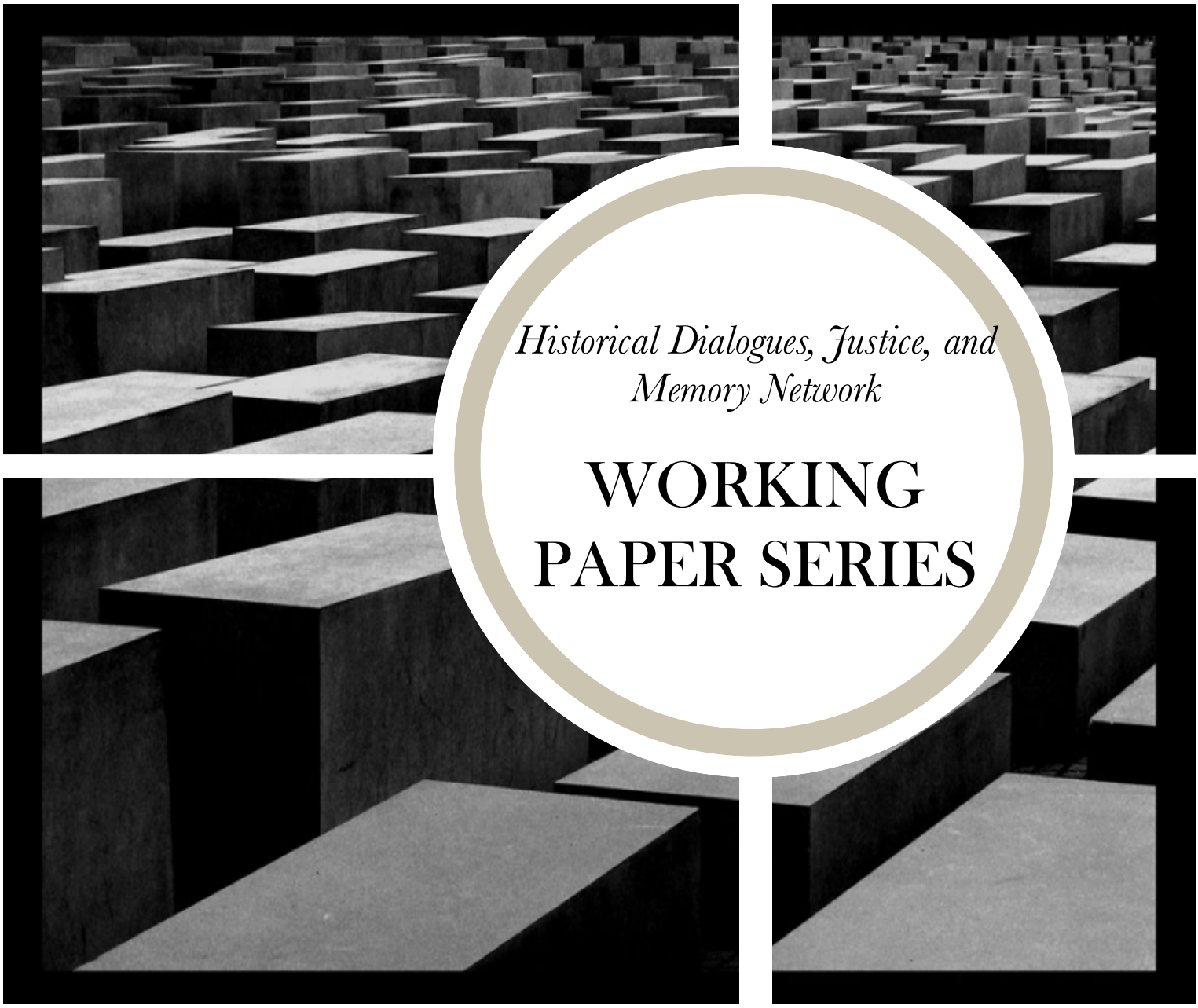

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"My Rude Awkaening"

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My Rude Awakening

Gonca Sönmez-Poole

Abstract

Part memoir and part reportage, this working paper is the personal story of one ethnically Turkish woman as she explores the historically contentious and complicated subject of the Armenian Genocide. Weaving together her own personal memoirs, along with the interviews she has held with members of a Turkish-Armenian dialogue group she founded, the writer attempts to give an honest account of her own personal journey into the subject. By going beyond what has been widely discussed within the diplomatic, political and academic circles, the author attempts to show how a Turkish individual can be re-educated and subsequently be expected to make a deliberate and definite decision about the Armenian Genocide, the kind of experience and decision that has eluded millions of Turkish people for an entire century.

> *I had a conversation long ago, like when I was in college, where somebody I was talking to said that the genocide didn't happen, and I don't know who would have said that other than a Turkish person. Maybe somebody else would have, but I'm guessing it might have been someone who was Turkish. And I remember being in this very fraught situation with this person . . . it's happening to me right now as I'm recalling it, something happened the minute he—it was a man—the minute he said that, I felt my palms tingling, and I looked down and my palms had broken out in beads of sweat, a thing that's never happened to me before or since . . . Being in the presence of someone who denied that the genocide had happened, and I was just staggered that I had this incredibly, you know, physiological response to it. And every time—my palms are tingling right now just to remember this—whenever I recall this event, that's what happens to me . . . beads of sweat, and I don't sweat much.*
>
> —Joyce VanDyke, playwright and lecturer

I don't remember the first time I met Mary,[1] but it was one of my first true conversations with an Armenian American in the Boston area. We had met for dinner, and as Mary told me the details of what happened to her grandparents before and during the year 1915, I remember not feeling too hungry anymore. Mary's maternal grandfather arrived in the United States at age fifteen, after losing his entire family to the Hamidian massacres preceding the genocide of 1915. His paternal grandfather escaped the atrocities of 1915 three times, and finally made it to the States when he was in his fifties. I remember the light bulb going on inside my head when, as Mary and I discussed the controversy over the word *genocide*, I subtly implied that it might just be possible—for the sake of peace—to call this horrendous tragedy by another name. I had never seen such an expression of intense shock, incredulity, dismay—and other uncomfortable feelings we don't usually want to witness in someone we've just met. For Mary and millions like her across the world, the reality of the Armenian Genocide is not only permanent but also profoundly personal. That's when I discovered an indisputable fact: the Turkish people have a long learning curve ahead of them when discussing the Armenian Genocide with the diaspora Armenians in the United States. The Genocide is undeniable despite any reasons the Turkish state and its defenders can come up with to deny it. And the denial, whether for personal or professional reasons, will not stand—not now, not ever!

