**The Continuing Legacy of Armenian Print Culture in Istanbul: On the periodical Agos and the publishing house, Aras**

Legacy relies on time. It is a sum of shared and transmitted values that prove to be durable. When it comes to the history of Armenian print culture in Istanbul, we see a long tradition of insistence upon life and the priority of script and writing as a common life style.

For Armenian people, the tendency of recording seems to be nearly genetic. Armenian case is unique in its emphasis over the authentic alphabet which is even mystified as the symbol of unity. The first translations accomplished as the classic Armenian version of Holy Bible, constitute a milestone in the Armenian literature. Moreover, regardless of where Armenian people live, we see a fruitful printing history, bilingual in its orgins. Interestingly enough, the forced Diaspora, Armenians had to come up with, turns to a contribution of these people in the respective country they live and choose as the new homeland. Meanwhile, the printing also seems to overcome the extermination imposed upon Armenians in 1915 when the lost and silenced voiceof expression is rediscovered again and again.

The 500th anniversary of the publishing of the first Armenian book in Venice, gives us an opportunity to revisit the main statitions of this long printing journey where Istanbul as a significant port city plays a major role in it. Today I will specifically focus on the contemporary two representatives of Istanbul’s publishing life, namely Agos weekly newspaper and Aras publishing house. This choice is justified by the authentic stance of these two examples as well as my personal experience within them. However, in order to be able to display the distinctive qualities of these two, I also want to briefly dwell on the history that lies behind them and give basic information about the social and political conditions that enabled the emergence of these publishing institutions.

There seems to be a direct correlation between trade and culture, as culture flourishes with the material accumulation poured into the culture products. This was the case with Cilicia, as the conjunction point of major trade routs and in 12-13. century when it became an important center for ornamented manuscripts.

Another main turning points in Armenian printing history happened in 16. century where for the first time modern printing tecniques were used. Nor Culfa, just in the middle of European, Russian and Indian trade roads became rich due to silk trade and simultaneously major writers in philosophy and history experienced their most productive period. Gradually both Venice and Istanbul became two important translation centers. *Urpatakirk*, by Hagop Meghabard became the first book published by modern printing technic in 1512 which became a symbol of 500 year old printing history. *Urpatakirk* also proves the close relation between trade and culture as it is actually a book of spells for Armenian trade men. After Meghrabed we have another pioneer in printing history, Tokatetsi Apkar Tıbir in Venice. He then founded the first Armenian print house in Istanbul at the courtyard of Surp Nigoghayos Church with the printing machines he brought from Italy in1567.

When we reached the 18th century of enlightenement, intellectuals came out as individuals free of the pressure by the church, thus leading the the golden age of printing. Great families like Arabyan family go on with their work for decades.

In 1912-1913 there was a huge celebration in Istanbul for the 1500th anniversary of Armenian alphabet and 400th anniversary of printing. The climax became Teotik’s research book *Dib u Dar* according which there are 462 Armenian printing houses in 95 cities of 17 countries, as of 1912.

Unfortunately Teotik would also become the recorder of Armenian Genocide when he published *Huşartsan Abril 11*i (Monument of April 11) just a few years later in 1919, giving the list and biographies of the intellectuals, teachers, doctors, lawyers, trade men, journalists and the clergy all becoming victim of 1915.

The Turkish Republic thus inherited the dark taboo of 1915 and prohibited the circulation of free information about this bitter part of the history. There was only the official version of history to read and write telling about ‘the collaborating Armenians sent to deportation as a security measure.’ Moreover, there has been a long and painful tradition of coup d’Etats since going over in 1946 to multi-party parliamentarian system and living three coup d’Etats and military interventions in 27 May 1960, 12 March 1971 and 12 September 1980 which also severely deteriorated the situation of the media.

The pro-Islamic AKP government ruling Turkey since ten years, enjoyed the support of central right voters as the party declared to overthrow this dictating state system and also to work for the EU membership just a way of democratization. The problem is that there seem to be implicit prerequisites of becoming power. Thus, while starting its way with a devoted struggle against coup d’etats and conspiracies, AKP also took over the controversial state tradition of inherited red lines.

As for the Armenians, the date of 24 April is the day where the voice of Armenian people was stolen and silenced. Language as the natural source of expression and culture as the natural transmitter of identity were taken away from the people. Armenian and Kurdish somehow turned everything else than being just natural languages of two ancient Anatolian people. They became so politicized and symbolized that they somehow lost their original natural setting of simply be transmitters of life experiences.

