

Ruth Barnett

THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

(23/6/10 Belfast, Council of Christians and Jews)

If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? If not now, when? Rabbi Hillel.

First they came for the trade unionists; as I wasn't one, I took no notice. Then they came for the communists; I wasn't one so I did nothing. Then they came for the Jews; I wasn't one so I looked away. Then they came for me and there was no one left to stand up for me. Pastor Martin Niemoeller.

On January 19th 2007, the Armenian -Turkish journalist Hrant Dink was murdered in Istanbul. Editor of the Armenian and Turkish language newspaper AGOS, Dink was an advocate of minority rights and dedicated to ensuring the continuation of Turkey's multi-cultural society. Through this work, he made both friends and enemies and became a symbolic and eventually a literal target for nationalist hatred.

Armenian Institute, London, information about the film shown 15/6/10: Osman Okkan and Simone Sitte's haunting documentary (Germany ©2009, 80 min) gives background on Hrant Dink, the murder and the ongoing trial.

Turkey, today, is riven in conflict between the military secularists and the government that has leanings towards Islam; between the nationalists who want to keep Turkey 'pure' Turkic and those who want to acknowledge and respect its minorities; between those who want to join the EU and those who want to unite with other Islamic countries.

In my opinion, Turkey is suffering today from the effects of massive denial of its history. A Turkish republic that venerates and almost worships its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, cannot tolerate the fact that Mustafa Kemal was the genocidaire who completed the cleansing of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians from Anatolia after WWI up until the sack of Smyrna in 1923. In spite of over half the countries of Europe and over half the states in the USA having fully acknowledged the Ottoman Genocide against the Christians, Turkey still denies, ever more vehemently and frantically, that there was a genocide during WWI perpetrated by its Ottoman forebears. Inside Turkey a law operates still today, to arrest and punish anyone perceived to insult the 'good name' of Turkey and/or Atatürk (which means 'father of the Turks'). Outside Turkey, its ambassadors protest at moves to recognise the genocide and send Turkish students to disrupt lectures about the Armenian situation.

I will share with you how I became interested in the Armenian Genocide:

In 2001 the British Government installed the first annual Holocaust Memorial Day. I was not invited to the big event in London but I noticed that the Wiener Library was offering a conference on "Genocide", so I went to that. At that conference, I heard a survivor of the Armenian Genocide speak of his family's

experiences and I was shaken to the core. To my shame, I had never heard of this brutal genocide that had so many similarities with the way that Nazis treated the Jews. I determined to learn about it.

Our government put Holocaust teaching as a requirement in the National Curriculum from 1991. As teachers at that time had had no education about the Holocaust themselves, it was difficult for them to suddenly teach such a sensitive subject and they needed support. I joined a group convened by the LJCC (London Jewish Cultural Centre) willing to go into schools to talk with teachers and tell their personal survivor stories to the students. After hearing the Armenian survivor speak, I began to sense that Holocaust education in schools was being used to ward off any wider realisation of the extent and seriousness of genocide. The ethos was that the Holocaust was a 'one-off' that must never happen again, and it was perpetrated by German Nazi thugs that had nothing to do with us here in England. I was shocked that some of my closest Jewish friends thought I should forget about Armenians and focus on supporting Jewish issues problems. Some Christian friends who either knew nothing about the Armenian Genocide or told me 'they are the wrong kind of Christians' further shocked me.

From colleagues in Frankfurt, where there are both Armenian and Turkish communities, I heard that there had been an exhibition of the Armenian Genocide in Frankfurt the previous year. I contacted the curator of that exhibition, Dr. Tessa Hofmann who lives in Berlin. As I learnt from her, following up her recommended sources, I became convinced, as she was, of the link between the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust.

