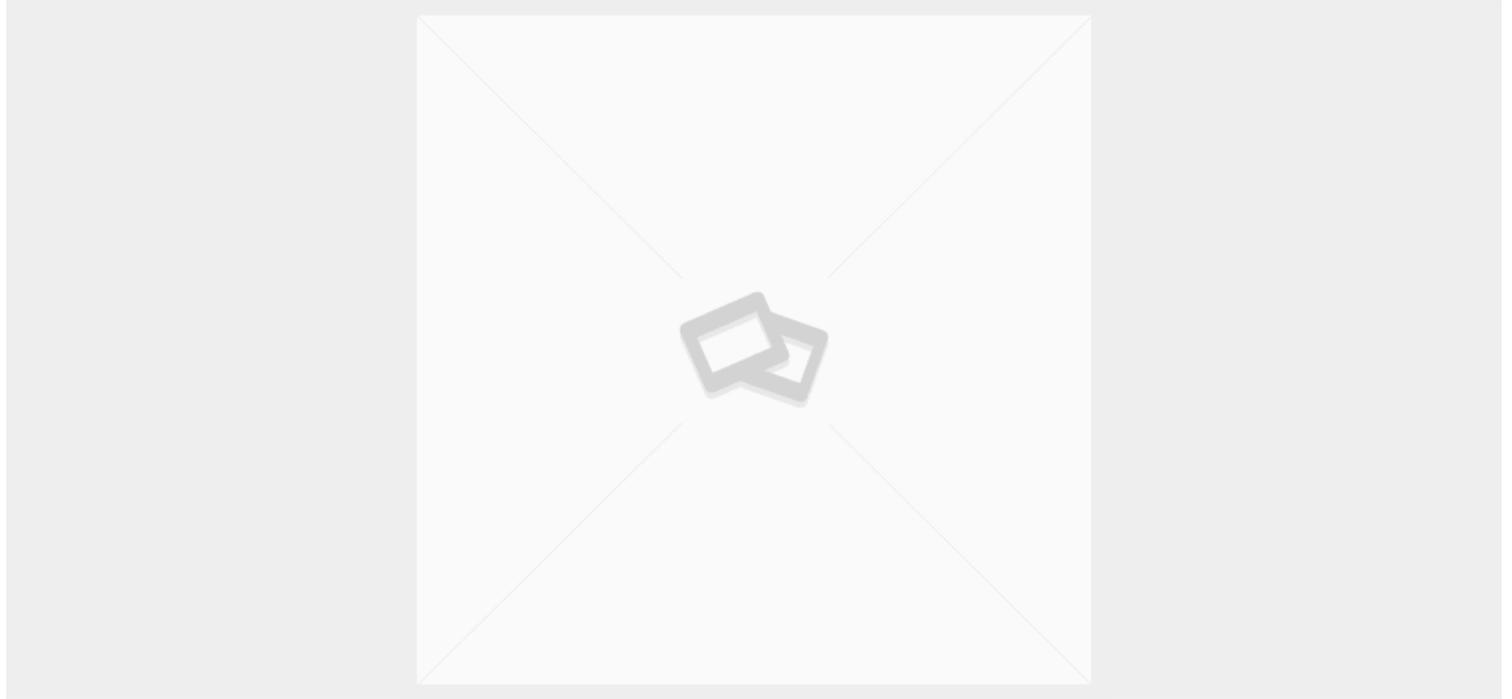


# A TRIBUTE TO VARTAN OSKANIAN: AVE ATQUE (IT IS HOPED NOT) VALE

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By Avedis Kevorkian, Philadelphia, PA

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In my opinion, Vartan Oskanian was the only good man in the Armenian Government--and, also, the only honest man. With his retirement, I feel that the record should show how well he performed on behalf of Armenia.

In London, there is a distinguished organization called the Royal Institute of International Affairs (RIIA), known as "Chatham House"--the home of one of Britain's greatest statesmen. If you have heard of "Chatham House Rules," it comes from the cardinal rule of talks at the RIIA which is that nothing is quoted and there are no reports, thus ensuring that the speakers may speak frankly and "off the record."

The audience, generally, is composed of some of the most distinguished and prominent figures in British politics--including members of Parliament (both Commons and Lords).