The subject is a big one, closely linked to international human rights norms and practices. Included in these, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide nearly defines the ancestral history of every Armenian. By contrast, for most Turks, the story of the events around 1915 in Ottoman Turkey has been manipulated by a state policy coupled with an education system bent on denying the full extent of what happened to the Ottoman Armenians.[2] Add to that the Turkish people's paranoia about any connection to the Jewish Holocaust—the singular event that defines genocide for most Turks—and you've got a confused, conflicted mass of Turks who would rather avoid the subject.

The honest truth: this mass of the confused and conflicted—and for the most part simply ignorant on the subject of 1915—included me until I reached the not-so-young age of forty-eight.

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[1] Some of the names in this article have been changed for confidentiality.

[2] For a detailed analysis of the Armenian Genocide within the Turkish education system, see Jennifer M. Dixon, "Education and National Narratives: Changing Representations of the Armenian Genocide in History Textbooks in Turkey," *International Journal for Education Law and Policy*, special issue, Legitimation and Stability of Political Systems: The Contribution of National Narratives (2010), 103–26.

"What matters in life is not what happens to you but what you remember and how you remember it."
—Gabriel Garcia Marquez

On May 4, 1982, I learned that a man I knew personally had been shot to death on his way home from work. That kind and gentle man was Orhan Gündüz, Turkey's honorary consul to Boston at the time. I had stopped by his little souvenir shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts, for a quick hello—as it happened, just a few hours before he died. I remember trying to console his wife during a few phone calls, and speaking some words of condolence at his funeral. But what I remember most is how Gündüz's murder (a group named Justice Commandos against Armenian Genocide claimed responsibility) confused me so much that I spent the next twenty-five years avoiding the subject altogether.

During those early 1980s, some "influentials"—Turkish people active in the Boston area—often sent me lengthy packages of propaganda material to submit to my employer at the time, WCVB-TV. The aim was to make sure that nothing outside the official Turkish narrative (which at the time referred to the events of 1915 as the "so-called genocide") would be exposed in Western media. This was also a time when the program I worked on, the news magazine *Chronicle*, was producing stories about the richness of Boston's ethnic makeup. But there had been no profile of the relatively small Turkish community, and when it was time to air the *Chronicle* program on Armenians, I skipped work—the first and last time ever in my life. I just wasn't ready to hear the "G" word repeated over the airwaves, and I knew it most certainly would be used: that infamous, scary, to-be-avoided-at-all-costs word, *genocide*. The reasoning was quite simple if you were raised in Turkey. Like most other Turkish people of my generation, my knowledge about Armenians was limited to what I had studied in history classes: the Armenians had sided with the enemy during the waning days of the Ottoman Empire, and for that they were forever marked as traitors, for Turkey and the Turks.

Over the next two decades, I shunned the subject of the Armenian Genocide because it was too uncomfortable, too painful, and too difficult to deal with. In fact, when I earned a mid-career MA degree at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, I wrote my thesis on the rights of Turkey's Kurds, bypassing the subject of the Armenians. I was passionately involved in the question of rights for the Kurds, but avoided anything related to the Armenians.

And I raised two children, instilling in them my values of equal rights and social justice, but with one exception: I did not speak about the Armenians or the reason I had stopped going into Watertown (second-largest Armenian populated area in the United States) after the death of Gündüz, who my children had never met.

Then came the summer of 2006. I was pulled into—and never quite retrieved from—the complicated, confusing, controversial world of Armenian-Turkish relations when I was invited to work on a dialogue project, a collaboration between the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the Fletcher School[3] I had been invited as an observer-advisor for what is called a track 2 initiative in international conflict resolution and mediation practice.[4] The aim of such an effort is to bring together influential individuals from communities in conflict in the hope of "transferring up" the

[3] Turkish-Armenian Workshops/The Inter-Communal Violence and Reconciliation Project by the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. Director: Pamela Steiner, EdD. Co-Director: Prof. Eileen Babbitt. Observor-Advisors: Phil Gamaghelyan and Gonca Sönmez-Poole.

[4] For a detailed description of conflict resolution methods such as track 2, see United States Institute of Peace, "Tracks of Diplomacy," http://glossary.usip.org/resource/tracks-diplomacy (accessed 3/11/2015).

ensuing knowledge and insight to those in power within the countries involved.[5] As our small core team tried to find common ground and recruit Armenian and Turkish people for a series of dialogue workshops, I found myself caught between the desire *not* to believe what the world's Armenians simply called genocide, and the insatiable need to dig deeper:

> I was waiting anxiously by the window at our suburban home in Massachusetts . . . our tenth-grade teenaged daughter had not come off the bus like she normally does . . . she is never late . . . and I'm thinking to myself "Did something happen to her? Did someone do something to her? Is there some big network out there watching me and my children because I'm working on this Turkish-Armenian thing?"