Moreover, there were other breaking points in the Republic period too when non-Muslim minorities felt that they do not belong to the country as equal right citizens. As examples of repressive policies labour battalions were drafted among non- Muslims during World War II and the so called Wealth Tax in 1942 levied mostly on non-Muslims resulted in financial ruination and transformation of capital. Many people unable to pay taxes were sent to labor camps. The tax was seen as a racist attempt to diminish the economic power of minorities in Turkey. The exodus reached its climax with the Istanbul Pogrom of 1955 September 6-7 anti-Greek riots were orchestrated in Istanbul by the Turkish counter-guerrilla. In addition to commercial targets, the mob clearly targeted property owned by Greeks, Jews and Armenian. Churches, synagogues, schools were vandalized, burned or destroyed.

In such an atmosphere Armenians of Turkey generally preferred to live as a close community, to be as invisible as possible for protection. Two important representatives of Armenian media in Istanbul are actually the dailies of Jamanak and Marmara.

Jamanak is not only the oldest Armenian newspaper; as of 1908, it is also the oldest newspaper of Turkey still being published. In the founding years it was a meeting point for various intellectuals such as Zabel Esayan, Arşag Çobanyan, Yervant Odyan and Vahan Tekeyan. Today editor in chief of the newspaper is the fourth generation of owner Koçunyan family, Ara Koçunyan. He emphasizes that the language of the publication is not ‘aggressive’ and that there is no organic political relation of the newspaper to any party or institution. Focusing on the social life of the community in Istanbul, Jamanak also brings a lot of religious news about Echmiadzin Armenia as publication preference.

Nor Marmara was founded by Suren Şamlıyan as Marmara newspaper published twice a week and then becoming a four pages daily. In 1967 the newspaper was called Nor Marmara and since then the editor in chief is Rober Haddeciyan. He believes that ‘the press should enhance the public to its level.’ The newspaper primarily focuses on social and cultural life of the community reporting with a heavy Armenian without taking political stance whatsoever.

The 90’s witnessed the ethnic and cultural identity demands by the Kurds. This social cal and politimovement had also its impacts on Armenian community so that when in 1993 Aras Publishing was founded as the first Armenian publishing house after so many years, the frst books published were short stories of Mıgırdiç Margosyan who told about the Armenian life of Diyarbakır known for its Kurdish background. Coinciding with the Zeitgeist, *Gavur Mahallesi,* (District of the Infidel) *Söyle Margos Nerelisen* (Tell me Margos, where are yor from) were also appreciated for their documantary content of an Armenian life that became a tale to tell.

Aras Publishing was welcome as he "window into Armenian literature and culture." With its Turkish and Armenian books, it has now established itself as one of the few publishing houses producing works in two languages. The main fields of interest are Armenian literature, history, culture, modern Armenian translations and Turkish works of contemporary Armenian. The publication scale of Aras is highly extensive. Apart from the representatives of *kavari kraganutyun* like Hagop Mıntzuri, Hamasdegh, Krikor Ceyhan; Aras also published books of William Saroyan, the realist Krikor Zohrab, the modernist Zaven Biberyan and contemporoary peoms of Aram Pehlivanyan. Important research books by Kevork Pamukciyan, Levon Zekiyan, George A. Bournoutian have been published as well as interesting biographies of Arshille Gorky and Khrimyan Hayrig.

During 1990’s Armenians became target by the ultranationalistic newspapers as of collaborating with PKK, armed organization of the Kurdish movemenet. Thus, in order to tell oneself in one’s own voice the first Turkish-Armenian weekly newspaper Agos was founded in 1996 by some young volunteers headed by Hrant Dink. Founder and editor in chief Hrant Dink also wished to establish solidartiy among Armenians who are unable to speak their mother tongue.

