

**Interview with K.M. Greg Sarkissian, President of the Zoryan Institute**  
**By Esra Elmas**  
**Agos, August 10-15, 2011**

- 1. Actually Hrant Dink did an interview with you in 2002. After 9 years, this will be the first after him, I guess. Let me start with the assassination of Hrant Dink. What do you think about the process in which, at the end, Hrant Dink was killed in 2007?**

The murder of Hrant Dink came as a shock to all of us at Zoryan. During his visit to the institute nine years ago, he shared with us his vision to bring the Armenian and Turkish peoples together through dialogue and reconciliation. The conversation is as vivid as if it had taken place yesterday. We were both aware that Turkish history was highly politicized by the events of 1915 issue, but we both also understood that it was critical that the parties should not see each other through the lens of that era.

As to your question about the process which led to the killing of Hrant, I would suggest we review what took place in Turkey during the five years preceding his killing, or following AKP's coming to power in 2002.

Under the leadership of Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Gul, the AKP implemented numerous reforms, entered into negotiations to bring Turkey into the EU, launched successful economic development programs, and reduced penalties for surrendered Kurds. But, most importantly, they gave the European courts of Human Rights supremacy over Turkish courts. These reforms gave real hope to the intellectuals, scholars, human rights activists, media personalities and civil society that there was real change coming to Turkey, including freedom of speech and thought. It is ironic that just a month before Hrant was killed, Prime Minister Erdogan spoke in New York about good relations between citizens of Turkey who came from different backgrounds.

Unfortunately, the promise of democracy and freedom of speech contrasted with the government's actions during this same period. Numerous people, including some 75 journalists, intellectuals and writers were indicted under the notorious Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. Hrant and others who were part of the Istanbul Conference in 2005 were called "traitors" by the AKP-appointed Justice Minister, who accused them of "stabbing the nation in the back." The irony here is that most of the people indicted under Article 301 were acquitted. Hrant felt that he was being singled out, as a Turkish citizen of Armenian heritage, for rougher treatment for the same alleged offense and the appeal court gave him a 6-month suspended sentence. He was particularly shaken when he was beaten by an angry mob when leaving the courthouse. As a Turkish citizen all Hrant wanted was to see his country move forward dealing with the events of 1915 in order to make it a more inclusive place. After all it was his homeland as an Armenian and as a Turk, albeit with his dual identity. In situations of this nature there are many forces involved, one of which is the government's actions and statements. These may have incited hatred against Hrant, so that certain individuals felt justified in killing him, in order to prevent him from exposing a larger historical truth that was being covered up. The same government did everything it could to silence anyone who threatened to expose this historical taboo. Well known examples are the trials and the silencing of Elif Shafak, Orhan Pamuk, and many others. In the end, this process led to Hrant's killing and silencing him once and for all.

- 2. What does the murder of Hrant mean for the Armenians?**

To answer what Hrant meant to the Armenians is a loaded question that needs several hours, if not days, to describe. My view of how Armenians see Hrant's killing is as a victim of the state's policy on the Genocide. In order to understand why Armenians think that way, I will ask you to recall Prime Minister Erdogan's statements in reaction to his assassination.

Hrant's murder was directly related to his opening up questions in Turkish society about the events of 1915 or the Armenian Genocide, as mentioned earlier. Second, Prime Minister Erdogan's speech on Hrant's killing was telling, when he said: "It is extremely thought-provoking that Dink is chosen as a target. When there are new activities regarding the alleged Armenian Genocide in some foreign states...."

Here the Turkish prime minister is linking the death of Hrant directly to the "alleged Armenian Genocide." That linkage is also made in the mind of every Armenian, in Turkey or elsewhere. The culmination of Hrant's articulation of what really happened in 1915 and Prime Minister Erdogan's reference to the "alleged Armenian genocide," led to Hrant being labelled as the the 1,500,001<sup>st</sup> victim of the Genocide.

**3. Do you follow Hrant Dink's case? The murderer Samast recently was sentenced to 22 years and 10 months imprisonment. He will become eligible for parole in 2021, after serving 2/3rds of his sentence. What do you think about the judicial process in Turkey?**

Of course, we at the Zoryan Institute have followed the case very closely. We study the forces and factors that shape the Armenian reality worldwide. These factors include the diasporan existence, the Genocide, and, naturally, developments in Turkey and Armenia and Turkish-Armenian relations. In addition, we had a close personal relationship with Hrant, with whom we shared a vision of Turkish-Armenian relations.

