

Proposals for Turkish-Armenian dialogue conversation between Gabriele Nissim and Gérard Malkassian

Nissim: A whole century has gone by since the Armenian genocide. I believe the most important thing right now is to raise a discussion within Turkish society and pull down the walls that prevent dialogue. The call “We have a dream, together”, which you have launched with other French intellectuals of Turkish and Armenian descent, is headed precisely in this direction. This reminded me of what happened amidst the Cold War, when civil society opened up to dialogue with the dissident movements of Eastern Europe. Those were the years of the Helsinki Accords, by which Russia was demanded to respect human rights. Things though started to change precisely thanks to that form of grassroot dialogue. In the same way, I am convinced that today we’ll obtain something good from Turkey only there is some push from within the civil society...

Malkassian: Yes, we are persuaded, too that dialogue and reconciliation are the goals that need be followed, although our stance is not understood by everyone, above all in the Armenian community of France. Despite the steps forward that were taken, many believe that international pressure is still the uncontroversial way to deal with the Turks. Of course, we must consider that Turkey was not defeated in the war, therefore we cannot solve things like in the German case. Ours is a different problem.

Nissim: This reminds me of Armin T. Wegner, the German writer to whom I dedicated my recent book (*La lettera a Hitler*, ed. Mondadori, *Editor’s note*). After the Holocaust he was one of the first people to deal with the key subject of reconciliation, when it was absolutely unthinkable that a Jew could talk to a German. Only after the Nurnberger trial and the admission of guilt of President Adenauer – who also acknowledged the right of Jews to reparations – Germany could regain credibility in the eyes of the world. But there is a huge difference between yesterday’s Germany and today’s Turkey. In the former case the entire generation of villains was still alive, which is not the case in Turkey. And this is precisely the point! We cannot deal with the recognition of the Armenian genocide as if events had unfolded yesterday, because they did a century ago. I have always told my Armenian friends that their contribution to dialogue is essential, and we should not only ask ourselves “What can the Turks do?” but also “What can the Armenians do to open this dialogue with the Turkish society?”. This is the question that I would like to ask you, too.

Malkassian: First of all I must say on the Turkish side there is a growing openmindedness on the issue. Ten years ago it concerned only intellectuals, but now it involves more people with a new outlook and a remarkable degree

of awareness, above all regarding themes such as the democratization of Turkey, the recognition of minorities' rights, the relinquishment of violence as a means to handle problems. On the Armenian side, I believe we have to start a dialogue with all those who are willing to look at the past in a more openminded way, even though many of them do not use the g-word. I am persuaded that everything else will follow spontaneously. Putting the use of the word "genocide" as a requirement for dialogue is not certainly of help for anybody.

Nissim: Which word do you use?

Malkassian: I will mention the case of the two promoters of the initiative born around the appeal "We have a dream, together". Michel Marian, French philosopher of Armenian descent, and Ahmet Insel, economist and political scientist, in 2009 co-authored the book *Armenian Taboo*, in which two intellectuals tried for the first time to exchange their family as well as personal views of Turkish-Armenian history, handling the genocide issue, too. In the book, later translated into the mothertongues of its authors, Insel did not use the word "genocide" but, like many people, he spoke about *crimes against humanity*.

Nissim: I recently took part in a conference in Israel with some prominent genocide scholars, including Yehuda Bauer who on the occasion put forward the proposal to adopt the term "massa atrocities" (MAS) to refer to war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing and genocide. By doing this we could overcome the confusion about the various definitions, last but not least the definition of genocide established by the United Nations in 1948. Maybe, under these terms, also dialogue with the Turks could become easier...

Malkassian: Yes, we can accept to start dialogue with people sharing this opinion. We have seen that people like Insel are willing to recognize reality, thus genocide itself. Thus we must be more openminded and not focus exclusively on the *G word*; doing so would equal preventing dialogue from broadening. Furthermore, we need a more morally focused approach to the issue.

Nissim: What do you precisely mean?

Malkassian: In 1965, when the Armenians mobilised to get the crime recognised, the theme of the historical injustice endured with the loss of goods and land was predominating. But today we consider two completely different features: on the one end the extermination of a population within the Ottoman empire; on the other one a war with political consequences, followed by promises made and never kept by Armenia. Little by little, among the

Armenians the idea took root that these two features are distinct, and that the recognition of genocide is a moral and ethical stance rather than a political demand.

