VOX POPULI—VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

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By Jirair Tutunjian, 23 July 2012

In the past century, the conversation between Armenians and Turks has been monopolized by the governments of the two neighboring Asia Minor countries, their media, including that of the Armenian Diaspora, and the formal organizations representing the two nations. There has been little recorded exchange between “ordinary” Armenians and Turks. Partly to rectify the situation, the Institute for International Cooperation of the German Adult Education Association, in partnership with Anadolu Kulture and the Armenian Centre for Ethnological Studies ("Hazarashen") and the financial support of the German Foreign Office, launched (2009) a project titled Adult Education and Oral History: Contributing to Armenian-Turkish Reconciliation.

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In Armenia, an Armenian-Turkish workshop was held on oral history titled “History and Identity—Building Bridges for Dialogue and Understanding.” Civil society representatives, historians, anthropologists and oral historians from both countries participated in the workshop. One of the major outcomes of the project was to interview “ordinary” Armenians and Turks in Turkey and Armenians in Armenia to determine their perspectives on the Genocide of Armenians and to gauge their views on the prolonged conflict between the two nations. The interviews were published in a handsome 178-page, illustrated volume titled "Speaking to One Another". The first part of the book (“Wish they hadn’t left: the Burden of Armenian Memory in Turkey”) was compiled by Prof. Leyla Neyzi of the Sabanci University in Istanbul. Prof. Hranush Kharatyan-Araqelyan, the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Armenian Academy of Sciences in Yerevan, tackled the second part of the book—“Whom to Forgive? What to Forgive?” The professors also directed the oral history interviews in their respective countries. Below are abridged interviews of some of the Armenians and Turks who talk of their experiences, the experiences of their parents and grandparents, and voice their opinions on the ongoing hostilities.

KAMIL from Aksehir, went to school (the early ‘60s) in a building which was an Armenian school before the Genocide: “You know the benches used in the churches for prayer, we studied on them. Of course that was a mystery to us. They were saying, ‘Here is a kilise … There was a big organ in the

basement. We were all curious about it… the teachers used to warn us not to touch it. But we knew nothing about the organ being played in church. We weren't told any of this, this was a secret. Like something hidden."

ARAM, an Istanbul doctor, has been married twice, both times to Turks. During his childhood, he says, "These subjects were taboo. They were not spoken of at home. They said we were wealthy. They had hidden cans filled with gold which remained there , and went through difficult times." He points out that speaking about the past has only become possible in recent years. "We never investigated our Armenian side. Doing these kinds of things was considered nationalist when we were growing up. Circumstances were more dangerous and difficult."

He remembers several of his father's anecdotes which illustrate the difficulties of being an Armenian national sportsman in Turkey. "When we won a match the newspaper would write, 'Our sportsmen won the match', but if we lost, they wrote, 'Our sportsmen of Armenian origin lost the match.'"

While working in Anatolia Aram was surprised when he was approached by Armenian converts. "There was a man called Mehmet the Kurd. He showed great interest in me. One day he brought a copper tray; there was Armenian writing on the bottom. I found out that his mother was Armenian."

ADIL, from Diyarbakir, remembers his great grandmother, Sosi, who was an Armenian. When she was thirteen years old, "They seized her, as was done many times in many places," he says. She lost her whole family in 1915. Adil's great-grandfather "bought" her from a villager who had hidden her in a basket, and married her, although he was twenty years older. Adil says Sosi "was a very sweet woman, a devout Muslim. She prayed all the time and didn't interfere with anything." Adil also remembers her stories: "It was so affecting and painful for a child. She'd cry and I would get upset."

NECMI, 70, retired teacher from Divrigi, says: "It's a pity what happened to the Armenians in our land… Everybody accepted that provocations originated from Armenian organizations and that hostility came from other sources. It happened, and they were armed…"

SELIN. 24-year-old Armenian woman from Istanbul, says, "My grandmother's mother is from Van. My maternal great grandfather wasn't mentally stable because he was witness to terrible events. He found his own father's corpse in a sack in the church. After that he lost his ability to speak. All family members have some kind of problem. All these things that have to do with being Armenian affect me. My mother's way of denying her own existence is passed on to me."

Selin's grandfather grew up selling trinkets on the streets. His eventual success as a trader was repeatedly thwarted by actions against non-Muslims. During World War II, he was drafted into units made up exclusively of non-Muslims. They were subjected to the notorious wealth tax and went into debt. In September 1955 he was forced to defend his home against marauders.

MEHMET, 62, from Igdir, on the slopes of Mount Ararat. "The Armenians that my father used to describe were people who were armed, aggressive, hostile, murderous… We cannot erase what

happened in the past. In fact, the present generation is not responsible for the events of the past. They just inherited that history…"

AVETIS , Armenia. He remembers his father telling him that his Turkish friend helped him and his brother. He describes some Turkish civilians as "more humane, more benevolent, amicable and intimate. When his father and brothers were hiding in the mountains, their Turkish friends would come at night and bring them water and food."

ARPIK, Armenia. "My mother in law had a daughter, her name was Satik. When a Turk tried to take her away she was 14 years old, a small girl, the big guy was dragging her, mother was resisting, saying don't touch her, she is too small, have pity on her. This girl was trembling from fear, fell down, got up and couldn't move. She was so frightened that she died after a week. We always visited to the cemetery to put some flowers. But the old woman would say: "Thanks great God that my baby died pure, died innocent, no Turk made use of her."

The above and scores of wide-ranging interviews took place between October 2009 and February 2010. Individuals in Turkey and Armenia from diverse backgrounds and regions were interviewed to record how they remembered and reconstructed the recent history of Armenians and Turks. One of the aims of the project was to investigate post memory: how did individuals recount events they themselves did not experience but which were transmitted to them by older generations.

Readers interested in obtaining the book should contact Prof. Leyla Neyzi, Sabanci University, 34956 Orhan/Tuzla, Istanbul, Turkey or click on Speaking to One Another.