ISRAEL CAN NO LONGER IGNORE THE FIRST HOLOCAUST

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By Robert Fisk, The Independent, January 30, 2010

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George Hintlian, historian and prominent member of Jerusalem's 2,000-strong Armenian community in Jerusalem, pointed out the posters a few metres from the 1,500-year old Armenian monastery. They advertised Armenia's 24 April commemorations. All but one had been defaced, torn from the ancient walls or, in at least one case, spraypainted with graffiti in Hebrew.

"Maybe they don't like it that there was another genocide," George told me. "These are things we can't explain." More than 70 members of George's family were murdered in the butchery and death marches of 1915 - when German officers witnessed the system of executions, rail-car deportations to cholera camps and asphyxiation by smoke in caves - the world's first "gas" chambers. One witness, the German vice-consul in Erzurum, Max von Scheubner-Richter, ended up as one of Hitler's closest friends and advisers. It's not as if there's no connection between the first and second Holocausts.

But the times, they are a-changing. For ever since Turkey began shouting about Israel's slaughter of Palestinians in Gaza a year ago, prominent Israeli figures have suddenly rediscovered the Armenian genocide. Who are the Turks to talk about mass murder? Has anyone forgotten 1915? For George and his compatriots - there are in all 10,000 Armenians in Israel and the occupied West Bank, 4,000 of them holding Israeli passports - they had indeed been forgotten until the Gaza war. "In 1982, the Armenians were left out of a Holocaust conference in Jerusalem," he said. "For three decades, no documentary on the Armenian genocide could be shown on Israeli television because it would offend the Turks. Then suddenly last year, important Israelis demanded that a documentary be

shown. Thirty Knesset members supported us. We always had Yossi Sarid of Peace Now but now we've got right-wing Israelis."

Maariv and Yediot Ahronot began to mention the Armenian genocide and George Hintlian turned up on Israeli television with Danny Ayalon - the foreign office minister who humiliated the Turkish ambassador by forcing him to sit on a sofa below him - and Knesset speaker Reuven Rivlin who said that Israel should commemorate the Armenian genocide "every year". The Israeli press now calls the Armenian genocide a "Shoah" - the same word all Israelis use for the Jewish Holocaust. As George put it with withering accuracy: "We have been upgraded!!!"

This piece of brash hypocrisy has not gone unnoticed by Yossi Sarid who has described how, a few months after Recep Tayyip Erdogan denounced the Gaza war, "an important Israeli personality telephoned me and said the following: 'Now you have to hit back at the Turks, to denounce them for the crimes they committed against the Armenians You, Yossi, have the right to do so...'" Sarid was appalled. "I was filled with revulsion and my soul wanted to puke," he wrote in Haaretz. "The person who telephoned me was an example of the ugly Israeli who had disgracefully been at the forefront of those who denied the Armenian Holocaust." So now "new tunes" - Sarid's phrase - are being heard in Jerusalem: "The Turks are the last ones who have the right to teach us ethics."

The bright side to this anguished debate is that one of Israel's top Holocaust experts bravely insisted - to the fury of then-foreign minister (now president) Shimon Peres - that the Armenian massacres were undoubtedly a genocide. Tens of thousands of Israelis have always believed the same; several hundred are expected to turn up at the Armenian commemoration on 24 April, and most Israelis refer to the Armenian genocide as a "Shoah" rather than the tame "massacres" hitherto favoured by the political elite.

Yet the most extraordinary irony of all occurred when the Armenian and Turkish governments last year agreed to reopen diplomatic relations and consign the Armenian Holocaust to a joint academic enquiry which would decide "if" there had been a genocide. As Israeli Professor Yair Oron of the Open University of Israel said, "I am afraid that countries will now hesitate to recognise the (Armenian) genocide. They will say: 'Why should we grant recognition if the Armenians yielded?' Recognition of the Armenian genocide is a paramount moral and educational act. We in Israel are obliged to recognise it." And American-Armenian UCLA Professor Richard Hovannisian asked: "Would the Jewish people be willing to forgo the memory of the Holocaust for the sake of good relations with Germany, if Germany were to make that demand?" George Hintlian described the Armenian-Turkish agreement - which in fact may not now be ratified by either side - as "like an earthquake".

We walked together in the cold afternoon through the darkened interior of the great Armenian monastery of Jerusalem with its icons and candles. George opened a cabinet to reveal a hidden staircase up which priests would creep for a secret week when invaders passed through Jerusalem.

In this dank, pious place, Ronald Henry Amhurst Storrs, governor of British Mandate Jerusalem, would often sit to ponder what he called "the glory and the misery of a people".

Miserable it has been for thousands of Armenians here. Up to 15,000 lived in Palestine until 1948, many of them survivors of the first Holocaust. But 10,000 of these Armenians shared the same fate as the Palestinian Arabs, fleeing or driven from their homes by the army of the new Israeli state. Most lost their businesses in Haifa and Jaffa, many of them seeking refuge - for the second time - in Jerusalem. A few set out for Cyprus where they were dispossessed for the third time by the 1974 Turkish invasion. As George put it bleakly, "Today, 6,000 Armenians are residents of Jerusalem and the West Bank. They cannot travel and they are counted as Armenian Palestinians. For Israeli bureaucracy, they are Palestinians."

George himself is the son of Garbis Hintlian who, as a 17-year-old, survived the death march from his home at Talas in Cappadocia. "We lost my uncle - my grandfather was axed to death in front of him." After the 1918 armistice, he worked for the British, carrying files of evidence to the initial (but quickly abandoned) Constantinople trials of Turkish war criminals. To no avail.

And glory be, if the tables haven't changed again! Turkey and Israel have made up and become good friends again. Yossi Sarid anticipated this. "Let us assume that Turkey will renew its ties with Israel. Then what? What then? Will we also renew our contribution to the denial of the Armenian Holocaust?"