

FETHIYE ÇETIN'S PAEAN TO HRANT DINK

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Fethiye Çetin, Montreal-Toronto, 16-18 January 2015

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As a nine-year-old girl, when I first heard my grandmother's story about the 1915 disaster, the death marches, then the silence, the pain and the loneliness that followed her, she was about 70-years-old.

✘ After a while, I started taking notes with pen and paper, in order to record the events and names in her story. Nearly sixty years had passed after the terror that she experienced, but my grandmother still remembered very clearly her village, her house, all the names of her relatives including her grandmother, her grandfather, her cousins, even the name of the village official. Despite all the external attempts to make her forget, she remembered everything that she and her family lived through. It was as if she had kept repeating the story to herself for sixty years, in order not to forget. ✘

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When I started sharing her story within my circle of friends, I realized that almost everyone had some sort of memory or story linked to the Armenian Genocide.

For example, a friend told that they found a box of silver buttons in a secret compartment in the walls of their house, that her grandfather explained how all the houses in that neighborhood had previously belonged to Armenians, and how all the Armenians were brutally murdered and their possessions plundered. Another friend remembered a story about a piano in the stables. No matter at what age, traumatic stories resist the passage of years or the pressure to forget and not to remember.

History is full of attempts to forget the heavy load of the past or to restart after cleansing the pain of the bad events of the past. Is this ever possible?

We know that after the Peloponnese Wars there was a law passed prohibiting the remembrance of the painful events of the war. Or Cicero's statement at the Roman senate after Caesar was murdered, that all memories related to the murder must be left to infinite forgetfulness.

The official state version of history in Turkey is also subject to a similar policy of permanent amnesia regarding the 1915 events. A typical example is a statement given by Sevkettin Aydemir, the author of Mustafa Kemal's biography: 'I believe the fighting and settling of accounts between Turks and Armenians is a page of human history best to be forgotten. Which side was responsible? Who was guilty? I think it is better not to find out answers to these questions and forget these events forever.'

But unfortunately, despite all attempts, laws and pressures to make people forget these events forever, this policy cannot be implemented.

As Stefan Zweig said: "As long as the conscience remembers, no crime can be forgotten."

People do not forget what they learned or experienced. Even after a long period of silence, a single trigger, signal or memory is enough to start a process of struggle between remembering and forgetting, and memories long forgotten start emerging from the hidden depths of the brain.

The permanent amnesia policy does not work for the victims of history, nor for the perpetrators of the crimes. As the victims start demanding truth and justice, the walls of the amnesia policy begin to crack and break down, and no matter how much effort to keep the walls intact, the truth finally emerges.

This is because mankind never learns how to forget, as Nietzsche has said. No matter how much he tries to run forward and away from the past, the memories chained to him, come along with him.

On the other hand, the state which forces the individuals to forget the past, keeps all the information, records, documents about the past under its control, in locked safes and rooms, in places beyond the reach of the public, in order to bring them out and use them as discriminatory policies against the minorities, the 'sword leftovers', the ones defined as 'others'. In other words, in one hand the state uses every means to make people forget the past, but on the other hand the state never forgets the past and keeps reminding the people about the differences in the minorities. As a result, the forced amnesia policy becomes converted to a policy of continuous remembering.

As an example, my uncle, whose mother was an Islamicized Armenian, was refused admission to the military school. Author Vedat Turkali explains that before any student is admitted to the military school, all his family past is researched to make sure he comes from Turkish heritage. Similarly, all identification cards and property deeds prior to the founding of the Republic are kept in secret archives.

With the emergence in recent years of many stories about the past, with biographies, books, films, documentaries, panels and conferences, one can conclude that the monopoly of the state in controlling the past has come to an end.

But, one hundred years of denial, falsification, persecution and hatred policies and the resulting fear and conditioning, still prevent people from discussing the past in a calm and rational manner.

Because of the state driven hatred and enmity against Armenians, the discussions about 1915 are still a game of numbers and contradictory versions, preventing people from seeing the human aspects of the problem.

Erdogan's 2014 statement which equates the pain of all peoples during the 1915 events, is an attempt to reduce the significance of the Armenian Genocide. These politics cause heavy wounds among the victims. Instead, attempts must be made for dialogue and empathy, based on different memories.

Local memories have started a revival because the great crime was witnessed by all local people. Despite the attempts to wipe out traces of the past, it is impossible for the local memories to forget.

The original names of the villages and cities where we lived, the meanings of these names, the stories told by our grandparents, artifacts, neighbors, our cooking, our family histories all lead us to remember a different history than the state version.

Time does not eliminate the burden; in fact, it makes it heavier. Our conscience needs to be cleansed, our spirit needs to be healed. Remembering and facing the past is now a must for the Turkish people.

