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The Righteous as witnesses to truth in the Armenian affair

Although not unique, the story of the Armenian genocide has become an “affair”.

As far as the present is concerned, the significance of the US House Foreign Affairs Committee resolution 252 – which defines the events of 1915 as “genocide” – is clear: withdrawal of the Ambassador and threats of a crisis in relations between the two countries.

It is an “affair”, because it:

- 1) involves the issue of historical revisionism
- 2) recalls active witnesses, who belong to the category of opponents of evil
- 3) leads to certain conclusions on the subject of historical truth and memory.

A State that commits genocide commonly refuses to recognize the evidence. The crime is conceived and carried out in secret and the perpetrators try to conceal or destroy all proof of it. In February 1915, the leaders of the Union and Progress Committee drew up a plan to annihilate the Armenian subjects of the Ottoman Empire; their aim was to achieve ethnic uniformity in the country and prevent part of Turkey’s territory being “amputated” in the event of an independent Armenian state being set up at the end of the First World War. The Young Turks disguised this plan, passing it off as a measure to deal with the Armenian uprising. In actual fact, the “uprising” was nothing more than a handful of Armenian soldiers defecting to the Russian army in the border areas. The ensuing clampdown, which decreed the seizure of Armenian assets and enforced deportations, affected the whole Armenian population, women, children and the elderly (the men having been the first to be eliminated). In no way could these acts have been construed as precautionary measures in the context of war, as Turkish governments have repeatedly claimed right up to the present day. Contemporary witnesses were absolutely clear in their minds that the purpose of the deportations was extermination. Almost all the Armenian deportees died in the autumn of 1916, and criminal intent was by then manifest (cf. Marcello Flores, *Il genocidio degli armeni*, Il Mulino, Bologna).

The Ottoman government that succeeded that of the Young Turks prepared court cases against those responsible for the massacres who were sentenced by default. Mustafa Kemal, founder in 1923 of the new republican Turkey, managed to impose his conditions on the victors of the war. He picked up the legacy of the Young Turks and stuck to the version of the Armenian population having been transferred within the overall framework of war.

Between the two world wars, Mustafa Kemal’s Turkey re-wrote history, excluding any hypothesis of criminal intent against the Armenian population from the country’s past.

In 1965, the Armenian community, at home and in diaspora, increased their pressure on Turkey to acknowledge the Armenian genocide, while a growing number of research scholars all over the world, including Turks, recognized that genocide had indeed been committed.

Over the years, denial has reached paradoxical proportions, with victims even being tarred as perpetrators: it was the Armenians that committed genocide against the Turks.

For Turkey the issue became even more complicated when the country applied to join the European Union.

Requirements for admission include coming to terms with the historic truth about the Armenian genocide (1987, 2000, 2002). The most nationalistic part of Turkish society and of the political class rose up, demanding punishment for those courageous Turkish intellectuals who have dared to raise their voices in favour of recognizing historic truth: their objective analyses and brave declarations signal the uneasiness of Turkish society about a past that has been denied for too long.

The historic picture of Turkish revisionism makes the Armenian affair a particular one. As Catherine Coquio¹ has observed, such revisionism has had two negative effects on the Armenians' reflections: on the one hand the silence of the survivors and the Armenians' insistence on a strictly historic search for "proof" of the crime; and, on the other, the delay in forming any "critical thought on the subject of testimony of the event".

As far as the subject of the Righteous and of witnesses is concerned, it is worth pointing out that for us Armenians the tale of "good people in evil times" includes not only the role of the "rescuers", the Righteous for whom the Talmudic tradition says "he who saves a life saves the whole world", but also the role of active witnesses, who often pay a high personal price for their struggle for truth.

Before, during and after the genocide there were those who risked their own lives, performing heroic deeds to rescue fellow human beings ("neighbours" in the biblical sense) from certain death; others went beyond just "not harming" the Armenians, raising their voices to denounce and testify, and thus becoming guardians of the truth about what happened. The greatest injustice, as Salvatore Natoli recalled, is that of omission.

In the most tragic moments of the 20th century, many simply looked the other way, but others did react, stretching the confines of neighbourliness (cf. Stefano Levi Della Torre).

For the Armenians – who know what it means for a crime against them to go unrecognized not only by the government that committed it, but even by successive governments through to the present day – the concept of the "Righteous" extends beyond the rescuers to include active witnesses, militants for memory, thanks to whom we can give the victims a moral burial.

The burden of remembering only evil and the responsibilities of the perpetrators of evil is heavy indeed; with it comes a sense of uneasiness, misgiving and resentment.

In the Armenian affair, this condition is further aggravated by denial. However, if we shift our focus from those who saw their Armenian neighbours as a threat to those who continued to see them as fellow human beings, we can create the conditions for overcoming the burden of history and opening up to trust.

We would "abuse memory", as Flores said, if we responded to the abuse of revisionism by focusing solely on the evil committed. For the purpose of fostering dialogue among peoples, remembering acts of human kindness can be very helpful.

