

Hrant Dink : I am the one who understands his nation's pains and bears that burden

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Alin Ozinian : "It was in the middle of October, 2006. We arranged to meet with Hrant Dink at his office in the "Agos" newspaper. I have taken interviews on the theme "Mental and spiritual atmosphere in Turkey about the Armenian Problem" with 30 Turkish academicians, journalists, politicians and intellectuals. Hrant got me acquainted with many of them. Now it was his turn to answer the questions.

It was warm atmosphere at the office and we easily started the talk. Sometimes we switched off the recorder during the friendly talk and he expressed his worries. I did not take them serious but the stupid scenery comes true just two months later. After the interview both of us was sure we did a real contribution for the existing situation: Me with my questions and he with his responds. We were quite happy.

Last time I talk to Hrant on 16 January 2007 when I was in Yerevan. I wanted some points of view to realize the project into a book. The talk was short. He said to me, "Come to Istanbul, we will talk face to face". I went to Istanbul for many times after our talk but we never talked face to face."

Will you tell me how, why and whose idea was to found the "Agos"?

The foundation of the newspaper was a difficult task as it was decided to publish the "Agos" according to the needs of Turkey's Armenian community. But the "Agos" was published contrary to some negative reactions. Up to then some questions were raised: it was not enough in the community to publish only in Armenian, as the majority of people came from Anatolia and they were Turkish speaking. There was a serious lack of information in the community as people can not read the Armenian press. And then enclosed society itself causes difficulties, it needed to get accustomed to. We had to struggle. The Turkish society accepted the Armenian community in other way. The word Armenian was considered to be an abuse; the Turks connected the Armenians with the Kurdish Worker Party (PKK) or with ASALA. There was a great anxiety and trouble in the community when the Karabagh problem was discussed in Turkey.

We lived like a worm. We heard what was on TV but could do nothing. We apposed, cried, told that all these were lie but could not speak loudly. We need to break the wall, it was necessary. One day the Patriarch Ghazanchyan invited us and told that there was a photo of an Armenian priest and Abdullah Odjolan in the "Sabah" newspaper and there was written under the photo "Here is the fact of Armenian and PKK collaboration". Then His Holiness stated that it was a lie, the priest was not an Armenian. He asked me and my friends who were with me at that time what we thought about all that. I expressed my point of view and suggested that it'll be meaningful if we invite a press- conference. It was a brave action, all the local and international press came and it was a great success. The impression was indescribable. After the meeting I suggested that it was nonsense to invite a conference on every occasion, we had to take definite steps. And I suggested publishing a newspaper.

We were running it with my friends. Later they left and I was the one to run it. By using the newspaper we also wanted to create an intellectual cuisine youth to grow sociologists and intellectuals.

What problems did you come across during foundation and after it?

The first problem was to subdue the community conservatism. We felt anti-sympathy by local Armenian press. There were people who thought we would work for months or in the best case for a year but it is 10 years that we have been working. Some people thought it was a regress to be published in Turkish. But we tried to do a good thing, by using the Turkish language for the community. I am sure they have already been persuaded.

When you founded the newspaper did you think it would be better for Turks to read the press and get some news about the Armenian community?

Our main objective for this society was to be a window to a large society. I think this is our success: the two societies started to penetrate into each other. We managed to discuss our own problems equal to Turkey's problems. We think that only through Turkey's democratization it was possible to solve the problems. Soon the community also started to show interest towards the main problems of society. The Armenian society together with the "Agos" struggled braver for its identity; felt the patronage started not to fear.

Will you tell about the peculiarities of being an editor, publishing a newspaper especially for a minority in Turkey? Please introduce us your viewpoints on freedom of the press in Turkey.

There is no special difficulty in publishing a newspaper for the minority. If you are not an editor with principle, if you do not have a certain political motivate, if you are interested more often in illustrated news then you have no professional difficulties. But if you are a journalist of certain ideas, sure you will have difficulties. Recently we have had some common difficulties connected with freedom of the press, in accordance with Turkey's criminal new code and the Press law there is some control over us. We also suffered: the newspaper was confiscated for several times. I think we get more than we deserve and the only reason is our attitude toward the Armenian problem. I am sure this is the reason but we have not repudiated yet, aside we will go on.

Let's talk on European Union role for Turkey. Is it necessary for Turkey to become a member of EU?

This is an irrevocable process for Turkey. It is necessary to understand Turkey's reason to enter EU it is not a simple desire. The real reason is the fear. It's the reason why this process moves so slowly. Why Turkey fears? It is the fear of instability and fear is mutual. Because of this fear this process is continuing and there is no way to go back.

