

PANDORA'S BOX FOR ISTANBUL ARMENIANS / REMNANTS OF THE SWORD

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Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 27 May 2020

Only a few months after the long delayed election and appointment of Archbishop Sahag Mashalian as the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople (Istanbul) in December 2019, the Istanbul Armenian community is again in crisis. The latest turn of events brought forth the unpleasant realities in the leadership of the Istanbul Armenian community, or the lack of it.

It all started on May 15, 2020 by the firing of two long-serving and popular principals of Esayan high school and Esayan middle school by the Director of the charitable foundation in charge of Esayan. Esayan School in Taksim, Istanbul was founded in 1895 by two brothers, Mgrditch and Hovhannes Esayan, and is one of 17 Armenian schools left in Turkey, all of them in Istanbul, compared to more than 800 schools in Ottoman Turkey prior to the 1915 Armenian Genocide. This historic and prestigious institution has a primary school for boys and girls, a middle and high school for girls only. Both my wife and I are graduates of Esayan primary school. Every Armenian school in Istanbul, as well as every Armenian church, is directed and controlled by an Armenian charitable foundation, accountable to the General Directorate of Charitable Foundations of Turkey.

And now, time to review the contents of Pandora's Box. Esayan School is controlled by the Holy Trinity (Surp Yerrortutyun) Charitable Foundation, which also controls the church of the same name. It is one of the wealthiest charitable foundations, with significant real estate assets, including 26 office buildings, numerous apartments and more significantly, the historic Tokatliyan Hotel which at present operates as an office building. The monthly revenue of the charitable foundation is estimated to be over a million dollars, even with the mismanagement and inability to utilize the real potential of the assets. Although the foundation is supposed to have a Board of Directors of at least seven members to be elected every four years, the Turkish government has not allowed elections for the past seven years and due to deaths and resignations, there are only two Directors left in control of this vast real estate empire, school and church, accountable to no one. And the senior of these two Directors, a lawyer by profession, unilaterally decided two weeks ago that the two dedicated and popular principals of Esayan School had to go.

The dismissal of these two ladies caused a huge uproar and massive protest within the Istanbul Armenian community, as well as among the thousands of Esayan alumni scattered around the world. The Toronto branch of Esayan Alumni, along with other alumni and community leaders, immediately called upon the Istanbul Patriarchate to use its moral and legal authority to intervene and to have the two Holy Trinity Foundation directors reconsider and revoke the dismissal decision, and if they resist, to ask for their resignation. The Patriarch did call upon the two directors, as well as the two principals to come together and discuss the issues face to face – but only after the government relaxes the covid virus related restrictions some time in June. It is disappointing that the Patriarchate did not consider to make use of technology by inviting both sides to an immediate video conference via Skype or Zoom, as time is of essence in this issue.

This incident also brought to the forefront the issue of elections for the Armenian charitable foundations and why the government prevents them for the past seven years. This situation is similar to the Patriarchate elections which were prevented from the time the previous Patriarch was incapacitated ten years ago until last year, during which an acting Patriarch ran the affairs of the patriarchate, in complete obedience to the government, perhaps not always in the best interests of the Armenian community and the church. The directors of the charitable foundations also run their affairs, individually and unilaterally, unaccountable and perhaps not in the best interests of the Armenian community overall. The wealthy charitable foundations with significant assets are supposed to assist the schools and churches of charitable foundations with limited revenues. But this rarely happens. The directors of most of the wealthy charitable foundations run their empires, hire or help their buddies, buy and sell assets without the advice of professionals, and of course, they like their chairs and are content with the lack of elections. Some foundations have become extremely wealthy in recent years and have received significant compensation as they have won several lawsuits against the government which had illegally expropriated assets in the past. These assets should be put to use for the good of the entire community, for schools, bursaries, social services and employment, by regularly elected, competent, responsible and accountable members of the community. Unfortunately, this is not the case at present, except for a few directors with good intentions.