This does not mean that the political implications are anyhow lesser, but only that distinguishing the pathway of dialogue from political strategy is a sounder and more authentic approach. This seems to me as an important feature to go on with a certain harmony with the needs of many Armenians, too.

I was puzzled by the discovery of a completely different idea of genocide existing in Armenia: to them it is an abstract theme, a historical event among many, which then was followed by the rise of the Soviet Union, then the GULag, and so on until the current issues. But during my recent trip to Yerevan I perceived a renewed sensitiveness on the issue, which stemmed also from the declarations of Pope Francis on genocide. Everybody, from the taxi driver to the poet, wanted to share comments about those words, which have struck people's minds so strongly not only because they were uttered by the Pontiff – only 10% of the Armenians are Catholic -, but for their moral content as the speech was delivered on the eve of the centenary of genocide. This is the pathway that needs be followed to get out of the crisis and pave the way for constructive dialogue between Turks and Armenians.

Nissim: I though think that this is a very abstract approach, especially if we think of Ankara's hardline. What could be the actual signals of moral change on the side of the Turkish government?

Malkassian: First of all, it would be important to remove the names of those guilty for the genocide from street plaques, monuments, and the textbooks that still sing them as heroes. The second step could be to admit the theft of the goods from the Armenian community – until six months ago the Turkish Republic had its official premises in a building that had been seized from an Armenian family in 1915. Also the NATO base of Incirlik, in the South East of the country, is built on a piece of land that had been seized from Armenians. We are not demanding restitution, but I think a revocation of such seizures, where possible, is really urgent. The key feature is the awareness of the wrong done. Some time ago, talking with a young Turkish woman of Circassian descent, I tried to "justify" the aggressions perpetrated against the Armenians in 1915 by Circassians escaping the Caucasus referring to the persecutions endured by the latter at the hands of the Russians.

I could not continue because she very firmly told me that the Circassians assaulted the Armenians out of greed and they were thieves. That woman very clearly denounce the crimes of her ancestors; today we can see the same reaction in some Turks who draw the will to start dialogue from their own experience dealing with sense of guilt and the aspiration to free themselves from it

Nissim: After World War Two, the Germans kept feeling guilty for the fate of the Jews. But since the Armenian genocide a whole century has gone by, and today young people in Turkey do not feel tied to what happened one century ago, they do not even keep memories of it. So what can an Armenian tell a Turkish youngster to make him aware of the genocide that is still denied by the Turkish authorities?

Malkassian: Although it is difficult to talk abstractly about a *Turkish youngster*, we can advance three hypotheses based on the geographical areas they are from, the social class, personal history and education of the young people we are dealing with. In Turkey's North-East, for example, people live like in a fortress, where nationalism predominates and there not much openness to dialogue. It would be really difficult to get in touch with a Turkish youngster from these regions, presumably not even so eager to communicate. In the South-East, whose 70% is Kurdish and of other minorities, the rediscovery of the past has already been undertaken; there the problem was about finding a way to share memories, but the inhabitants of this region are already prepared for dialogue. Then comes the Western region, with the widest variety of phenomena, in which many people do not even know about the existence of Armenians living 2 km away from him. But there are many more people, above all young people and university students open to Western culture and values, who agree on a key point: the recognition of the crime, on which a part of modern Turkey is founded, is indispensable to overcome Turkey's violent past. This country always hangs on the balance between a culture of democracy and one of violence, as shown still today by Erdogan's line.

Nissim: In other words, by recognizing the Armenia genocide Turkey would have the opportunity not only to break up with that kind of past, but also to show the entire world that it has been set anew today, different from the one that had stained itself with that massacre. It would be like drawing a virtual line of separation between the Ottoman empire and the government of the Young Turks on one side and today's Turkey on the other, don't you think so?

Malkassian: Of course, this is a key message, for young people above all. And the discourse about the Righteous is of the utmost importance because it helps foster the awareness of what happened through the example of the brave people who have said no and who still nowadays represent a positive side of that past and Turkish history in general.

Nissim: This is a key factor, indeed, also for another reason. As Nicolas Tavitian has recently put it (Tavitian is an adviser specialised in European affairs and the director of *AGBU Europe, Editor's note*) in a meeting organized in un convegno organizzato dal Parlamento europeo per la

Giornata europea dei Giusti, tacere sulle figure dei Giusti turchi-ottomani che soccorsero gli armeni per rimuovere il genocidio, significa rinunciare alla parte migliore della storia turca. Si parla oggi in Turchia delle figure dei Giusti turchi ottomani?

