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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

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MEHMET CELAL BEY (1863–1926)

The 'Turkish Oskar Schindler'

Mehmet Celal Bey, known as the 'Turkish Oskar Schindler', was born into a distinguished family in the suburbs of Constantinople in 1863; his father was a government official in the Ministry of Finance, and his grandmother was the daughter of Sultan Abdul Hamid. After a good education at the Mekteb-i Mülkiye-i (now the Faculty of Political Science, University of Ankara) and in Germany, he occupied a string of very senior positions: *vali* of Erzurum (1910–11), *vali* of Aydin (1911–12), minister of the interior (1911–12) and minister of agriculture (1913). On 11 August 1913, he was appointed *vali* of Aleppo, before being transferred to Konya on 4 June 1915 for refusing to obey his orders to deport the Armenians. In October 1915, he was once again dismissed from his post for the same reason.

When the Armenian genocide began, Celal Bey was in post in Aleppo. He immediately realized that the deportations were part of a programme to exterminate the Armenians. Aware too that their annihilation ran counter to the interests of the Ottoman Empire, he was tireless in his denunciations of this senseless plan while also attempting to mitigate the extremity of the orders he received. He notably refused to deport the Armenians of Antioch (Antakya) and did everything in his power to save his Armenian friends Krikor Zohrab and Vartkes Serengülian, managing to secure temporary reprieves for them. When these two Armenian members of the Ottoman Parliament (the former also being one of the greatest writers in the Western Armenian language) were arrested and sent to

Aleppo, Celal Bey refused to put them in prison and instead housed them in a hotel, where he allowed them to receive visitors. When he received orders to transfer them to Diyarbekir, where certain death awaited them, he refused to do so and instead arranged to keep them in Aleppo. After Celal Bey was forced to resign his post in Aleppo, the two deputies were ordered to be transferred to Urfa (Edessa), but they were murdered on the journey. Krikor Zohrab was bludgeoned with stones, shattering his skull.

Celal Bey's actions in coming to the aid of the Armenians were prompted by more than one motive. First and foremost, even if the aim of eliminating everyone who was not Turkish by birth was viewed by a large number of high-ranking Ottomans as an end that justified any means, his own conscience would not allow him to support the massacre of innocent people, 'I cannot go against my conscience', as he later wrote in his *Memoirs* (published in 1918 in the Turkish-language journal *Vakit*).

Convinced as he was that the Young Turk leaders were impervious to the spirit of justice and immune to any feelings of compassion and would never change their views, he also endeavoured to impress on them the serious harm that their policy towards the Armenians would inflict on the nation. He wrote a personal and confidential letter to Talaat Pasha containing a passage that he reproduced in his *Memoirs*:

Working towards the destruction of the Armenians will bring a loss to the country that it would be impossible to make up for in the years to come. Were all our enemies to consult with each other for months to find the best way to inflict damage upon us, they would not be able to conceive of a greater calamity.

While in post at Aleppo, Celal Bey also tried to alert the foreign diplomats there—especially the Italian and American consuls—to the urgency of the situation, urging them to push their governments to intercede on the Armenians' behalf. For this, he was accused of 'betraying his country' by the local branch of the CUP, before being exonerated by an inquiry. When he was removed from his post and ordered to transfer to Konya in June 1915, he declared that if the Armenians in Konya were due to be deported, he would not accept the new post. The government gave him an assurance that the

Armenians in the city would not be touched, but he soon realized that these were mere empty words. Konya occupied a key position in the organization of the deportations, as it lay on the route between Adapazarı and Bozanti: its railway station thus became a transit or regrouping centre for the deportees, and all the deportation marches from western Anatolia and Thrace converged there.

Before Celal Bey was appointed, the Armenians of the province had endured the regime of Azmi Bey (formerly chief of the Istanbul police), who extorted money from them, organized searches and refused to allow medics or missionaries to dispense any aid to the deportees. He even claimed that local Armenians should count themselves fortunate: 'The policies adopted with regard to the Armenians cannot now be modified. The Armenians of Konya should consider themselves lucky because they have been deported no further than to a neighbouring province.'

Celal Bey's appointment to Konya was therefore a relief for the Armenians: he refused to allow them to be deported and grasped every opportunity to try to save them, sending regular demands to the authorities to provide shelters for the deportees, writing letters denouncing the inhuman cruelty of the policy and delaying the departure of the convoys. His frustration was now intolerable, as he described in his *Memoirs*:

My position at Konya was that of a man sitting on the bank of a river without any means of saving anyone from its waters. Blood flowed like water, and thousands of innocent children, blameless old men, defenceless women and strong young men were borne away to oblivion on those currents. Anyone I could save with my hands and fingernails I did save, the rest vanished never to return.