The dismissal of the two Esayan principals triggered another scandal. The self-appointed spokesperson for the Istanbul Armenian community, the head of the Holy Saviour (Surp Prgitch) Hospital Foundation, took it upon himself to send a letter to the General Directorate of Charitable Foundations of Turkey, recommending that the control of Esayan School be taken away from the Holy Trinity Armenian Church Foundation and transferred to his Hospital Charitable Foundation - a completely unilateral and outrageous act, without consulting and discussing with anyone. Instead of advocating for the legal and democratic process of election of directors, he further suggested that appropriate people be 'appointed' to run the school. Although one should give the benefit of doubt and hope that this act has good intentions, it is difficult not to speculate about ulterior motives. This person has publicly suggested in the past that if Esayan School is losing money, it should be closed and merged with another high school named Getronagan (Central) School. This person is also on record stating that Getronagan School is run badly and 'is raising militants'. Getronagan School is situated at the commercial centre of the city, sitting on a very valuable plot of land. Perhaps merging the two schools on the Esayan School plot, and selling the Getronagan School property could be the end game in this person's mind. As in many other Armenian communities, schools are now deemed dispensable by charitable organizations if they lose money. Unfortunately this reality is further exacerbated in the Istanbul Armenian community, where there is no election and accountability of the charitable foundation directors, no unity and cooperation between the 'have' and 'have-not' charitable foundations, no moral and legal authority of the Patriarchate, and the result is the loss of historic institutions and valuable individuals.



Remnants of the Sword

Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 11 May 2020

The term 'remnants of the sword' or 'kilic artigi' in Turkish is quite widespread in Turkey. It describes the members of an enemy group that survived the mass killing by Turks, and now continues living among the Turks despite the threats, dangers and insults. This term is generally used to define the remaining minority Armenians, Assyrians or the Pontic Greeks after the genocides during the First World War. For example, the surviving Armenian orphans taken in by Turkish or Kurdish homes, were called 'remnants of the sword'. But recently, the term has been transformed into a more ominous meaning. Just like the word 'Armenian' which is used to swear or insult during an argument, as in 'Armenian bastard', or 'Seed of Armenian', Turks have recently started using the term 'remnant of the sword' to insult one another. A politician calls an opponent in Parliament a 'remnant of the sword' to imply that the opponent has family roots mixed with Armenians, or the President refers to Kurdish militants as 'terrorists originating from the remnants of the sword'.

For the Armenians and the hidden Armenians who are the descendants of the genocide survivors, the real 'remnants of the sword', it is truly painful to hear this term, for whatever reason it is used. As Garo Paylan, the Armenian MP in Turkish Parliament recently stated, the use of this word is like re-opening an old wound and bleeding again. Many Armenians in Turkey, Armenia or in Diaspora do not need any reminders, as the wound has never healed.

I would like to relate the story of a real 'remnant of the sword'. As the readers of my book 'Trauma and Resilience' remember, I left Turkey and came to Canada after I found out at age 17 that my own grandmother was a remnant of the sword, who survived the genocide after being deported from Bursa, an hour away from Istanbul, but gave birth to a baby boy along the way who died after ten days during her long and torturous trek toward the Syrian Desert. One of the first people I met in Canada was an elderly Armenian man who was well known for his cooking skills in Toronto and for

organizing the barbecues for church picnics, weddings and other large gatherings. He had a strange scar on top of his bald head, and one day he told me his story of 1915, while we were preparing the meat for another church picnic.

His family was from Tokat, interior of the Black Sea region of Turkey. He remembered he was about 5 years old when the Armenian women and children were ordered to collect their belongings to start the march toward destinations unknown. After a few hours walk from their village, they were stopped and surrounded by a large group of soldiers with bayonets and swords. His mother knew what was to come and immediately hid the little boy under the covers of her long skirt. Then the slaughter began. As his mother was getting stabbed by the bayonets or cut by a sword, the boy's head also received a cut. And her mother peed on the boy just as she gave her last breath. But the boy survived under his mother's skirt with the cut on his head.

Eighty years later, this old man, a remnant of the sword in the real literal sense, while preparing the barbecue meat under the hot sun, his sweat mixed with his tears told me, 'To this day, I smell my mother's pee every day'.

Imagine the trauma this boy suffered when growing up and then growing old.

Armenians will never forget and forgive the perpetrators of this crime. But the crime is not only what happened in 1915. The real crime is the continuing denial and lies about what happened in 1915. The official version of history in the Turkish textbooks, preached by brainwashed historians to a brainwashed population still defines the 1915 events as 'only relocating the Armenian revolutionaries and their families securely from the war zone in the eastern front to safer regions in the south'. Were places like Tokat or Bursa in the war zone? Were Armenian women in Tokat and Bursa revolutionaries? The deniers of the genocide are just as guilty as the perpetrators of the genocide. And we, the remnants of the sword, will never stop the struggle for truth and justice.

There are no comments yet.