It's embarrassing to admit, but I remember trying very hard to push those anxious thoughts aside and pull myself together more than once when I first started working on that Harvard-related dialogue project. I recall that strong feeling of paranoia—and how relieved I was when I heard that my Armenian counterpart had experienced the same type of irrational fear when he'd first started working alongside Turks.

What was the source of this irrational fear? Paranoia? Mistrust? So I started thinking . . . and what was the first thing that came to my mind about Armenians? Actually, not much! We hadn't learned a thing about Armenians when I went to school in Turkey, not during the years 1965 to 1978, anyway. Except for a few hush-hush rumors about one classmate at my all-girls private high school, who was dating an Armenian boy. And even then, we knew nothing about what *Armenian* meant—but definitely not someone to have an amorous relationship with, that's for sure.

I also recall bits of conversations with my mother, most likely during the transition from college to graduate school in the United States. Both my parents had grown up around Fatsa and Giresun, seacoast towns by the Black Sea. Once, my mother told me something vague and obscure, in a whisper, as if she wasn't sure she should say it: when she was young, she had heard stories of boats filled with Armenian people that left and never returned. Granted, numerous similar stories have been reported even more clearly by others today, but what makes this one noteworthy for me is that years later, my mother didn't hesitate to engage in a shouting match with me when I tried to include the word genocide in our conversations.

What's the gap between knowing something unspeakable happened in the environment where you grew up, and actually calling it by its proper name? I found the answer in my desire to learn and read and face uncomfortable truths, culminating in a reeducation journey of a lifetime.

Throughout that journey, Mary—my dinner companion mentioned at the beginning of this article—and I would eventually form a bond of friendship that transcends our respective identities. I am from Turkey, and even though I haven't delved into my family tree (and I don't expect that search to even slightly change the way I think about the genocide), I believe I am ethnically Turkish. Mary has never set foot inside Turkey. I am married and a mother of two, while Mary has no children and lives with a steady boyfriend. My first career, before I got involved in international minorities and human rights, was film and broadcasting. Mary used to teach high school math before becoming a consultant in diversity training. Yet today, Mary and I can spend hours on the phone, speaking about a multitude of subjects, but never forgetting the intensity of that first dinner we had together, when she told me the story of her ancestors from Anatolia.

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[5] For more on various dialogue initiatives among Armenians and Turks, see Anna Ohanyan, "Transfer Up or Down? Dialogue Groups between Turkish and Armenian Communities in the United States," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2012), 433–60.

But getting to know Mary would come later than the early stages of that Harvard dialogue project. Between late 2006 and early 2007, our core team tried our hardest to come up with an overall statement defining the purpose of this dialogue workshop. What was the aim? What was the point? I remember the tedious hours spent in Dr. Pamela Steiner's den, trying to write a mission statement. In our effort to stay true to the work of "conflict resolution," I remember trying not to call attention to the word genocide, because the statement would be shared by a group of Turkish invitees whose personal inclinations on 1915 were not yet clear to us. I also recall emails and other announcements forwarded to me from the Turkish community at the time, urging me to make note of the "Turkish" perspectives: the dispute over numbers of Armenians massacred (have they read the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide and understood what "in whole or in parts" means?); the fact that there were also Turkish people with excruciatingly sad stories from the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 (what moral authority condones the targeting of a particular ethnic group because another had recently suffered war casualties?); or the fact that the Armenian lobby in the United States was spending bucket of dollars for genocide recognition (what about the buckets of dollars spent by Turkish organizations trying to influence some US politicians by spreading denialist propaganda?).

But here's the catch for those nodding their heads in agreement with my parenthetical comments! Those are my thoughts as I write *today*, in March 2015, as I stand convinced of the reality of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 perpetrated by the governing authority at that time. Yet back in late 2006 and early 2007, I was in a constant state of confusion, coupled with an imbedded sense of "Yes, but . . ." And these "Yes, but" feelings belonged not only to me, but to millions of Turks of my generation who were raised and educated with blinders on when it came to the subject of 1915. This void was based on a state-led policy of *dismissal*: using the expression "so-called genocide" before reluctantly upgrading it to "the events of 1915"; *deception*: I doubt I was the only one enraged by the lack of 1915-related information available through high school and beyond; and *discouragement*: obstructing any semblance of inquiry or research on any topic that deviated from the conscious decision not to admit the reality of state-sponsored war crime.

The extent of this atmosphere of denial can even be seen in the comments of Prof. Taner Akçam of Clark University. An unrivaled authority on the Armenian Genocide, Akçam himself didn't use the term genocide until 2000. When I asked him about his own reticence about the "G" word, he said, "There is a very simple reason: Fear. Fear on two different levels. First, regardless of how critical you are of your government, as a Turk, living with the Turkish state's bombardment of denialist propaganda, you always want to keep a margin, saying, 'Who knows? Maybe it is not indeed a genocide? Better be careful with this term . . . Who knows?' Basically, this is the fear of not knowing what really happened. The second level is the psychological atmosphere in Turkey; it was a big problem speaking out about the Armenian issue, let alone using the 'G' word until recently."

In fact, the existence and capricious or selective use of Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code[6] points to the severity of a national taboo that has victimized journalists, academics, and human rights activists until recently. So most of what I wrote earlier in parentheses was not clear to me, nor was I comfortable internalizing it, when I was involved with the dialogue project at Harvard. That is, until the morning of January 19, 2007, when I awoke to the news headlines on National Public Radio:

[6] https://www.germanlawjournal.com/pdfs/Vol09No12/PDF_Vol_09_No_12_2237-2252_Developments_Algan.pdf (accessed Mar. 11, 2015).

