

Karin Karakaşlı\*

\* Writer, Agos newspaper.

### **Let the State Apologize and the People Listen to Each Other**

Commemoration is not merely an act pertaining to a single day in history. The person or event that we choose to remember or not to forget actually involves a secret pact concerning our future as well.

In our country, not long only up until a few years ago, the date of April 24 was merely the day following April 23 the National Sovereignty and Children's Day. Just a random day in the calendar. However, the same day was the expression of the deepest mourning for the Armenian world, and all these years it actually awaited its addressee for the comprehension and recognition of this collective pain.

On April 24, 1915, in the middle of the night, 236 Armenian intellectuals among whom were Ottoman Meclis-i Mebusan (The First Parliament) members, writers, artists, doctors, journalists, lawyers and clergy were taken from their homes and exiled towards Ayaş and Çankırı. They were all killed, except for a few. The Armenian people of Anatolia, who first lost their voice, were subjected to the İttihat Terakki (Committee of Union and Progress) administration's systematic slaughters as of May and in convoys of children, women and elderly were deported to the Syrian deserts towards Der Zor. On the way they were attacked by Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa (Covert Intelligence Agency) gangs, decimated with famine and disease, and then they understood that there is no going back and nowhere to reach either. They did not even have a tombstone; they turned into anonymous piles of bones.

Armenian people were numbering millions in 1914, and by 1917 there was no one left in their homeland. Meanwhile the remaining Armenians and the diaspora Armenians, who miraculously survived and made themselves second homes in various countries and the Armenians in Armenia the only neighboring country that Turkey still has its borders closed to, are waiting with a symbolic gravity for the comprehension and recognition of this crime against humanity in their history. Surely history does not vanish when denied, but the denied history impedes the prospect of establishing a future free of the sorrows of the past.

Addressed by the official historiography as the "displacement of the traitorous internal enemy Armenians from the east for security reasons" and later condemned to a deep silence, 1915 has been commemorated also in Turkey for the past few years. The commemorations held on April 24 this year embraced different meanings complementing one another. In the ceremony organized on Taksim Square, while a larger crowd compared to previous years was carrying black and white photographs of the Armenian intellectuals exiled from Istanbul and sent off to die, present at the square along with Armenians and general public of Turkey were also the Armenians from diaspora who had come to Istanbul specifically for this commemoration. Again on the same day, in front of the current Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, which then was the Central Penitentiary where the intellectuals were held prisoner, a billboard was displayed with the names of 2 thousand and 300 Armenian villages that no longer exist. Annihilated villages and the penitentiary whose past was wiped blank told a lot on their own. For the first time Assyrians were also present at the commemoration held here. Speaking at the commemoration Şabo Boyacı, from the Assyrian Youth Federation in Sweden, noted that thousands of Assyrians were subjected to the massacre called 'Seyfo' (Sword) and added:

It is evident that today when Turkey is seeking for a real peace, the inability to come to terms with the past would result in futile efforts. The institution of peace can be meaningful only and only if it is built on humane values rather than congruence of beliefs.

This year the tradition of commemoration spread across the country at large with events organized in İzmir Basmane, Diyarbakır, Adana, Batman, Ankara and Bodrum. The first commemoration Dersim Armenians Association organized in Dersim brought us the voices of those who have been forced to live their Armenian identities in secret. Speaking at the commemoration, Serkan Sarıateş was saying:

We took refuge in Dersim and we did not die, but we have been mute for exactly 98 years. Keeping silent, having to live by gulping back one's sobs, not being able to tell your story and that which is in your memory, not being able to light candles in the monasteries abandoned to the hands of time, not being able to mutter the tragedy inside one's self, is sometimes a feeling heavier than death itself. For the first time after 98 years we are talking as ourselves, we are speaking with our name.