If military in Turkey definitely had been rejected entering EU, the process will not come to this level. If we do not become a member of EU, one day we will also have to leave the NATO. The process goes so slowly because of the reason that there is no great desire to become a member of EU. I do not think it will be possible to stop the process. We may slow it, sometimes freeze it, but can not cancel it.

If we observe the history of the state there are three important periods influencing into Turkey's interact process. The first was Cold war period when the country had some problems with leftist movements and abolished them. The second period was when clerical forces came into office in Iran. Islamists of Turkey demanded their participation in country's administration and today they came into power. The third period is EU membership process and so far nothing had influenced Turkey so much. The process left no group homogeneous in Turkey. Today, there are powers among soldiers, bureaucrats, academicians and media who speak against EU.

What is the greatest problem in the process of Turkey's Europeanization and modernization?

Opposing reactions coming from the lower class by the upper class. The laws of the upper class. These are

the first problems. The second great obstacle is fear of the upper class. Turkey occupies less area unlike the Ottoman Empire, this is the reason of not to lose more. This can be also called "a syndrome of Sevres". Every change causes fear and doubt in Turkey. This is the reason why the changes in Turkey moves so slowly.

Turkey is both a crossroad and a border between West and East. I think Malatia is the border in Turkey. East and West of Malatia are quite different worlds.

In effect Turkey is a country of strategic importance but depends at the same time on East and West. Depending on the situation it will be injustice to wait quick adaptation from Turkey. One of the greatest reasons that changes do not occur easily is the new building built in Turkey which is the upper identity created and was obliged to whole society. That's why they are afraid to get to know their real history. Every other historic comment has an effect of an earthquake for the identity. This earthquake is also a threat for Europe. The identity may pull down but over whom this is uncertain...

May reformations take place in the sphere of democracy and human rights in the process of corresponding EU demands?

I have no doubt but it is a difficult process. Laws may be passed but while putting them into forces there will be opponents... Change of thinking is necessary, democracy will sufficiently change the way of thinking. The more the way of thinking is changed the quicker democratization will be.

However trouble of people in some situations is observable, For instance, freedom of thought is considered to be high treason (Turkey's criminal code, article 301), and freedom of religion, conscience (head scarf) may be accepted as regress. What is the reason? In effect are people ready for those reformas?

Today people are speaking about the raise of the nationalism but I do not believe that nationalism increases but it is being increased by some people. It became more obvious in the last two years. Those people do their best to model coming elections in Turkey.

They make plans to throw down the party "Justice and Development". However they have no reason neither economic, nor democratic. We are only to inspire nationalists and it is done everywhere at funerals of martyrs, against EU or while welcoming the Pope. I think the whole pain of those responses is the coming elections. They do not want to give sits to the Islamists in the government. We will see what will happen...

Do you agree that there are differences in Turkey based on ethnic roots? Can you speak about reasons provoking it and consequences following it?

As for ethnic roots, no doubt there are various attitudes. A simple example, today not only Muslims but also Christians, Armenians should have been in main headquarters, military powers, police, various official government offices and ministries. The main reason provoking it is security. Turkey has evaluated the contest of minorities in conception and takes it as a matter of security. I say facts, there are mathematical data. Out of 300000 Armenians at the Lausanne period today 60000 is left and the Turkish population is increased from 13 million up to 70 million. When one increases how it happens that the other is decreased? It was necessary to decrease the number of minorities.

Some crucial points appeared, for instance the law for property tax, September 6, 1955 but what happened is already past. Besides, the Armenians for being safe and sound left Turkey because of economic and moral problems.

There is one more fact as well. You will not find anything connected with minorities especially the Armenians in any textbooks. There are facts on minorities only in the textbook of the National Security. In the elementary school there is not even a sentence like "Ali gives the ball to Hakob"; Ali will always give it to Veli. When we observe them we are nowhere. Only in the textbooks of National Security you may find the word "Armenians" which will take place in the unit of unprofitable groups which play bad tricks with Turkey.

How can you estimate relationship between Turkey and Armenia?

We may speak about non-existing relationships. I do not see any relationship after Armenia gained its independence. First the USA attempted to make some steps then EU but in vain. Desire exists but it is very weak. Turkey has not yet got accustomed to the thought that Armenia is an independent country in the Caucasus. There is a state, a neighbor, Turkey should comprehend this and start relationship. When state policy fails public policy takes its place. There are some attempts to establish non-governmental relationship from to sides, but they are very weak, very few.

What do you think the 1915 events should be called?

I have no doubt. It was genocide.

What do you think of diplomatic relations without preconditions suggested by Armenia and the committee of historians proposed by Turkey?

