



Some of those assembled in Cologne
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Carrying On Hrant Dink's Legacy

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by

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COLOGNE, Germany — On the 11th anniversary of the murder of Hrant Dink in front of his Agos office in Istanbul, Turks and Armenians and Germans gathered in several German cities, not only to commemorate his passing but to celebrate his life's work, with a pledge to continue his struggle for equality, dignity and reconciliation. Berlin, Hamburg and Cologne were among the several venues for events on January 19-20, where speakers from the Armenian community joined with Turkish intellectuals, journalists and artists — many in exile here — and German human rights activists.

The event in Cologne on January 20 was especially significant because the city has become the unofficial capital of the “other Turkey,” with an expanding population of Turkish opposition figures. It is also the seat of the Diocese of the Armenian Apostolic Church as well as the headquarters of numerous human rights organizations engaged in cultural and political dialogue. The KulturForum TürkeiDeutschland and its co-founder Osman Okkan, a documentary filmmaker, joined with the City of Cologne's Lord Mayor and Cultural Affairs Office, the German-Armenian Society (DAG), the Hrant Dink Forum and the Armin T. Wegner Society, to host an evening of political discussion, illustrated by short film clips and framed in musical interludes.

A Sober Assessment

The situation inside Turkey has deteriorated dramatically since Dink's death under the rule of the increasingly autocratic President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP, with devastating repercussions on all aspects of political, cultural and social life, especially for anyone suspected of holding opposing views. This fact dominated the proceedings and lent a task orientation to the entire debate.



Following a musical introduction with a piece by Komitas, Okkan welcomed the capacity crowd and introduced Minu Nikpay, who represented the Armenian community; Archbishop

Karekin Bekdjian was unable to attend due to commitments in Istanbul. Nikpay said that even after 11 years, Hrant Dink still lives in our hearts, and paid tribute to his spreading knowledge of the Armenian people, their history and culture; he gave a new voice to those Armenian writers, politicians, architects, artists and intellectuals who lived as Turkish citizens. And he provided a model of courage. Expressing her gratitude for the resolution recognizing the Armenian Genocide that the German Bundestag (parliament) passed in 2016, she applauded the “courage and steadfastness” of all parties who successfully resisted the pressures from Turkish quarters on the members of parliament, pressures including death threats. Hrant Dink had no fear, she said. “We bow down before him. May God bless his soul.”

Such pressures have not evaporated since that resolution; on the contrary, the political shift inside Turkey has made itself felt here, and increasing attempts to deny the genocide are being viewed with concern as preludes to anti-Armenian attacks by extremists. Osman Okkan denounced the long tentacles of certain Turkish entities that reach into Germany and Europe, with the aim of intimidating opposition figures, and pointed to the growing numbers of journalists and others seeking safety in Cologne. “We support the ‘other Turkey’,” he said, “with all democratic means — that is our pledge to Hrant Dink.”

Cem Özdemir, the Green Party leader who led the parliamentary drive for Genocide recognition, stressed the fact that “the clocks have been turned back since Dink’s death” in Turkey. Merely participating in a panel discussion on the subject of the Genocide may lead to job loss or jail. Television stations that have hosted such debates have been shut down or have been forced to toe the government line. Turkish-Germans have been jailed, for political reasons, and, Özdemir said, they are also threatened on German soil; one such individual wears a bullet-proof vest for protection. He added parenthetically that, while attending a similar event in Berlin, his daughter had asked him why Hrant Dink didn’t have “the BKA,” meaning official security protection from the German authorities. Özdemir, known to have received threats, had to explain to her that there are some states that not only deny protection, but even kill.

Political Exiles

That none of this was exaggeration was illustrated by the roster of participants at the event. Asli Erdogan, who was recently released from jail (on charges of having made propaganda for a terrorist organization), was on the program but was unable to attend due to ill health; she had just been in Paris to receive the Simone de Beauvoir prize for human rights. Ragıp Zarakolu, from the Belge publishing company, was on hand; he had been jailed and for 20 years and could not leave Turkey. Once he was free to travel, he left for Sweden, where he lives in exile. Celal Baslangiç, formerly of Cumhuriyet, has been in German exile for one year. The two took part in a round table discussion in Turkish, addressing the questions of how to protect minorities in Turkey, and how to provide support from Europe for those fighting for human rights.

As more and more Turkish intellectuals arrive in Cologne, a city that Özdemir dubbed the “center for those who fled Turkey,” the issue is urgent. Berivan Aymaz, who filled in for Asli Erdogan, was the right person to address it. She is a Green Party member of the North Rhine-Westphalia state parliament, active in the committee on integration. As for the influx of de facto political refugees to Cologne, Ayman said the city should be happy that so many have made this choice. She made the often-overlooked point that many new arrivals from Turkey are not seeking asylum, but rather hope the situation in their homeland will improve and allow

their safe return. The problem is, they do not receive the support they require from the institutions; the city, the state and the federal government, she said, must do more.

