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An Armenian-American Case

I was recently invited to speak on a panel entitled “The Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma” as part of a conference hosted by the International Trauma Studies Program in New York. I’m a writer, and my first two novels have explored the intergenerational effects of the 1915-1921 Ottoman Turkish genocide of the Armenians that killed an estimated 1.5 million Armenians, including virtually my grandmother’s entire extended family. Only she and her younger brother survived. As a writer and the grandchild of a survivor, I was delighted to accept the invitation; the other panelists were distinguished experts on the Holocaust, and the opportunity to share in a dialogue with them and their colleagues was an exciting prospect.

I struggled, however, with my paper. While I am an attentive reader of the academic literature in the field, I’m not an expert and am uncomfortable trying to assume an authoritative voice on the topic. Yet the professional stature of the forum seemed to demand more from me than personal anecdote and opinion. What kind of truth, and what kind of voice to speak that truth, could I offer in such a context?

A few days before the event a disturbing—indeed a traumatic—event occurred that helped me answer that question. Jack Saul, the conference organizer, called me, I assumed, simply to confirm the final details of my participation. In the course of the conversation he let drop that he wanted to add a respondent to my paper (though not to the other presentations), a response to be given by someone he described as a bright young psychologist, one of his graduate students in the Trauma Studies Program. She was from Ankara, Turkey, and he said that she had a different position on what had happened to the Armenians than my own.

I asked Jack what her position was and he said it was “middle of the road.” I paused on the phone and then asked, “Is she a nationalist?”

He replied, “Well, no her politics aren’t right wing.”

I said, “Nationalists can span the political spectrum. The Turkish poet Nazim Hikmet was a Communist and a nationalist.”

In any event, he wondered if he could have his student present her differing point of view as part of the discussion.

I countered, “How would it be to have a child or grandchild of Holocaust survivors sit on a panel with a Holocaust denier so they could present their differing views?”
He said, “That’s not what I had in mind. I thought perhaps…”

I interrupted, “Do you know what happened in Turkey in January? Do you know that Turkish nationalists murdered Hrant Dink, the Armenian editor of the Armenian-Turkish bilingual newspaper in Istanbul? And that the writer and this year’s winner of the Nobel Prize for literature Orhan Pamuk had to cancel a book tour to Germany because of death threats provoked by what he has said about the Armenians?”

He replied, “Yes, I do know about that.”

I went on, “As far as the panel goes, I am not interested in having a discussion about the historical truth of the Armenian Genocide. There might be other people who would be prepared to have such a discussion, but I’m not.”

Continuing to try to persuade me, he said, “No, we don’t have to have that discussion. But perhaps it would be interesting to talk about your different narratives of suffering. When I was in Kosovo I was at a meeting of journalists who were talking about the sufferings of their various groups. And one group felt that the narrative of the other group’s suffering cancelled their own out. It was a competition as to who had suffered more. But all of them suffered.”

I replied, “I have been at lectures where Turkish people stand up and say, ‘My grandmother was raped by an Armenian.’ I would never deny the suffering of that person or that family. But there is a difference between wartime atrocities perpetrated by both sides of the conflict and a state-sponsored campaign of genocide meant to exterminate a people and dispossess them of their lands. If you want to have a debate about the Armenian Genocide, I’d prefer not to come to the conference.”

He said, “If that’s how you feel, I’ll tell her that she shouldn’t bring that up. We’ll just stick to the topic of intergenerational transmission of suffering.”

I felt guilty about silencing someone, if that’s indeed what I had just done. Where was my commitment to free speech? Maybe if I were a better, more evolved person I’d be able to have a dispassionate debate with someone about the historical reality of the Armenian Genocide. I would make a convincing argument and there would be one fewer Turkish denier in the world. But I’m too emotional. And does anyone honestly believe that a few minutes of ad hoc politically charged debate interjected into a panel format would do anything to bring substantive historical perspective to the issue?

I thought back to an Armenian Genocide lecture at NYU I had been to years ago by German historian Hilmar Kaiser. Right-wing Turkish Gray Wolves had come into the lecture hall to disrupt
it. They were burly, leather-jacketed men and the threat of violence hung on the air like cigarette smoke. It was only because of Hilmar’s dispassionate skill at diffusing the situation that the campus police were convinced to let the lecture go forward.

Later I said to Hilmar, “I was practically shaking with fear. The way you fielded their questions without ruffling a feather was impressive.”

He said, “I don’t care about the Armenians really. What I care about is that they don’t do the same thing again to the Kurds.”

With this in mind, I finally said to Jack Saul, “I’m sorry to be so adamant. But thank you for letting me know she will be there. I’d hate to be blind-sided by something like that.”

When I hung up the phone I started making a mental list of books and articles I should re-read in preparation. Perhaps I should photocopy some articles to bring with me to distribute. I decided to call my friend the writer and activist Peter Balakian, who often deals with Turkish deniers at his lectures on the Armenian Genocide, to ask for advice.

Peter said, “The important point is to talk about the asymmetry of power both in the Genocide itself and in its subsequent denial. Turks need to understand this asymmetry of power in what happened and what is happening today.”