> Hrant Dink, a Turkish Armenian newspaper editor, was gunned down by a sixteen-year-old Turkish nationalist in front of his office in Istanbul. I did not know Dink, and I hadn't read what he'd written and said about Armenians, Turks, or the Armenian Genocide. But I knew one thing with absolute certainty: something horrible and despicable had happened, and it was unacceptable. The year was 2007, twenty-five years after I had buried the subject of the 1915 genocide, after the assassination of Turkey's honorary consul Orhan Gündüz in Massachusetts.

Following the news of Dink's assassination, I started down a long and winding road of learning, reading, and thinking. First, I read any material I could find having to do with Dink's writings and his life as an Armenian living and working in Turkey.[7] Dink had a style all his own, and he wrote passionately and openly about being exactly who he was: a person of Armenian ancestry, but fully from Turkey, the same land where over a million of his people were victimized during the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Yet Dink was not a historian. He was a journalist, the founder of *Agos*, the first Turkish-Armenian newspaper ever published in Turkey.[8] Starting in 1996 and until the time of his death, Dink made it his mission, through *Agos*, to open the eyes of Armenians and Turks to the realities of their shared histories. He called for dialogue between the two communities. Because he considered Turkish and Armenian people as a bit "sickly" (emotionally, that is), he believed that talking to each other would be the only way toward healing.

At first, Dink didn't use the term genocide when referring to 1915, sticking to the more traditional Turkish terms, such as *kıyım* or *katliam*, early in his career with *Agos*. But he was heard saying the "G" word on the television in the months prior to his assassination. Dink had a way with words, and he didn't like to mince them. He believed in dialogue, but he was emphatic about the tainted history of the country he called home. What he thought about terminology could not have been made clearer when he wrote these words:

> If a state decided to send its own citizens, including the defenseless women, children and the elderly on an unknown and endless journey, uprooted them from their native environments and caused the elimination of a large majority of a particular nation . . . exactly what part of our humanity can explain the mental gymnastics involved in describing such an event? Exactly which nugget of which part of our human honor can we exonerate if we are to keep up the acrobatics over the question "should we call it genocide or should we call it deportation," incapable in condemning both with equal force?[9]

Unfortunately, when Dink used the expression "poisonous blood" in a series he wrote about Armenian identity, his words were taken out of context and misinterpreted as an insult to Turkishness. He was accused under the Turkish Penal Code, and even though his conviction was overturned, the damage was done and his fate was sealed. As the mainstream media fueled the flames of anti-Armenian fervor, one tragically misguided youth shot him in the back, silencing the

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[7] Here is a partial list of such books: *İki Yakın Halk, İki Uzak Komşu* and *Bu Köşedeki Adam* are compilations of Hrant Dink's articles and other writings published by Uluslararası Hrant Dink Vakfı Yayınları (2008/2009); *Hrant* by Tuba Çandar, Everest *Yayınları* (2010).

[8] Suggested reading: Yasemin Koç Gabrielsen, "Agos and the Armenian Community: An inquiry on the reformation of the Armenian Identity in Turkey" (PhD diss., ODTÜ (Middle East Technical University, 2015).

[9] As quoted in Çandar, *Hrant*, 534. The translation from Turkish is my own.

one man who would contribute the most to Turkey's future openness on the subject of 1915 by the ultimate sacrifice of his death.

"The Truth will set you free but first it will piss you off."
—Gloria Steinem

I was at once inspired by Dink's words and enraged by what had happened to him. I had dreams of producing a full-length documentary about him, a dream I gave up soon after I realized I would face too many obstacles. But I still had lots to learn, and I couldn't stop my personal and professional curiosity about the Armenian Genocide. So I started speaking to a variety of people, locally and internationally, in person and on the Internet. I attended workshops, participated in events, and heeded the call of my background in television and video as I paid attention to documentaries on the subject of 1915.

Now, instead of avoiding those scenes of inhumanity—as necessary evils committed during the founding of a nation-state, based on a fervent belief in state security, coupled with the venom of ethnic or religious hatred—I watched any documentaries I could find on the Armenian Genocide[10] (avoiding hastily produced tabloids on social media). Was this disturbing and uncomfortable? Yes. Was it useful? Yes, and mostly because for me, watching these documentaries lifted the illogical obsession that most Turkish people have: that the idea of a genocide applies strictly to the Jewish Holocaust committed by the uniquely evil group of Nazis in World War II Germany. But every time I watched a 1915-related documentary, I faced a bitter truth: the Holocaust was the worst atrocity of World War II, but it was not the first genocide of the twentieth century. The Nazis were a repulsive, despicable group, but the leaders of the ruling Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) party in 1915 committed acts just as reprehensible based on their own vision and philosophy.

My reeducation journey didn't end with the effects of heart-wrenching and stomach-churning visuals. I was able to seek out and converse with a wide variety of Armenians in and around Massachusetts. According to my contact list, the number easily reaches 200, some having recently immigrated from Istanbul but most having been raised in the United States, and almost all descendants of genocide survivors. I set up coffee and lunch dates and joint outings to absorb as much as I could from all these new acquaintances. I listened to recollections of grandparents very similar to Mary's. I tried to reassure those who were apprehensive about traveling to Turkey, the land where their long-lost ancestors had perished, where family trees were forever cut by the nightmare of 1915. I also spoke with people whose grandparents hailed from places like Marash in Turkey, where some Turks had actually saved the lives of Armenians.

And finally, to add yet another layer to the legacy of that horrible time, I listened in disbelief to one Armenian woman from Istanbul who found nothing wrong with the way things had happened in 1915. My mouth dropped as I heard her repeatedly articulating that the powerful usually won and that's the way it went in those days! Had the taboo-infused silence over an unacknowledged genocide so repressed some Armenians that they would willingly condone the acts of a criminal group of Turks? Or had the messy, political, untrusting atmosphere surrounding the Armenian Genocide pushed some Armenians to use extreme caution when speaking to someone like me?

