

# **In Istanbul, a Crack In the Wall of Denial**

*We're Trying to Debate the Armenian Issue*

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**By Elif Shafak**

ISTANBUL

I am the daughter of a Turkish diplomat -- a rather unusual character in the male-dominated foreign service in that she was a single mother. Her first appointment was to Spain, and we moved to Madrid in the early 1980s. In those days, the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia, known as ASALA, was staging attacks on Turkish citizens -- and diplomats in particular -- in Rome, London, Zurich, Brussels, Milan and Madrid; our cultural attaché in Paris was assassinated in 1979 while walking on the Champs-Élysées. So throughout my childhood, the word "Armenian" meant only one thing to me: a terrorist who wanted to kill my mother.

Faced with hatred, I hated back. But that was as far as my feelings went. It took me years to ask the simple question: *Why* did the Armenians hate us?

My ignorance was not unusual. For me in those days, and for most Turkish citizens even today, my country's history began in 1923, with the founding of the modern Turkish state. The roots of the Armenians' rage -- in the massacres, atrocities and deportations that decimated Turkey's Armenian population in the last years of Ottoman rule, particularly 1915 -- were simply not part of our common historical memory.

But for me today, and for a growing number of my fellow Turks, that has changed. That is why I am in Istanbul this weekend. I came to Bosphorus University to attend the first-ever public conference in this country on what happened to the Ottoman Armenians in and after 1915. As I write, we are fighting last-minute legal maneuvers by hard-line opponents of open discussion to shut the conference down. I don't know how it will turn out -- but the fact that we are here, openly making the attempt, with at least verbal support from the prime minister and many mainstream journalists, highlights how far some in my country have come.

Until my early twenties, like many Turks living abroad, I was less interested in history than in what we described as "improving Turkey's image in the eyes of Westerners." As I began reading extensively on political and social history, I was drawn to the stories of minorities, of the marginalized and the silenced: women who resisted traditional gender roles, unorthodox Sufis persecuted for their beliefs, homosexuals in the Ottoman Empire. Gradually, I started reading about the Ottoman Armenians -- not because I was

particularly interested in the literature but because I was young and rebellious, and the official ideology of Turkey told me not to.

Yet it was not until I came to the United States in 2002 and started getting involved in an Armenian-Turkish intellectuals' network that I seriously felt the need to face the charges that, beginning in 1915, Turks killed as many as 1.5 million Armenians and drove hundreds of thousands more from their homes. I focused on the literature of genocide, particularly the testimony of survivors; I watched filmed interviews at the Zoryan Institute's Armenian archives in Toronto; I talked to Armenian grandmothers, participated in workshops for reconciliation and collected stories from Armenian friends who were generous enough to entrust me with their family memories and secrets. With each step, I realized not only that atrocities had been committed in that terrible time but that their effect had been made far worse by the systematic denial that followed. I came to recognize a people's grief and to believe in the need to mourn our past together.

I also got to know other Turks who were making a similar intellectual journey. Obviously there is still a powerful segment of Turkish society that completely rejects the charge that Armenians were purposely exterminated. Some even go so far as to claim that it was Armenians who killed Turks, and so there is nothing to apologize for. These nationalist hardliners include many of our government officials, bureaucrats, diplomats and newspaper columnists.

They dominate Turkey's public image -- but theirs is only one position held by Turkish citizens, and it is not even the most common one. The prevailing attitude of ordinary people toward the "Armenian question" is not one of conscious denial; rather it is collective ignorance. These Turks feel little need to question the past as long as it does not affect their daily lives.

There is a third attitude, prevalent among Turkish youth: Whatever happened, it was a long time ago, and we should concentrate on the future rather than the past. "Why am I being held responsible for a crime my grandfather committed -- that is, if he ever did it?" they ask. They want to become friends with Armenians and push for open trade and better relations with neighboring Armenia . . . . as long as everybody forgets this inconvenient claim of genocide.

Finally, there is a fourth attitude: The past is not a bygone era that we can discard but a legacy that needs to be recognized, explored and openly discussed before Turkey can move forward. It is plain to me that, though it often goes unnoticed in Western media, there is a thriving movement in Turkish civil society toward this kind of reconciliation. The 50 historians, journalists, political scientists and activists who have gathered here in the last few days for the planned conference on Ottoman Armenians share a common belief in the need to face the atrocities of the past, no matter how distressing or dangerous, in order to create a better future for Turkey.

But it hasn't been easy, and the battle is far from over.

Over the past four years, Turks have made several attempts to address the "Armenian question." The conference planned for this weekend differed from earlier meetings in key respects: It was to be held in Istanbul itself, rather than abroad; it would be organized by three established Turkish universities rather than by progressive Armenian and Turkish expatriates; it would be conducted completely in Turkish.

Originally scheduled for May 23, it was postponed after Cemil Cicek, Turkey's minister of justice, made an angry speech before parliament, accusing organizers of "stabbing their nation in the back." But over the ensuing four months, the ruling Justice and Development Party made it clear that Cicek's remarks reflected his views, and his alone. The minister of foreign affairs, Abdullah Gul, announced that he had no problem with the expression of critical opinion and even said he would be willing to participate in the conference. (As it happens, he has been in New York in recent days, at the United Nations.)

Meanwhile, the Armenian question has been prominently featured in Turkish media. Hurriyet, the nation's most popular newspaper, ran a series of pro and con interviews on this formerly taboo subject, called "The Armenian Dossier." The upcoming trial of acclaimed author Orhan Pamuk, charged with "denigrating" Turkish identity for talking about the killing of Kurds and Armenians, has been fervently debated. Various columnists have directly apologized to the Armenians for the sufferings caused to their people by the Turks. And stories have been reported of orphaned Armenian girls who saved their lives by changing their names, converting to Islam and marrying Turks -- and whose grandchildren are unaware today of their own mixed heritage.

All this activity has triggered a nationalist backlash. That should be expected -- but organizers of the Conference on Ottoman Armenians were nevertheless surprised last week by a crafty, last-minute maneuver: a court order to postpone the conference pending the investigation of hardliners' charges that it was unfairly biased against Turkey. The cynicism of this order was clear when we learned that the three-judge panel actually made its decision on Monday; it was not made public until late Thursday, only hours before the conference was to begin.

Organizers said they would try to regroup by moving the site from Bosphorus University, a public institution, to one of the two private universities that are co-sponsors. We were encouraged by the immediate public reaction: Not only did some normally mainstream media voices denounce the court order, but Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in televised interviews, repeatedly criticized it as "unacceptable." "You may not like the expression of an opinion," he said, "but you can't stop it like this." Foreign Minister Gul, in New York, lamented what effect this would have on Turkey's quest to join the European Union: "There's no one better at hurting themselves than us," he said.

Whatever happens with the conference, I believe one thing remains true: Through the collective efforts of academics, journalists, writers and media correspondents, 1915 is being opened to discussion in my homeland as never before. The process is not an easy one and will disturb many vested interests. I know how hard it is -- most children from

diplomatic families, confronting negative images of Turkey abroad, develop a sort of defensive nationalism, and it's especially true among those of us who lived through the years of Armenian terrorism. But I also know that the journey from denial to recognition is one that can be made.

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