Malkassian: Unfortunately these figures are not very broadly discussed, but I know a scholar of the “*Anadolu Kültür Foundation*”, a very important cultural centre based in Turkey, that has worked for many years already to build a kind of a great catalogue of the Righteous, visiting all Turkish regions, town after town, to gather their tales. It is not the only institution to deal with this, but only few do this job, which is not recognised or brought about by anyone. A lot needs to be done to make these figures popular, above all among the young people. By the way, historical research into these subject matters started only 15 years ago, we are just at the beginning. In March, on the anniversary of genocide, the Sorbonne università in Paris held a four-day conference with rapporteurs from all over the world – mostly Turkish, then Armenians, many Germans, and Americans. The participation showed that this topic has become the focus of international historical research at the global level. But we do not know many things, yet about the Armenian genocide. For example, we know nothing about the support and participation of Turkey’s middle class: it cannot be stated if they were all *bystanders*, either guilty or innocent. In April I took part in a meeting about the Armenian Genocide at Istanbul’s Boğaziçi university that came after the very important conference of 2005, the first organized in Turkey. I remember in particular the work of a young Turkish researcher, coworker of historian and sociologist Taner Akçam, who is still dealing with the passing of memory of genocide within the Armenian families of Turkey through the study of the songs and lullabies in particular. Alas, the words of those singsongs, passed on from one generation to the subsequent one, are really harrowing: they speak about fear and death. This is only one thread of research. *Hrant Dink Foundation*, which last year organized a meeting on the Islamised Armenians, this year will deal with the economic implications of genocide. By the way, it suffices to think of the research carried out by Turkey’s Mehmet Polateli who, analysing the cases and the numbers of seizures, has highlighted that the majority of the goods that were taken away from the Armenians were agricultural lands. This information totally changes their image in the eyes of the Turks, who usually consider the Armenians as very rich bourgeois... an image which is very similar to the one of the Jew rooted in Europe...

Nissim: It would really be important that the knowledge of the Armenian culture and history spreads in Turkey. In Poland, for example, there are nearly no more Jews but there is a sort of a Jewish fashion, a rediscovery of that culture through specific places like cafés, bars.. I think the point is also

how to make the Armenian culture known in Turkey, because after all Turks and Armenians lived together before genocide...

Malkassian: They lived near each other, not together. My father remembers this well. He told me: "When I had to go somewhere, I got out of the Armenian quarters, I entered the Greek and then the Muslim quarter". They lived separated, but in peace. It has been so until 10 years ago: Turkey's Armenians, usually quite well-off and educated, were silent about their identity and did not mention it unless they were within their community. Things have changed, above all thanks to Hrant Dink and his newspaper, *Agos*, the first Armenian magazine written for a fourth in Armenian and for the remaining part in Turkey. All other Armenian papers in Turkey were entirely in Armenia, but Dink wanted to talk above all with the Turks, other than the Turkish-speaking Armenians, to make it possible to them to learn about his culture of origin. Besides this newspaper, 20 years ago a little publishing house was set up, *Aras*, whose main goal is to make the Turks aware of Armenian literature in their own language. We are at the beginning, above all in Istanbul where I have seen Raymond Kévorkian's and other books about the Armenians in the Turkish bookstores. The same goes for Armenian music, in particular the one of singer Onnig Dinkjian, coming from a village in the country's South-East, Diyarbakir, whose melodies helped the rebirth of that che musical tradition. And the disc is sold! But I repeat: it is only a start, because many Armenians are still afraid.

Nissim: Can we say that the Armenians are gradually moving into the public arena in Turkish society? In what other ways is this change, that started thanks to Hrant Dink's work, happening?

Malkassian: There is a kind of *Armenian pride*, a feeling that is spread in the new generation, first of all the one of journalists, or around *Aras* publishing house. Furthermore, ten years ago *Nor Zartonk* ("*New awakening*"), a juvenile movement of people claiming their own "armenity", was created and found a place in modern Turkey, as they want to help rebuild the country with the involvement of Armenians, too. I have talked for long with these young people, who of course feel a bit of anguish, because "you never know, someone can assault you.." but nothing more. Hrant Dink's death was a tragedy, but also a positive shock for the conscience of many people, both Armenian and Turkish. The murder
in 2007 of this democratic journalist who did not talk about hatred but about dialogue had multiple effects. Fear has increased, but on the other hand his murder triggered a change in the moral climate of the country and Armenians have felt slightly less isolated, because 100,000 people took to the street eight year ago and demonstrated for that Armenian. Nothing alike had never occurred before.

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