

Thoughts on the April 24 Observance

BY BERJ ZAMKOCHIAN

I am writing from the indescribable beauty of San Zenone, Italy, the Mekhitarian summer retreat house, which has been serving the Armenian monks as a monastery during the restoration of their centuries-old monastery in Venice on the Island of San Lazzaro. Surrounded by the Alps, in this glorious natural environment, I am fortified from morning until evening with that which is Armenian, starting in the early morning with morning prayers, followed by the age-old celebration of Holy Eucharist, and then the various activities of the day -- from students attending classes to monks busy with their scholarly activity. An exchange of opinions and thoughts at the table, a return to the completion of the projects of the day, and finally prayers that bring to fruition the day and its labors. It is in this holy environment that I have given myself to thoughts of the approaching 85th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, with the hopes that from this holy place, God will give me grace and wisdom for the direction of these writings.

So much has been said and written on the subject of the Armenian Genocide, and our observance of it, most of which is very upsetting to me personally. Lately, two of our most celebrated and well-known historians have argued as to the Turkish premeditation of genocide. I fully appreciate the fact that if we, as Armenians, are ever to present our case to an international tribunal, these points must be fine tuned and presented. My problem remains that the final result of both theses is the same; the destruction of Armenia and the Armenians, and that is where I am.

One of the most upsetting articles I read was titled "Forgive and Celebrate" by Noubar Dorian (*TAR Int'l*, May 22, 1999). The author complains about being subjected to "ranting oratory, some reasoned but mostly stupid; the cruel Turk who continues to ignore our demands for and return of our occupied lands, condemnation of an indifferent world." The author writes, "We should stand back and take a deep breath and wonder if stoning the Turk to avenge our victims is the right course. Should we continue to condemn the present-day Turk for the actions of their ancestors? All that has ended now: today we have a free independent Armenia. We should forgive and celebrate." The writer continues, "What about our younger generation? Should they be victims of our lament; our tragic pictures, our sad songs?"

How many wrong conclusions can we draw from such presumed premises? April 24 is not about sad songs, ranting oratory, stupid or otherwise. April 24 has its agenda. If somehow that is lost, then we have missed the mark, ergo the fiery, and most often stupid, oratory. Yes, indeed, I also lament being subjected to this inspired stupidity.

The act of genocide was so well planned and executed by the Turk that the intellectual treasures of the race, which flowered after centuries of cultivation by our great scholars, the ancestors of the monks of this monastery where I am writing this article, became its first victims. They were the first to be collected and slaughtered and, if for nothing else, the Turk bears the guilt of this barbaric action, and is worthy of condemnation. We were left without those who were worthy of leadership and direction.

Indeed, there is an agenda for April 24, and it must begin for us, and especially for us as Christians, before the Holy Altar of God. We are the followers of Him who taught us from the mountaintop:

"Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall find comfort." It is from there that we seek answers and direction as to the why of the horror of the murder of a nation.

What a wonderful example our heroic ancestors gave us! After the loss of everything, they stood steadfast in faith, in the "valley of the shadow of death." One day, in God's eternity, I pray that we will come to an understanding of His will.

Thank God, some Armenians were directed to come to America. If we belong any place other than in our homeland, it is in America. The Constitution of the United States was first written not in Philadelphia, but 1325 years before on the battlefield of Avarair, and with the unique conviction of its authors fighting to the death with undying faith in a moral victory. The Constitution did not extract such a ransom from its authors.

The founding fathers in Philadelphia spoke of "the injustice of one man being the injustice of all mankind."

This must be our mandate as Americans.

What about our mandate as Christians, we who are so great at bragging to an uncaring world that we are the first Christian nation? What about Christ's words about "the injustice done to the least of His brethren being done also unto Him?"

It is not for us to condemn or forgive the Turks. That is all within the province of God. It is for us a moral obligation to condemn genocide, the brutality of man, the rape of a nation, be it under the guise of German nationalism, or Turkish fanaticism. With the condition and disposition of repentance and full restitution, we must forgive but never forget. Mankind must never forget the bloody smoldering fires of our sainted Armenian martyrs. To forget is to relegate Armenia and the Armenians to the everlasting abyss of history.

What about this "raging hostility and anger towards Turkey, stoning the present-day Turks for the acts of their ancestors?" Who is in denial of the genocide, the ancestors, or the present-day Turks? Who spends millions rewriting Turkish history and establishing chairs of study in our American universities with the themes of denial of any genocide of Armenians, and lately with a new twist, the Armenian Genocide against the Turks? If that is the case, what in hell are they doing on our ancestral lands? The irony is that present-day Turkey does this with our American tax dollars.

How can I have anything but raging anger towards Turkey, with its attitude towards present-day Armenia? Please tell me that Sumgait is not Turkey, and send the blood to my head. If ever the Armenian has an obligation to rage to a world, it is now, in a century that has seen the worst bloodshed in the history of man. Could it be that this was the plan of He whom we claim to follow?

Please, why is it that we so confuse our priorities? I certainly celebrate American Independence Day with happy songs, and all the trappings of that festive day, but I also mark Memorial Day, and Veteran's Day with the proper attitude of solemnity.

Indeed, we **must** sing our sad songs on April 24. How could we do otherwise? In this regard, as an American Armenian, I have sought my role and obligation as a musician. The organ is my vehicle and it has been called the "king of instruments." Its greatest strength is in the expression of man's most profound thoughts and feelings.

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I found in the young German composer Julius Reubke all those ideals in his monumental "Sonata on the 94th Psalm" expressing the proper sentiments of April 24. I also took it upon myself to beg some of our great composers to write special works for me. My dear friend Richard Yardumian wrote a monumental piece for me, called "Chorale-Fantasia", based on the Easter Introit "Ee Kerezman." Its hushed conclusion transcends music and becomes a theological statement, through its quotation of Armenian liturgical themes. My beloved brother Haroutiun Dellalian wrote a "Requiem Trionfale" for me, a work that he never lived to hear performed. That piece says it all in Haroutiun's distinctive musical style.

I asked a non-Armenian to write for me a Concerto for Organ and Full Orchestra, which is dedicated to the Armenian Genocide. It is a masterpiece in three movements: 1. Trial and Condemnation. 2. Death. 3. Rebirth. The work is that of Jeffrey Brody, a Boston-born composer who has taken the same path of study as I did. He is himself an organist and brings that dimension to his score. This is not music for the faint of heart. It is bold in its strength, filled with theology, symbolism, and based on Armenian themes. It has had four performances since its creation, and on April 24, 2000, I will per-

form the work in Rome's St. Peter's Basilica.

Yes, indeed, we must all do our own thing!

On this holy land of San Zenone, in this very sacred Mekhitarist house, I awoke one night about 1:30 with tears in my eyes as I was at mid-point in this writing. I awoke with thoughts of my mother and father, both of whom suffered terribly through the genocide. Never did they bare their souls to the family, but we were very well aware of the deep wound. My thoughts were of my father just before his death. I must say that my father was larger than life itself, never sick a day in his life, only to be struck at the end with cancer. My mother cared for him with loving care, always cheerful, and with the hope that he was going to conquer his condition. In the final agony of the untold pain of that horrible sickness, as he lay unconscious, he cried for his mother. For the first time in three years, I saw with horror my mother break down as she cried, "My husband calls for his mother, a mother he was denied, a mother who was murdered by the Turks when he was three months old, a mother that he never knew!"

Remember, please, April 24 and never forget!

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San Zenone**