### **Along the River and the Tomb**

Besides the commemorations in Istanbul, two other special meetings were held that I find tremendously important. Speaking at the conference titled "Diyarbakır Armenians on the Anniversary of Deportation" hosted by the Diyarbakır Bar Association and organized with contributions of also the Metropolitan Municipality and with the participation of historian and writer Ara Sarafian, Gomidas Institute Director and editor of *Blue Book*, the Diyarbakır Bar Director Tahir Elçi conveyed the importance of 1915 in terms of Kurdish history and future:

A part of the society, primarily the Kurdish tribe aghas, have also partaken in the official policy, practices and atrocities committed against the Armenian people. I think that the 'Armenian truth' is a very key issue in confronting the past. Surely the official history and ideology is denying this infamous crime committed against the Armenian society and thus hiding the evidences of this crime. However, the Kurdish society that has been carrying out a rights and law struggle for decades under very difficult circumstances must assist in unveiling the truth regarding the violence committed against our fellow Armenian people.

Afterwards, Sarafian and participants threw flowers to the Dicle River from the On Gözlü Bridge on the spot where 635 Diyarbakır Armenians were put on rafts and told they were being sent to Mosul. Those people never reached Mosul. When they arrived at the village of Şefka, named Suçeken today, they were taken off the rafts and killed. Sarafian explained that meeting with Kurdish politicians and people and commemorating the Armenian Genocide and 'Seyfo' the Assyrian genocide at the very heart of the suffering constitutes a very important step in the reconciliation process. His words were a wish shared by all:

This is a declaration of peace that aims to alleviate the victims' pains and heal their wounds. We say, let this process continue, let the children of these lands, Kurds and Armenians, Turks and Assyrians, Arabs and Yezidis, Muslims and Christians live without fear, in peace and harmony.

Yet another meaningful commemoration was held by the side of a tomb. In the morning of April 24, the Human Rights Association (İHD) Istanbul Branch and Ara Sarafian visited the grave of Kütahya Governor Ali Faik Ozansoy in Zincirlikuyu. Renowned poet Süleyman Nazif's younger brother Ali Faik was the Kütahya governor in 1915 and had put up a great resistance against the Committee of Union and Progress not to deport any Armenians from his province, prevented forced religious conversions, and moreover served an official communique to reopen the Armenian schools in his district. In the midst of destruction someone had promised life. If the school was to be reopened, there would be Armenian children filling up the seats in those classrooms.

During our interview at *Agos* with Ara Sarafian who had come to Istanbul at the end of February in order to deliver the *Blue Book* he edited to the members of TGNA, he had said the following: "This here is my country. I am addressing the state of Turkey. After all these generations my roots are still here." He had also shared a dream of his:

If Turkey becomes a free country that disowns its negative past, if it becomes a country where we can talk openly and share the same moral standards in the human rights framework, if the state of Turkey assumes responsibility for the past and can make symbolic gestures like deeming diaspora Armenians eligible for citizenship of Turkey, then I would wish to be able to live here.

### **Need for Integrity**

These days have coincided with a time when hopes of peace are emerging regarding the Kurdish issue after a very painful, three decades long civil war. Like Sarafian we all have the dream of a country where we wish to be able to live in, a country based on equal citizenship. And such a country is possible only through integrative politics.

Such a beautiful word, integrity... How we miss being in the same place at the same time both body and soul, with our heart and mind, how we miss being complete. But our states of completeness most often remain lacking. A part of us is always captive in somebody else or an irrelevant time or place, and our entire life goes by trying to gather our pieces. Derived from the Latin "integer", in all its equivalents in Indo-European languages the word has the meaning of whole, complete along with the meaning of upright, honest, which is most noteworthy. You know it is not possible to talk about righteousness without having integrity, and it's as if that's what this word reminds us most.

The human being needs integrity, as much as the society and its administrative apparatus, the state. The understanding that delimits the state's survival with a historical continuity has, to date, matched the thing called state's integrity with the perception of protecting its existing borders. However, integrity should also involve the ability to own up to segments of the past and by learning from them live the present day and found a different future.

Looking at the state's politics of apology, unfortunately it is still not possible to see this much needed integrity. Referring to the Dersim Alleviates, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said "If there is need for an apology on behalf of the state, if there is such a literature, I would apologize, I am apologizing" for the Dersim massacre in 1938, but unfortunately timing-wise he was acting with the objective of inciting the crisis within the main opposition party (CHP) that was started with CHP Tunceli MP Hüseyin Aygün's statement where he shared his historical pain.

