected her Armenian neighbours. While the Armenians were crying in the streets, my mother and her family were crying inside their homes. Her grandmother saved two Armenian girls from deportation, but soldiers later picked them up again. This made a big impression on me.”

Zarakolu and his late wife, Ayşe Nur, founded Belge International Publishing House in Istanbul in 1977 and have published ten books on the Armenians. “The first book was Yves Ternon’s *History of a Genocide*, in 1993. It was banned and confiscated, and we were accused of making terrorist propaganda. My wife was sentenced to two years in prison. In 1994, our office was firebombed. Now I’m on trial. The state fears these books will open discussion in Turkey, but that has already begun. These books have helped change the minds of Turkish intellectuals, and now there are more courageous people in Turkey.”

That’s crucial in this struggle for recognition, says Fatma Müge Göçek, associate professor of sociology at the University of Michigan. “It’s important for Turks like us to speak out because only then will Turkish society listen. If we close ranks with the Armenians, then what nationalists see isn’t the other—it’s the Turk with the Armenian.

“As long as human rights are important to the world, I don’t see anything short of recognition emerging,” says Göçek. “At least that’s what I, as a human being, strive for. Whether it happens in my lifetime, I cannot tell. But at least I’ll leave this place and this problem in a better condition than I found it in.”

Canadian and American Armenians have also been touched by the Genocide. Here is what some of them have to say:

Canadian **director Atom Egoyan**, whose movie *Ararat*, about the Genocide, won a Genie for best movie.

“I was doing a film review of *Midnight Express* for a student paper. Outside the theatre, Turkish students were giving out pamphlets refuting the images in the film. And that was a trigger for me. I became really involved politically and wrote the script for *Ararat*. But I wasn’t ready to turn it into a movie: I was full of rage and demonized Turks who hadn’t come to terms with this. I didn’t know that there’s a generation of Turks who know nothing about this. If there’s to be dialogue, we have to understand the overwhelming nature of the admission for a people who’ve had no preparation from their government. We can’t just expect someone to accept they’re genocidal.

“Can a human-rights transgression that happened so long ago and has been systematically denied be brought to justice? That’s the enduring question. Do these things go away with time? I don’t think they do.”

Canadian **singer Isabel Bayrakdarian**.

“My father’s father was forced to march in the desert. He survived, but his wife and two-year-old son died of starvation. My mom’s parents also survived. Turks captured her grandfather and tortured him by pressing a branding iron all over his body. He escaped but was later killed.

“So I grew up with this fierce loyalty to my culture and this need to know what my grandparents went through to make sure I remain Armenian. That’s what colours my singing. When I sing the Armenian song “Deleyaman,” non-Armenian musicians have told me, ‘I don’t know what it is about that song, but it broke my heart.’ It was written as a love song, but after the Genocide, the lyrics ‘I miss my beloved’ acquired a different meaning. ‘I miss my beloved’ not because he’s late from tending the sheep in the mountains. No, he was massacred.

“My mother’s the reason I have such a strong Armenian identity. I saw so much fire in her that this tragedy had happened and still isn’t recognized, but that as long as we don’t forget, we will have justice.

“The pain will never heal because this was a plot to annihilate us. The fact that I’m here and singing Armenian songs, it’s like rising from the ashes and rebuilding.”

American musician **Serj Tankian from System of a Down**, an Armenian band that is the subject of *Screamers*, a documentary about their worldwide campaign for Genocide recognition.

“My grandfather and grandmother are survivors of the Genocide. My grandmother has passed away, but my grandfather is still alive—he’s 96. He was five during the Genocide. His father, uncles and grandfather were taken away to a ‘work camp’ but were exterminated. Later Turkish soldiers took him and others out of their village. They were robbed, raped, starved and some were killed. He lost his eyesight for two weeks

“When I heard these stories, my heart opened up and I felt like crying. It’s mind-blowing that man could do that to man in the 20th century. Any time you allow an injustice to occur, you’re encouraging others to think they can get away with it. Hitler did. And genocide is still occurring in Darfur. It’s ridiculous! We haven’t learned our lessons.

“Some of our songs, like ‘Pluck’ and ‘Holy Mountains,’ touch upon the Genocide and the victims and are in homage to them. It’s part of our lives; it’s a part of who we are.

“I’m blown away by Turks who say they’re not only fans of our music but also of the stand we take and what we talk about. It means the tide is turning, that we’re breaking through barriers—and people are realizing the truth.”

Copyright 2006
Reader’s Digest Magazines Canada Ltd.