There are numerous questions about what prompts individuals to "act out of a sense of justice", about the consequences of institutions, ideologies and conditions that allow evil to spread. But I will limit myself to recalling some of the Righteous for the Armenians that I have tried to save from oblivion, bringing their ashes or earth from their graves to the genocide memorial in Yerevan in Armenia and interring them in the Wall of Remembrance.

My meditation on the Righteous began with journeys among the Armenians of the diaspora in Turkey and Armenia. I travelled round the land of my father, talking to survivors, people who had met witnesses of the genocide and I visited cemeteries where the Righteous lie. And this prompted me to reconstruct their stories, the lives of these men and women who were involuntary participants in a drama that did not concern them directly and about which the world appeared to have forgotten.

I have written about the "militants for memory", who fight for truth against all forms of revisionism. I have tried to save them from oblivion and to bring these exemplary figures to the attention of the public.

The types of deeds they performed can be classified and distinguished by recognizing the various ways in which they stood up against evil. They did so by:

- confronting the persecutors man to man while trying to stop the deportations;

¹ AA.VV. *Storia, Verità, Giustizia. I crimini del XX secolo*, by Marcello Flores, B. Mondadori, Milano, page 363

- dissociating themselves and disobeying orders (including Turkish officials and Ottoman subjects);
- rescuing and helping victims there and then.

But I would also like to remember certain militants for memory, both contemporaries of the genocide and Turkish militants for memory today who pay a high price for their commitment to truth.

From Italy, his land of exile, I took the ashes of the German intellectual **Armin Wegner** to Armenia. A volunteer in 1915 in the Mesopotamian campaign at the outbreak of the First World War (Germany was allied with Turkey) he witnessed the deportation and massacre of the Armenians. Circumventing orders and prohibitions and thereby risking the death penalty, he took photographs of the deportation camps – vital documentation for us Armenians – collected letters of entreaty from the condemned, trying to forward them to foreign embassies, wrote dramatic accounts of the horrors he had seen. On his return to Germany he tried to tell the world about the plight of the Armenians. The genocide went unpunished and another was on its way. The signals were there for all to read. Wegner sent a letter to Hitler begging him not to repeat the tragedy of the Armenians with the Jews. His appeals cost him detention and exile. Wegner, a militant for memory, is a Righteous man for both the Armenians and the Jews. The Yad Vashem memorial honoured him with a tree in his name and independent Armenia honours him among the Righteous in the “Wall of Remembrance” at Dzidzernagapert. In his final days, Wegner expressed the hope that someone would take up his appeal, continuing to give voice to the victims.

From Voghera I took earth from the grave of **Giacomo Gorrini**, the Italian consul in Trebizond, the first diplomat to publicly denounce to the world the violence, torture and killings of the Armenians that led to the first genocide of the 20th century.

From Syria I took a handful of soil from the grave of the Beduin Arab **Fayez El Ghossein**, author of the first documentary book in Arabic about the Armenian genocide. An eye-witness to the deportation and massacres of Armenians and a deeply religious Muslim, he was determined to prevent the Europeans from one day blaming Islam for the massacres, perpetrated in fact by a secular, atheist government that dubbed itself progressive.

The list of the “names restored to memory” over the last few years has grown. They belong to all nations and have different stories.

And lastly Righteous Turks, contemporaries of the genocide. If I succeed in my task, I shall have, at least in part, accomplished my mission.

Today’s Turkish militants for memory risk their freedom and their safety: **Ayşe Nur Zarakolu** (who died prematurely in 2002), honoured and rewarded by our Committee for her work to defend the memory of the Armenian genocide and the human rights of the Kurdish minority in Turkey; her husband **Ragıp** who has taken up her legacy, publishing books on the Armenian genocide and is subjected to constant prison sentences; the historian **Taner Akcam**, sentenced to 10 years’ imprisonment, now living in the United States, **Baskin Oran**, currently on trial, and so many others, such as **Rakel Dink**, who continues the work of *Agos*, the newspaper founded by her husband **Hrant Dink**, a Turkish journalist of Armenian origin, who worked for dialogue between Armenians and Turks, assassinated in 2007. A tree commemorates him in Yerevan and also here in Milan in the Garden of the Righteous on Monte Stella.

In conclusion, a brief reflection on memory.

After the physical destruction of a group and its culture, all that is left is memory.

Among Armenian communities, genocide denial produces the same devastating effects that denial of the Holocaust produced and still produces amongst Jews; from generation to generation, their suffering is renewed, it remains difficult for them to re-elaborate their loss, difficult to forgive.

Denying the truth prolongs the crime and, as Elie Wiesel put it: “The Armenians died twice”.

Memory thus determines moral choices. Individual memories, if shared by many, become historical memory, a heritage for all mankind.

At the time of the genocide, there were Turks that disobeyed. I would like to honour them, even if revisionism is still an obstacle. I am convinced that the memory of witnesses and of the disobedient will one day have the power to bring everyone to recognize the truth, and this creates a link with goodness. Truth and reconciliation, truth without revenge.