At this point emphasis should be placed on his words, "if there is such a literature". No there is no such literature. In this geography, apology always corresponds to a pejorative. And of course once an apology is expressed you end up acknowledging the rightfulness of a truth. And again at the same time, you end up exposing how the years gone by with its denial were a huge lie. Moreover, you end up releasing a stray worm to gnaw at the public conscience like "Who knows what other lies we were told, what were concealed?" However you look at it, it is very difficult, this business of apology. That is why the words spoken by the Prime Minister were of such historical significance.

All the same, apology too has a literature in its own. Let's start with personal relations. The moment of apology is like a special rite conducted solemnly, sincerely, where words are chosen with greatest care. For both sides the time dilates, sense of place vanishes. A real integration is experienced.

The Prime Minister's timing of apology coincided with the point of striking CHP at its own home. Among the polemics of that period, I find it meaningful to recall the words of CHP Chairperson Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu: "Sadly, Erdoğan's mental map is the same with the Armenian diaspora's mental map. But he is so infuriated that I would not be surprised if this Prime Minister soon imposes the Armenian genocide claims on this nation..."

With that strange instinct of being an Armenian you are already in waiting, to see when your turn will come. It will most definitely come. And the reply sure enough comes with the same velocity and blatant force: "I defy him who that speaks of Tayyip Erdoğan the Prime Minister of the Republic of Turkey and the Armenian diaspora in one breath. I say, know your place."

Yet that which is called the Armenian diaspora is the Anatolian Armenians who managed to survive the 1915 and live scattered around the world. What you call the Armenian diaspora is the longing for one's soil, homeland, plenty of pain and umbrage. What you call the Armenian diaspora is rage felt against the deliberately continued politics of denial and is in essence a humane expectation. The expectation for a statesperson who has the heart to not consider the word Armenian an insult and shoulder the pains of the past. Even the limited number of documents disclosed by the Prime Minister revealed how systematically they operated in order to turn Dersim into Tunç-eli (bronze-hand). A governor with unlimited authority and the rank of major-commander, the attacks launched with cannons and gas bombs. Tens of thousands dead, as many exiled and girls given up for adoption...

Now, won't this picture on its own ever summon up 1915 anyhow? Do we have the luxury of picking and choosing subjects to our liking from history, making do with their apology and leaving the rest aside in waiting as if to say "leave it disheveled" as in the popular song and hair product commercial? Especially when in fact everything has been intertwined... Especially when lynching campaigns have been started against Hrant Dink because he reported on the claims that Atatürk's daughter, the first woman war pilot of the Republic of Turkey Sabiha Gökçen, who was assigned to bomb Dersim, may have been an

Armenian girl who lost her family in 1915 and was adopted; when touching upon the “survivors of 1915” taboo was shown as reason to make an attempt on his life...

Apologies are expressed in solemnity, not as if making a dare. It is not hurtful but healing. In the name of not adding insult to injury, it is a huge test on its own. I think on this subject as well it would do us good to heed to the children, the world’s little sages. When one of them hurts the other while playing and then says “I’m sorry”, with droopy lips smarting with pain still fresh they look the other in the eye for a second with a bright little star in the middle of their tears, and ask “But you won’t do it again, ok?” That “Okay” changes everything.

### **What the Human Stories Tell**

Gate of cognizance is cracked ajar not by official historiography but alternative books, testimonies and literature, which assume the mission of recording the unofficial history in all geographies where history has been consciously distorted. In this respect, the first American-born child of an Armenian family that immigrated from Bitlis to the USA, William Saroyan answers for all of us that question of “so what happened really” with his own life and literature. In these foreign lands, where he had to be born but had no sense of belonging to, Saroyan searched for Bitlis, the lost hometown. After many long years, he would explain in his play titled *Bitlis* why he did not buy back his old house and settle there in 1964 when he plunged through the roads of Anatolia with his hefty body:

There are no Armenians in town, here I would merely be a strange local. An American Armenian writer, who has a sufficient income as a result of his 30 years success, comes to Bitlis and decides to rebuild his family’s house. He buys the house of his grandmother’s siblings –not his cousins- from the rich Kurdish businessman and settles in this house with his typewriter. He takes long walks on the hills and lives there ever after. A crazy Armenian...