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[10] Here is a partial list of such documentaries: Andrew Goldberg, *The Armenian Genocide* (2006); Jeff Colman, *1915, The Armenian Genocide* (year?); J. Michael Hagopian, *Voices by the Lake* (2000); Franz Werfel, *Forty Days of Musa Dagh* (1982); Adam Schiff, *Screamers* (2006); Bared Maronian, *Orphans of the Genocide* (2010); Araz Artinian, *The Genocide in Me* (2005); Bared Maronian, *The Wall of Genocide* (2007); Roger Hagopian, *Memory Fragments* (2007); *My Father's Village* (2003), *Witnesses* (2005), Apo Torosyan, *Voices* (2007).

I have yet to find a satisfying explanation for this one Armenian woman's psychology, but I decided to heed the call of another, very different Armenian from Istanbul: Hrant Dink. He had repeatedly called for dialogue between Armenians and Turks, so I decided it was time I put my four years of soul searching and intense questioning to use, in the cause of a grassroots dialogue effort. In the fall of 2012, I began recruiting a group of women I'd communicated with, and formed TAWA, the Turkish-Armenian Women's Alliance. The root of the controversy over 1915 lay across the ocean in Turkey, but I had to start somewhere, and the environment I knew best was my hometown of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

TAWA

At the outset, my plan was simple. I would pull together a group of Armenian and Turkish women and invite them to meet at my home for regular—though not too frequent—sessions of dialogue, with the possibility of working on a collaborative project. Coming from a broadcast journalism background, and having worked with the basic standards of objective, independent reporting, I knew I wanted nothing to do with the lobbying corridors or diplomatic circles within Turkey, Armenia, or the United States. In short, I wanted to go to the "people" themselves. And having managed my own small nonprofit organization for the past decade, I thought I had a good shot at inspiring a group of what I considered open-minded women for the cause of improved dialogue among Armenians and Turks.

But there was one huge obstacle to this worthy goal, despite all my good intentions: I was not an outside mediator, a facilitator, or a third party. I was ethnically a Turkish woman (regardless of my hyphenated last name, which I consistently make a point of using). And I was trying to bring together a group of Armenian and Turkish women! So what was I to call this project? It clearly wasn't an official track 2 effort, because I wasn't exactly searching for the influentials that such a setting requires. This also was not a traditional conflict resolution or mediation group led by a professional facilitator. What I was going for, perhaps naïvely, was a truly grassroots effort where a group of Turkish and Armenian women would get together and work on a collaborative project, and while doing so, would better understand each other—and, subsequently, their respective communities.

Gathering some of my newly acquired friends of Armenian ancestry was easy compared to signing on the few Turkish women I knew. Because there is no yardstick when assessing a Turkish person's understanding or interpretation of 1915, I went with my gut instinct, going for those with an open mind.

Avoiding the Unavoidable

I knew that deciding when and how to speak about the Armenian Genocide in a group like TAWA, with such divergent understandings of the history, could be a balancing act.

As part of my vision for TAWA, I asked the women for one-on-one interviews, hoping that our journey together would potentially form the backbone of a future documentary. Not all agreed, but to those who did sign releases, I posed the following question:

"Are you comfortable with the term *genocide*?"

Cemre answered that she thinks of the word *katliam* (*massacre* in Turkish) instead of *soykırım* (*genocide* in Turkish), adding, "Words are loaded, they're not just words." Demet replied that yes, she was comfortable with the term genocide, but she later sent me an email explaining her personal understanding of the word. She qualified the events of 1915 as "not lending a hand" to the Ottoman Armenians, instead of a clear case of genocide.

During the following months, as I continued conducting the interviews, the answers to my question about the genocide became more nuanced. Cemre, who had initially called the word "loaded," began hinting at acceptance, at least on a personal level. "Sure, the government is in denial," she said. "But as people, we can accept and move forward." Demet began to explore the importance of language. She wondered what terminology Armenians actually have in their heads when they say that genocide occurred . . . a favorite theme for some in the Turkish community, including those (not necessarily Demet herself) who deny the genocide.

So does the entire problem among Armenians and Turks all come down to a single word? Does the solution lie in how Armenians themselves define what happened to their ancestors during the end of the Ottoman era?[11] And didn't President Obama—when Turks, Armenians, and some Americans held their breath to hear what he would say during the genocide commemoration on April 24, 2012—choose the term *Medz Yeghern* (*the great evil crime*) instead of genocide, to the vast relief of the Turkish state?

The point is, most of the world's Armenians see the language issue as simply a diversion. For them, what happened to their ancestors under Ottoman Turkey and especially in 1915 was genocide, an open-and-shut case. It is also true that several of the Armenian participants in TAWA expressed their disinterest in terminology. Playright Joyce VanDyke based her play *Deported* on the experiences of her grandmother and best friend, two women who barely survived the genocide. VanDyke says,

> I just have never been someone who gets highly exercised about the terminology, and yet there does seem to be a fixation on the word; to some people it has to be capitalized, it can't be lowercased . . . it was a million and a half, no it was six hundred thousand, I mean, I don't know . . . I'm not a highly argumentative person about things like that . . . and I can't get passionate about them. I just call it the genocide because I think that's what it was . . . it was very obviously what it was.

Terminology aside, the legacy of the Armenian Genocide is unquestioned by the world's 8 million-plus Armenians because it is simply unacceptable to deny an action so immensely cruel and unjust.

Here is another TAWA participant's take on the importance of digging deep and talking about what happened in 1915. Laura Bilazarian-Purutyan says,

> If an individual has an injustice in their life whether as a victim or a perpetrator or, you know, partly both . . . in order to move on from it and not have that experience own their life and their future and dictate all the decisions it makes going forward, [he or she] has to unpack and shed light on that experience . . . otherwise that experience is like putting a rug over it, but it's still this mountain in the middle of the room with a rug over it . . . it's just not going to get cleaned up without acknowledgment, so I guess what I'm grappling with is to what extent that is [completely Turkey's and the Turkish people's] responsibility and to what extent [that] is a two-way street of responsibility.

