HASAN CEMAL AT DINK COMMEMORATION IN TORONTO

Posted on January 21, 2014 by Keghart



Category: Opinions

By Raffi Bedrosyan, Toronto, 22 January 2014

On January 19, 2014 the Toronto Armenian community gathered together to commemorate the seventh anniversary of the assassination of Hrant Dink. More than 500 people filled the Armenian General Benevolent Union Centre to capacity, with standing room only. The keynote speaker was renowned and influential Turkish journalist and author Hasan Cemal, who also happens to be the grandson of Cemal Pasha, one of the three leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) (*İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyeti*), which planned and perpetrated the Armenian Genocide in 1915.

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Migirdic Migirdicyan was the master of ceremonies of the event. After a beautiful rendition of Sari Aghchig and Cilicia songs by young soprano Lynn Anoush Isnar, one of Hrant's friends, Raffi Bedrosyan introduced Hasan Cemal. Bedrosyan explained that Hasan Cemal worked for many years as the Editor-in-Chief of the Cumhuriyet daily until 1992, the official mouthpiece of the Kemalist state and the defender of the denialist official version of history related to the 1915 events. Hasan Cemal then moved on to Sabah newspaper as editor until 1998, the largest circulation newspaper at that time, and then to Milliyet until March 2013, when he had to resign under pressure from Prime Minister Erdogan for criticizing the anti-democratic state of the government. At present, he writes for the independent web portal t24.com, with still the highest readership for his articles.

In recent years, Hasan Cemal got influenced by the writings of journalist Hrant Dink and historian Taner Akcam, and started questioning the veracity of the state version of history. As a result, he went through a gradual intellectual transformation, until he reached the conclusion that those events were indeed a genocide. In 2008, the year after Hrant Dink was assassinated, he went to Armenia and visited the Genocide Memorial, placing flowers there for Hrant and all the past genocide victims, sharing their pain. In 2012, he wrote a book titled ***1915: Armenian Genocide*** in Turkish, which became a bestseller for months, explaining his personal evolution, as well as openly acknowledging and apologizing for the genocide.

In his moving speech, Hasan Cemal stressed the need to separate personal family history from general history. He gave examples as to how he had to distinguish between his grandfather's actions versus his stand against the genocide, and his dramatic meeting in Yerevan with the grandson of one of the planners of Cemal Pasha's assassination in Tbilisi in 1922. Hasan Cemal also explained the

long journey he had to go through from having a 'captive' mind, based on the state version of history, to an 'emancipated' or 'liberated' mind, after seeking and finding the facts and truth about the 1915 events. He stated that a small but fast increasing segment of the Turkish civil society has already started to acknowledge the truth about the genocide and urged the Turkish state also to face its past and acknowledge and apologize for the 1915 events.

(L-R) Shirinian, Cemal, Bedrosyan, Sarkissian & Migirdicyan

Following the speech, there was a short discussion session among Hasan Cemal and two Zoryan Institute representatives, president Kurken Sarkissian and Executive Director George Shirinian, moderated by Raffi Bedrosyan, about the significance of building a 'common body of knowledge' regarding the historic facts of 1915, in order to be able to have meaningful and constructive dialogue toward reconciliation between Turks and Armenians.

The Toronto commemoration was another proof that Hrant Dink's legacy lives on and gains more momentum every year, both within Turkey and in all four corners of the world, with demands of truth and justice to prevail for 1.5 million Armenians plus one, for Hrant Dink himself.