Reading 1 — REMEMBERING RESCUE

Although many people were aware of the massacres of Armenians, very few reached out to save others. Yet the stories of ordinary Turks who did what they could to save Armenians are recorded in the stories of survivors. Too often, the stories are of nameless individuals, and, as historian Richard Hovannisian observed: “Altruism during the Armenian Genocide of 1915 is a subject that has not been studied.” He and his colleagues are working to understand the complex motivation of individuals who saved Armenians during the genocide. Scholars at the Zoryan Institute, an Armenian research organization that works to educate people about the genocide and Armenian life, believe that much can be learned from sharing the stories of Turkish rescuers.

As the leaders of the Ottoman Turkish government in 1915 were rounding up the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire for mass deportation and slaughter, a number of Turks risked their own lives to help Armenians escape certain death. There is no way to know today how many such individual acts of courage and humanity occurred in those tragic times. Our sources of information are largely anecdotal: family histories transmitted orally, autobiographies and personal memoirs, and the oral testimonies of survivors.

These acts of heroism and kindness stand in stark contrast to the cruelest savagery displayed by the perpetrators of the Armenian Genocide. Their importance is great, for several reasons. First, they are additional evidence of the Armenian Genocide. Secondly, they illustrate that, while there was indeed a genocide, not all Turks supported it. Thirdly, these stories serve to reassure us of the human potential for courage and virtue. While these stories do serve as evidence of goodness, they can not and should not be used to counterbalance the record of evil in some quantitative manner, as there are relatively few documented examples. The quality of goodness they evidence, however, may give some comfort to us all.

What did these people do? As Armenians were being rounded up, forced to sell all their possessions, save what they could carry, for a tiny fraction of their worth, and led off to what was certain death, some individual Turks hid them in their homes, while others helped them escape to safety. It must be noted that these Turks did so in the full knowledge that to be caught helping an Armenian meant summary execution…. In such highly charged circumstances, one can only imagine today the difficulty of helping Armenians escape to a safer location, or keeping secret the fact that a group of Armenians was hidden in one’s home. Providing food for them, giving them privacy for bathing and other necessities of life, were all fraught with mortal danger.

Why did they do it? One can only speculate. We know in some cases it was because of long-standing personal friendships. Yet, there are many cases where Turks helped Armenians who were strangers. It seems that basic human decency was a key element, although there are cases where some benefit to the rescuer was involved (e.g., bribes, labor, sexual exploitation, marriage to the rescuer’s chil-

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Members of Kourken Sarkissian’s family were among those that were rescued by Turks:

I am the son of genocide survivors. My father is now 90, my mother 82. His father was hanged, his mother raped and killed, and of the nine children in the family, only he and his five year old brother survived.

The story of my mother’s family was different, atypical, but not to be neglected for that reason. My maternal grandfather was hanged in front of his family, which included his pregnant wife, my grandmother, and four children between the ages of two and eight.

A Turkish businessman, Haji Khalil, had been my grandfather’s partner, and had promised to care for his family in case of misfortune. When a disaster greater than anything either of them could have imagined struck, he kept his promise by hiding our family in the upper story of his house for a year. The logistics involved were extremely burdensome: including my grandmother’s niece, there were seven people in hiding. Food for seven extra mouths had to be purchased, prepared and carried up undetected once a night 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 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 knew what he was doing. Had he been caught sheltering Armenians, he would almost certainly have shared their fate. Luckily, his household was loyal and discreet, and so I was one of the few children of my generation and neighborhood to grow up with uncles and aunts, all of whom remember the Turk Haji Khalil—may God bless his soul.

I grew up in the predominantly Armenian districts of Aleppo and Beirut, attended Armenian schools and joined Armenian organizations like the Zavarian movement. The dream of a free, independent Armenia and of the nightmarish genocide perpetrated by the Turks became the obsessions of my life. Both from Armenian organizations and from other survivors I learned that Turks had been inhuman monsters, and indeed many had
behaved as such. Yet the memory of Haji Khalil was also part of my consciousness, and so I grew up with a dichotomy, knowing the story of a humane Turkish man, his family and household.

This internalized duality taught me that truth and justice cannot be had easily; they must be searched for . . . . I want to extend my hand to the people of Turkey, to ask them to remember that though at one time their state was led by mass murderers, they also had their Haji Khalils, and that it would honor the memory of the latter to acknowledge the overwhelming truth of the genocide, to express regrets, so that the healing process may begin between our two peoples. Because without this healing mass extermination as a tool of political dominance may become more common in the future.91

CONNECTIONS

❖ Is it important to understand the motivation of rescuers? Do their actions speak louder than any words or explanations they might share?

❖ Often entire groups of people are blamed for mass atrocities like the Armenian Genocide. In an essay titled “Intervention and Shades of Altruism during the Armenian Genocide,” Richard Hovannisian writes:

Even in the extreme circumstances of 1915, there were thousands of Turks, Kurds, and others who opposed the persecution of the Armenians. Some of them tried to intervene. The testimony of the victims attests to the fact that kindness and solace were manifest amid the cruelty and suffering, and that the human spirit was never fully extinguished.

How do these stories of break down generalizations and stereotypes? How do they help the healing process?

❖ Knowing the story of Haji Khalil taught Sarkissian that “truth and justice cannot be had easily; they must be searched for.” How can stories like Sarkissian’s and Khalil’s broaden our perspective on how all people understand truth and justice?

❖ Kourken Sarkissian says “I want to extend my hand to the people of Turkey, to ask them to remember that though at one time their state was led by mass murderers, they also had their Haji Khalils.” What does he hope will happen through the acknowledgment of Turkish rescuers?