

## **A General Outline of The Conference and Some Conclusive Remarks**

by *Boghos Levon Zekiyian*

Dear friends and colleagues,

We have today the not easy task in itself, and rather the highly arduous task in our special case, of drawing conclusions from our meeting, of striking a first balance of our debates, of weighing the pros and cons of several instances and commitments that we have been discussing of.

A first remark that becomes imperative regards the difference of cultures, of “*langages*”, of mental and behavioural categories between us. This is an important factor not to ignore for a constructive dialogue not only, I think, between Armenians and Turks but in general between all and the various components that have taken part in the debates.

Having made this preliminary statement, it seems to me that we can share the following considerations:

i. I would start with Ruben Safrastyan’s paper which considered Tutkish-Armenian relations on the background of their centuries long mutual relationship. In the limits of time that he could share, Safrastyan gave us a general frame of that centuries-long mutual relationship that had, he underlined, both positive and negative aspects, and this not only as far as political relations are concerned, but also other levels and dimensions of life: cultural, linguistic, every day’s reality, etc. One could ask why the organizers asked to develop this subject rather to an Armenian. A plurality of interventions might of course have been suitable. We hope that this may be achieved in a near future. In any case, it was important, we think, to have an initial report on this topic by an Armenian, since with whatever terms one may name and explain what happened in 1915, there is an unchallengeable reality: it is the Armenians who lost almost everything in that part of their historic homeland and of their most rooted colonies through Western Anatoly.

ii. As far as the concept, the reality and typologies of genocide are at issue, we had a general framework by the papers both of Pier Paolo Portinaro, Israel Charny and Frank Chalk. Even if there is not yet a univocal definition of genocide in all its possible forms and dimensions, we can say nevertheless that the UN Treaty’s basic definition is the common starting point from which any further research and debate on the matter can develop.

iii. A point which seems to me of foremost importance to make is that almost all papers presented here, by scholars of whatever nationality or ethnic origin, agreed considering the Armenian case as a genocide in the proper and true sense of the term.

iii. Another issue that came out, especially from Raymond H. Kevorkian’s paper and from some interventions during the debate, was that displacements of various populations took place in the Ottoman Empire in those decades between the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. What happened, however, with Armenians and which the official Turkish version calls *tehcir* (deportation) was very different from the other displacements since all Armenians were deported wherever they were, and as Prof. Halil Bertkay pointed out very clearly, for the simple and unique reason that they were Armenians. The common assumption that the Armenians of Istanbul/Konstantaniye and Izmir were exempted from those measures should be now revisited, according to some documentary evidence adduced by Taner Akçam during an intervention in the debate, since a number of Armenians of those cities were also deported in the same way and for the same reasons.

iv. An important issue that has been exposed, by Prof. Hermann Goltz, very clearly and with adequate evidence, is the German complicity in the Armenian genocide. We have not yet a clear and unequivocal statement on this point by any government of Federal Germany.

v. There is the very important issue of taboo. Upon this question a first light was shed by Mme H el ene Piralian whose paper moved from her book *G enocide et transmission* which

introduced in recent years, together with Janine Altounian's parallel works, the psychoanalytical approach into the studies on Armenian Genocide. Piralian's keen observations regarding both Armenians and Turks as to their involvement in the death process, even if for different and, mostly, opposite reasons, and as to the possible ways of rescue should be made, I think, the object of ongoing scholarly reflection.

The psychological implications of both the tragedy itself and of the taboo built around it were hinted at or dealt with extensively, in different forms and ways, in the papers of Ferhat Kentel, Murat Belge, and Baskın Oran. Ways of overwhelming the taboo have been suggested, some of which have also raised reactions. I think that the common agreement that this taboo must be in any case overwhelmed can already be considered as an achievement to form a common platform to face the question how to overwhelm it, even if opinions on this last point differ.

If I am allowed to express a personal opinion, I consider the struggle for the full acknowledgement of human rights and to banish at all any kind of crime of opinion from legal practice in Turkey – as everywhere else needing reformations in this field – of absolutely primary importance. In this frame I also consider of a peculiar weight the psychological factor so that the change in Turkey's public opinion concerning the Armenian Genocide, after decades of amnesia and of brain washing – as it has been evidenced by various panellists –, may rather be the result of a conviction diffused on an enlarging social basis than of an imposition from above. There is, however, a basic condition, indispensable to achieve this goal: that a complete freedom of expression and debate may be granted to every Turkish citizen on the Armenian question as well as, of course, on whatever intellectual or historical issue. We again rejoin here the factual urgency of full freedom of thought and opinion. Turkish State officials affirm continuously: Let this matter be discussed by scholars. But when a scholar, being a Turkish citizen, goes beyond the limits of the established official version of the so called Armenian dossier, has often to face serious troubles either with authorities or with media. Even in these days the organizers of this Conference were asked on behalf of the Turkish Consulate of Milan to send the texts of the papers delivered by some of the Turkish scholars. Such a request is really incomprehensible for anyone who thinks according to the European standards of human rights and of the freedom of thought and opinion.

We can include in this point the paper by Aldo Ferrari. This paper opens a wide field of debate: Europe's historical and moral identity, its geographical borders, the nature of the European Union, the conditions for its membership, and finally, how to place the official recognition of the Armenian Genocide in this general frame.

vi. Legal aspects. These aspects were the main object of the paper delivered by Vladimir Margaryan. This topic opens a very wide range of problems as well and needs a high level of specific competence in international law. Also in this case, a plurality of approaches might have been suitable, as I already pointed out in relation to the matter touched upon by Ruben Safrastyan. One point, however, that emerges with quite evidence from Vladimir Margaryan's exposé is that in the frame of applicable law there is no space for eventual political territorial claims of Armenia from Turkey.

vii. Finally the question of guiltiness in relation to descendents. I mean here this question especially from a psychological viewpoint. There was no paper especially dedicated to this question, but it was hinted at during debates without further development. Another topic hinted at during debates were the origins and the evolution of Armenian national movements and revolutionary parties starting from the late 19th century. Let us again wish and hope that these topics too may be made object of deepening research in future meetings.

As a conclusion, it is possible, I think, to affirm that this meeting, in spite of some moments of comprehensible tension, offered a valuable demonstration and a high witness that dialogue is possible. We had indeed converging viewpoints on more than one issue, as one can also realize from these present review. At the same time this Conference has also confirmed that a more

comprehensive, and thereof a less obsessive and unilateral approach of the proposed questions can serve as an instrument of dialogue also for those who were up to now reluctant to it.

In this context, we are authorized, I believe, to affirm that we shall be able to come out from the blind alley both of negationism and of the refusal of dialogue and confrontation, at least on a scholarly ground, more than for the strength of arguments and sharp dialectics, for the balance of our approach and the soundness of our methodology.