

Turks Who Saved Armenians: An Introduction

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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.¹ 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.²

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. It was common practice for the soldiers to take the rescuer to his front doorstep or a public square and shoot him for all to see. 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, labour, sexual exploitation, marriage to the rescuer's children), as well as forced conversion to Islam.³

It is rare for Armenians as a group to acknowledge that there were Turks who helped them during the Genocide, although individual Armenians are able to do so. The events of 1915-1923 were so catastrophic and so debilitating for Armenians, both physically and psychologically, that perhaps it is only after the span of some 86 years that one can begin to look at this issue with any degree of objectivity.

Some Turks feel that the Armenians blame them unfairly. They feel it exonerates them that, whatever may have happened, it happened in the Ottoman Empire, which was then a different country. Some vehemently deny that the Genocide of the Armenians ever happened, or lay the blame for it on the victims, or justify it because it was wartime, or claim that Turks suffered, too. The facts do not bear out these rationalizations,⁴ and yet they are repeated over and over, as if the repetition will make them somehow more credible. Such unconvincing efforts at face-saving do not reflect well on the honor of the Turkish people. If Turks truly want to defend their national honor and find their place among the democracies of the modern world, they must make a genuine effort to face the truth about one of the darkest pages in their history.⁵ While that truth may be very unpleasant for Turks to face, learning that there are stories of righteous Turks, and that Armenians also know these stories, handed down from their grandparents and parents, may make it a little easier.

The Republic of Armenia and Turkey are contiguous neighbors, yet they do not enjoy official diplomatic relations or the economic benefits concomitant with such relations. Armenians are injured, on many levels, that Turkey denies the Genocide. For their part, Turks are injured that they are blamed for their lack of adherence to truthfulness and democratic principles. Each country and each people has something to gain from the normalization of relations with the other, yet the dialogue between them has yet to begin. It is hoped that this modest collection of stories of Turks who saved Armenians may make it a little easier for that dialogue to begin.

From a broader perspective, scholars have questioned how people can commit genocide, and how other people can stand by and do nothing in the face of such gross violence and injustice.⁶ They remind us that we, as individuals, have a responsibility to establish in modern society a universal atmosphere which engenders and promotes the sense of caring for others.⁷ It is also hoped that, by reading these examples of how individual Turks behaved morally and altruistically towards their Armenian fellow citizens, under the most difficult circumstances, we all may learn how people can feel caring and sympathy for others.

Notes

¹ Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, "Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe." In Israel W. Charny, ed., *Encyclopedia of Genocide*, Vol. 2. Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 1999, p. 496.

² Schulweis, Harold M., in Mordecai Paldiel, *The Path of the Righteous: Gentile Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*. Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House, 1993, p. xii, xiii.

³ Richard G. Hovannisian, "The Question of Altruism During the Armenian Genocide of 1915." In Pearl M Oliner, et al., ed., *Embracing the Other: Philosophical, Psychological, and Historical Perspectives on Altruism*. New York and London: New York University Press, 1992, p. 288ff. See also *ibid.*, "Intervention and Shades of Altruism During the Armenian Genocide." In Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide: History, Politics, Ethics*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992, pp. 177ff.

⁴ See, for example, [Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The Key Elements in the Turkish Denial of the Armenian Genocide: A Case Study of Distortion and Falsification*](#). Cambridge, MA and Toronto: Zoryan Institute, 1999. See also the [Bibliography on Denial of the Armenian Genocide](#) elsewhere in this web site.

⁵ See on this, for example, Taner Akçam, "The Genocide of the Armenians and the Silence of the Turks." In Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian, eds., [Studies in Comparative Genocide](#). London: Macmillan, 1999, pp. 125-146.

⁶ See, for example, Israel W. Charny, *How Can We Commit the Unthinkable?* Boulder: Westview Press, 1982; Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996, pp. 375ff.; Eva Fogelman, *Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*. New York: Anchor Books, 1994, pp. xiv-xx; Ervin Staub, *The Roots of Evil: The Origins of Genocide and Other Group Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

⁷ Samuel P. Oliner and Pearl M. Oliner, op. cit., p. 499; Staub, Ervin, "Preventing Genocide: Activating Bystanders, Helping Victims Heal, Helping Groups Overcome Hostility." In Levon Chorbajian and George Shirinian, eds., [Studies in Comparative Genocide](#). London: Macmillan, 1999, pp. 258-259.