Secrecy, silence, forced amnesia and denial are the first line of defense for the perpetrator. The criminal always wants the victim and the outside observer to remain silent. Truth and justice are deadly fears of the perpetrator. The perpetrator attempts to hide the truth with all its might,

mechanisms and institutions. This is why memory is the enemy of the government.

Kundera says: 'People's struggle against the government is same as memory's struggle against forgetting'.

Now, it is no longer possible to fit the long spear in the sheath. Memory keeps on resisting against forced amnesia.

In my country the most important name of this resisting force is Hrant Dink.

Because Hrant Dink, with his stand, kept on reminding them their past full of crimes, the past which they desperately tried to make people forget.

Because Hrant Dink not only kept reminding them of the truth about the past, but everyone that he touched with his words, his readers, his listeners, his followers, people in the street, everyone believed him.

They murdered Hrant Dink, because he stood right where the state had drawn the red lines, the taboos that it feared.

Because Hrant Dink, despite all the pressure, rose against the regime by attempting to promote democratic rules and regulations. It was never an acceptable thing to have an Armenian come out with messages of 'democracy, justice, truth'.

And they attacked him even when they couldn't attack others.

When they realized their efforts to convince the outside world was useless about the 1915 denial of the Armenian Genocide, they attacked Hrant Dink within Turkey, using an organization called 'Struggle Against Alleged Genocide Claims'. They directed all their anger against Hrant Dink, they made him the target as if in a psychological warfare against the 'enemy'.

In those days, there was a trend toward the European Union. They created an imaginary threat of 'missionaries' in order to fight against the EU and the West. Again, they used Hrant Dink as the target of this new fight against a virtual enemy.

Hrant Dink was also the main target of both the government and opposition forces which were in a deadly struggle in those days for control of the government. The biggest prize was the President's office and the government was in danger of losing it, resulting in a no holds barred war.

Hrant Dink became the only visible target for the historical hatred against Armenians, and he stood in the cross-hairs of both opposition and government forces.

If what's at stake is the life of an Armenian, it made no difference for the warring sides equally biased against Armenians. Hrant Dink was not considered worthy enough to receive police protection. The warring sides now found a common target in Hrant and hatred for Armenians.

The hatred for Armenians also became quite apparent in all the trials and investigations following the murder, as the perpetrator of the crime, the state, ensured that all the state officials would be exempt from any investigation. During these eight years since the murder, the competing forces in the government still use the murder as war material against each other.

In a society without memory, violent incidents and injustices are treated as current, ordinary problems. But the source of injustice, the codes and signals of violence are hidden in the Armenian Genocide, in the state organization based on the denial and hiding of the Armenian Genocide. The murder of Hrant Dink is clear evidence enabling us to see the overall picture about this state organization.

They say 'you can't have tyranny and cruelty without spectators'. The tyrants in Turkey, just like in other countries, gain strength from the spectators, from their increasing numbers. With tacit approval of the spectators, the 'crime' stops being a crime. The real perpetrators were not called into court, the crime was left unpunished.

Murat Belge said in an article: 'If a society just watches a crime without any interference, it does become part of the crime in a way. Moreover, life does not allow us to just watch without interfering.'

The great crime that took place in this land hundred years ago was also watched by a society, which also became partners in crime. In the end, the crime perpetrated by the criminals stopped being crime in the eyes of the society; that is, it became acceptable and legitimate. It became customary. We now have an acceptable criminality in society and the perpetrator state is gaining strength from it.

I am one of the closest witnesses of Hrant Dink's murder. I was with him in the court cases throughout the long preparation stage of the murder. My evidence is based on my eyewitness account.

I presented and continue presenting to the judiciary and prosecution all I know, I see, I think about this murder. But unfortunately all my efforts so far has ended up in countless binders or in notes attached to desk calendars. They were not included in formal prosecution inquiries, evidence that I pointed out was not investigated, suspects that I pointed out were not questioned.

The history of this country is full of cases where criminals are not tried, even if tried are not punished, where the perpetrators do everything possible to make the society forget the crime. Our history has countless political assassinations and unsolved murders.

I acted as Hrant Dink's lawyer before his murder, and I am his family's lawyer after the murder. Obviously I do not possess the force and resources of the prosecutor to uncover the real planners and perpetrators of this murder. I don't have intelligence organizations at my control either, which could provide me with clues and information. I base my case only on what I witness, and what I see in the trial documents.

Yes, our history is full of shameful events, unaccounted crimes, unsolved murders. We inherited this shame from the past but we are responsible not to pass it on to future generations.

I want to pledge with you as witness that I will try to bring to account all the shame and present a clean future to the next generations.

My promise is a promise to Hrant, that I will continue to seek truth and justice, to the utmost of my abilities and until the end of my life.

Thank you.

