

Hrant Dink's Last Column, before he was murdered:

Like a nervous pigeon: my unsettled state of mind

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by Hrant Dink

At the start, the investigation launched against me by the office of the State Prosecutor in Sisli on the charge of "demeaning Turkdom" did not worry me. It wasn't the first time. I had already had a similar case brought against me in Urfa. In 2002, at a talk I gave at a conference held in Urfa, I had said that I "am not a Turk ... I am an Armenian and a native of Turkey [Türkiyeli]." And because of that, I had been fighting a charge of "demeaning Turkdom" for three years.

I wasn't even following the hearings. I paid no attention. Lawyer friends in Urfa were pursuing the matter for me and attending the hearings in my absence.

Even when I went to the State Prosecutor's office in Sisli to give a statement, I was not concerned. In the end, I trusted in what I had written and in my intentions. When the prosecutor evaluated not just that one sentence, which by itself was meaningless, but the entirety of what I had written, he would easily understand that I had no intention of "demeaning Turkdom" and this comedy would come to an end.

At the end of the interrogation I was certain that there would be no case opened. I was sure of myself.

But what a surprise! A case was opened.

Again, I did not lose my optimism.

So much so, in fact, that when I was interviewed live by telephone for a TV program, I told the lawyer Kerinçsiz who had denounced me that "he shouldn't get too excited, this case would not result in any punishment for me, and if I were to be sentenced, I would leave the country." I was sure of myself, because in fact in my writings I had no intention, no aim of demeaning Turkdom---none whatsoever. Those who read all of the columns that I had written would be able to understand that quite clearly.

As a matter of fact, that is precisely what the committee of experts [bilirkisi] appointed by the court, consisting of three faculty members from Istanbul University, stated in the report it submitted to the court.

There was no reason for me to worry, at some stage or other the case would certainly be dismissed.

"O grant me patience," I kept on sighing.

But it was not dismissed.

Despite the expert report, the prosecutor insisted that I must be punished.

And thereupon the judge decided to sentence me to six months' imprisonment.

When I first heard the news of my conviction, I found myself under the bitter pressure of the hopes that I had been nourishing during the course of the case. I was astonished... My disappointment and my refusal to accept this were boundless.

For days and months I had been holding out, saying, "Just wait and see until the judgement is issued and I am acquitted, and then then you will see how sorry you will be about all you have said and written."

At every court hearing, it was repeated in newspapers, in press commentaries, in TV programs, that I had said "Turkish blood is poisonous."

On each occasion, I was made a little more famous as an "enemy of the Turks."

In the corridors of the court building, fascists assaulted me with racist curses.

With signs and banners, they rained down insults on me. Each time, the hundreds of threats coming in by telephone, e-mail, and by the post increased a bit more.

To all of this, I sighed "O grant me patience," and continued to hold out, waiting for the verdict of acquittal.

When the verdict was announced, the truth would certainly become apparent and these people would be ashamed of what they had done.

My only weapon was my sincerity.

But now the verdict had been issued and all my hopes lay in ruins.

What's more, I found myself in the most distressing situation possible.

The judge had issued his verdict in the name of "the Turkish nation" and had legally inscribed me into the court records as one who has "demeaned Turkdom."

I could endure anything, but it was impossible that I should endure this.

As far as I was concerned, for a person to demean the people he lives with because of ethnic or religious differences was racism, and totally inexcusable.

Thus it was in this mental state that I gave the following statement to the press and media colleagues who were waiting ready at my door, wanting confirmation as to "whether or not I would be leaving the country, as I had previously said I would":

"I will consult my lawyers. I will apply to the Supreme Court of Appeal for a reversal of the verdict, and if need be I will also go to the European Court of Human Rights. In the event that I am not vindicated by any of these, I will leave my country. Because in my view someone who has been convicted of such a crime has no right to live together with his fellow countrymen." When I uttered these words, I was once again emotional, as always. My only weapon was my sincerity.

Black humor

Amazingly enough, the same deep power that sought to isolate me among the people of Turkey, and to turn me into a target, found a pretext in this statement of mine as well, and opened another case against me, this time charging me with trying to influence the verdict. Furthermore, while all the press and other media had carried this statement, the one on which they fixed their eyes was the statement in Agos. Thus it was the board of Agos and I who were charged with trying to influence the verdict.

This must be what they call "black humor."

I am a person accused of a crime; who has more right than the accused to seek to influence the verdict?

But see how funny it is, the accused was now charged with seeking to influence the verdict.

"In the name of the Turkish state"

I must admit that I have reached a point where I have to a great degree lost confidence in the "system of justice" and the concept of "law" in Turkey.

How could I not? These prosecutors, these judges, are they not people who have studied at the university and have graduated from faculties of law?

Is it not to be expected that they have sufficient capacity to understand what they read?

But alas this state's judiciary is not independent, as so many statesmen and politicians have not hesitated to state openly.

The judiciary is not there to protect the rights of the citizen, but to protect the state.

The judiciary is not on the side of the citizen, but is under the direction of the state.

As a matter of fact, I am completely certain of this: even though the verdict passed on me states that it was issued "in the name of the Turkish nation," it is very clear that it was not a judicial decision issued "in the name of the Turkish nation" but "in the name of the Turkish state." Thus, though my lawyers were going to apply to the Supreme Court of Appeal, what guarantee was there that the same deep power that had decided to put me in my place would not be influential there as well?

And in any event, were the judgements issued by the Supreme Court of Appeal always the right ones?

