ARMENIAN PLIGHT RESONATES IN AUSTRALIA

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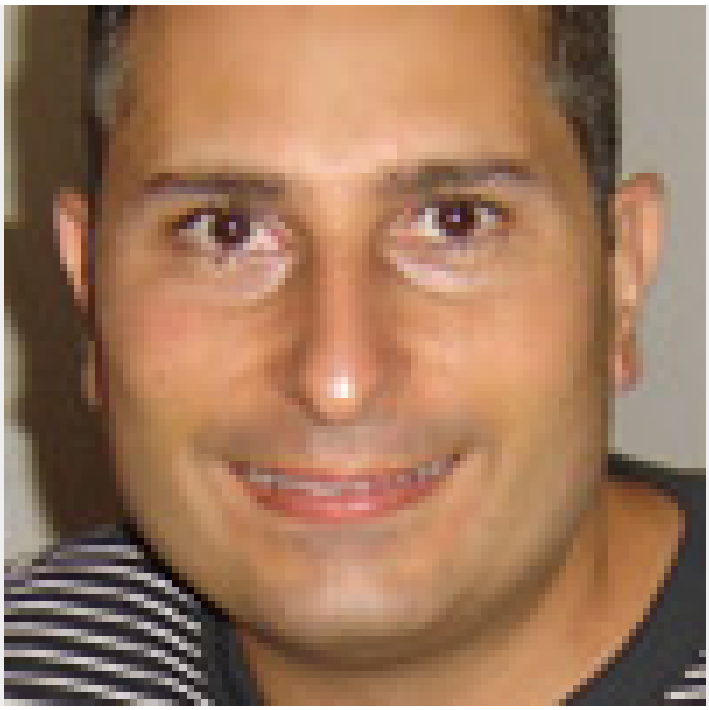

Category: Opinions

Vicken Babkenian,ABC The Drum Unleashed, 10 September 2010

When the prominent Melbourne academic and activist Jessie Webb returned from Geneva as Australia's representative to the General Assembly of the League of Nations (predecessor to the United Nations) in 1923, she made a strong appeal to the nation's women. She urged them to support the League's efforts to reclaim the thousands of Armenian women and children in Turkey who had been abducted into Muslim households during the Armenian genocide in 1915 and forcibly converted to Islam.

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Webb was among a large number of prominent Australians who had mobilised to help survivors through the Armenian Relief Fund, arguably Australia's first international humanitarian aid effort. Established in Victoria in 1915, and supported by the major churches, the fund soon formed branches in every state in the country. Major appeals were launched, calling on Australians to donate money and goods. The collected goods were sent directly to the destitute Armenian refugees aboard the Commonwealth government line of steamers which the then prime minister, Billy Hughes, had promised would be free of charge. The relief movement culminated in the establishment of an Australian-run orphanage in Beirut, Lebanon, for 1700 Armenian orphans. By 1927, tens of thousands of Armenians were still held in captivity awaiting reclamation.
Eight decades later, visiting for this year's Melbourne Writers Festival, is author and Turkish human rights lawyer, Fethiye Çetin. Presenting her book, My Grandmother, a memoir of Çetin's discovery of her Muslim grandmother's true Armenian Christian identity, Fethiye's grandmother was among those who were not reclaimed.

When Fethiye was growing up, she knew her grandmother as a universally respected Muslim housewife. It would be decades before her grandmother told her the truth: that she was by birth an Armenian Christian. She went on to tell the dramatic story of being saved from a death march by a Turkish gendarme captain who then adopted her and expressed her desire to connect with her remaining true family in America.

Like Fethiye, most Australian Armenians, including myself, are descendants of those who survived the death marches of 1915. They have brought with them many stories of survival and of lost relatives. It was by all accounts, the darkest episode in Armenia's history of over 3 millennia.

Viewed by some historians as equal in intent and trauma as the Jewish Holocaust, denial surrounds this period - officially in Turkey, as well as among many Turkish and Armenian families. And despite Australia's part in the relief efforts, this history is mostly unknown to the wider population. Fethiye Çetin's memoir and visit serve to bring this history and its personal stories to our attention.

Fethiye's grandmother's story will resonate with Australians as a reminder of our nation's own Stolen Generation. But it is also a reminder of the proud moment when we joined in a global effort to save the survivors of one of the most horrific events in modern history. In Australia, this landmark response was an early manifestation of the humanitarian ethos that formed part of the nation's engagement with international movements throughout the past century.

Vicken Babkenian is an independent researcher for the Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies.

Fethiye Çetin is in Australia as part of the Melbourne Writer's Festival. For more details see www.spinifexpress.com.au