

# THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL RESEARCH CENTRE: THE ZORYAN INSTITUTE

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## **Background: The Need for a National Research Centre**

In the late 1970s, a small group of Armenians, absorbed with questions about their history, their identity, and their future as a nation, came to the conclusion that there was a crucial need for a place to think critically about the Armenian reality. These individuals, propelled by deeply felt intellectual concerns, and compelled by strong desire for change, set about conceptualizing an institution which would provide a forum for free and critical thinking about contemporary issues affecting the Armenian people, through a process that is analytical, scholarly, and detached. Taking into account the impact of rapid changes in modern society, including advances in technology, in an ever-shrinking world, this process would include the continual and systematic reexamination and reevaluation of their reality. This forum would facilitate intellectuals and the community at large to raise substantial questions about contemporary Armenian history and identity, and help develop new perspectives on vital issues, both current and future. Among its primary goals would be for the Armenian people to express their history in their own voice and define themselves (and not let others define them); to understand the forces and factors that have brought them to where they are today; and to help educate and involve the people in a higher level of discourse, without claiming to have all the answers.

The trauma of the Genocide had become such an overriding concern for the Armenian people, especially in the Diaspora, that generations later they were still in crisis mode, thinking only about survival. Intellectual responses in this situation were considered a luxury. The tendency was rather to take action of some sort, but without clearly strategizing what those actions should be. In the Armenian tradition, the intellectual had been relegated to the role of a teacher in the classroom. It had been forgotten that the intellectual has a dual role, both to develop the theoretical ideas and provide for their practical applicability. This group, however, saw it as essential that the intellectual reassert his/her role as thinker in society. In order to understand and deal with the trauma, it was essential that Armenians understand what happened during the Genocide, how it happened, and why it happened. It was essential that scholars and intellectuals research and analyze these subjects and make their findings known.

Since such a large proportion of Armenians have lived outside of Armenia proper for centuries, which was further exacerbated by the Genocide and mass deportation in

1915, the Diasporan experience was also crucial to address and understand. What does it mean to be Armenian when you have not lived in Armenia for generations—in some cases for over five hundred years? What are the markers of Armenian identity—language, religion, a nation-state? Can one have more than one cultural identity? If so, how do they interact? Is one cultural identity dominant? If so, what are the implications of this? And what can be the role of the Diaspora in projecting and working towards the future of the nation? The group was cognizant of the fact that there are some outstanding examples of individuals who had been born in Diaspora, but had gone on to make a tremendous impact on their homelands. (Theodor Herzl, for example, a Hungarian-born Jew, went on to become the founder of the Zionist movement, which ultimately led to the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and its policy to encourage the return of Jews to “the promised land.” Mahatma (Mohandas) Gandhi, an Indian living in South Africa, went on to lead India to independence and became its first Prime Minister in 1949.) It is noteworthy that the nineteenth century renaissance of western Armenian literature and language flourished in Istanbul, far from historical Armenia. In 1918, the declaration of independence of the first Armenian Republic was made in Tbilisi, Georgia, instead of Yerevan. In the 1940s, when Soviet Armenia was under the threat of being converted from a Soviet republic to an autonomous region, Armenians from all over the Diaspora responded to the call and flocked to repopulate the country in order to prevent this loss of statehood. Even though Armenians were living in a wide variety of countries and had a wide variety of local experiences, they still had numerous issues and concerns in common. It was essential for Armenians to understand their Diasporan experience, and to confront such vital issues as assimilation, loss of language, intermarriage, the preservation of their culture, and the struggle for genocide recognition and for an independent homeland.

In dealing with contemporary Armenian reality, it would have been impossible not to deal with the presence and influence of Armenia, which represented for many the idea of a homeland, a cultural and spiritual centre, and the guarantor of nationhood for all Armenians. At the same time, owing to the influence of the cold war and its effects on communal politics, Soviet Armenia was also a source of serious friction between various elements of the Armenian community in the Diaspora. There was a conflict of views as to whether the security, economic viability, religious freedom, and cultural identity of Armenia was better preserved as an independent country with a market economy, or as part of a denationalized, centrally planned empire.

The group felt that those in the Diaspora had a special responsibility to fill a certain void. In the homeland—then under a communist regime—the Armenian mind was active but could not have open access to information or express and share its thoughts freely. In contrast, those in the West had open access to information and the freedom to think and express themselves, and also the ability to provide the support structures to enable scholars to think and work. This afforded the possibility of creating a formal organization to deal with the numerous, vital issues related to the Genocide, Diaspora and Armenia.

