

Hrant Dink: Belated Victim of Armenian Genocide

Posted on 19. Januar 2008 by Toros Sarian

On January 19, 2007 the publisher and Editor of the bilingual weekly Istanbul newspaper AGOS was shot by a young Turkish nationalist. Who was this Armenian who had over the years continuously and persistently displayed courage through his intellectual campaign against the Turkish state apparatus? A state which not only denies the Armenian Genocide but also has created through a systematic racial indoctrination of its citizens a social and political climate in which such murders are tolerated if not accepted by society. The Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul Mesrob Mutafyan whose relationship to Hrant was not always free of conflict, described Hrant Dink with the following words „his life full of struggle and challenges turned Hrant Dink into a courageous, sensitive and decisive personality; becoming a symbol for justice, freedom of belief and human rights. He voiced his opinions and ideas with total disregard for the possible dangers. When he was convinced of the necessity of doing something then he acted with the same decisiveness.”

Hrant Dink was born in Malatya on 15th September 1954. This city had before the Genocide a large Armenian population. His father Sarkis, a tailor, came from Gürün and his mother Gülvart from Kangal. Hrant was the eldest of three sons. In 1960 his family moved to Istanbul and a year later his parents separated. Hrant and his brothers were sent to an Armenian orphanage in Gedikpasa which was run by the Armenian evangelical community. The children spent the Summer in the Tuzla holiday camp on the Marmara Sea. This place played an important role in his life as he met here Rakel. Together with her they later ran this holiday camp. After attending the local protestant Armenian community Primary and Middle schools, Hrant went to the Armenian Grammar school Surp Hac Tibrevank in Üsküdar. In these years he developed his political awareness and became a supporter of a radical left party. In 1972 he changed his name and was then called Firat Dink. His friend Armenak Bakirciyan, who came from Diyarbakir and also involved in the left revolutionary movement, renamed himself Orhan Bakir.

The purpose of changing their names was not to distance themselves from their Armenian roots but to avoid unnecessary difficulties for innocent Armenians due to their campaigning. As result of Hrants political activities he was expelled from the

Armenian Grammar school. In May 1980 Armenak, Hrants friend and political ally, who was a leading member of the Maoist TKP/ML, was shot by the Turkish security forces. Hrant Dink was later very critical and disappointed about the attitudes of the Turkish left regarding the Armenians and the question of national identity. "I was extremely shaken that the Armenian genocide was also not discussed by the Turkish left, and that they closed their ears especially to problems concerning national and cultural identity. But I believe that exactly this fight about retaining ones own identity, to live ones own tradition and being allowed to speak ones own language is an extremely decisive fight."

After his A-Levels at a Turkish school Hrant studied Zoology and Philosophy at Istanbul University and founded with his two brothers a bookshop in the Bakirköy district which still exists today. In 1984 Hrant experienced the bitter realities faced by any Armenian institution or foundation in Turkey in the form illegal dispossession. On the basis of a law from 1936 which regulated foundations and inheritance, the Tuzla Summer Camp was confiscated. This event was a turning point in Hrants life.

Until the mid 70's the Armenian community in Turkey had led fairly inconspicuous lives. However, after Armenian organizations had begun taking military actions against Turkish facilities and embassies abroad the situation changed dramatically for the Armenians in Turkey. The State increased its suppression and rekindled the hate against the Armenians. In view of the near civil war conditions prevailing at the end of the 70's it is not surprising that these developments were scantily reported by the international community.

Almost daily bloody armed attacks took place between left wing organisation and fascist groups or the state security forces. This disparate and divided revolutionary movement was in the end brutally put down by the military putsch of 12th September 1980. Tens of thousands revolutionary's were imprisoned and dozens of political prisoners were tortured to death or executed.

Although, the Armenian organizations ended their armed struggle from the mid 80's, the repression by the Turkish state of the Armenians increased even more. One reason for this was the success of the Armenian Diaspora in gaining international recognition of the Armenian Genocide. The fury of the Turkish state was felt by Armenian minority in Turkey. At the same time the Turkish regime in order to be considered for EU membership, had to allow a minimum of democratic civil liberties.