I do not think Turkey's attitude an honest one. The Armenian side is more sincerely.

Why? Do you have any doubts that the committee of historians will be of any use?

Yes, everybody thinks that the committee of historians will be of no use. Policy like always will go on without relations and results. This is the way which Turkey loves: no relations. I think Azerbaijan also obliges such policy to Turkey. The Armenian side is more reasonable and desirous.

What is your opinion about the third state to interfere the problem and bills on genocide accepted in parliaments?

My point of view in these bills may be considered a very romantic one, but I have not denied it. I think also the world like Turkey takes double-faced position in the process of accepting the Armenian genocide. The world is aware of the reality for a long time; they had their role and influence on those times. Nowadays France accepts it after decades. It is not like moral attitude, because the case is used as trump card in relations with Turkey. It is very painful for me as an Armenian when my tragedy is used as political trump card on international arenas. I can not stand it, I oppose against it. I am indifferent towards third states. I think the problem should be solved between Turkey and Armenia. But it should be solved not through punishing bills but morality. We do not need punishing bills in morality, our conscience is enough. I believe that these two states may overcome but I do not want to predict anything.

Do you divide Armenians between those who live in Armenia, in abroad and in Turkey, while speaking about the Armenian question?

Not only in connection with that matter but in general I think so. Turkey is a far and irresistible state for Diaspora but for Armenia it is a neighboring state and keeps Armenia independence. For the Armenians living in Turkey, Turkey is their motherland. Though I say such things I do not want to separate Armenians and accept the Turkish point of view. Turkey should establish good relations with every state. But these two states should come into conclusion and solve the problem. I do not think that Armenians living in Turkey must be involved in the talks as they are citizens of Turkey.

As a citizen of Turkey are you worried about the Armenian-Turkish closed border? What is your estimation on Turkey's policy towards Armenia that accepts Azerbaijan's problems as its own, and sets preconditions in the relations with Armenia?

During the Demirel's government good relations were established between Turkey and Azerbaijan. Turkey attempts to make relations with Armenia taking into account the Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. Frankly saying Turkey does not want to annoy Azerbaijan negotiating with Armenia. Azerbaijan does not allow Turkey to negotiate with Armenia using the Karabagh problem.

Any nationalistic power will solve this problem in anti-Azerbaijani way. Turkey also takes this side and

does not consider Armenia as its neighboring country. First Turkey exterminated the Armenian question, but as Armenia gained its independence the question again resurrected. Turkey suddenly saw a phantom and the same question raised how to do with Armenia. Turkey was in a desperate situation but the Karabagh problem emerged and clung to it with its four hands, rejoiced it and ran for help. Turkey thought that it would take a long time. This is the continuation of policy...

According to you is the Republic of Turkey the continuer of the Ottoman Empire in the history...

I do not expect apology or responsibility from anybody. I am the one who understands his nation's pains and bears that burden. I do not think of financial compensation or returning of lands. For me it is important to repair relations broken in the past, to know who and what circumstances played role. European states may also have a positive effect, compensate their guilt and try to soften the disagreement founding economical and cultural advantageous platforms to make the two states become closer.

May we state the role of the "Ittihat ve Terraki" is great in this matter?

Not only one group is in charge, there were assistants who promoted and closed their eyes on it. Today, also existing people who are reluctant that reality may come into world. If you seek responsibility there are many of them, each one has its share but I am not the one to remind of this. Presumably it sounds very romantic but every one should admit his guilt.

Let's try to analyze what are the main problems of the two states?

There are disappointments, unwillingness; enmity and fear...

Today some new fears exist. The Armenians also fear we need to pay attention to them. The Armenians are subdued between Azerbaijan and Turkey. There are two states suppressing from right and left. Fear and insecurity is an important handicap it needs to be inoculated.

We need to explain fairly that Turkey may be a friend of Armenia. The Armenian side should be reasonable, should see the present situation. There is an independent Armenia with two states around carrying out an embargo. Armenia may relax only in the south but there is mullah administration which is not clear how long it may go on.

Diaspora should ponder on this. Armenia should settle good relations with its neighbors and to become a member of EU. If Armenia were a member of EU today Turkey will subject to embargo not Armenia but Europe.

Instead of passing bill in parliaments of different states it will be better for Diaspora to persuade those states to accept Armenia into EU. They should be reminded of their history, responsibilities as they have their share of guilt in today's situation. Diaspora at least should be able to say to carry out that. This is my formula to go ahead and we should demand from the Europeans for the steps taken in the past.

Alin Ozinian, Agos Newspaper / Istanbul, October 2006

Sources

Source : <http://europenews.dk/en/node/5907>