I said, “But Peter, the panel is about the inter-generational transmission of trauma. I want to talk about that. I was looking for a quotation—I know I saw it someplace but I can’t remember where—about how Turkish denial of the Genocide is a late stage of the Genocide that visits trauma on the subsequent generations.”

He knew it. Roger W. Smith, Eric Markusen, and Robert Jay Lifton, in “Professional Ethics and the Denial of Genocide,” detail the negationist work of a few U.S. historians in the service of the Institute of Turkish Studies in Washington, D.C. They cite Israel Charny’s paper “The Psychology of Denial of Known Genocides,” which notes, “Denials of genocide make no sense unless one sees in them renewed opportunities for the same passions, meanings and pleasures that were at work in the genocide itself, now revived in the symbolic processes of murdering the dignity of survivors, rationality, dignity, even history itself” (qtd. in Smith, et al. 286).

The day after the call, I tried to go back to writing my presentation, but froze. No dispassionate, neutral-seeming, “professional” talk could ever work to communicate my situation. I was alternating between sadness, anger, and fear when thinking of the phone conversation and imagining what might happen at the conference. What could I say in the language of “Trauma Studies” to the place I found myself in?
And then I decided: I would go to the panel and tell the story of my phone call with Jack Saul, of my responses to it, and of my refusal to enter into a “dialogue” that to me was an assault.

At the conference later that week, after glancing with apprehension at Jack Saul’s assembled students, colleagues, and friends, I did just that. As I finished the talk, I looked out at the stunned but attentive audience. What would happen next? Would Saul deny the conversation? Get angry and attack me? Or would he suddenly understand what he had done and apologize? Sadly, he did exactly what I had hoped my talk would pre-empt: he took the microphone and said he wanted to allow his Turkish student to speak. Several people in the audience murmured, “No.” But he handed the microphone to her.

She said, “My grandfather was a poet, and he wrote about the suffering of different people. We have a library full of books about people around the world and their suffering. My family is devoted to human rights. We care about people. To me the word Armenian means neighbor. And this place, this conference, it is the coming together of the world. Here is an Armenian novelist and a Turkish psychologist, and we are talking in front of an American audience. My grandmother told me stories of what happened during those times during World War I and how everyone suffered…”

By this point she was weeping, but this last sentence was a signal to me of the start of the denial phase of her narrative. I stood up and walked out of the room. I refused to be used as a prop for the denial of history.

I later heard that after my departure the young woman launched into the official Turkish account: “The Armenians died because of the war—many people suffered, were displaced and starved, but there was no Armenian Genocide.”

At a recent book signing at a New York City bookstore, a first-time author named Margaret Ajemian Ahnert discussed her memoir about her relationship with her mother, who was an Armenian Genocide survivor. During the question-and-answer period several Turkish men in the audience disrupted the event by shouting, “This is a lie, this never happened,” and handing out flyers denying the Genocide. One of the men, a Turkish immigrant named Erdem Sahin, was taken away by police and charged with resisting arrest. He later told a New York Times reporter that he and the other protesters were angry that France had “made it illegal to say there was no genocide.” (The legislation was approved by the French National Assembly last fall.) Mr. Sahin went on to say, “We realize that if we don’t do something, we will soon have no rights. We are fighting for freedom of speech” (qtd. in Barron B3).
Hrant Dink opposed the French legislation that makes denial illegal. He also opposed Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code that criminalizes “insulting Turkishness.” This was the law used against him, novelists Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak, publisher Ragip Zarakoglu, historian Taner Akçam, and others for referring to the Armenian Genocide. Dink said, “Those who restrict freedom of expression in Turkey and those who try to restrict it in France are of the same mentality” (qtd. in Malek).

There is a strong Armenian Genocide recognition bill in the United States House of Representatives that is close to passage. As reported in the *Boston Globe*, “The Turkish government is paying big money to two former congressmen-turned-lobbyists—Bob Livingston, a Republican, and Dick Gephardt, a Democrat—to twist arms on Capitol Hill” (O’Brien 1). The Turkish government has also enlisted the leadership of the powerful Anti-Defamation League and the American Israel Public Affairs Committee as allies in this lobbying campaign against the legislation.

However, in Turkey there is an emerging civil society movement that tries to speak openly about what happened to the Armenians and about what is happening now to the Kurds. There are Turkish historians and scholars who are writing about what many of them carefully call the “Armenian Massacres.” The Turkish historian Taner Akçam, who has been prosecuted for using the word genocide, has filed a complaint against the Turkish government in the European Court of Human Rights, claiming that Article 301 violates three articles of the Convention for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, to which Turkey is a signatory. Akçam remarked, “Facing history and coming to terms with past human rights abuses is not a crime but a prerequisite for peace and reconciliation in the region” (qtd. in “Taner” 1).

Sometimes I weary of speaking for an historical tragedy that occurred over ninety years ago, long before I was born and in a distant place. I suppose some people cling to their victimhood as a kind of identity—their own way, perhaps, of working through the trauma they have experienced—but I’m not one of them. And yet, the terrible gift I have inherited from my grandparents, and the fact that people are still being jailed and killed for stating the truth about what happened to them, will never be stolen from me, even in the name of “dialogue,” or through the rituals of a discipline that sometimes reproduces the very trauma it is meant to study.

Works Cited

