

GÉRARD DÉDÉYAN

AGO DEMIRDJIAN

NABIL SALEH (+)

Pour mon collègue de l'université d'Athènes, Hervé Georgelin, éminent chercheur et traducteur pour tant de sujets qui m'intéressent, à commencer par Smyrne, mais aussi pour les populations non musulmanes de l'Empire ottoman, Juifs, Arméniens et autres chrétiens orientaux de notre temps, sujets abordés diulement, grâce à une précieuse polyglotie,

The Righteous and People of Conscience of the Armenian Genocide

en très amical hommage, et en souvenir des rencontres avec mon père, Charles Dédéyan, gardien, avec son frère Christian, de la mémoire de Smyrne,

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Gérard Dédéyan

Preface by

YVES TERNON



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TESTIMONIES REVEALING A RESPECT FOR OR
COMPROMISE WITH THE CONCEPT OF 'ADĀLA

Armenians who escaped the genocide were able to do so for a variety of different reasons, as the historian Hasmik Tevosyan has documented. Many of the Armenians of Smyrna and Constantinople were saved by the presence of foreign diplomatic missions in the cities. Some Armenians were spared because they possessed valuable skills that the Young Turks did not want to lose. Some women married Muslims, most of them against their will, and converted to Islam, while children were placed in Turkish families as slaves or were adopted by couples who were unable to have children. Some Armenians escaped under the protection of the Russian army (notably in Van) or the French navy (at Musa Dagh). Some, for the most part orphans, were taken in and rescued by missionary organizations. And others, more rarely, survived the massacres thanks to their Kurdish or Turkish neighbours, who hid them at the risk of their own lives. Many of these cases involve rescuers whose names have not come down to us. And not all of them were disinterested. Given the dangers involved and the religious differences between the Armenians, Turks and Kurds, which were widely exploited by Young Turk propaganda, there were few people prepared to take the risk of saving the Armenians.

Yet there were still instances of rescues for humanitarian motives. In the town of Bayburt, the Turkish townspeople were generally opposed to the deportations, to the point where Mehmet Nusret Bey, *kaymakam* of the *kaza* of Bayburt, felt obliged to execute three Turks, so making an example of them and encouraging a more cooperative attitude. In May 1915, the elite of the town's Armenian

community were arrested and hanged, while the first convoy of deportees left the town on 4 June, to be followed by others throughout the month. Despite local opposition to the deportations, the deportees were massacred, and very few Armenians survived.

Some Armenian families entrusted one or more of their children to Kurdish or Turkish families before they were deported. The missionary Henry H. Riggs, a witness to the genocide, described the attitude of many Turks towards the Armenians with whom they had lived side by side:

Their Moslem neighbours were inclined to side with them rather than with the government, in spite of all the efforts of the government to inflame the minds of the Turk, the more intelligent Turks for the most part remained either indifferent or positively friendly to the Armenians. Some were very outspoken in their condemnation of the government and expressed their sympathy with the Armenians. There were plenty of Turks, of course, who gladly took advantage of this opportunity to clear up old scores with their Armenian rivals, or of enriching themselves at their expense. But there was no outbreak of popular fanaticism on the part of the Turks. In fact, we who had lived all our lives among the Turks and knew something of their ways said again and again at the time, 'This is not a Turkish outbreak.' It was altogether too cold, too calculating, too efficient. The common people liked it not.

So it happened that the Turks individually did much to help their friends and rescue them from their fate. Some did it from real neighbourly kindness, some from motives of cupidity or worse. At first, a large number of Armenians took refuge in the homes of their Turkish neighbours hoping thus to be overlooked in the general search. Soon, however, it became apparent that the government officials would not tolerate this. Threats of severe punishment and the systematic searching of suspected Muslim houses by the police soon brought most of the Turks to terms, and all but a few of the Armenians so sheltered fell into the hands of the police. Some were directly betrayed by their protectors, but more were secretly turned out to shift for themselves, which was little better.

There were some few Turks, however, who were either fearless enough or influential enough to defy the threats of the government.

In spite of repeated commands and threats, they kept the Armenians whom they were sheltering out of sight of the police, and refused to reveal their hiding places.