The noon talks also have one other rule: The guest speaks for 30 minutes, and there are 30 minutes of questions, and the session is adjourned.

When I first heard Oskanian, it was early in his tenure as Foreign Minister.

He spoke for 30 extemporaneous minutes, without a text and without notes. He explained Armenia's policies and positions. After a long applause, the chairman said that it was "the first time that anyone of the rank of the Foreign Minister spoke exactly 30 minutes without notes and spoke to the issues," and he invited the audience to show again its appreciation of this remarkable feat.

Oskanian handled three or four questions with simple, concise but full answers. Then, the chairman--Sir John Price--recognized a representative of the Azerbaijan Embassy (he had probably been forewarned of the man's presence). The young man rose and spoke and spoke and spoke and spoke--he had evidently prepared his long statement (or it had been prepared for him)--so boringly that the audience began shouting "Question" over and over. Sir John intervened and asked, politely, "Please what is your question?" Undeterred the Azeri went on, accusing Armenia of every crime in the book--it wasn't the snake that corrupted Eve, it was an Armenian; it wasn't Cain who killed Able, it was an Armenian; it wasn't the fleas on the rats that caused the Bubonic Plague, it was an Armenian; it wasn't Booth who killed Lincoln, it was an Armenian; it wasn't Hitler who started World War II, it was an Armenian, and so on (or, so it seemed to me). Finally, despite the constant shouts of "Question" and Sir John's repeated polite request, the young man sat down when he had finished his idiotic statement.

Whereupon, Sir John turned to Oskanian and said, "Since no question was asked, I will call on someone else." However, Oskanian

said, with a smile, "No, permit me to respond to what he said." Without notes to remind him of the disgraceful Azeri performance, Oskanian spoke to the charges that were raised, point by point. When he finished, there was spontaneous applause by the audience.

The rest of the session ended without incident, and Sir John remarked again, that never in his experience had he been so impressed by a speaker at Chatham House--and he invited another round of applause.

The second time I heard Oskanian was also at Chatham House but it was at a seminar on the Caucasus. He was in the country for one of his periodic talks with the British Foreign Secretary. This time, he had 3x5 cards as notes, because he was citing various statistics.

During the question period, a former Turkish ambassador to Britain was recognized, and he, too (but in a more polished manner than his Azeri cousin), took Armenia to task and blamed the problems in the area on the Armenians. He, also, did not ask a question, so that the chairman noted the lack of question and was about to acknowledge another member of the audience.

Again, Oskanian said that he would like to respond to the comments of the Turkish former ambassador. Again, from memory, he politely corrected every mis-statement, and cited facts. So devastating was Oskanian's reply that the Turk spent the rest of the session with his head bowed, apparently studying the wood-grain pattern on the very impressive desk at which he was sitting. Not for the first time, I felt sorry for a Turk when his lies are exposed so well. I wondered why Turks feel it necessary to make fools of themselves in open forums.

The Armenian Genocide was not on the agenda, and it was not mentioned. I managed to be recognized and I asked if, in his talks with the Foreign Secretary, he discussed the recognition of Armenian Genocide by Britain. He said, "Yes. I always discuss recognition with every meeting with the Foreign Secretary and with all governments."

Afterwards, as we were leaving, Oskanian approached me and thanked me for raising the question, "Otherwise, it wouldn't have come up, since it wasn't on the agenda." This seminar, too, was attended by top people.

From comments made to me by people in or near the British government, everyone has the highest regard and respect for Oskanian, and one even noted that he overshadowed any representative from the "emerging nations."

When I learned that Oskanian had resigned, I contacted a former British ambassador to Yerevan and passed on the news, with the comment that, in my opinion, Oskanian will be sorely missed, the reply (I did not ask for one nor did I expect a comment from anyone in the British government) was: "He was an asset to Armenia: a Foreign Minister any country would have been proud of."

Great praise, indeed, considering that Britain takes its direction from America (who gets its instructions from Ankara on matters-Armenian) which meant that Oskanian could not convert the British mind. But, there is no doubt that London, like Washington, knows that it is hypocritical and

that its denial of history is not based on fact.

Of course, I have heard Oskanian at Armenian audiences, but those talks matter little as far as a measure of his worth.

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