BRANTFORD CEMETERY PLAQUE DEFERRED

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By Jirair Tutunjian, 26 May 2014

BRANTFORD, Ontario, Canada (May 26)—After more than a year of controversy, claims and counter-claims, extensive media coverage in Canada, Germany and in Turkey, and lobbying by opposing parties, the Brantford City Council decided today to defer to sometime in June its decision regarding the plaque intended to memorialize the immigrants from the Ottoman Empire who are buried at the Mount Hope Cemetery.

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The relevant portions are located at 60:00 - 94:00 and 123-137 marks
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Councilors heard the reaction from the two major opposing parties—the Alevis and the Muslims—to the most recent city hall proposal about the content (symbols and text) of the plaque. Suleyman Guven, an Alevi cleric and editor of the Kurdish Alevi "Yeni Hayat" weekly, represented the Alevi side. The Muslims were represented by Imam Mohammed Al-Farram of the Brantford Mosque. The proposed plaque would include the words "Al-Fatiha", the star and the crescent, and a Koranic quote in Arabic and in English, in addition to the names of the people buried in the cemetery.

The below includes quotes from Mr. Guven's oral presentation and extracts from his prepared text, which he could not read, because of the Mayor Chris Friel's objections. Since the mayor did not allow Mr. Guven to read his prepared speech, the Alevi representative gave copies of it to all the councilors. The hearing began in a tense atmosphere. Mr. Guven said the ban by the mayor was a violation of his freedom of expression. As a result his presentation was brief and sounded rushed.

The Alevi representative said a well-known Brantford researcher had determined, after years of study, that the people buried in the "Turkish Lot" of the cemetery were Alevis. So had a Turkish

professor teaching at a Turkish university, he said. The latter had come to her conclusion after she had "obtained the passport information" of the individuals buried in the plot.

"They had Alevi names. The majority came from the Kigi area of Bingol where Kurds and Armenians lived side by side for a long time," said Mr. Guven and added: "Some of the people buried here might be related to my ancestors. They come from the same area—Dersim—where I come from." He pointed out that those buried in the plot had their headstones facing east. "This is another proof of their Alevi identity. As believers in the sun, Alevis place their headstones eastward. Muslims are buried facing Mecca.

After listing a number of differences between the Alevi and Muslim faiths, Mr. Guven objected to the text and symbols of the proposed plaque. He said: "The words Al-Fatiha at the top of the script pertain to Sunni Islam; the star and crescent represents the Republic of Turkey; and the quote below them is from the Koran."

In his prepared speech Mr. Guven criticized the behind-the-scene machinations of the Turkish Embassy to erect a monument dedicated to the so-called Turks. He said that after the Turkish diplomats were criticized for politicizing the matter, they pulled back and proposed a plaque instead. "When their efforts backfired, they used the local mosque--which has nothing to do with this issue--as a stooge. The Turkish Embassy tried to trick the councilors and the City of Brantford by injecting Turkish Muslim words and symbols into the plaque."

In his prepared text, Mr. Guven said: "The Turkish Embassy, which has a hidden agenda, spread rumors that radical Armenians were behind the resistance to stop the inaccurately-worded monument and plaque."

The Alevi leader also criticized Mayor Friel for the latter's indifference. "Why did the mayor never bother getting in touch with the Alevi community of Ontario when he knew the Alevi links to the cemetery?" he asked in his prepared text. "Last August I wrote a letter to the mayor. However, he sidetracked and ignored our request while he was cozy with the Turkish side, the oppressors of our people."

In concluding his statement to the mayor and to the councilors, Mr. Guven said: "If you ignore the facts and the findings which I have mentioned, you will be siding with the oppressors of my people and be party to the discrimination of my people in Turkey and the assimilliationist policies of the Turkish Embassy. If the plaque contains misinformation, we will use every legal means to challenge that misinformed decision. Please respect our dead."

Imam Mohammed Al-Farram, a Palestinian Arab and a long-time Brantford resident, began and ended his speech with quotations from the Koran. He said: "One-hundred Turks and 400 Armenians were brought to Brantford at the turn of the 19th century. Some died and were buried in Brantford."

Mr. Al-Farram insisted that there was no Alevi religion. He said Alevis are Muslims, read the Koran

and have no priests. To underline his point, he added: "President Assad of Syria is Alawite. How could an Alawite be the head of a Muslim nation if Alawites were not Muslim?" Whether deliberately or because of lack of information, Mr. Al-Farram apparently saw no difference between the Syrian Alawites and the Alevi Kurds of Turkey and seemed to ignore the fact that a major reason for the Syrian War is the resentment among some Muslim Syrians for having a non-Muslim rule the country.

Mr. Al-Farram said: "There's no doubt the names of the buried are Muslim" and mentioned that he had been in consultation with the Turkish community regarding the controversy. Unlike Mr. Guven, Mr. Al-Farram talked far longer than his allotted 10-minutes. He was not told by the mayor to curtail his prolonged, and sometimes wandering, speech.

A councilor asked Mr. Guven whether he would approve if the plaque mentioned the Ottoman Empire. Mr. Guven said that the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey had massacred Alevis, and that he objected to any mention of the two states.

Following the two presentations, the councilors and the mayor discussed placing two gravestones—one for each religious group. Neither Mr. Guven nor Mr. Al-Farram objected. However, Mr. Guven said he couldn't speak on behalf of the Alevi community and that his community should decide the Alevi position.

When the councilors convene in June, they will hear the official Alevi and Muslim positions, and presumably decide how to memorialize the immigrants buried here a century ago.