For Holocaust Memorial Day 2002, with the help and support of our rabbi, Frank Dabba Smith, Tessa brought her exhibition photos to London and we set up an exhibition in Harrow & Wembley Progressive Synagogue that we titled "The Armenian Genocide: the Prototype for the Holocaust" with an explanatory information booklet to hand out. People who viewed the exhibition commented how they were struck by the similarity between the two genocides: the increasing government-encouraged hatred of the target group over many years, the waves of pogroms, the final unleashing, under cover of war, of carefully planned rounding up of communities after the leaders had been murdered, the death marches, the use of criminals and other ethnic groups to do most of the killing, even concentration camps in the desert.

As part of this exhibition, Dr. Hofmann gave a presentation about the Armenian genocide and its links with the Holocaust; and subsequently I went to more lectures and did considerable reading on the subject.

German and Austrian officers of the Austro-Hungarian army, allies of the Ottoman Turks, were involved in the genocide and were later able to inform the Nazis how it had been done. One in particular, Dr. Max Erwin Scheubner-Richter Schreiber- Richter, a close senior friend of Hitler, was shot in the Munich Putsch of November 9th 1923 in which Hitler was arrested. Hitler mentions Scheubner-Richter's death in "Mein Kampf", the book he wrote while in jail. Some people think that he chose November 9th for the pogrom in 1938,

that became called Kristallnacht, as revenge for Scheubner-Richter's death, for which he blamed 'the Jews'.

As Hitler is recorded as having said to his generals on the Eve of the invasion of Poland, "Who now remembers the Armenians?", it is clear that failure to bring the Armenian Genocide to closure after the end of WWI created impunity for further genocide. And I would go further to say that every genocide we deny, allow to escape historical analysis or disappear from history and/or cultural consciousness, creates ever more impunity for power-hungry potential genocidaires.

A further complication to this issue is the problem of 'realpolitik'. Too many politicians are prepared to sacrifice their integrity and humanity in the cause of political self-interest or the 'three lined whip'. Our British government has all the documentation to confirm the Armenian Genocide in its own archives, and yet colludes with Turkey in continuing to maintain the denial. The Israeli government, for the same reason, denies that it was genocide.

The recorded debates of the British parliament during WWI show clearly that the government commissioned a report on the Ottoman massacres of Christians, on the basis of which it warned Turkey that it would be held responsible and the Armenians given justice. But after the war this didn't happen. The Treaty of Sèvres (1920), which would have given the Armenians justice, was not ratified before the previous Entente states and Turkey over-rode it with their Treaty of Lausanne that gave Turkey the whole of Anatolia (home of the murdered Christians) and blocked all Armenian claims. Although the three leading 'Young Turks', Talaat, Enver and Cemal, who were responsible for the Ottoman massacres and death marches, were court-martialled in Turkey after the end of the war and sentenced to death, the new Turkish republic made false claims that the Armenians were traitors and insurgents and denied any intent.

By 2003 I felt confident that I had absorbed enough understanding of the Armenian Genocide to realise what Turkey's denial meant in psychological terms and I started writing and giving papers. I wanted both to support the Armenian survivors and to raise awareness in the general public of knowledge of the genocide and the damaging effects of denial. As a consequence of these papers, I was invited to make a presentation in Yerevan in April 2005 at an international conference on genocide to mark the 90th anniversary of the start of the Ottoman genocide on April 24th 1915, when a large number of Armenian intellectuals and leaders were arrested, decapitated and the heads displayed as trophies.

The conference included a march of commemoration up to the Tsitsernakaberd memorial on the hill overlooking Yerevan, where each person laid a single flower round the everlasting-light. While waiting in the queue to lay my flower, I noticed a garden of baby fir trees with commemoration plaques. The only Jewish one was from the Yerevan Jewish community and the only British one was a personal one from Baroness Cox. I decided there should be a tree of support from the British Jewish community.

