APRIL 2011: REFLECTIONS ON THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

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Category: Opinions

Mark Gavoor, April 2011

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Why?

Have I written all I can about it? Or am I just feeling that for all the deep insights and passionate expression of the injustice, we are just banging our heads against a rubber wall.

We will dutifully write our congressmen. We will hope and pray that the American President uses the word Genocide when he gives his remarks commemorating the tragedy that befell our people.

Maybe it is simply that April 24th, the day of commemoration, falls on Easter Sunday this year. Easter Sunday is a joyous day of rebirth in which all Christians rejoice in the forgiveness of our sins and realize the potential of everlasting life. Maybe, this year, God is telling us to take a break, to take some deep breath and reflect on what we really want.

As a people, we will not do that. We will commemorate the Genocide but not on Easter Sunday. We will commemorate it the next day on April 25th. We will have rallies. We will gather and listen to speeches. We will lament that Barack Obama did not use the word Genocide yet again.

There are almost no survivors of those dismal days still with us. Those precious few are at least 95 years old. They will not play a central role in the commemorations.

In one sense, by waiting and being firm in their position that it was not Genocide, Turkey is slowly winning. With the passing of years, the events of nearly one hundred years ago are becoming more history than current events. I have often likened it to the plight of American Indians. This country treated them horribly. We are now acknowledging that but that is about it. It happened a long time ago. It was a dark period of our history that we are not proud of and that is about it. I can see the same thing happening in Turkey. This is, of course, what the government is doing. There is much more going on in Turkey or so I am always being told.

There are no survivors left in our family. My maternal Grandmother was the last and she passed away in 2007. My grandfathers died in 1959 and 1974. Various great aunts and uncles are all gone as well. The link to what they called the

"old country" is all gone. They are all buried in the United States where they lived the majority of their lives.

Armenians are not the only people to have suffered such a move. There are very few Christians and Jews left not only in Turkey but in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and Egypt per the CIA World Factbook. These numbers, percentage-wise, would have looked different 100 years ago.

Country	**% Muslim**
Egypt	90%
Iran	98%
Iraq	97%
Syria	90%
Turkey	99.8%

Many Jews and Christians have been displaced from their ancestral homes in Iran and Iraq. It is and is not about religion. Really bright intellectual people will say it is not about religion. It is a socio-political-economic problem. I do not always buy into that view entirely. I am not so sure how to separate the religion vector from all this.

While we fight and struggle to right a 96 year old wrong. The world moves on. Turkey, as mentioned is struggling with many issues relating to a rising tide of Islam, a tolerance movement, citizens revealing and reveling in their minority heritage, and the old guard trying to protect the secular republican ideals and state created by Ataturk. Turkey could have protests the likes of which have toppled governments in Egypt, Tunisia, and still evolving in Bahrain, Syria, and other countries. What is happening in Libya is simply horrible.

So, what is the 96 year old issue that we Armenians keep bringing up year after year compared to the forces of change now rocking the Middle East. Sure, we need to pursue this. But, we also need to navigate within and around the upheavals happening in the Middle East. What if such upheavals occur in Turkey, Azerbaijan, or Georgia? What does that mean for Armenia and Armenia's security? As a collective people, we need to make sure that the territorial integrity of Armenia and Karabagh remain intact and our brothers and sisters there stay safe and secure.

What if such an upheaval comes to Armenia? It is certainly possible. The government there is arguably in the hands of or heavily influenced by oligarchs. Corruption in Armenia is a real issue and the fairness of elections is a matter of serious contention. It is a very poor country. The real shame is that it did not have to be.

What if such an uprising occurs in Armenia? Will that give Turkey the opportunity to annex the last bit of Armenian land in the region? Will it afford Azerbaijan the chance it has been waiting for to trying to take back Karabagh and perhaps go further into Armenia? These might be the kinds of issues we probably need to consider in addition to the annual protests, commemorations, and beseeching of US and Turkish governments to admit what really happened.

Some Armenian brothers and sisters in Germany have created a new site. It is dedicated to preserving on-line the Armenians and Armenian life in the Armenian Highlands now commonly referred to as Anatolia. It has just begun and and has some great promise (though I would prefer authentic instrumented soundtrack… but that is just me.) It is worth checking out and contributing in terms of content or donation if you are so motivated.

April 15: I am out of whatever Armenian funk I was in. Sometimes it is just a bit frustrating to be Armenian. Allow me to elaborate a bit.

The Diasporan Armenians and the citizens of the Republic of Armenia are not as united as they could and should be. I personally felt a fair number of my brothers and sisters there looking at me as a foreigner. Of course, I am. I am a citizen of the United States of America and not the Republic of Armenia. I have not lived in Beirut nor in Istanbul. I grew up in Detroit, Michigan.

I have not lived in an environment where there is a large concentration of Armenians around. I do not know the language as well as I should. I do not understand fully what is going on in Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, or even LA.
It matters not. I feel as Armenian as anyone, no matter how they view me. I live a dual life. I live an Armenian-American life. I can look and act like a typical American and yet be Armenian at the same time.

How are things changing in Turkey? There will be a second annual April 24th Commemoration in Taksim Square in Istanbul. The commemoration is sponsored by the Human Rights Association, Turkey Istanbul Branch - The Committee Against Racism and Discrimination. The commemoration is not sponsored by Armenians.