## **The Founding of the Zoryan Institute**

With all this as a background, Jirair Libaridian conceived the idea of an institute in the late 1970s. He, Garbis Kortian, Nora Necessian, and I were involved in the initial stages of the project and nurtured the idea, which gradually became a reality. And so in 1982, we, along with a small group of people, established the Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Soon, others joined us, such as Varouj Aivazian, Alvar Badalian, Levon Charkhoudian, Levon Chorbajian, Salpi Ghazarian, and Khachig Tölölyan, to name only a few. We were particularly attracted to Cambridge, a centre of research and learning, by its vibrant intellectual life nurtured by dozens of major universities in the area. As our activities grew very quickly, so did our group of staff members and volunteers, and our network of associated scholars. In just a few years, we had thriving offices in Toronto, Los Angeles, and Paris.

## **The Work of the Zoryan Institute**

In 1983, the institute launched the Oral History Project as a unique source of information on the social history of the Armenian communities in Turkey, both urban and rural, before, during, and after the Genocide. Some 700 survivors' oral histories have been recorded on video and audio tapes in such cities as Los Angeles, Boston, New York, Toronto, Montreal, Beirut and Yerevan. To stimulate new thinking and new approaches to complex issues in the Armenian experience, the institute has organized nearly a dozen international conferences, and hundreds of seminars and lecture series in partnership with universities and academic institutions. In 1986, it launched the Open University program, to share the results of its research with the community at large, in several cities in North America and Europe. Over the past twenty-two years, the Zoryan Institute has accumulated a wealth of archival materials relating to the Armenian Genocide, including the personal papers of missionaries, government officials, diplomatic and military correspondence, intelligence reports, land deeds of deported Armenians, photographs, eyewitness accounts, survivor memoirs, and a wide variety of artifacts. Since its inception, the Zoryan Institute has published forty-one books and periodicals in six countries and five languages. Deserving of special mention is *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, which commenced publishing in 1991. This award-winning periodical is a forum for the analysis of the contending "others" that pose cultural, political and economic challenges to the hegemony claimed by many nation-states and addresses a wide range of phenomena encompassed by the terms *Diaspora* and *transnationalism*. These publications have been groundbreaking in their content and their approach, and many are now classics in their field.

From the beginning, all of the institute's programs incorporated a strong comparative element, whereby the Armenian experience was studied in relation to the experiences of other nations and within a global context. At the same time, they incorporated an

interdisciplinary perspective, analyzing issues from a variety of points of view, such as history, political science, sociology, law, etc.

In 1991, after Dr. Libaridian took the position as Director of the Department of Research and Analysis of the Presidium of the Parliament of Armenia, and as a result of restructuring, the institute shifted its administrative centre to Toronto, while keeping the Cambridge office as the centre for archival management and research support. When Vahakn Dadrian became Zoryan's Director of Genocide Research and George Shirinian became Program Coordinator in 1999, there was renewed activity in genocide and human rights programs, and renewed emphasis on documentary research and comparative genocide studies. Scholars from around the world intensified their work with the institute on specific projects: Taner Akçam from Turkey, Yair Auron from Israel, Wolfgang Gust from Germany, Eric Markusen from Denmark, Lorne Shirinian from Canada, Roger Smith from the United States, and many others. These scholars have been responsible for original research and the publication of numerous books in North America, England, Germany and Israel in collaboration with the institute.

One particularly memorable achievement was the International Conference on "Problems of Genocide," held in Yerevan in April 1995, and co-sponsored by the Republic of Armenia's National Commission on the 80th Anniversary Commemoration of the Armenian Genocide and the Zoryan Institute. Some fifty experts from around the world gave papers and participated in discussions of numerous cases of genocide, with a particular emphasis on comparative genocide. The conference proceedings were published by Macmillan and issued in 1999 as *Studies in Comparative Genocide*, a pioneering book in the field.