It did not take long for Celal Bey to realize that the aim of the deportations was the liquidation of the Armenians. He shared these fears with the Italian and American consuls in Aleppo, with whom he had formed firm friendships. In confidence, he informed them that he had received secret directives ordering him to destroy the Armenian population, and that this went against his conscience. He was convinced that the only way of tempering the savagery of these orders was to warn the German and Austrian empires (which with the kingdom of Italy formed the Triple

Alliance). The hectoring, peremptory tone of the telegrams he received from Talaat Pasha clearly indicates the risks he was running in refusing to obey orders. After finally dismissing him from office, the minister of the interior wrote:

How many local Armenians remain who have not been deported and are being held in situ, in accordance with my latest instructions, and how many have arrived from other regions and have been temporarily detained, also according to my instructions? And how many Armenians are there intended for other destinations? Supply me with detailed answers within three days.

Pointing out to Celal Bey that state censorship was likely to hinder the delivery of his messages, the Italian consul offered to take them to Constantinople himself with a letter of trust.

In August 1915, Celal Bey left Konya to travel to Istanbul for medical treatment. In his absence, the local CUP members deported some 3,000 local Armenians. A second convoy was about to leave when Celal Bey returned and halted it, so providing temporary rescue for the Armenian families, whom he allowed to return to their homes, most of which had already been looted. For as long as Celal Bey remained in post, the Armenians of Konya stayed there, but after he was dismissed from office in October 1915, they were all deported. Even when still in office, Celal Bey had little room for manoeuvre, and despite his opposition some Armenian men were in fact deported. Dr William S. Dodd, chief physician of the American Red Cross Hospital in Konya, noted:

All reports that the Government are providing food are absolutely false, those who have money can buy, those who have none beg or starve ... How many can survive it? ... The *vali* is a good man but almost powerless. The Ittihad Committee and the Salonika Clique rule all. The Chief of Police seems to be the real head.

Celal Bey had sent a number of telegrams to the Sublime Porte criticizing the treatment of the Armenians. As has been seen, he stated that the destruction of the Armenians would be an irreparable loss for the country as the reason for his opposition to these atrocities, and declared that a simple sense of civic duty prevented him from taking part in an action that he believed was fundamentally damaging to the interests of his country:

Scarcely could I have imagined that a government would ever be capable of exterminating its subjects in such a way, its human capital which must be considered as the nation's greatest wealth. I believed that these measures derived from the desire to temporarily remove the Armenians from the field of operations, necessitated by military considerations. This was the reason behind my telegrams to the Minister of the Interior asking for funds to build camps to house the deported Armenians. By way of funds, I was sent an individual bearing the title of 'immigrant settlement agent', whose mission was in fact to deport the Armenians en masse.

In halting the deportations and allaying the sufferings of the deportees, Celal Bey achieved the impossible, contriving to avoid the forced departure of some 30,000 Armenians from Konya. His dismissal on 3 October 1915 put an abrupt end to his actions, however. He was replaced by Ferid Bey, known as Hamal Ferid (Ferid 'the Porter'), the secretary in charge of the CUP in Konya, who with the support of the most prominent party members in the city applied the deportation policy with extreme ruthlessness.

The close links between the deportation of the Armenians and the confiscation of their possessions cannot be over-emphasized. With Celal Bey gone, Konya became, as Raymond Kévorkian notes, a marketplace in which Turks would go round Armenian houses and tell the owners that they should hand over their belongings, since soon they would no longer need them as they would be dead. When the Armenians were deported, a commission for 'abandoned property' seized their houses and bank accounts. An appeal by Karekin I Khachadourian, archbishop of Konya, to the commanding officer of the German troops stationed in the city had no effect.

In the years after these events, Celal Bey and his family faced considerable financial difficulties. In 1918, he and a German partner set up a modern farm project in the Eskişehir region, but the machinery they imported from abroad was confiscated by the Turkish authorities. He later started an insurance company. At the end of the war, a new era opened up for him. While the CUP were accused of leading the country into the abyss, Celal Bey, who had done everything to oppose them, was appointed governor of Adana, then under French control (Cilicia was under the French mandate from 1919 to 1921). Once in post, he made contact with Mustafa

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Kemal to lend him his support in his struggle against the Allied occupation of Turkey. This did not prevent him from offering his continuing support to the Armenians, writing to Mustafa Kemal to ask him to be merciful to the Armenians of Cilicia so as not to provide them with a pretext for supporting the French.

Celal Bey subsequently became mayor of Istanbul, occupying the post from July 1921 to March 1922. He died on 11 February 1926; his funeral cortege in Istanbul was followed by a large crowd made up of both Armenians and Turks.

A man of wide education, liberal values and high morals, Mehmet Celal Bey obeyed his conscience, acting with unimpeachable honour throughout his country's darkest years.

Sources and further reading

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