From 1990 Hrant Dink began looking for ways for the Armenian minority to express itself socially and politically. Together with a few friends and with the support of the former Patriarch Galustyan, Hrant Dink decided to publish a new Armenian newspaper. The first issue of the Bilingual weekly AGOS appeared on the 5th April 1996. Within a short time it had become the most important Armenian newspaper in Turkey with a circulation of more than 6000. The idea of publishing a bilingual Armenian newspaper came to Hrant Dink because he wanted to inform the Muslim-Turkish majority about the history, culture and the current social and political problems being faced by the Armenian minority. He was convinced that only through increasing awareness within Turkish society could the existing and deep rooted prejudices against the Armenians be broken down. In an interview about the AGOS he said “We view the AGOS as our instrument for education and reconciliation. This does not prevent us from holding up a mirror to the Turkish society and saying that when we wish to join the EU then we must accept responsibility for our history and the forced assimilation of all minorities must be ended”

The renowned Italian based Armenian Language and Literature Professor, Zekiyan, described Hrant Dink as the man who made courageous strides to drag the Armenian Community in Turkey out of the ghetto existence. Hrant Dink and the AGOS broke through the wall of silence and fear which the remaining Armenians have lived behind since the Genocide. The editor of AGOS was increasingly becoming a National Threat for the Turkish state; a threat which had to be silenced. Nationalists orchestrated harassment campaigns and the Judiciary started regularly legal proceedings against him and other workers at AGOS. The Turkish media also played their part in creating an atmosphere of hatred.

Hrant Dink did not give up hope even after his prosecution and sentence for Insulting of Turkishness and decided to appeal against his sentence at the Court for Human Rights in Strasbourg . He had lodged his appeal just a few days before his murder and had no idea that at the same time Turkish-Nationalist fanatics had already planned his murder and that the State Security forces were aware of this. Ogün Samast, Hrant Dink's murderer, said after his arrest that the Armenian had insulted Turkishness. He posed proudly, between two grinning Turkish policeman, before the cameras holding a the Turkish flag in his hand. One of the policemen even congratulated him by saying “Well done brother”, and was depicted in Turkish television broadcasts as a national hero by the state security forces.

“Ogün had carried out his national duty and had saved the honor of Turkey”

enthused Yasin Hayal the man who had encouraged Ogün Samast to commit the crime. Celattin Cerrah, the Head of the Istanbul police explained in a statement just after the murder that it had not been politically motivated but that the young perpetrator had only been following his “National feelings”.

On January 22, 2007 Turkey and the world was eye witness to a moving event in Istanbul. Over a hundred thousand people paid their last respects in silence to an intellectual in a city which had also witnessed the arrest of hundreds of Armenian intellectuals and their expulsion and murder on 24th April 1915. The developments in Turkey since the 19th January have shown that the solidarity with the Armenian minority was only of short duration. The country is confronted with other more pressing problems. The fate of the Armenian minority is again left to chance and many see emigration as the only way out of their hopeless situation.

The Turkish government has recently hinted that paragraph 301 will be changed. However, an internal fight is taking place between the coalition parties as to how §301 should be changed. In principal, any amendments to §301 will not result in a significant change to the undemocratic processes valid in Turkey at present. The armed forces, the bureaucracy and the allied nationalistic political forces within the parties will use any methods at hand to oppress any opposition to the ruling state ideology.

These developments pose for us the question What can we do about the continuing oppressive policies of the Turkish Government? It is in any case important Armenians continue informing world opinion of the undemocratic and racist nature of the Turkish state. The present nationalistic state ideology was established by the Young Turks after their takeover in 1908. Anyone who questions this ideology or doubts the official version of Turkish history is automatically an “enemy of the state.” A state which not only denies the Armenian Genocide but also brutally suppresses any honest debate regarding this crime. Therefore it was clear to Hrant Dink and his friends that the achievement of Freedom of Speech is of utmost importance in the battle against the Turkish system of lies and denial.

The fight which Hrant Dink had begun with the founding of AGOS will continue and many more courageous people will become victims of fanatical Turkish nationalists. However, in the end this racist Turkish system, built upon violence and suppression will collapse as other criminal systems and governments have done so in the past. Hrant Dink's commitment and courage in the fight for Freedom of Speech and Justice will serve as an example for all people. Like so many other Armenian martyrs

before him, he will always be remembered by his people.