

NEITHER TO LAUGH NOR TO WEEP – A MEMOIR OF THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Author: Abraham H. Hartunian, Beacon Press: Boston June, 1976

The book entitled “Neither to Laugh nor To Weep – A Memoir of the Armenian Genocide”, memoirs originally written in Armenian by Abraham H. Hartunian, compiled and translated into English by Vartan Hartunian, his son, is a biography of a priest based on his personal experiences and ideas, who served in Turkey between the dates 1895-1922. In the publisher’s note part publisher introduces him as “an Armenian Protestant pastor and community leader who miraculously survived the massacres and deportations of the Armenians in Turkey from 1895 to 1922”. So when I refer to the author, I refer to both Abraham H. Hartunian, who is the author of the original text, and Vartan Hartunian, who prepared the final version of the book in English.

The author divided the book into 3 parts within the framework of time-periods and 14 chapters according to some specific experiences he had been through. For instance first part covers the dates 1872-1914, second part 1914-1918 and the third part 1919-1922. The events take place around South East Turkey and ends up in Izmir, from where his journey to United States starts. While reading the book, one wonders how all these events started and what the breaking point was that ended the peaceful co-existence and co-habitation in these regions.

There are two main points to emphasize; the signs of the author’s strong religious belonging and the reflection of the intervention of the third parties to the internal problems of Turkey (or Ottoman Empire before 1923) and how the events ended up in the eyes of the Armenians. While trying to understand the changing times in the Armenians’ eyes, it is important to underline the fact that the time periods mentioned in the book were war times when the whole country and population faces drastic, traumatic upheaval.

Starting from the first chapters; for instance at page 34, first part of the book, the author says “The English ambassador then instructed his consul

at Diyarbekir to look after our case, and one day the dragoman of the English consulate, Mr. Tovmas Mugerditchian, appeared in court.” When the author took initiative and asked for help from American and English embassies, his request was not rejected and English authorities took action. Obviously, English authorities and individuals were involved in the Armenian issue directly or indirectly according to the personal experiences told in the book. On page 40 it is also stated that “a wealthy British women, on their way toward the Armenian provinces, stopped in Severeke” and she was very much interested in hearing the situation of the churches and Armenians living in the region, she asked questions and gave a letter to A. Hartunian written by a student living in Tarsus to be delivered to his mother. Considering the fact that first part covers the years 1872-1914, before World War 1 and the unfortunate events, it is interesting to see the direct British interest in the Armenian issue.

In part 2, chapter 6, while explaining how Zaytoon was taken back by Turkish army, after Armenian rebellions, author tells his personal experiences such as preparations for the deportations in 1915. They (Zaytoonists) have been ordered to leave and go to Fundejak and Derekoy and some of the religious heads also have been summoned by Turkish officials, including Hartunian himself, to deliver the messages to Armenian community. Unfortunately there had been a battle between Armenians and Turkish army. In the end, as a consequence, Constantinople strictly ordered Armenians to leave their guns and surrender. It is interesting to see in this chapter, during all this chaos suddenly the government decides to exempt Protestants from deportation as assign of positive discrimination differentiating them from the more militant and militarily organized Gregorians, of local administration officials towards Armenians. This decision shows us that Turkish officials (at least some of them) tried to find another way or different possible solutions to solve the problem. Some even take initiatives and try to do something at the personal level. For instance: A “mutasarraf” has sent to his personal police to keep eye on the officials who have been told to search the church where Hartunian is working at and made sure that nobody attempted to do anything tricky that might put the church under a difficult situation.¹ So we can understand that during the times of first WW1, the aim of the Turkish officials was actually trying to provide security in the region, manage unfortunate events, protect the citizens in the most possible way and suppress rebellions (in a subtle or violent manner, it is a different discussion). After the order to keep Protestants it is obvious that the reason behind the deportations was not to “get rid of” from a certain group, but trying to find a solution to solve the conflicts in the region as soon as possible.

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After going through some events, in chapter 7, the author decides to approach to German missionaries and live under their protection. Germans are busy with the construction of Berlin-Baghdad railway road and they are hiring workers and covering their living expenses. According to the book, there were thousands of people working there including approximately 12 thousand Armenians.² But later on, with another order coming from the government, it has been decided to send them to Baghtche.

Under the 10th, seeing an open support to 300 French soldiers is interesting. Especially when one recalls the part about lack of food and other living facilities, he or she wonders how they managed to take care of the soldiers on the “church campus”. At the same time, during the time of preparations for the war and rebellions, Turkish aghas and religious leaders invited Armenian aghas and religious leaders in order to discuss the options other than fighting each other. The idea is to unite against French army that has been getting ready to invade Gaziantep (Aintab). Armenians did not accept this plan but most revealingly, Hartunian admits that “it would have been much more wiser cause than the one we took. At least we would have lived” but since they thought it would have been the opposite of their cause, they did not accept this offer. There is another striking fact, mentioned by the author that seven safe “military” centers in Marash included churches, hospital, an American collage and a German orphanage. It is again admitted by Hartunian that these civilian centers were to be used as “military” centers and safe places.³ Actually it is surprising to see that these civilian facilities, or supposed to be civilian, has been called as “military” centers. It explains the reason why Turkish officials were cautious towards any kind of foreign institutions, even if they were presented as religious or humanitarian institutions.