Still, the way of opening up neither been easy for Agos nor for Aras. As Armenians of Turkey got used to live in their shell as closed as possible in order to protect oneself, both the Turkish translations of Armenian literature by Aras Publishing and the Turkish pages of Agos newspaper brought about a lot of turmoil and debate. Rober Koptaş who worked for years as the editor of Aras and is now in charge of editor in chief in Agos explains the reason behind this reaction: “There are those who agree with the activities of Aras and Agos and those who do not. People disagreeing usually prefer a ghetto-type life. It may be due to the sense of protection. They think that when culture is opened to such a wide extent, it will be dispersed. Especially with the publication of a Turkish newspaper there was the concern that Armenian newspapers would not be sold at all and disappear altogether. Another concern focuses external factors, the fear that becoming too visible may be problematic.”

Right from the start the leftist oppositional Agos also wished to struggle against the injust minority policy of the state, confiscating immobiles of minority foundations. There was also the wish to introduce the cultural wealth to Turkish society.

As the years passed, Agos gained the support of some of the national newspapers, while Hrant Dink became more and more a political public figure as a democrat not only sepaeking about the Armenian issue but about anything relevent on the agenda of the country. In order to come to terms with the past, Agos turned itself into a platform where alternative views were expressed about the decades-old taboo of Armenian Genocide. The emphasisi was always on the present day, where the opening of the border between Turkey and Armenia was aspired. Thus, the newspaper not only reported but shaped the political agenda.

Not only the newspaper itself, but Hrant Dink personally was something unusual. To the Armenians in Turkey who have lived as a closed community for decades, he proposed the other way round; to open up oneself to the large Turkish society in order both to share institutional and historical problems imposed as a State policy and also the huge Armenian cultural heritage.

Hrant Dink’s sincere and convincing style of peace discourse led to a series of confessions and debates. When he told his childhood spent in Armenian Children Camp in Tuzla the children had built themselves and which was confiscated years later by the State, all of a sudden this issue ceased to be a cold legal matter of minority foundations, but turned to the painful story of an Armenian man still carrrying the protest of the little boy within his soul. This personification humanized the Armenian Issue in Turkey, giving a voice to the silenced ones since the April 24th, 1915 when 220 Armenian intellectuals were taken away from their homes and forced to a march of no return to Cankiri; the actual signal of the limitless pain and suffer to follow for the Armenians as a whole nation.

Hrant Dink established his discourse on various questions which he posed in the coming years in form of influential publications and as speeches. To Turkey he would say: “When a State uproots its citizens, largely defensless women and children to unknown and never-ending paths, with which quality of being a human can we explain our desparate struggle to find the suitable word of naming this situation? If we cannot condemn it altogether before trying to decide whether to name it genocide or deportation, which single part of human honour can we save with our preferences?”

To Diaspora he would ask: “What is your priority? The forced recognition of genocide imposed upon Turkey or the democratization process which inevitably brings for this country coming to terms with history as well?

“The actual name of ethics is empathy” he declared. What made Hrant unique was that he embodied this empathy in person, turning it to an ethics in practise. For the first time word and action overlapped eachother enhancing the power of words to the utmost limit. According to this ethics, he carried his own history on his shoulder and tried to revive the souls of his ancestors in his own life while trying to develop an atmosphere of sincere dialogue between Turkish and Armenian people.

While he became an alternative model of being Armenian in Turkey taking responsibility of both identities; namely being an Armenian and a citizen of Turkey, he proposed a new style of living by taking initiative in Turkish-Armenian dialogue just as a natural result of this double identity. To him, taking the problem to its actual territory and the two involved parties was of utmost importance. What he practised turned to a new approach of being and living as an Armenian in Turkey inspiring a lot of young people in the course of time.

He touched taboos, dared to develop a unique discourse about Armenian issue as an Armenian of Turkey. When he published an article in Agos claiming that Sabiha Gokcen, the adopted daughter of Atatürk, might be of Armenian origin and had relatives in Armenia, he thought that it could be an opportunity to speak about 1915 not only from the perspective of the ones we lost but the ones who survived, who are still alive converted to Islam. In the story, entitled 'Secret of Sabiha Hatun,' Hripsime Sebilciyan, an Armenian from Gaziantep, who later took Armenian citizenship, claimed that she was Gökçen's niece and Sabiha Gökçen was an Armenian orphan adopted from an orphanage.

Two weeks later on February 21st, Hurriyet, the biggest daily paper of Turkey, carried the story to its headline: 'Is she Sabiha Gökçen or Hatun Sebilciyan?' The next day Turkish Military Chief of Staff's office issued a strongly worded statement, which said 'Sabiha Gökçen is a valuable and a strong symbol of Turkish women, and she represents Atatürk's vision of the ideal place of Turkish women in modern Turkish society. Opening such a figure to debate, for whatever purpose, makes no contribution to national integrity and social peace. It is unacceptable to qualify a claim, which is published in an abusive discourse against national sentiments and values, as 'newsmaking.'