As to the judicial process, Ogun Samast's sentence is not the key issue. Rather, it is the mindset that is behind this killing, which is, in my opinion, the same mentality as that of the Young Turks in 1915. The true judicial process should deal with the root causes that were behind Hrant's murder. If one is to bring justice to Hrant's murder, then it must deal with the act of suppressing the history of 1915, for which some people seem willing to do anything, including killing people who dare to ask questions. If the root cause is not dealt with one wonders if there will be similar future victims.

**4. Concerning the genocide issue, is there any difference between the position/perception of an Armenian who lives in Turkey, in Armenia, and in the Diaspora? Like what?**

Whether it be Diasporan Armenians, Armenians in Turkey, or in Armenia, there is no difference in their understanding of the historical truth, and therefore in their collective memory. There is enough historical evidence, documentation and physical evidence to show what happened to the 2 million Armenians in Turkey. Every Armenian at some point faces the questions, where did I come from, how did I get here, what happened to my grandparents, or my great grandparents. The majority of Armenians around the world all confront the same answer: they were deported from their ancestral cultural homeland and most were killed.

No doubt collectively in Armenian minds it is known that the Ottoman Turks annihilated the Armenian presence from their homeland. This is true for Armenians in Turkey, in the Diaspora and in Armenia.

What may be different in their position is how to go about reconciliation with today's Turkish government.

**5. Although most of the AGOS readers may already knew Zoryan Institute, let's remind them the story behind it. What is Zoryan Institute and what was the reason of founding it?**

The official name is self-explanatory: The Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation. I stated earlier, it deals with the study and analysis of the events that shaped the contemporary Armenian reality within a universal context. There were a few of us involved in the founding of the institute in 1982. The idea at its inception was originally the brainchild of Jirair Libaridian, who left the institute in 1989, to join the government of Armenia. Since then, the institute has evolved and expanded to include universal human rights as part of its mission by establishing a new division called The International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies. Another international division was created for Diaspora Studies. For me personally, the issue of identity has been the driving force behind my involvement with the Institute from the beginning. Both my parents were from Anadolu, survivors of the Genocide. It was natural that I grew up in a home with the traditions of Anatolia. This includes the food, customs, music, language, etc. that made me feel close to Turks, Kurds and Armenians who also came from that region. Being of Armenian ethnicity and going to Armenian elementary school, I grew up with Armenian culture and language. Being born in Lebanon and raised there until the age of eighteen, submerged in Lebanese culture as well, gave me an identity that was also Lebanese—but I was not an Arab. When I visited Armenia, I found that their culture and traditions were somewhat strange to me. When I moved to the US to attend university and work, even though my language became English, I was not an Anglo-American. So what was I? So, I began a quest to understand what exactly my identity was. That included knowing my history, the town my parents came from and especially what my relationship to Turkey is. The founding of the Zoryan Institute was the vehicle for that explanation and understanding.

**6. So your personal story is the main motive in forming the Zoryan Institute. What does it mean to be the son of such a family? How do you deal with this conflict?**

In 1995, I shared a very personal story publicly at the International Conference on “Problems of Genocide” in Yerevan. I talked about a righteous Turk, Haji Khalil, my grandfather's business partner, who had promised to take care of his family in case of any misfortune. When my grandfather was hung by the Ottoman authorities, and the deportations of the Armenians began, Haji Khalil, this pious Moslem, kept his promise by hiding my mother's family in the upper storey of his house for almost a year. There were seven people to hide, food for seven extra mouths to be purchased, prepared and carried up undetected nightly, and had to suffice until the next night. Haji Khalil's consideration was such that he even arranged for his two wives and the servants to be absent from the house at least once a week, so that my grandmother and her family could bathe.

When two of the children died, he buried them in secret. He took tremendous risks and his situation was dangerous, because his servants understood what was transpiring. Had he been caught sheltering Armenians, he would certainly have shared their fate. Luckily, his household was loyal and discreet, and

therefore, I was one of the very few children of my generation and in my neighborhood to grow up with uncles and aunts, all of whom remember Haji Khalil, the righteous man. This is in contrast with my father's story, who was orphaned at the age of eight, his father hanged, his mother raped and killed, and of nine children in his family, only he and two brothers survived. The dichotomy of the nightmarish experience of my father, and the memory of Haji Khalil was another reason to embark on the founding of the institute.

**7. What about your children? How do your children feel and think about these issues? Do they have any attachment with the past? Do they support the job that you do in Zoryan?**

I forwarded your question to my children to answer for themselves. Here are their answers.