How have things not changed in Turkey? This week in Bismal a district of Diyarbekir (the current manifestation of the ancient Armenian capital Dikranagert) there were protests resulting in the killing of at least one protester. Per the Hurriyet Daily News, the Supreme Election Board of the country vetoed the candidacy of twelve independent candidates. As the candidates were Kurdish, government foul play was highly suspected. There was a national uprising and protests that resulted in one death which sparked more protests.

How have things not changed in Turkey and how Armenians react to things? There was also a lot of buzz on the Armenian Listserv about the vandalizing of the ruins of a monastery near Van and Aghtamar. There were debates about the newsworthiness of the report, if Kurds really had done this as reported, and using the word "Kurds" was insensitive or even racist in some convoluted way.

Some people living around whatever is left of Armenian religious buildings in Turkey may well be racist. Others may simply know that the Armenians probably are not coming back to claim any of these structures and stones. The availability of precut stones is valued for construction and repair of the humble abodes in some of these rural locales.
We are saddened by the photos of Armenian cross stones used for wall construction or table tops. We are sick to our stomachs when we see the same relics used as stair steps or even worse, urinals. There is a huge frustration among Armenians that so few care, that we can do nothing about it, and a vast majority of sites are gone.

Look at the before and after photos on just one site to get a feel for what has happened

Lots of things change in 100 years. No matter what Armenians in the Diaspora claim or claim to want, we have little voice in Turkey and perhaps just a bit more in Armenia.

April 16: In settling in for a night's sleep, I did what many Americans with too many televisions in their homes do. I flipped on the TV in the bedroom. Turner Classic Movies was just beginning "America America" the classic 1963 black and white

film by Elia Kazan. I had heard my parents speak of this movie often. I had to watch it. Once I started, I could not stop.

The movie is based on a 1961 book by Kazan of the same title. It is loosely based on the immigration of Kazan's uncle Avraam Elia Kazanjoglu. The movie begins in 1896 in a non-descript village in Anatolia around Mt. Aergius in Cappadocia. The town is made up of Greeks, Armenians, and Turks. Almost immediately there is a massacre of the Armenians in the town. This is the kind of localized atrocities that led to the Genocide of the Armenians in 1915.

The lives of the Greeks and Armenians in this village were portrayed to be quite miserable. They were sheep. They were always afraid of what the Turks might hear them say or how the Turks might react to their actions. Most did not want to leave their ancestral homelands. But, Stavros Topouzoglu, the name given to Kazan's Uncle's character, was fixated on getting out and getting to America. This story is how Stavros struggles first to get to Constantinopolis. There he works as a hamal, a human mule, loading and unloading ships and eventually makes it to America.

The depiction of the Turks in Stavros's village and those he met on the road to Istanbul were very much as the Armenian villagers described them to be in various books and other reports. It did not look like anyplace or time that I would have wanted to live in. I am certain Kazan did not have any intention of being kind to the Turks. I felt he accurately captured the look of the times.

April 24: It is Easter Sunday. It is also the day the Armenian intelligentsia and leaders were rounded up in Istanbul. They were never to be seen again. There is a list on wikipedia of all those that were rounded up that day. Not all were killed. It is worth reading the list to see the names most of which I am not familiar with. Reading the list definitely took me out of whatever blaise faire I was experiencing earlier this month. I believe that I will read this list every year.

I woke to read about a roadside bomb that went off outside a Catholic church in Bagdad. Seven people were injured. Easter mass was being conducted when the bomb went off. It seems to me that the outrage is much less than when that Florida preacher burned a copy of the Koran a month or so ago.

I forget the freedom I take for granted in this country. I am sitting in the comfort and coziness of my own home typing this letter. The worst I have to fear is a negative response from a reader. I think about the protests in Turkey from earlier this week. I think about the protests in Yemen and Syria. I think about the protests that have turned into civil war in Libya. I think of the US military presence in Iraq and the on-going war in Afghanistan. I think about the taking of this land where I now live in and how it was taken from the indigenous people that were here. I think of the inhumanity of man to man.

I will listen to Ara Dinkjian performance *Adanayi Voghpuh* from his album **Peace on Earth**. This lovely sad song is for the 1985 Adana massacres but it applies to 1915 and the too many sad parts of the long history of the Armenians. Ara does a masterful job on this lament.

I will also listen to Erkan Ogur and Djivan Gasparyan performing Yemen (Havada Bulut Yok) from Ogur's album Fuad Erkan Ogur & Djivan Gasparyan . It is a song about Turkish soldiers that went to fight in a war in Yemen for Ottomans. It is a lament for those that went and did not return: *Giden gelmiyor, acep nedendir?* This lovely sad song has been symbolic in referring to the Armenian Genocide. It is a lament for those that went and did not return: *Giden gelmiyor, acep nedendir?* Those who have left do not return. It is too sad.

It is too sad because this song is about the suffering of common people that had to send their sons to die in a war in Yemen. It is a war they probably could care less about and had no part in the starting of. They just contributed their sons to go and die for that "greater glory." The YouTube shows photos of soldiers from that era. Yet, the song and that last lines of the chorus applies to the Armenians that lived in the same villages. They too had left and were not coming back.

There you have it; my reflections on April 24, 2011. I really have fulfilled the tag line: A Letter of Musings and Meanderings. I have mused and meandered about the grayness of the black and white history reflected through a mirror half a world away and ninety-six after the fact. Those who were driven off are now all gone. The lifestyle they had is no more. We need to look forward and act positively for our people… all people.