The historian Taner Akçam, a professor at Clark University, Massachusetts, dedicated his remarkable study *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility* to the memory of the Turkish businessman Haji Halil, 'a devout Muslim Turk who saved the members of an Armenian family from deportation and death by keeping them safely hidden for over half a year, risking his own life'. He first heard this story from Greg Sarkissian, president of the Zoryan Institute (a registered charity in the United States and Canada that promotes the study and recognition of genocide, with particular reference to the Armenian genocide), whose own family had been saved by Haji Halil, who hid the eight members of his mother's family in his home for some six months. Halil had promised his Armenian business partner that if anything should happen to him, he would take care of his family. He kept his promise, hiding the family in his home and taking on the responsibility of feeding eight extra mouths, which was no easy feat in wartime. It was vital to avoid getting caught, moreover, as he and his family were risking their lives. To avoid suspicion, he smuggled extra food into the house at night. When two of the Armenian children died, he buried them in secret. His servants knew that he was sheltering Armenians, but none of them betrayed him. In risking his life to protect the family, he thus honoured his promise to his Armenian friend.

The accounts collected from survivors and eyewitnesses of the genocide by the ethnologist Verjine Svazlian shed light on stories of Turks who rescued Armenians, and their mixed reasons for doing so. Armand Arapian bore witness to the way in which his grandfather Armenak Arapian was saved:

Armenak must have been born in 1875. His father used to call him Artin. He had five brothers and one sister. The whole family lived in Akşehir in central Turkey. They had grown wealthy importing and exporting furs and opium, which it was not yet illegal to grow. According to family legend, when you came out of Akşehir railway station there were three immense warehouses that belonged to our

family. Armenak was the accountant for the family business. In 1912, he married Myriam Mesdjian, my grandmother, who was then sixteen. The celebrations lasted for a whole week, as was the tradition among wealthy families. In 1913, my aunt, Verkine, was born, followed in June 1915 by my father, Movsês. It was with these two tiny children that the family was deported across Turkey to Der Zor. During this first exodus, Myriam's brother died of typhus. On the journey, Armenak managed to save his family by hiding in the basement of a house belonging to a Turkish family. History does not relate whether or not their protectors were Righteous people.

This story demonstrates the difficulty that so often surrounds the designation of 'Righteous'. It is not always easy to determine whether the motivations of rescuers were purely altruistic, or whether there was an element of self-interest at work.

Taron Khachatryan describes how a Kurdish woman promised her Armenian neighbours that she would save their seven-year-old son. She was true to her word. When officials came knocking at her door, she claimed that she had killed all the Armenians who had crossed her path with her own hands. In fact, she kept the child with her for a year.

One unnamed witness told how a Turkish soldier, whose name is now forgotten, saved an entire Armenian family in Smyrna. He went to warn them of the danger of a massacre, mounted the children on donkeys and led the family to the port, where they were able to board a ship to Greece and so avoid the massacres. The Armenian family later learned that their Turkish rescuer and all his family had been executed for helping the Armenians flee.

Mariam Karatchian, born in 1903 in Adiyaman, had been left under a tree with her little brother while their mother went to beg for a crust of bread, when a Turkish gendarme found them and killed the little boy by crushing him with a rock. A Kurdish woman who witnessed the scene took pity on the little girl, leading her away in case she suffered the same fate as her brother. Hiding the girl in her tent, she managed to heal her wounds by applying a salve and took care of her until the Americans arrived and took her to the orphanage in Aleppo.

Hagop Mourad Mouradian, born at Ferteck in 1903, was entrusted by his mother to a Kurdish family, which was to prove his salvation. All the Armenians in the village were massacred, with the exception of a few who were also sheltered by Kurds. When he grew up, Hagop married a young Kurdish woman, and together they had three children.

Born in Kessab, also in 1903, Kioulinia Dzerouni Moussoyan recounted how she and her family were deported in 1915. On the march, her elderly grandfather was struggling to walk when a Turkish gendarme approached and struck him. Kioulinia's mother screamed at the gendarme, asking him if he had no shame in hitting an old man. Suddenly seized by remorse, the gendarme went to find camels for the family to ride on, but the grandfather died of thirst on the way. The rest of the family did not reach Der Zor but stopped in the town of Hama, where a Turk offered them shelter in his house and did all he could to help them. It was thanks to the goodness of this family that Kioulinia's family survived.