### **Establishment of the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies**

Recognizing that there was a serious gap in the university curricula regarding the study of genocide from a comparative perspective, the institute, with the help of a committee of scholars and volunteers launched in 2001 a unique course titled, "The Genocide and Human Rights University Program" (GHRUP). Annually, twelve of the foremost experts in genocide studies come together with about two dozen students from around the world in an intensive, 65-hour, accredited seminar. The purpose of this course is to train a new generation of scholars to undertake the study of genocide at an advanced level. Along with a comparison of other case studies, such as the Jewish Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide and the Rwandan Genocide, as well as the exploration of many other themes, there is a focus on the Armenian Genocide as the archetypal genocide of the 20th Century. In 2003, Zoryan established a special division, the International Institute for Genocide and Human Rights Studies, whose sole mandate is to oversee the GHRUP and extend the program to other universities.

As a result of the success of this course, a partnership between the University of Minnesota and the Zoryan Institute has been established. The University of Minnesota, through its College of Liberal Arts, the Institute for Global Studies, and the Center for Holocaust and Genocide Studies, adopted the Genocide and Human Rights University Program developed by the Zoryan Institute. The same course is offered now in Minneapolis and Toronto, fully accredited by the University of Minnesota.

### **Observations on the Present**

The Zoryan Institute has come a long way in the past twenty-two years, as a result of a great deal of effort by the members of its Academic Board of Directors, associated scholars, the staff, and the hard work of numerous dedicated volunteers and supporters. Zoryan's work is not just an intellectual exercise. It is designed to serve as a basis for developing and planning practical concepts related to the nation's future. Reflecting on where we were at the time Zoryan was established compared to today, it is evident that the Armenian reality and the world around it have changed radically. Today, the Soviet Union is gone; we have an independent Armenia, the Republic of Nagorno-Karabagh, and a prosperous and vibrant Diaspora. As a nation-state, we now have the opportunity to define ourselves, to shape our own future, and to make our place among the family of nations on our own terms. There is no limitation on what we can achieve, except our own imaginations and our willingness to think.

### **Considerations for the Future: Armenian-Turkish Relations**

In 1995, I shared a very personal story publicly at the International Conference on Problems of Genocide in Yerevan. My personal story tells of a 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 hanged by the Turkish authorities and the deportations of the Armenians began, Haji Khalil kept his promise by hiding my mother's family in the upper storey of his house for almost a year. The logistics involved were extremely burdensome: 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. 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 precarious, 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 genocide perpetrated by Ottoman Turkey, and the memory of Haji Khalil became the obsessions of my life.

The story of Haji Khalil attracted the attention of the only Turkish scholar attending the conference, who came in order to share his analysis of why there is silence in Turkey about the Genocide. His paper about the taboo on this subject in Turkey and the challenges to the state of Turkey accepting this reality, as well as his very presence in Yerevan were strong testimony that there are those in Turkey who know the facts of the Armenian Genocide and are willing to take a stand for truth, based on the principles of universal human rights.

The next morning, when all the participants in the conference attended a mass in memory of the victims of the Genocide, I approached Taner and asked him to join me in lighting two candles: one for the memory of my grandfather, lit by him, and one for the memory of Haji Khalil, the righteous Turk, lit by me. The emotional bond at this moment was so overwhelming that we embraced each other and became committed to work together to bring about a change in the hearts and minds of both of our peoples for reconciliation. We hoped that one day they would have warm, neighbourly relations, just as we were embracing as two human beings. Taner and I have since become convinced that the best way to achieve this would be to facilitate a dialogue by making key information available for both societies. We firmly believe that only through dialogue, based on truth, can there be reconciliation between our two peoples.

Therefore, the Zoryan Institute is collaborating with the University of Minnesota to support a long-term research project entitled "Creating a Common Body of Knowledge," conceived, created and run by Taner Akçam. The objective of this project is to create a common body of shared knowledge by making a wide range of documentary sources available to Turkish civil society and Western scholars, in Turkish and English, on the history of the events leading to, during, and immediately after 1915. The broader goal is to facilitate an informed, rational discourse on the issue between Armenians and Turks, hopefully leading to dialogue and the normalization of relations between these two peoples.

Through such scholarly activity, the dichotomy I have felt throughout my life regarding Turks and the Armenian Genocide may begin to be resolved. Accordingly, I want to extend my hand to the people of Turkey and ask them to remember that though at the end of the Empire the Ottoman state was run by the Ittihadists (Young Turks) who were led by mass murderers, it also had its Haji Khalils. It would honor the memory of those righteous Turks if the successor state of the Ottoman Empire would acknowledge the overwhelming truth of the Armenian Genocide and express sincere regret, so that the healing process between our two peoples may begin.