But how do we start cleaning under that rug? Do we do it individually, or in groups? How might we organize such groups? And, most important, how do we deal with the feelings of someone like my friend Mary, the kind of Armenian American for whom any direct or indirect questioning of the

[11] For a more detailed analysis of the terms Armenians use for the events of 1915, see "What Our Words Mean: Towards the Vindication of 'Medz Yeghern,'" *Armenian Weekly*, Aug. 2, 2013, http://www.armenianweekly.com/2013/08/02/what-our-words-mean-towards-the-vindication-of-medz-yegher.

1915 genocide would cause tension that could destroy the future of a group like TAWA? In fact, when I tried to come up with a collaborative statement of sorrow and solidarity by the Turkish participants as we approached April 24[12], one Turkish TAWA member would not put her name on the statement.[13] Another wanted to make sure it contained nothing offensive toward the founder of modern Turkey (Atatürk) before signing. But even though the "G" word was clearly absent in those few short sentences I wrote, one woman simply would not sign!

And that's why, in spring 2013, Mary and her eventual assessment of our group would have a major effect on us all as we neared April 24. The strength of Mary's feeling about the genocide wasn't really a surprise; the signs were bubbling up soon after she was invited into the group. I had regular phone calls and email exchanges with most participants in between group meetings. Yet every time I spoke with Mary, I had a sense that I was being quizzed about something . . . that she was curious about whether the Turkish participants truly recognized the Armenian Genocide. Because I had decided not to ask every Turkish participant to utter the "G" word as a prerequisite[14] to involvement in the group, I spent a lot of time explaining to Mary privately how we had to deal with some gray areas. And how, even though it may have seemed to *her* like a valid litmus test in assessing a Turkish person's values, asking someone of Turkish background to accept the term Armenian Genocide may not be the best way to start a collaborative group.

But I need to insert parentheses again here. The truth is, it seemed that the more I *didn't* broach the subject of genocide with TAWA members, the better chance I had of reaching my initial goal of a collaborative mission. In fact, one Turkish participant—who had suggested that we get to "know each other better" at the founding of TAWA—approached me very soon after the group's first sessions with the idea of a cultural or arts project; she no longer emphasized the need to get to know each other as a first step!

Another participant was extremely optimistic about collaborating and helping the disadvantaged of the world together. "Let's fight with hunger," Demet said. "You know, goodness is good for everyone. It would heal me and, you know, people from both sides, I think." Demet's idea was that TAWA could be a heartwarming role model for other groups in conflict. Our group could take up a cause, and try to change the world.

A little utopian? Maybe. Well meaning? Absolutely. And yet, the narrative of "healing together" brings up another sensitive subject in the realm of Turkish-Armenian relations: the question of exactly *who* needs healing, and from *what*. For the world's Armenians, 1.5 million of their ancestors were annihilated in 1915, either point-blank or during state-enforced death marches away from their homeland in Anatolia. Thousands of Armenian children were taken from their homes—either by force, or when given up by parents fearing the worst for them if they stayed—to be assimilated or raised as Muslims after the genocide. And there is now ample evidence that a significant portion of the properties of the deported or killed Armenians was confiscated by the

[12] April 24 is the day when Armenians around the world remember and honor their ancestors who perished during the genocide of 1915.

[13] "We—your TAWA friends of Turkish ancestry—would like to express our feelings of solidarity and togetherness on this day of April 24th, a day we acknowledge and accept as being extremely significant to you and your ancestors. We want you to know that we share your pain over the undeniable suffering and injustice that were exerted upon the Ottoman Armenians during the events of 1915. Please know that we will be with you in spirit when you remember and commemorate your ancestors on this and every other April 24th that is to come. We love you and hope to work together for a better future for the next generation of Armenians and Turks around the world."

[14] Most dialogue or conflict resolution work among Turkish and Armenian communities usually falls victim to the Turkish participants' lack of recognition or acceptance of the Armenian Genocide. Therefore, the success of a dialogue group usually depends on the group being made up of like-minded people who have in one way or another acknowledged the genocide. Such a group usually participates in collaboration based on culture or the arts, or forms a friendship circle without significantly solving or softening the conflict: the Armenians' insistence on acknowledging genocide versus the official Turkish denial as reflected by Turkish people with varying degrees of understanding and acceptance.

government at the time, eventually ending up in the possession of those Turkish citizens who were not their rightful owners. International law defines any *one* or *all* of these actions as genocide, a term coined by Raphael Lemkin at the end of World War II.[15]

On the other hand, the official narrative of the Turkish state affirms that there was no genocide, but there were war conditions (starting with the Balkan Wars and leading up to World War I) during which many people, Turkish and Armenian, died.[16] In that narrative, the pressing need is for a "shared healing" strategy, which, although appealing to some, does not sit well with most Armenians, and especially those who actively work on genocide recognition.

The subject of the Turkish people's suffering—along with the Armenians'—around 1915, especially in relation to the Balkan Wars, had come up early in our TAWA group meetings.[17] And I'd known, without even looking at my friend Mary's face during these conversations, that statements about "shared suffering" or "shared pain" did nothing to break her discomfort. It was obvious that Mary needed a certain type of conversation to hold her in the group. And we were a diverse group, with a variety of backgrounds; being female was really our only commonality. It was obvious that we needed to get to know each other better before we could even approach the subject of a collaborative project. In fact, when we took a vote on which subjects to discuss in our meetings, Mary adamantly pushed for a discussion of history—and in fact, this topic *did* garner the most votes.