In addition to the children who were saved in this way, some Turks showed their gratitude to Armenians who had previously helped them by saving Armenian lives in return during the genocide and so running all the attendant risks. We know little about a man named Hac Halil Boum, for instance, except that he rescued an Armenian who had previously saved his own life in prison. One of the torments inflicted on the Armenians by the Turks was to entomb them in ancient Persian underground water cisterns, where they were forced to try to survive among the decomposing bodies of their compatriots. One man, Elias Djerdji Nasri Nazarian, was able to survive thanks to Hac Halil Boum, who managed to get him out of the cistern in which he was imprisoned.

Yeghya Demirdjian recounted how her father Haroutioun and his younger brother Hayk were rescued in Mamahatun (present-day Tercan). The two boys, then fourteen and twelve, had already lost their father, a man of good reputation who had gone to a political meeting and never returned, probably having been killed on his way there or on the way back. When the deportation order was posted on the walls of the town, the family's Kurdish neighbours, grateful for the many kind deeds the father had done for them, went to find his widow and offered to hide her family with them. She chose to

leave the town with her fellow Armenians, taking her two youngest children with her, as she thought that her skills as a nurse would be useful and ensure her survival. But realizing that Haroutioun and Hayk, being older boys, would be killed as soon as they left the town, she decided to entrust them to the Kurds and left them to live with them. One day, while the boys were watching the cows with the family's daughter, the girl's cousin, a gendarme, came and told her to hand over the children to him. She refused and gave him a slap. When she told her father about the altercation that evening, he went to see his brother and complained about his son the gendarme's attitude. When the son came home, his father beat him with a stick and forbade him ever again to dare ask for the Armenian children whom his uncle had taken in. Never again did he do so, for in these regions the respect commanded by the father of a household outweighed all other considerations. After the Armistice, the boys left for Malatya before going on to the refugee camps in Aleppo. The family later settled in France, where Haroutioun's granddaughter would meet and marry a young Kurd who was as distinguished in his character as he was in his lineage.

Antranig Tchachikian told how his family was saved by a Turkish gardener. Born in Tripoli to a German father, a civil engineer who specialized in building bridges, and an Armenian mother, Archalouys, Antranig was caught up in the full horror of the genocide. Despite being German, his father was killed, along with his brother, and the rest of the family was sent into exile. They were saved by their Turkish gardener, who had been well treated by the family and felt gratitude and loyalty towards them. When the massacres began, he hid Archalouys, Antranig and his sister in the long grass under one of the bridges that his father had built, and despite all the risks smuggled food to them. When the Americans reached Tripoli, the family were able to sail for Greece, safe and sound, thanks to the Turkish gardener who had saved their lives.

In Smyrna, the family of Antranig Semerdjian also owed their lives to the kindness of a Turkish neighbour. In 1918, the family lived in a quarter of the city that was too close to the French consulate for the Turkish army to be able to perpetrate a massacre there. So the Turks ordered the Armenians not to leave their houses, in the hope that they would die of starvation. The three Semerdjian

children, Antranig, Khatoun and Vartivar, the eldest of whom was just thirteen, remembered writhing on the floor, tortured by hunger pangs, when a Turkish neighbour knocked on their door and brought them food. Despite the risks, she continued to feed the family for several months. Eventually, the family were able to board a French ship bound for Athens, where they arrived unharmed.

Similarly, Assadour Hovsep Menetchian, born in Afyonkarahisar in 1907, was saved thanks to a Turkish neighbour who came to see his mother and asked her to leave her door open and come and take refuge with her. When the police knocked on the Turkish neighbour's door, she pretended that a high-ranking official lived there. The police believed her, and thanks to her goodness and presence of mind the family was saved.

The story told by Jean Kujumjian is particularly remarkable. When a convoy of deportees left Adana for the terrible fate that awaited them at Der Zor, the gendarmes who were escorting the march, knowing that the deportees would be massacred when they arrived at their destination, diverted the convoy in a different direction, thus saving large numbers of Armenians from certain death. Afterwards, they could never go back to their homes in Adana, since if they did so they risked being hanged for disobeying orders.