Moreover, involvement of third parties to the Armenian efforts in South East Anatolia region has been revealed in the second part as well. The author himself tells in the first part that he lived in one of the American colleges like many other Armenians who are running away did, the second part follows up with the occupation of Kahramanmaraş and Gaziantep, and vicinity, (Aintab as written in the book) by British Army. It is interesting to read that Armenians living in these regions see the occupation as their liberation. There was a very high expectation on the British Army in the way that they would fight Turkish people and “save” Armenian community. For example, the author stated that one day Armenians gathered with British officials in order to “(There was an) ... exchange of opinion about the present situation, the possibilities for the future, and about the cause and freedom of the Armenian nation”⁴. But it was

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the war times and later on, when the situation started to evolve circumstances changed, policies also changed. In Hartunian's words officials in the British army started to get closer with the Turkish officials because of "oil, mines etc."⁵ and therefore, they abandoned Armenian community. He openly writes "Oh that we had realized from the start that all the European powers were thinking only of their own gain and were ready to sacrifice the Armenians!" Actually it is more than a sentence, maybe it is kind of a declaration about the expectations and the disappointment on the European powers who were "supposed to "save Armenians". "(...) The European, Judas-like, kissing us, betrayed us. The Britisher, the Frenchman, the German, the Italian, the Russian - all the Christian powers of the world are our murderers. The Armenian nations must not forget this fact" he continues. Maybe the strongest expression of all "The Christian powers of the world are the murderers of the Christian Armenian nation!"⁶

Later on, after giving up on British Army and withdrawal of the British troops, Armenians decide to look for help from French troops that are in Antep already. In a couple of days they enter Marash with "brave Armenian volunteers" (...) "Different sentry groups, composed of Agerian, Tunusian and Armenian soldiers, were organized under the leadership of French officers, undertook to protect the city."⁷ But conclusion with the British goes for the French troops too. Starting from an unfortunate event, an Armenian volunteer was shot while patrolling around the city by a Muslim man and battle between Turkish people and joint French troops – including Armenians -⁸, French officials did not respond and react in a way Armenians expected, and in the end they felt betrayed and left alone again. The author even says that if French troops really wanted they would have taken the city but "Turk was dearly loved by Frenchman".⁹ It is possible to sense the level of "hate" in the entire book but in chapter 10, 3rd part, it is written that "at nightfall, as if to avenge the deeds of the Turks, the Armenians set mosques and Turkish houses on fire and killed few Turks they found here and there. Again the Armenians were joyous and were congratulating each other." Besides many of similar expressions, this sentence gives an idea about the general environment and how Armenian population were acting against Turks. One wonders if this feeling of hate existed since the beginning or only after all these unfortunate events among Turks, Armenians and third parties who were involved directly.

Throughout the chapters 11th, 12th and 13th the author tells the experiences he had while he is moving to Izmir (Smyrna as it is written in the book) from

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Antep and Maras (Aintab and Marash as it is written in the book). During this long journey and unfortunate events one more time we see that the author blames Europeans and Americans for what happened to them “(...) although the European showed himself most false, although the American broke faith in selfishness and fear (...)”.¹⁰ On the other hand, when he was getting prepared to move to America he gets an offer from a Greek church in Izmir as well as promises to provide safety and protection by the government of Greece. Thinking that moving to America would be much easier from Izmir and his son already lives there, he decides to accept the offer and start serving at a church again. Even though at first the Armenian community sees Greece as their liberator this time, it is possible to sense the feeling of regret of the Armenian community. Armenians first tried to communicate and act together with the Greeks when they first arrive to Izmir. It is also very important to see that the annual conference of the Bithinian Armenian Evangelical Union happened without any interruption by Turks or the government officials.¹¹ When the Turkish army passed the Afyon-Karahiser frontier Greeks decide to leave and adding the attitude of the Greek officials towards religious heads, Armenians felt like Greek diplomats and officials betrayed and left alone to death the Greek minority: “Woe unto you unjust diplomacy! Shameless, ignoble, deceitful diplomacy! The Greek nation deceived her people and betrayed them to the Turk, to be strangled by his hands! I spit on you, hellish diplomacy!”. It is quite obvious to see mistrust of Armenians on Greece as well.¹²

But as a final and conclusive statement, after all these events and long ways passed, author says “That base, murderous, Moslem Turk dealt with us better than these European Christians! If only we had known this before and dealt instead with the Turk!”¹³

Secondly, as I said before, there is a strong sense of religion and belonging in the book. Since the Armenian community gathers around the church and religious missionaries, the strong effect of religion over the ideas, mentality and social practices is quite obvious. In fact, there is a term he used that got my attention, after the occupation by the British Army his church was crowded and İbrahim Hoja, approached him and expressed his feelings about Christianity stating that he believes that the Christianity is the real religion and Islam has been corrupted. The author said that “he was sincerely happy that the door was finally open for the Christianization of Islam”¹⁴. He proceeds

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explaining his experiences by giving examples of the Muslim people who converted to Christianity. Although it is not clear whether this was the main aim of the church, this process, or the author was just expressing his strong feelings.

In general, besides the strong sense of religion and religious belonging, between the lines it is possible to see that the Armenians regret relying on Europeans and America since they did not act the way Armenians expected. During the war times circumstances change and therefore the policies of the countries change accordingly. This idea is missing in the book because author mostly focuses on the fact that Europeans and America are trying to have good relations with Turkey since they have a strong interest in the resources like mines, oil and so on in the last chapters¹⁵. Also, although Turkey (or Ottoman Empire before 1922-1923) had been through two very tough wars, First World War and Independence War, the general country-wide situation of the country is omitted in the book while analyzing what is going on and the core of the problems related with food, capabilities and general environment in the country. Particularly when he is telling some events, related with the lack of food or health facilities and secure environment, it is crucial to keep in the mind the fact that during these time periods people living around this region, without any discrimination, suffered because of many different reasons. Furthermore, not all of the deaths are related with conflicts, one should keep in the mind the fact that more Muslims also died because of the same problems Armenians faced. Nevertheless, the book gives us insights from the mouth of an Armenian priest who while defending his misgivings, inadvertently reveals concealed facts and feelings.

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