There are so many human stories to be comprehended... The tragedy of the priest, composer, choir conductor, singer and ethnomusicologist Gomidas Vartabed (Soğomon Kevork Soğomonyan) also depicted to the public as a ‘Komitaci’ (secret society member) due to his name, is a case in point to explain the dimensions of the destruction. This artist clergy, who is known for the polyphonic choirs he founded, the Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish folk songs he compiled, and his polyphonic work titled *Badarak* still performed in masses at Armenian churches, was arrested on April 24, 1915 and sent to Çankırı on a train. When he was brought back to Istanbul through the intervention of his close friends the poet Mehmet Emin Yurdakul and writer Halide Edip, he had already built an eternal hell for himself with the agony of inhumane practices he had witnessed on exile. He never could leave this hell again. Gomidas, who was admitted to the military hospital in the autumn of 1916, was then transferred to the Villejuif Mental Hospital in Paris in 1919. On October 22, 1935 he lost his life in this hospital. Really what was it that killed this suffering soul who had come to the point of making curtsies to salute strangers and even trees, mistaking them for the gendarmerie?

Or let me shortly talk about Nazaret Dağavaryan, whom I came across in the science laboratory of Getronagan Armenian High School where I was teaching. Merely the list of Dağavaryan’s professions fills up two lines: medical doctor, agricultural engineer, philologist, physicist, teacher, principle, director of countless associations, Armenian Local Assembly delegate and Sivas parliamentarian of the Ottoman Meclis-i Mebusan... When his conferences on medicine that he delivered at the French Hospital were branded as political

propaganda, he had to take refuge as a patient at the very hospital where we worked as a doctor. Long afterwards when he escaped to Marseille with great difficulty, he entrusted the Getronagan School with the biological samples, laboratory materials and mineral stones that he doted upon. With his black inked pearl like handwriting he noted the name and origin of every single stone. The faded labels give away the times bygone.

Today in the official minutes of the parliament archive Nazaret Dağavaryan's name is mentioned in the following record: "Sivas Deputy Nazaret Dağavaryan Effendi's motion of interpellation regarding the issues, which he has identified in the form of twenty seven articles on the subjects of cultivation, veterinary, mines and forestry, has been negotiated and its five articles have been addressed, and upon the proposed motion it has been decided to negotiate the remaining articles during the budget proceedings."

While Dağavaryan pondered on cultivation and agriculture, lawyer Harutyun Şahrigyan, deputy of Istanbul, journalist Onnig Tertsagyan deputy of Van, teacher Hovhannes Serengülyan deputy of Erzurum and Hampartsum Boyaciyani deputy of Adana were struggling in the name of II. Meşrutiyet (Constitutional Monarchy) which they believed would bring about transformation. And again while Dağavaryan was discussing land reform, Istanbul deputy and lawyer Krikor Zohrab was demanding civil law reform in favor of children and women. In the act of annihilation, that targeted first the voice of the Armenian people and destroyed nearly 250 intellectuals, those who were exiled to Ayaş on April 24, 1915 were never again seen alive. Dağavaryan was sent off on grounds that they would be tried by the Martial Court (Divan-ı Harbi Örfi) established in Diyarbakır. On the road, he and his friends were killed by the Circassian Ahmet gang working for the Teşkilat-ı Mahsusa. Zohrab was slaughtered with his head crushed by a stone. All that was left behind was a stone-like silence. A deadly silence that denies, ignores and wraps one with fear...

### **Difficulty of raising your voice**

Many long years have gone by since. As the Republican era's discriminatory practices towards non-Muslim minorities continued, the Armenian community with a learned fear withdrew as much as it could. Breaking points recurred in the Republican era as well with the Capital Tax implementations in 1942 and the 6-7 September events in 1955. In the former it was the unfair taxes of impossible magnitudes that were collected only from the minorities with the pretext of war conditions, the latter was during the escalation of events in Cyprus when assailants, agitated with the provocation of the bombing of Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki, razed to the ground the homes, businesses and churches of the minorities in Istanbul. Minorities, who read the "This is not your homeland" message underlying these destructions experienced in the recent past targeting their economy and security, once again immigrated, once again diminished.