My son Haig, who is 22 years old now, answered as follows. "As children of Armenian descent and more importantly of our father, we have been exposed to the issues surrounding Genocide Studies & Human Rights especially related to our cultural history. As we are two generations away from the events that took place in 1915, we are slightly removed from the issues. However, due to the pride we hold as Armenians, and seeing how our people suffered, we also hope to resolve this issue so that Armenia can move forward. Being strong advocates for human rights, regardless of ethnicity, nationality or culture, we believe that our father's work at Zoryan has taken part in shaping our outlook on the world..."

Alex, who just turned 18, answered as follows: "Yes, we have an attachment to the past and the Zoryan Institute. The genocide is a huge part of not only Armenian history but my family history, and who knows if I'd be growing up in Canada today if it wasn't for the genocide."

**8. What is your aim with the program of Human Rights and Genocide Studies that runs every year by the participation of people coming from different parts of the world?**

The program has a number of objectives. It is designed to help prepare university students to become the next generation of genocide scholars. It takes a comparative and interdisciplinary approach to cases of genocide such as the Holocaust, the Armenian Genocide, Cambodia and Rwanda, among others. The comparative study of genocide, a gross violation of human rights, can help us identify and understand the conditions under which genocide and other acts of mass violence are likely to take place; it can help illuminate the warning signs of impending violence; and it can suggest ways in which genocide may be prevented. Also, we strive to show through a comparative approach that genocide is a shared human experience and, as such, must be the concern of all individuals and institutions.

Genocide has taken place in many countries, and it is possible that it can take place in any country. We make the effort to bring in students from around the world to become expert in genocide, so that they can return to their home countries empowered with the knowledge to become like the proverbial thousand points of light and work towards its prevention everywhere.

**9. Here, it is also possible for the opposite parties of the massacres to meet with each other during the two-week program. How is it possible? Have you ever had any troubles about this?**

If with this question you mean to ask whether we have had the descendants of a perpetrator nation and victim nation attend the same class, then indeed, we have. We have had Tutsis and Hutus, Armenians and Turks, Jews and pro-Palestinian individuals, and such. All students come to the class with certain prejudices, but one by one, over the duration of the course, the program dismantles these prejudices and ten to twelve professors help elevate the students' understanding of the facts and complexities of genocide studies. It is through this academic process and their new understanding of humanity that students from all walks of life can begin to speak the same language. That is the success of this course.

The aim of the program is to convert our emotional perspective to an intellectual one, using academic tools, where, through education, your understanding of a situation is elevated to a universal perspective. After this, you can't help but speak as a representative of all humanity, and not as a representative of one camp or another.

**10. Do students hesitate to participate in debates, or do they feel any other pressure on themselves? Like what?**

No, I don't think so. You've been there. You've seen that the professors encourage the students to participate in discussion. There may be hesitation at first, but as the sessions progress the participants evolve and develop the prospective and the language to discuss sensitive topics in an open, mutually respectful environment, in keeping with the standards of an academic institution.

**11. What is the impact of opposite sides on the content of the program?**

I'm not sure what you mean by "opposite sides." When you're dealing with the truth, based on reliable evidence, there can be only one side.

**12. Do you have some other programs or activities at the Zoryan Institute?**

There are three branches in the Zoryan Institute. One deals with Armenia, another with Diaspora, and the third with the Armenian Genocide. Part of the latter is a program called "Creating a Common Body of Knowledge." The objective is to provide authoritative documentation that will be accepted and shared by Turkish and Armenian civil societies and western scholarship as primary sources on the subject of the Armenian Genocide. Incidentally, this program is the brainchild of Taner Akçam. These documents may be in German, Ottoman Turkish, English, etc., and are intended to form the basis for a common understanding of what happened in history. The more such documents are made available to Armenian and Turkish societies, the more they will be empowered to question the narratives imposed by states. Ultimately, the Common Body of Knowledge can lead to the truth about the events in question and an understanding of each other.

It is worth noting that Zoryan publishes two academic journals. *Genocide Studies and Prevention: An International Journal* is published in partnership with the International Association of Genocide Scholars, and, like *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, is also published in partnership with the University of Toronto Press.

**13. Do you know the way you are perceived from outside? I mean what is the perception of Zoryan in Turkey and in Armenia?**

In international circles, Zoryan is well regarded as a serious research and educational centre, adhering to the highest academic standards. Unfortunately, in the Turkish media and Turkish-sponsored websites, Zoryan, its work, and that of its associated scholars are sometimes misrepresented as propaganda. I remember *Radikal*, for example, stating that Zoryan is known as the most powerful propaganda centre of the Armenian Diaspora.

In Armenia, Zoryan is recognized as a very important centre for Genocide and Diaspora Studies. As far back as 1987, Zoryan signed a formal agreement with the Institute for Diasporan Studies in Yerevan to deal with issues of the Armenian Diaspora. Zoryan has partnered with various Armenian organizations and the Academy of Sciences, conducting research and organizing major international conferences.