It was actually we to follow the coming publications with concern when a strong anti-campaign started against Hrant Dink in the media, supported by demostrations of ultra-nationalist and followed by sue cases that made him to a vulnerable target labelling him as an insulter of Turkish identity. Taken his life-long struggle of true dialogue you can easily imagine the pain he had to suffer under this injust and intolerable accusation.

When Hrant Dink, called on Armenians of the Diaspora to be aware of and free themselves from the “poisoning effect of hatred against the Turks,” he also wanted to call attention to the problematic past of Armenian identity. Now that an independent Armenia existed, all productive energy should be used to boost the prosperity of this new country. As for the heavy burden of 1915, he proposed carrying it on one’s shoulders until the end of the world. This reality was above any efforts to convince others of its existence. It was their own moral struggle and problematic of being a human to acknowledge it. Still, efforts should be made in order to clear the minds of Turkish people who had been taught lies for decades. That’s why the democratization process in Turkey was the key solution for him, given the fact that only in a democratized country could people question their past and come to terms with it.

Ironically, his language of peace, so strong in conviction, was turned into a monster when his call to Diaspora Armenians to build an identity of reconciliation was distorted out of context and defined as an insult to Turkishness, as if he had said: ”Turkish blood is poisonous.” He was prosecuted, tried and sentenced.

Thus, Hrant Dink became an open target and was tragically killed on January 19, 2007 in front of the newspaper office. The huge shock wave was felt during Hrant Dink’s funeral when hundred thousands marched together in solidarity. Whenever an evil is not confessed and acknowledged a what it is, there is the great danger of it being repeated in another context, causing the domino stone effect of miseries falling onto each other as the first unacknowledged one becomes the legitimation of the next.

This was actually the tone and speechless speech during Hrant Dink’s funeral when hundred thousands marched together in solidarity. The huge masses on January 23, can be read as an outbreak against all the silenced injustice that was inherited generation after generation while the placards “We are all Armenians. We are all Hrant Dink” became the symbol of pure solidarity.

Last year, more than 30,000 protesters came together to mark the fifth anniversary of Hrant Dink's murder on January 19, as a reaction to the court ruling which saw a single suspect sentenced to aggravated life imprisonment; main suspect and police informant was acquitted together with all the 15 others. Moreover, İstanbul High Criminal Court issued the infamous verdict that Dink's murder was not an organized crime. Unless the Dink decision is overturned by an appeal court and the trial continues in the widened shape to include all the networks the 100-year-old murder tradition will continue with what it has been doing.

Now we have cobblestone with date and time of Dink's murder, written in both Turkish and Armenian, in front of the Agos building just like the *Stölpersteine* in Germany in front of the houses where Jews used to live and got evacuated to the KZ camps. Thus, each and every day when I go into the building, I have to see this cobblestone and it turns to all of us to a moment of promise.

There is the mission of Agos and Aras to insist on this opening up of the souls where the border between Turkey and Armenian is still close and where 1915 still waits for its fair and humane acknowledgement. Moreover, the murder trial of Hrant Dink has become a symbol for all the extrajudicial killings where the real responsibilities have not appeared yet. Hostile expressions against Armenians continue to exist both in school books and in the media so that Turkish and Armenian identities still include antagonistic depictions of each other.

On 15 September 2010, which also marked the 56th birthday of Hrant Dink, writer Tuba Çandar published a huge biography *Hrant* where she also called on Turkish society, on all people of Turkey, ‘to lift him from this pavement.’ That now seems to me the legacy of both Agos and Aras.

Just as I was completing my presentation draft, the book of Raymond H. Kévorkian - Paul B. Paboudjian *Armenians in Ottoman Empire before 1915* was published by Aras, which was acutally made to a series in Agos under the title ‘Once upon a time’. This new conjunction seems to imply that the continuing legacy imposes upon us the struggle for the life after 1915 as well. Only then, will the souls find their peace, among them the dearest one of Hrant Dink, inspiring us all to a new promise of trust and confidence. Confidence in oneself and trust in the other.