There, after so many generations of silence, Hrant Dink who made that voice heard once again after decades asked, "So we withdrew in ourselves, and what good did that do... Were we able to stop melting away as a population or economically?" This question template containing its own answer was actually a striking observation. Hrant Dink taught the Armenian society of Turkey whence he came how to crack its shell and share its beautiful pearl inside with the greater society. At the same time he showed the greater society why these people live in their shell and shun even their own pearls. And he did all this through his newspaper *Agos*.

Turkey's first Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper *Agos* was founded in April 1996 with Hrant Dink as its editor-in-chief. It became the paper's core principle to share with

public firsthand information on the provocative publications at the time geared towards forging a link between the Armenian Patriarchate of Turkey and the PKK, the gradual transformation of the word Armenian into a swearword, and the destruction created by the state's minority politics primarily the ban on minority foundations' acquisition of real estate. Moreover, in order to enable the solidarity of the Armenian society in Turkey, who had to maintain its own schools, churches and associations without any financial support from the state, there was the need to embrace the Armenians who immigrated to Istanbul or abroad and never learned their mother tongue because there were no schools to attend or Armenians living in post-1915 Anatolia. Sharing the Armenians' accumulated skill and craftsmanship on this land in numerous fields ranging from art to artisanship was yet another goal.

Like in every new institution, the founding years of *Agos* went by in efforts of seeking and creating its own identity. The first period's goals gradually expanded to include very comprehensive items of the agenda, such as contribution to the Turkey-Armenia dialogue, enabling the Armenian Issue to be talked about in a new manner that pays heed to honor, the exchange of information, the freedom of thought and expression, and the democratization of Turkey in frame of the EU process.

Looking at the issue from Turkey's perspective, the approach to the Armenian was limited to certain frameworks. For some, the Armenian in the country was a human species whose absence was reminisced with shallow nostalgias like "They used to make such delicious dolma, topig. They were artisan people", but the reason of their absence was never questioned; and for some others, they were "potential traitors and internal enemies". For the first time, Hrant Dink exhibited the Armenian phenomenon as an undeniable reality through his own body and his own voice. The Armenians of Turkey became visible to such extent for the first time through him. Furthermore, he never ceased to create ideas and toil for the future of his homeland where he was born as a citizen of the Republic of Turkey. Based on his own experiences he contributed to countless issues such as the Kurdish problem, headscarf, and Turkey-EU relations.

According to Hrant Dink, the Armenian Issue could be duly addressed only in a truly democratized society where information can circulate freely. Therefore, the externally imposed bill processes on history could not yield any results except to trigger ultranationalist groups. He fervently supported the existence of alternative sources of history and meetings, and in every setting he tried to share the experiences of 1915 through human stories. And he let the listeners decide on how to name it.

Hrant Dink prepared the news that included claims on the possible Armenian origins of Atatürk's adopted daughter Sabiha Gökçen, also as an opportunity to discuss the Armenian taboo through the survivors rather than the dead. This publication for him was a means to initiate discussion on the fact that along with Armenians who died in that painful era there were also Armenians who survived by converting, being adopted or married.

However, after the news hit the headlines of *Hürriyet* daily, with the harsh statement of reprimand made by the military General Staff and one sentence twigged out of his article inculcating the diaspora Armenians to free themselves from their hatred of Turks, he was declared an "enemy of Turks" and his name was brought to a course most cruel for him through the anti-campaign launched and accompanied by the radical rightist media and certain important columnists of national newspapers.

Soon after the General Staff's statement, when he was being threatened by MİT (National Intelligence Agency) members at the Istanbul Governorship, he was killed. He was

killed when he was feeling compelled to explain himself over and over again, wasting his breath on every article, every interview, conversation. On January 19, 2007 he was shot to death in broad daylight at the entrance of his newspaper *Agos*, when courts were persistently convicting him despite the expert opinion report, when the Court of Appeals saw no harm in approving this conviction, when *Ülkü Ocakları* (ultranationalist youth organization) was shouting in front of *Agos* “From now on Hrant Dink is the target of all our rage and hate, he is our target.”