After the genocide, there were some Turks who showed kindness to the survivors. At this stage, they were not running the same risks as those who had intervened during the genocide, but their good deeds were not forgotten by the survivors. As a young woman, Esther Armine Zerahian recalled how the director of the orphanage at Samsun, whom she called 'Müdür Effendi' ('Mr Director') and about whom she knew nothing except that he was Bulgarian, was kind to the orphans. It was to him, she testified, that she owed her life.

These Righteous and people of conscience were driven by a variety of motives. Some risked their lives out of friendship, others out of compassion, others again out of gratitude towards Armenians who had been their benefactors, and some because they were doubtless unable to stifle the instinct to save a child. Sometimes the Islamic faith also played a part. The Islamic concept of *'adāla* or justice, as we are reminded by Fatma Müge Goçek, forbade the massacre of innocents, echoing the hadith describing how Muhammad put the Jewish Ben-i Kureysh tribe to the sword for rebelling against him but spared the innocents and children. Hence

Muslims with a true understanding of Islam could be prompted to undertake good actions by their religious sentiments.

There were also some Turks and Kurds, finally, who might have enabled some Armenians to survive, but who could not by any means be described as Righteous. Some officials and gendarmes agreed to help Armenians escape deportation in return for money. The father of Serop Chloyan, born in Kharpert in 1903, gave a sum of money to a high-ranking Turk in the hope that he would help. This proved to be of no avail, however, since several members of the family were deported all the same, and those who remained were reduced to slavery. Other Armenians did manage to escape the death marches by paying, but it was not unusual, nevertheless, for people who had been paid to save Armenians in this way to fail to honour their promises once the deal had been done. Rescuing Armenians was a punishable offence, after all, with sanctions that grew in severity as the genocide unfolded. Whether or not they demanded money from them, the rescuers of Armenians were risking their lives.

The fate of Selim Agha, the Kurdish chief of a small village in Sassoun province who bribed a Turkish officer, hoping to save several Armenian families by declaring they worked for him, is testimony to the gravity of the danger. While Selim Agha was genuinely one of the Righteous, the Turkish officer who took his bribe had no intention of honouring his word. A few days later, Selim Agha was beheaded for helping the Armenians, and his severed head was sent to Muş as a warning to other Kurds who might be tempted to act as rescuers.

Papken Injarabian related how as a child, after seeing a number of his family perish during the genocide, he was abducted by a Kurd and reduced to slavery as the man's goatherd, ill-fed and barefoot. In four years of captivity, he had nine different masters. He eventually managed to escape, despite the threats of his last master, and reached the orphanage at Urfa.

A young Turkish woman called Sevim told how her Armenian grandmother had seen her entire family killed in front of her. The man who had massacred her family then forced her to marry him and convert to Islam, changing her name to Ayse. She was terrorized by her husband throughout her marriage, and only when close to death did she dare speak Armenian again.

Zepur Medznakian recounted how, surrounded by corpses, she had cried out that she would convert to Islam. A Kurd tossed her a blood-soaked chemise and took her away with her seriously wounded sister. When he saw how serious their wounds were, he abandoned the girls on a riverbank. They hid in a wheat field and early next morning spotted some Kurds who had been sleeping in the open, as was customary in the summer. The Kurds gave the girls some food, then made them work for them. When Zepur caught typhus, the girls were handed over to the government, who put them in prison. There they were forced to convert to Islam and given Turkish names, Zubideh and Zelkha.

While these forced marriages and conversions may have enabled some Armenians to survive, they contributed to the annihilation of their identity. As Ugur Ümit Üngör points out, 'what was saved was merely the physical existence of this or that individual. The self was stripped of all its Armenian characteristics, including Armenian names, and these were buried deep in private memories and banished from the public memory.'

In the considerable research work that remains to be done in identifying the Righteous of the Armenian genocide, distinguishing between Righteous people who acted purely out of humanitarian and altruistic concerns, rescuers who were motivated by self-interest, and slave masters who preserved Armenian lives while contributing to the destruction of their identity thus presents a challenge, the resolution of which is as difficult as it is necessary.

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