It took me over two years to achieve such a tree. I met with the chairman of the Board of Governors of British Jews, who agreed it was a desirable humanitarian project, but in spite of many emails and phone calls, I never heard from him again. Finally, with the support of the executive Heads of the Reform and Liberal Jewish movements, I went ahead with organising a tree and a visit to Yerevan to plant it. At this point the project reached the ear of the Turkish ambassador, who contacted the Israeli ambassador with a demand that the project be stopped. The Israeli ambassador requested the Board of Governors to stop our visit to Yerevan. Sadly, the Reform Movement then dropped out, but Rabbi Danny Rich was prepared to go ahead. In August 2007 Danny and I and two other supporters planted our tree in Yerevan. To my astonishment, I was informed a year later, by friends returning from Yerevan, that our tree was healthy but had no plaque. Through the Armenian ambassador in London, we discovered that our email correspondence, about the wording of the plaque, with the curator of the Genocide Museum who also maintained the Memorial Garden, had been intercepted and wiped out. This was undoubtedly the work of Turkey's denial team. Eventually our British Jewish Tree got its plaque in 2008.

Finally, I want to come back to the issue of denial. Our human make-up is designed to make us amazingly adaptable. I don't think any other species has adapted to surviving in every bit of land on planet Earth and travelling the oceans too. But the most amazing protective adaptive mechanisms we have are, in my opinion, the psychological ones. Life is highly precarious and uncertain. Our minds would blow without our capacities for imagination and belief. We imagine security and continuity of being – otherwise continuing to live would be impossible. The human capacity for belief enables religious faith but also disbelief and denial. We have the ability to keep ourselves not knowing, what we do know but can't bear, by denial. A person in psychological denial usually believes the denial. That is she believes the untruth of what she can't bear to be true. Genocide is the ultimate atrocity against Humanity and very difficult to hold in mind. Many people don't want to know about the depths and extent of violence humans are capable of against other humans; to face this is to get uncomfortably close to the reality that each of us is capable of what the Ottomans did to the Christians in WWI and the Nazi repeated even more ferociously against the Jews in WWII. Nor has genocide stopped with the Holocaust. "Never Again" has, sadly, proved to be "Again and Again". Each violent atrocity increases the impunity for further violence.

Perpetrators of genocide usually try to wipe out the evidence of their crimes to support their denial. Modern Turkey is busy demolishing the ancient Armenian churches and grave stones of a culture far older than Ottoman culture in the Anatolian peninsular. Although it took 50 years before serious attention was paid to acknowledgement and memorialisation of those murdered in the Nazi Holocaust, most but not all the Jewish victims are accounted for. This means that the generations of survivors have a measure of closure.

It is now 95 years since the peak of the genocide and there are, as yet, no memorials at the mass graves of Christians slaughtered in the Ottoman genocide. This means that the survivors, their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren have no closure. Not only have their ancestors been murdered but the genocide continues as an attempt to wipe out their ever having existed. Another ethnic group that has no closure yet is the Roma/Gypsy/Travellers. Half a million Gypsies were murdered in the Holocaust as well as the 6 million Jews. Not only is this not yet widely known, but Gypsies are the most hated ethnic group right across Europe. The last bastion of culturally accepted racism is against Gypsies.

Greg Stanton of Genocide Watch (available on the internet) has outlined 8 stages that every known genocide goes through. There are six clearly visible stages, at which we could nip the impending genocide in the bud if we so willed, before the mass killing begins. There are always survivors to report the details but they are usually disbelieved or discounted. When the killing has stopped there is an 8th stage of denial until the details are acknowledged by the perpetrators. Only then can processing towards mourning and reparation begin and finally lead to closure for the survivors and commemoration by humanity.

Two problems arise from this continuing genocide in the denial stage. At an individual level, failure to face, mourn and resolve the trauma of being one of a victim/survivor group, means that the trauma is transmitted to the children. The children, the second generation, then have a second chance to tackle the trauma but if they are not able to, their children may be affected in turn. At a collective community level, we are not able to help individuals process the trauma of one atrocity before the next atrocity is upon us. My view is that this is causing a build up of unprocessed trauma in the community that is untenable and breaks out in various forms of frustrated violence. I represent this as Genocide Footprints in the inner world or Human Soul parallel to carbon Footprints in the outer environment. We may be destroying our home planet with our Carbon footprints but I maintain we are destroying our humanity with our Genocide Footprints.