# CEMAL PASHA'S GRANDSON SAYS GENOCIDE

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Harut Sassounian, Publisher, The California Courier, 7 April 2011

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Understandably, there was great tension in the air. The large hall was filled to capacity and many were turned away due to lack of room. The presence of armed policemen and security guards inside the hall was both reassuring and disturbing. Cemal confirmed that he was cautioned against coming to Los Angeles, but fortunately everything proceeded calmly. The most shocking thing that evening was not what Cemal said, but what another speaker, Dr. Pamela Steiner, the great granddaughter of Amb. Henry Morgenthau, did not say!

Kurken Berksanlar, Chairman of ABGU Asbeds, welcomed everyone to "an open-minded conversation." While admitting that some Armenians view with great suspicion Turks who acknowledge the Genocide, he believed that "progressive" Turks, who are speaking openly about the evens of 1915..., appear to be above and beyond the reach and control of today's Turkish government." Berksanlar then introduced the keynote speaker Hasan Cemal and the two discussants, Dr. Pamela Steiner, and Prof. Richard Hovannisian.

A columnist at Milliyet newspaper, Cemal immediately won over his skeptical audience by greeting them in Armenian -- "parev harkeli paregamner" -- and telling them: "I came here to open my heart and open my mind to you.... I know your pain, your grief of Genocide, your grief of Meds Yeghern." Ignoring Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code which bans the use of the term Armenian Genocide,

he courageously repeated those words several more times during his talk. He also condemned the Turkish government's denial of the Armenian Genocide, calling it "colluding in the crime!"

Cemal described his deeply moving 2008 visit to the Armenian Genocide Monument in Yerevan, where he laid three carnations in memory of his close friend, Hrant Dink, the Armenian journalist who was assassinated in Istanbul by Turkish extremists. While visiting Yerevan, he had a startling encounter with Armen Gevorkyan, grandson of the man who in 1922 assassinated his grandfather, Cemal Pasha.

Cemal described the progress made in Turkey during the past three decades on the recognition of the Armenian Genocide, going from total denialism to an apology campaign, restoration of Armenian churches, and holding academic conferences on this topic. He asked Armenians to come to Turkey to participate in the "recovery of memory." He urged them never to forget the past, without becoming its captives.

While Cemal's candid remarks left a good impression on the audience, Dr. Steiner turned off the attendees with her adamant and intentional refusal to use the word genocide. Instead, she used such typical Turkish denialist terminology as "tragedy," "suffering," and "events of 1915." As director of the Inter-Communal Trust-Building Project, she spoke about "possible steps towards building trust between Armenians and Turks." She stunned the audience by asking Armenians to acknowledge that "the Turkish people suffered horrendously during World War I … need and deserve acknowledgment for that!" As if that request was not outrageous enough, she went on to urge Armenians to "consider acknowledging Turkish suffering before they receive an acknowledgment for theirs!"

During the question and answer period, when I pointed out the irony of Cemal Pasha's grandson freely using the term Armenian Genocide, while the great granddaughter of Amb. Morgenthau would not, Dr. Steiner's response was inadequate. Her justification was that she was playing the role of a "facilitator," seeking "conciliation" between Armenians and Turks.

The final discussant, Prof. Hovannisian, in a stern voice, gave a polite, yet powerful response to the previous speakers. He told Hasan Cemal that the large Armenian audience had come not to listen to him as a Turkish journalist, but as the grandson of Cemal Pasha. He explained that understanding the Turkish perpetrators' mindset cannot in any way justify their actions. He cautioned everyone not to equate Armenian suffering resulting from intentional destruction with the suffering of Turks as a result of war. He emphasized that Armenians were seeking not only recognition, but, more importantly, restitution of their confiscated properties. He urged the Turkish government to return the hundreds of Armenian churches in Turkey to the Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul. Finally, in a direct allusion to Dr. Steiner, Prof. Hovannisian emphasized that "conciliation" required "acts of contrition." His remarks were greeted with a standing ovation.

I found Cemal to be both candid and brave. He could have easily avoided the use of the term

Armenian Genocide, maintaining that doing so could land him in jail. However, he made no excuses and used the genocide term several times. Considering his grandfather responsible for "the Great Catastrophe," he described today's Turkey as "a manic-depressive country!"

Although it is not easy to forget that Hasan Cemal is the grandson of one of the three masterminds of the Armenian Genocide, it would be wrong to hold children responsible for the sins of their parents. His position has dramatically evolved since his Boston appearance two years ago, when he avoided the term Armenian Genocide. I asked him privately at the end of his UCLA talk if he was not concerned that he could be taken to court for using the word genocide. Even though he said he did not think so, he found it important enough to mention my concern in a column he wrote in Milliyet upon his return to Istanbul.

The only sour note in Cemal's words that evening was his rejection of demands for the return of Armenian territories from Turkey. Nevertheless, it is not surprising to hear a Turk, no matter how tolerant, defend his country's territorial integrity. He did state, however, that the Turkish government should apologize to Armenians and pay compensation to them.

On the other hand, Dr. Steiner, as a Jewish-American and direct descendant of Amb. Morgenthau, cannot be excused for her persistent refusal to use the term genocide, despite her self-avowed good intentions. Anyone who does not acknowledge the truth of the Armenian Genocide loses the moral authority to play a constructive role in Armenian-Turkish relations. One cannot remain neutral between a victim and victimizer. She should heed the wise words of Holocaust survivor and Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel who stated: "Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim!"

As facilitator between the two communities, Dr. Steiner probably believes that she should not take sides. But telling the truth is not taking sides between Armenians and Turks, anymore than acknowledging the Holocaust is siding with Jews. Furthermore, it is not clear what exactly her role is as facilitator. Genocide is not a dispute that requires the services of a mediator. How can she reconcile two nations without the victimizer first making amends for what her own great grandfather called "The Murder of a Nation!"

Two days after her talk at UCLA, Dr. Steiner sent me a lengthy e-mail explaining further her role as facilitator and insisting that Amb. Morgenthau would have supported her work. I cannot pretend to know her great grandfather better than her, but being familiar with the Ambassador's humanitarian efforts during and after the Genocide, I have no doubt that he would have done everything possible to bring justice to Armenians, rather than remaining neutral between the perpetrators and their victims.