



April 26, 2000, Wednesday

Denial of evil history is final blow

By JOYCE APSEL

Joyce Apsel Ph.D., J.D.

Master Teacher, General Studies Program, New York University
Director, Rights Works; President, International Association of Genocide Scholars, 2001-2003

Before the invasion of Poland by the German army in 1939, Adolf Hitler made this comment in a speech to his commanding officers: "Who still talks nowadays of the extermination of the Armenians?" What lesson did the Nazi leader take from the world's failure to bring to justice those who planned and carried out the killing of the Armenians during World War I?

Hitler was referring to the genocide (genus means people; cide means killing) of the minority Armenian people ordered by Turkish leaders. Under the cover of war, the state eliminated the Christian Armenian minority through mass deportations, death marches and killings. By 1922, between 1-million and 1.5-million Armenians were killed and hundreds of thousands were refugees. The mission of ridding the Turkish state of the Armenian minority had been successful.

Though some officially denounced this terrible "crime against humanity," few individuals were made to pay for the crime, and the Turkish government continues to this day to deny that the genocide took place. What does it mean to deny past acts of atrocity? How does it affect the country where it was carried out? How does it affect the victims and their families? What signal is sent to other governments about denying rights and life to certain groups, or about considering future atrocities?

For a modern example, look in the St. Petersburg Times or other reference sources for articles on Chechnya. What do Russian officials argue is the justification for the war there? What is the position of the Chechnyan rebels? Of the people? How do you balance the rights of minorities with those of the majority? Is there anything the United States or other countries can do to help bring about an end to the conflict?

Impunity

What does the term "impunity" mean? Look it up in the dictionary: *im* is not; *punity* is punish. If an individual or a government commits a crime and gets away with it, that is impunity. One of the lessons we all are taught is that if we break rules or do something wrong, then we have to live with the consequences and take the punishment. Is it important for each of us to admit if we do something wrong or harm someone, whether through language or action? If harm is done to us, does it help if someone apologizes, admits the wrong or is punished? What happens when those who harm others get away with it? What is the legacy of that silence? Does the denial make it harder for us to forgive and forget?

Denial of genocide

One of the most extraordinary aspects of the genocide against the Armenians is that the Republic of Turkey continues to insist that the Armenians were not killed in a state-directed genocide. Because of Turkey's important strategic role in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, the United States and other countries have been reluctant to speak out against the genocide in recent years.

Refusing to allow the Armenian genocide to be denied and written out of history is essential. As noted scholar Richard G. Hovannisian writes in the collection *Remembrance and Denial: The Case of the Armenian Genocide* (Wayne State University Press, 1999):

"It has been said that denial is the final phase of genocide. Following the physical destruction of a people and their material culture, memory is all that is left and is targeted as the last victim. Complete annihilation of a people requires the banishment of recollection and the suffocation of remembrance. Falsification, deception and half-truths reduce what was to what may have been or perhaps what was not at all. . . . By altering or erasing the past, a present is produced and a future is projected without concern about historical integrity. The process of annihilation is thus advanced and completed by denial."

This month, a ruling by Britain's high court leveled a victory on this subject. Deborah Lipstadt, a historian who wrote an important book about Holocaust deniers called *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Free Press: NY, 1993), had been accused of libel by Hitler biographer David Irving. The court called Irving "anti-Semitic and racist" and rejected his charges that Lipstadt's book distorted the truth and damaged his reputation.

An early subject of Holocaust deniers was Anne Frank's diary, and neo-Nazis claimed that it was a forgery and a hoax. Otto Frank brought the deniers to court, and a 1986 scientific examination of the diary pages proved conclusively that it is authentic. After one of the first articles I wrote for this series in the St. Petersburg Times, I received a letter from a reader stating that he did not believe the diary was written by Anne Frank.

Denial of the truth of history has repercussions for each of us and our stories. As individuals and as a nation, we must face the rights and wrongs and learn from uncovering the truth of history, however painful. For example, for a long time, history books in the United States denied the degree to which U.S. history included violating the rights and lives of certain groups, such as American Indians and African-Americans. Facing the "stains" of our past is the way to begin working toward redressing the wrongs and moving forward. Human rights and dignity can be achieved only if we face the past and resolve to admit responsibility and error.

Remembrance is an important part of history. Here are two poems. The first is written by an Armenian poet, Siamanto (1878-1915), who was killed by Turkish security agents.

"And the spirits of all the dead, tonight,
Through my own eyes and soul,
Are awaiting the dawning of the light,
So that, to humanize the cruelty

Of our inhuman lives,
Perhaps from above a drop of light
May fall upon the murdered and the
murderer alike."

More than 80 years later, New Jersey-born Armenian-American poet Peter Balakian gives voice in his poetry collection *Sad Days of Light* (Carnegie Mellon Press) to memories of his Armenian grandparents and other family members who survived the 1915 genocide. With a mixture of emotions from rage to love, he records his story and that of the Armenian people. In the following poem, he traces his grandmother's terrible ordeal as she was driven from her ancestral home.

Road to Aleppo, 1915

There must have
been a flame
like a leaf
eaten in the sun,
that followed you -

a white light
that rose higher
than the mountain
and singed the corner
of your eye

when you turned
to find the screaming
trees dissolving
to the plain.

Even when the sun
dropped, there was a heat
like the ground
of needles stirring
up your legs,
and in a light
and dying wind
the throat of boys
droning like the sheep

beyond the hill
kept ringing
in your ears.
The silence

of the ground
filled the high
empty sky.

Your breath
like horizon
settled into black,
and you stuttered

every mile
to your daughter's
shorter step -

the moaning air
almost gone
filled inside
your dress.

"The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting."
- Czech novelist Milan Kundera

Dr. Joyce Apsel lectures nationally on Anne Frank, genocide and human rights. She teaches at New York University. Please address questions or comments about this series to: Floridian, Anne Frank and Human Rights, P.O. Box 1121, St. Petersburg, FL 33731, or e-mail Floridian@sptimes.com.