### **A new milestone**

This assassination was a milestone in many respects. Four days later on January 23, hundreds of thousands of people participated in his funeral and Hrant Dink was bid farewell with placards reading “We are all Hrant, We are all Armenians”. While the conspirator tradition of the state was exposed in his person, over the course of years the justice begrudged in this murder case turned the anniversaries of 19 January into a symbol of all massacres, provocations and unsolved murders by unidentified perpetrators of recent history including 1915.

During the aforementioned murder case, deleted phone conversations, contamination of evidence, hidden information, and expunged reports followed one after the other. No investigation has been opened against any of the officials in neither the police or the gendarmerie, nor the intelligence or the politics or judiciary that even the State Supervisory Council itself had recommended to have investigated. Consequently, the case was tried to be closed on January 12, 2012 by convicting two suspects without revealing the actual persons responsible for and the real perpetrators of the murder. The case that is now at the Court of Appeals will determine what sort of a Turkey we will live in, depending on the extent of “organization” this court finds behind the murder.

In course of the six years past since, the people of Turkey have perceived the “message” that has tried to be given regarding the 1915 taboo in the person of Hrant Dink, and made its stand in favor of breaking this taboo and the institution of peace. The petition started by a group of faculty members and journalists on December 14, 2008, declaring that “My conscience does not accept the insensitivity showed to and the denial of the Great Catastrophe that the Ottoman Armenians were subjected to in 1915. I reject this injustice and for my share, I empathize with the feelings and pain of my Armenian brothers and sisters. I apologize to them” has generated tremendous impact with its list of 30,837 signatories. Recalling the Prime Minister’s remarks regarding this petition will enable a better understanding of how the state politics still lag far behind the society on this issue: “They must have committed such a genocide since they are apologizing. The Republic of Turkey has no such problem.”

Now this society has another book in its hand. Last year in October the doyen name of journalism in Turkey Hasan Cemal’s book titled *1915: Armenian Genocide* was published. Cemal called out to the public with the following words:

Showing up in the corridors of *Agos* every year on certain dates with mournful faces, participating in Hrant Dink commemoration ceremonies and marches on every January 19<sup>th</sup>... Wonder if Armenians wanted to share their own pains with “Cemal Pasha’s grandson”, would they? I can’t know. But then I recalled that early morning in Erivan when the sun was rising in the mist painting the environs in red. Leaving



three white carnations at the Armenian Genocide Monument, I had mumbled to myself: “Dear Hrant, it is your pains that brought me here; I am trying to understand those pains of you and your ancestors, to feel it in my heart and share it. Sleep in peace my brother”...

As we approach 2015, confrontation with the Armenian genocide imposes itself as the point that should also be the fundamental basis of the resolution to the Kurdish problem. The protocols signed in 2009 stipulating to open the Turkey-Armenia border and start diplomatic relations are still waiting on the shelf. Both today and yesterday are obstinately locked away. However the society is ready to cross over the threshold. Because the country’s salvation is in that one and only hope of peace.

And that hope of peace requires integrity. In this respect the state’s official apology is not only an acknowledgement but also an assurance promising that these sufferings will not easily be experienced again. As a matter of fact the ongoing denial throughout the Republic era has also created the space for the new social grievances of recent period. Therefrom, while the Kurdish Problem reaches a solution I consider it important, not as an Armenian but as a citizen, to revisit 1915 as the first frame.

We are going through difficult and fragile days. On one hand there was the stampede of news agencies and journalists at the PKK leader Murat Karayılan’s press conference held in Kandil on ceasefire and withdrawal of armed forces; the same day in Silivri there was the trial of detained journalists standing trial in the KCK (Kurdish Communities Union) case for making news about the organization and Kandil at some point. That day in Silivri Prison, on the 13<sup>th</sup> hearing of the case against 46 journalists and press members, 26 of whom were under arrest, when on behalf of all defendants the detainee journalist Ertuğ Bozkurt presented the defense through a Kurdish translator and said, “Today is April 24, anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. We share this pain”, I shook. That was the integrity I am talking about.

Even though there has been a severe blackout in the press regarding the commemorations this year, voice finds itself holes to seep through and echoes ever more powerfully on the walls barricading it. In the person of Ertuğ Bozkurt, I too embrace with gratitude that voice which in the loneliest of times was lent to others, and I wish to stand side by side together in freedom and a peace where all KCK detainees have been released.