Was it not the same Supreme Court of Appeal that had signed off on the unjust decrees that took away the properties of the charitable endowments of the [non-Muslim] minorities?

Despite the efforts of the chief prosecutor, we did indeed apply, and what happened?

The Chief Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeal stated, just as had been affirmed in the experts' report, that there was no evidence of a crime, and wanted to acquit me, but the Supreme Court of Appeal found me guilty all the same.

However sure I was of what I had written, the Chief Prosecutor of the Supreme Court of Appeal must have been equally sure of what he had read and understood, for he objected to the verdict and referred the case to the Judicial General Assembly.

But, what can I say, the great power that had resolved to put me in my place, and which likely had made its presence felt at every stage of my case through machinations I'll never know, once again was active behind the scenes. As it turned out, the Judicial General Assembly, by a majority of votes, also decreed that I had demeaned Turckdom.

Like a pigeon

This much is clear: those who have tried to isolate me, to make me weak and defenseless, have, in their own fashion, achieved what they wanted. Even now, by the cumulative effect of the filthy and false information that they have disseminated to society, they have created a sector of society that perceives Hrant Dink as one who "demeans Turkdom," and whose number is by no means small.

The message log and memory of my computer is filled with lines full of rage and threats, sent by fellow citizens from that sector.

(Let me note here that I found one of these messages, originating in Bursa, to represent a particularly clear threat, and passed it on to the State Prosecutor's office in Sisli. To this date, I have received no response.)

How real or unreal are these threats? In truth, that is something I cannot possibly know.

For me the real threat, and the one that is really unbearable, is the psychological torture I have to live through by myself.

"What are these people now thinking about me?" This is the question that gnaws at my mind.

It's unfortunate that I am more readily recognized nowadays than I used to be, and that I sense more often people casting glances in my direction, saying "O look, isn't he that Armenian?"

And as a reflex, I wind up tormenting myself.

This torture is in part curiosity, in part worry.

One part is alertness, one part is being frightened.

I feel just like a pigeon...

Just like it, I am in a constant state of keeping my eyes out, looking left and right, in front of me and behind me.

My head is just as mobile... and just as ready to swiftly turn at a moment's notice.

Here is the price for you

What did Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül say? What did Justice Minister Cemil Çiçek say?

"Come on, there's really nothing about Article 301 that deserves to be exaggerated so. Is there anyone who has been convicted under it and sent to prison?"

As if the only price to pay would be to enter prison...

Here's the price for you... Here's the price for you...

O ministers, do you know what kind of price it is to imprison a human being in a pigeon's fright... ? Do you know... ?

Have you never watched a pigeon?

That which they call "Life or Death"

It's not an easy process I am living through... and which we are living through as a family.

There have even been moments when I have seriously thought about leaving the country and moving far away.

Especially when the threats have been directed at those closest to me...

At that point I have always felt helpless.

This must be what they call a question of "life and death." I could have kept on resisting of my own free will, but I had no right to endanger the life of anyone close to me. I could be a champion on my own behalf, but I could not claim the right to play the hero if that meant bringing danger upon anyone else, let alone those close to me.

In hopeless moments like these, I have gathered my wife and children around me and taken refuge in them and had my greatest support from them. They put their trust in me.

Wherever I would be, they would be there too.

If I said "Let us go," they would come, if I said "Let's stay," they would stay.

To stay and resist

Well, if we were to go, where would we go?

To Armenia?

Well but how would someone like me, who cannot abide injustices, put up with the injustices there? Would I not wind up in even greater trouble there?

As for going to Europe to live, it's not for me.

I'm the kind of person who, when I go to the West for three days, on the fourth I am writhing with discomfort, missing my country and saying "let it be over already so I can go back." What would I do with myself there?

Too much comfort would have discomfited me.

Above all, it is not in my nature to leave behind a "boiling hell" behind and flee to some "ready-made paradise." I'm the kind of person who seeks to turn the hell in which he is living into paradise.

To stay in Turkey and to keep on living here was both our true desire and something that was required by the respect we have for the thousands of our friends, both those we know and those we don't know, who are fighting for democracy in Turkey and who have come forward to support us.

We would stay and resist.

It may be that one day we would be forced to go, but... We would set out just like those in 1915 did... Like our forefathers... Without knowing where we were headed... Walking on the roads they trod... Feeling the torment, living the pain...

With that kind of blow dealt by fortune we might leave our homeland. And we would go, not to a place chosen by our hearts, but where our feet would take us... Wherever that was.

Scared and free

My wish is that we will never, ever be forced to live through such an abandonment. In any case, we have too much hope, too much need not to.

Now, finally, I am applying to the European Court of Human Rights.

I do not know how long this case will take.

All I know is that whatever happens, at least until the case is concluded I will continue to live in Turkey, and from that I derive some degree of comfort.

If the court rules in my favor, no doubt I will rejoice even more because that will mean that I will never again be compelled to leave my country.

Probably 2007 will be an even more difficult year for me.

The court proceedings will go on, new ones will begin. Who knows what sort of additional injustices I will have to confront?

But while all these things happen, there is this truth which I will count on as my guarantee.

Yes, I may find myself trapped in the nervous mental state of a pigeon, but I know that in this country people do not harm pigeons.

Pigeons continue to live their lives, even in the midst of cities, amidst crowds of people.

Yes, a bit frightened but to the same degree also free.

(Article by Hrant Dink translated by András Riedlmayer)