A Wound Too Deep to Heal

It was nearing April 2, when our fourth TAWA meeting was to take place. According to consensus, we would continue the conversation about our attempt to "understand the past." This goal for the meeting was purposely vague, because we just could not say that we would "discuss the genocide," or "talk about the genocide," or "talk about 1915!" So at our previous meeting, we had come up with a jumbled mouthful of a sentence: "Let's continue the conversation of today's meeting regarding our attempt to understand the past." How could it not be confusing? The officials have been fighting over 1915 for nearly a century; as we began TAWA, the Turkish nation was barely coming out of its state-enforced amnesia over the interpretation of its history. And I was trying to initiate the kind of discussion that would reveal to the Turkish participants exactly what was the source of Mary's extreme unease.

How could I possibly break this impasse? Did I even have the right tools and resources? What qualification did I hold? How could I possibly apply at least a bandaid over a century-old wound that had forever contaminated the relationship between Turks and Armenians?

Here I was, living in my cocoon in Cambridge. Having studied international human rights and conflict resolution in the United States, I'd had ample time to immerse myself in the world of diaspora Armenian communities. Yet I was still unsure how best to ignite a conversation—not only about the *past*, but about *understanding* the past. So I pulled out one of my go-to books on the Armenian Genocide: not a history book, but a personal account titled *Passage to Ararat* by Michael Arlen. I had read it first about a decade earlier and then simply shelved it in my library because my

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[15] United Nations General Assembly, "Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide," Dec. 9, 1948, http://www.oas.org/dil/1948_Convention_on_the_Prevention_and_Punishment_of_the_Crime_of_Genocide.pdf.

[16] http://www.mfa.gov.tr/controversy-between-turkey-and-armenia-about-the-events-of-1915.en.mfa (accessed Feb. 10, 2015).

[17] Under the AKP (Justice & Development Party) regime during which TAWA came into existence, the Turkish state changed its own terminology from the "so-called genocide" to "the events of 1915." In addition, Turkey openly and consistently encouraged the kinds of projects that would bring people from Armenia and Turkey together for improved relations, in an effort to support both peoples' exploration of their shared histories and cultures, despite the fact that today, the border between Turkey and Armenia remains closed for political reasons.

life at the time was too full of career and family. Then I reread it the summer before I embarked on TAWA, with a new understanding of what this history truly meant for the Armenians—and what Turks had been avoiding for nearly a century. I picked out a short passage to share with the group:

> Arshil said quietly, "Do you know what I think was worst about the trouble with the Turks? It was that the Turks and Armenians were brothers."
> I said, "But I thought the Turks hated the Armenians."
> "Don't brothers sometimes hate one another?" said Arshil.[18]

I remember reading these words aloud to the group during our meeting of April 2, 2013, with the hope of provoking some kind of discussion about the enormity of what had happened in 1915 when the supposed brothers (the Turks) turned against their brothers (the Armenians). Instead, the conversation quickly turned to Turkish domestic politics, a popular subject for most of our meetings. But then, here she was—Mary, sitting across from me, listening, and listening, and listening. At every stage of the conversation, she was looking for that tidbit, that little sign—something, anything, from any of the Turkish women, that she could translate into a clear, direct reference to the fact that there was something terribly wrong with the denial of the Armenian Genocide. But that sign never came.

Mary's face grew more stressed and pained during this meeting, until the moment came when I saw that expression again: the one I had seen on the first evening we had dinner together. It wasn't just that she was waiting for the word *genocide* to be spoken; it was something else. What Mary wanted to hear from all TAWA members was an acknowledgment, an acceptance, a complete and undeniable recognition that what happened in 1915 had been the willful destruction of the Armenian people and their culture. And that the Armenian Genocide had affected not only the 1.5 million who perished, but also millions of other families and their descendants who have lived with the legacy of trauma carried through generations. Well, that moment never came, for two reasons.

First, even though I had started TAWA with the intention of offering a space for dialogue and potential collaboration among the participants, I had never labeled the project a "mediation" or a "conflict resolution" exercise meant to discuss 1915 in particular. Did I believe the events of 1915 amounted to the first genocide of the twentieth century? I certainly did, and I had made that clear more than once, both in my conversations with TAWA and in some of my published articles. But I had never thought that my role was to facilitate a discussion in which one person would get to hear exactly what she needed to hear from another person.

Second, there was something a lot subtler at work here, separate from my own individual role. Having observed the dynamics of other similar dialogue groups, I didn't believe that any Turkish person could be pushed to say anything—especially in relation to something as horrendous as the Armenian Genocide—in a mixed group of Turks and Armenians. This much I knew, because I'd been there myself. Eight years earlier, as I sat in that small Harvard classroom during a workshop, these thoughts were racing through my mind as I tried to keep calm while my heart was beating a mile a minute:

> They're asking me to take notes on the board . . . The two groups—Turkish and Armenian—are supposed to call out what's most significant to them . . . Armenian genocide comes up, not once, not twice, but several times . . . How do I write that down? Small letters? All caps? Capital for the first letter? I guess I should put it in quotes—isn't that what us Turks are supposed to do?

[18] Michael J. Arlen, *Passage to Ararat*, Saint Paul: Hungry Mind Press, 1975, 199.

So much time has passed since that workshop—eight years as of this writing, eight years to realize how tightly the past is wound up with the present. How the events that occurred in the waning days of the Ottoman Empire cannot be separated from what Mary and her extended family experienced in their own lives—even though most of them never set foot in Anatolia, the Armenians' homeland for at least 4,000 years. But back in February 2007, in that Harvard workshop room, had I understood what this history meant, as I stretched out my hand to that blackboard and held it there for what felt like the longest minute of my life? No, I had not. So I placed the chalk on the board, and quietly put quotes around the word *genocide*. I can't say that all hell broke loose after that, but I remember trying to keep my cool when one of the Armenian participants wondered out loud, with a smirk, why Gonca had put quotes around the word *genocide*. Granted, today I no longer add those quotes, but as a Turkish American, I know how it feels to be tested and tried about a subject too bitter to deal with.