Political Prisoners

Although a number of German citizens jailed in Turkey for political reasons have been released over the past weeks, several still remain behind bars, the most prominent being Deniz Yücel, correspondent of *Die Welt*. During the visit of Turkish foreign minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu to Germany at the beginning of January, his German host Sigmar Gabriel received him for tea at his residence, and demanded the journalist's release. Çavuşoğlu reportedly asked for weapons deliveries in return, and Gabriel officially denied any linkage between the two. *Der Spiegel* in its latest issue (January 20) revealed that the Turkish official wanted the Rheinmetall arms producer to modernize the "Leopard" tanks that Turkey has, to render them more effective in the conflict with IS. Although Gabriel continues to deny any deal, *Der Spiegel* writes that that may not be the case and that Gabriel may just think if he repeats this often enough it will convince the public.

It was Deniz Yücel who brought the issue into the open, and forcefully so. In an interview last week with the German press agency DPA, conducted in writing from his cell, he stated categorically, "I am not available for any dirty deals." He said he absolutely did not want to have his release "besmirched with any tank deals of Rheinmetall or the dealings of any other comrades in arms." He also ruled out any deal, to swap his freedom for that of some Turkish military figure allegedly associated with the Gülen movement, who might be in German exile. This option had been mooted reportedly during talks that former Chancellor Gerhard Schröder had with Turkish officials on the case, earlier. Again, following Yücel's interview, Gabriel denied it all.

During the Cologne meeting, this became a central concern. That same day Turkish military were attacking the Syrian Kurdish YPG with bombs and artillery fire, in preparation for a ground offensive in Afrin the following day. If any improvements were going to be made for Turkey's German-manufactured tanks, clearly, they were not going to be deployed against IS terrorists, but against Kurdish units, as part of Erdogan's ethnic cleansing policy. The reports of Yücel's principled stand against any horse-trading were met at the Cologne gathering with applause and support.

The Power of Truth

In answer to the question, how can the resistance inside Turkey be bolstered, several speakers looked to Dink for guidance. Dr. Raffi Kantian, president of the German-Armenian Society (founded by Johannes Lepsius), referenced his personal contact with Dink, saying he was a very unusual individual, who refused to be silent and spoke out. At the same time, he knew how to build real bridges and to win over hearts. Kantian stressed the impact of his martyrdom on subsequent developments inside Turkey, from acts of resistance to statements of apology by Turkish intellectuals. Hrant Dink was told to be quiet, he said, but he was loud, very loud. And, fully aware of the dangers he was facing, he had said clearly, "I don't plan to die in bed."

If, Kantian continued, the circulation of *Agos* in 1996 was between 3,000 and 6,000, after his death it reached 20,000, and its influence remains immense. The newspaper is also dealing with other minorities, as Dink had desired. The Hrant Dink Foundation, he said, is increasingly active and, despite hostility, is organizing conferences on vital issues, with

international impact. For Kantian, the most important tool for supporting the opposition in Turkey is continued reporting, which is what his association's publication, *Armenische-Deutsche-Korrespondenz*, is dedicated to. This, as Kantian's colleague Vahan Balayan underlined, includes reporting on the developments in the murder trial and the implications they have for the rule of law in Turkey.

Günter Wallraff is an investigative journalist who has demonstrated more than once the power of the pen. In 1985 he published an exposé of the mistreatment of Turkish *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers), immigrants who were discriminated against on the job and in society. He had disguised himself as one such worker, code name Ali Levent Sinirlioglu, found odd jobs and recorded his experiences. His book became a bestseller while he became a legend. As he recounted in Cologne, he has managed to travel to Turkey several times recently to attend trials, and he has even succeeded in getting out of the country, evidently because of his popularity as Ali. The report he presented of conditions there was chilling: with more than 150 journalists jailed for political reasons, Turkey has more than Russia, China and Iraq combined. There is a construction boom as a result, as 80 new jails are being built to accommodate the estimated 50,000 new political prisoners.

Despite this, Wallraff projected a mood of optimism. First, he said Erdogan obviously does not realize that his repressive policies are a boon to book sales by the persecuted journalists and authors; Turkish-German author Dogan Akhanli, jailed most recently while on vacation in Spain, continues to write books that sell, and Yücel has a book scheduled for release in a couple of weeks. Jails cannot halt the literary effort. In addition, he believes that the days of Erdogan's regime are numbered, and that "we need to spread hope." For Wallraff, Hrant Dink is to be placed in the tradition of Nehru and Martin Luther King, a tradition of non-violent resistance which in the end can prevail.

This sense of optimism, informed by the courage of a growing number of people in the Turkish opposition, was palpable in Cologne. It pervaded the magnificent musical offerings, of Armenian compositions and those of other minorities, performed by Laia Genc (piano), Nure Diovani (violin), Beate Wolff (cello), Anush Nazaryan (soprano) and Stefán Ogáns (vocal). It was communicated by the images and words of Hrant Dink himself, as well as of his wife Rakel, in film clips of the funeral. Perhaps the most optimistic message came in the footage of a massive demonstration in Istanbul, with people carrying signs "We are all Hrant Dink" and "We are all Armenians," a demonstration not filmed 11 years ago, but on January 19 of this year, and transmitted to Cologne to be projected onto the screen in the hall. One could see the disproportionate deployment of police, armed to the teeth, as ludicrous as they were impotent to prevent the peaceful protest.

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