It is important to realize that Zoryan is not an exclusively Armenian organization. Our board members and the scholars with whom we work are of many nationalities and from many countries. Our Board Chairman is Roger W. Smith of the US. There is Yair Auron in Israel, Wolfgang Gust in Germany, Taner Akçam from Turkey, to name a few.

**14. What do you want for the future of Zoryan Institute and this program?**

Well, there are many and or endless wants. For example, I want there to be more financial support for this program, so that we could sponsor more students from different countries, including Turkey and Armenia to come to Toronto. Here, they could live together in the university dormitory, study with other students from around the world, have fun together in social activities, and be empowered by the education they received from ten to twelve renowned professors, and learn how to deal with the data and the evidence. In fact, it would be ideal to set up such a program in Turkey and Armenia, themselves.

**15. Turkish government does not recognize the Armenian Genocide. On the other hand, for the last two years, there are some people in Turkey who come together on April 24 in order to memorialize the pain of Armenians. Again three years ago some of the Turks apologized for Armenian Massacres. What do you think about these events?**

It is immensely heart-warming to see that some people in Turkish civil society have accepted the truth of 1915 and are sympathetic to the painful experience of the Armenians. The apology campaign is very much appreciated, and I hope that someday, the whole of Turkish society may be sensitized to come together on April 24 to commemorate the pain of the Armenians.

However, the official reconciliation will come only when the Turkish Government itself comes to terms with the historical truth of 1915 and liberates its citizens from this burden. I remember that Prof. Fatma Müge Göçek once said, "I, as an ethnically Turkish citizen, am not guilty, but am responsible for what happened to the Armenians in 1915. This is a crucial separation that has to be done for transformation."

You know, history, if not approached truthfully, will always be a stumbling block on the road to peace between our two peoples. Peace can only be achieved if people can talk openly about this subject, and

through the Common Body of Knowledge and education, arrive at a mutual understanding of the truth. Without truth, it is doubtful that reconciliation can be achieved.

**16. What does apology mean for the Armenians? Is the official recognition by the states indispensably crucial concerning the solution of the problem between Armenians and Turks?**

Studies on the reconciliation process in such countries as Rwanda and South Africa have shown that in order for an apology to be meaningful, it has to be part of a series of steps, in order to lead to reconciliation. These steps are 1) acknowledgement of guilt and taking responsibility, 2) a genuine expression of remorse, 3) asking for forgiveness, and finally, 4) making amends commensurate with the crime and acceptable to the victim group, so that the healing process can start. Turkish and Armenian people can definitely learn and implement this process.

To your question about recognition by the states being indispensable, if you mean Turkey, the answer is yes. As you will remember from the course, genocide is a political act perpetrated by a state. The conductor of the Armenian Genocide was the Ottoman State, usurped by the Ittihad ve Terakki party, as was the case of the Nazis taking over Germany. The crime committed was with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, in this case its Armenian citizens. The Turkish State is the inheritor of the Ottoman State, and therefore is responsible for that crime, even though modern Turkey did not commit it.

You may also recall learning about the eight stages of genocide described by Dr. Gregory H. Stanton of Genocide Watch. These are 1) Classification, 2) Symbolization, 3) Dehumanization, 4) Organization, 5) Polarization, 6) Preparation, 7) Extermination, 8) Denial.

Turkey's denial today of what the Ottoman government did to its Armenian citizens in 1915 is itself a continuation of the act and therefore the eighth stage of genocide.

**17. Apart from the state reaction, ordinary people both in Turkey and Armenia still have a nationalistic point of view and "otherize" each other. What are the reasons of it? Is it the education system or the way of official history-telling in both of the countries?**

First of all, I believe that education is very important, for both countries to have a new perspective about each other. But there is a complete absence of confidence building measures. For some years, Armenia has called for diplomatic relations with Turkey with no preconditions. However, Turkey has not taken advantage of this opportunity, and is keeping the border between the two countries closed, even though the Armenian side is open. Turkey should consider its relationship with Armenia on its own merits and not tie it to its relations with Azerbaijan. There are good precedents for this policy in Egypt's relations with Israel, at a time the latter was at war with Syria. Also there have been relations between Turkey and Greece, in spite of the complications over the situation in Cyprus. Interaction between the two peoples on social and economic levels can only develop goodwill and erase the negative stereotyping of each other. Finally, removing all restrictions about freedom of expression in Turkey and Armenia would definitely help eliminate the "otherizing" of each other.

Our destiny is dictated by our geography. We must approach our history truthfully and find a way to live together peacefully.