Reboot

Today, eight years after I added those quotes, it's also a whole year after TAWA's last official meeting. The group I began with high hopes is no longer active. Mary eventually left TAWA, but we continued meeting after her departure. We could even say that the group experienced a cathartic moment when, during the meeting following Mary's withdrawal, one Turkish participant read out loud a letter she had written and sent to Mary. She expressed the regret she felt over Mary's leaving, and apologized if she had said or done anything to offend her. Fighting back some tears as she read, this Turkish woman continued, "How long will it take for me to comfortably say 1915 was a genocide and not feel ashamed and angry to be a Turk, I'm not sure . . . Is it possible to be a 'proud happy Turk,' whatever the hell that means, and still recognize the genocide? I sure hope so . . . I want to be able to pass on to my daughter the true story so that she does not get confused in the way that I have been confused."

As an official group, TAWA dissolved in the spring of 2014, due to several factors: We were almost too diverse without a common profession or theme to keep us on the same page for long. We had intragroup splits, especially following the Gezi events in Istanbul,[19] which divided the Turkish participants along political lines. We experienced the limitations of an entirely volunteer group, whose commitment and energy fluctuated at a level that ruled out a longer project. Finally, I had to face the limits of my own time and energy, along with the absence of anyone else who wanted to lead the group in the future.

That said, I know that the mere existence of TAWA led at least six Turkish people to be exposed to the thoughts and perspectives of a group of Armenian women, and spurred an interest, however small, in learning and reading about the Armenian Genocide.

How do we measure the success or failure of TAWA, then? Can we possibly take the journey of six highly educated Turkish women over the course of two years of TAWA meetings, and use it to reboot the conscience of a people trained to not think about one of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century? How many years do those two years make, when multiplied by 76-plus million Turkish citizens? And what if the rebooting process takes longer for some than others? Who is measuring the success of this process? And is "process" the right way to go? Should there even be a process? What about a simple, straightforward decision on the Armenian Genocide? Who should we, as Turkish people, make an effort for in this process? For the Armenians? For ourselves? For our children? For Turkey? How important is it that we face the tainted legacy of our ancestors?

[19] http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/may/29/gezi-park-year-after-protests-seeds-new-turkey (accessed Mar. 9, 2015).

We can continue to ponder all these questions, but could it be that the key question is just this: Do Turkish people have the right to test the patience of Armenians who prefer not to sit through any kind of denial? Be it direct, indirect, or understated, denial is simply unbearable. Isn't that the lesson that Mary taught TAWA in the first place?

"In this unfolding conundrum of life and history there is such a thing as being too late."
—Martin Luther King Jr.

Today, as we approach the centennial of the Armenian Genocide, the slimmest hope for Turkey's recognition of genocide, generated by Prime Minister Erdoğan's condolence message of a year ago,[20] has been overshadowed by the government's current emphasis on insensitive gestures. One example is the invitation extended to Armenia's president Serzh Sargsyan to visit Gallipoli, a significant battleground during Turkey's War of Independence in 1915–1916. The invitation is not for March 18, as in years past, but for April 24!

A second example involves the misinformation generated in Turkey by the case of Doğu Perinçek, an ultranationalist leader accused of proclaiming that the Armenian Genocide is a lie fabricated by the international community. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is in the process of deciding whether Perinçek's free-speech rights should supersede the fact that his proclamation may translate into the kind of hate speech–laden atmosphere that already led to the murder of Hrant Dink in 2007. In an expected but misguided turn of events, most of the Turkish media interprets the upcoming ECHR decision as a judgment about whether the events of 1915 really represent a genocide, even though that question is certainly not what the ECHR is taking up with the Perinçek case.[21]

No More "Yes, but"!

So where does all of this leave me as I assess the last eight years of my reeducation, in the context of the future of Armenian-Turkish relations? My best answer is that I choose to hang onto the one identity of many that I have espoused over my fifty-five years. The subject of multiple identities has always fascinated me: I have enjoyed putting on one hat, then another, depending on the environment or the job. And yet, on the subject of the Armenian Genocide, I find myself at odds with all the various hats I have comfortably worn throughout my personal and professional life.

I come from a background of journalistic standards that direct me to cover all stories with at least two sources of reference. And I have studied conflict resolution principles, which dictate that I should not nod my head in agreement with one side of a conflict over the other. But on this one subject, one I have thought about and researched, soul-searched and inner-queried for the past eight years, I choose to plead my individual right to speak my mind. I no longer want to wait, I simply want to say what I think and feel. Not as a Turkish person, not as a journalist, and not as a member of a third party in a conflict resolution exercise. We all have rights, and no amount of state security should ever supersede those rights. So I want to speak the truth as a human who knows enough about the human rights of every man, woman, and child on this earth.

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[20] http://uk.reuters.com/article/2014/04/23/uk-turkey-armenia-erdogan-idUKBREA3M0XP20140423 (accessed Apr. 23, 2014).
[21] For more details on the Perinçek case: Geoffrey Robertson, *An Inconvenient Genocide*, London: Biteback Publishing, 2014, 193.

Turkey should wait no longer to officially recognize the genocide, because Armenians have already waited long enough.

If a century ago, the time and the conditions were right for those in power to make decisions that would uproot and destroy a certain ethnic, religious, or racial group of people, removing them from their ancestral lands by force or coercion, then the time for the descendants of those decision makers to speak the truth about that past is *now*—not depending on the political winds, and certainly not in another hundred years. I'm not waiting, and neither should the rest of humanity.