
First steps for better relations began in 1995

Hurriyet, Turkey - 28/11/2008

YEREVAN - The reconciliation process between Armenia and Turkey began long before President Gã¼l's visit to Yerevan with the first steps taking place in Paris in 1995, with the Armenian Diaspora Research Center and the Turkish-Armenian Democratic Dialogue Movement

Throughout the years, Armenian and Turkish individuals have played a vital role in fostering dialogue between the two societies in an effort to reconcile their rocky past.

Raffi Hermonn is one of those individuals, who since 1995, has made a great effort to increase communication between the estranged communities. Hermonn said he was the only journalist of Armenian origin to be registered in the Turkish Journalists' Union by the end of the 1970s. He moved to France just before the military coup of 1980 but kept on believing in his dream that Turks and Armenians may one day become friends again, despite all the tragedies of the past.

He was a leading figure in social developments in France aimed at fostering such dialogue, establishing the "Centre de Recherche sur la Diaspora Armenienne " (Armenian Diaspora Research Center), and the Turkish-Armenian Democratic Dialogue Movement.

Later, he got together with Jean Claude Kebapcian, a prominent name in the 1968 movement in France. Hermonn spoke to the Hurriyet Daily News & Economic Review on his works over the past 12 years. "In the mid-90s, we started the Turkish-Armenian Democratic Dialogue Movement, an organization that (former President) Jacques Chirac labelled the 'diplomacy of the people.'"

Armenia vs. diaspora Kebapcian and Hermonn were able to introduce many Turkish intellectuals to the diaspora in France, particularly AyÅ?enur and RagÅ?p Zarakolu, two of the founders of Belge Publications. However, not every step was successful and they faced many difficulties trying to initiate dialogue.

One example was an attempt to actualize the Turkish-Armenian Dialogue Congress in 2000, while the French National Assembly was debating recognizing Armenian claims of genocide. "French Armenians took action and put pressure on Armenia to not give passports to attendees. Likewise, pressure was put on the French counsel at Yerevan to not give visas to Armenians," said Hermonn.

He said, President Robert Kocharian and Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian then made an unexpected statement, "Kocharian and Oskanian were saying 'every effort to support Turkish-Armenian dialogue is beneficial. Let the Armenian youth do it, there is no harm in that.'"

Taboo book Hermonn said this was the first step in recent developments of a Turkey-Armenia reconciliation. "The congress took place in a French senate chamber. Jirayr Libaridian, advisor of former president Petrosian, was in attendance as was Lavrenti Parsexyan, ex-director of the Genocide Museum in Yerevan, on the stage next to Turkish intellectuals."

Hermonn's life course changed with a telephone call from Turkey in 1994. On the other end of the line was Pars TuÅ?lacÄ±, an ethnically Armenian Turk, who spoke of a book that had an unorthodox thesis on the Armenian issue and about to be published in Turkey.

The "Ermeni Tabusu" (The Armenian Taboo), by Yves TERNON was published by Belge Publications. "I could not believe my ears when I heard such a work had been published," said Hermonn. Less than a month later, he heard the news of a Zarakolu couple being prosecuted and the publishing house being bombed. Hermonn decided to take action, he prepared a file on what had happened to the Zarakolu couple and presented it to some French foundations. Hermonn said 16 foundations, including France Liberte, founded by Danielle Mitterrand, the wife of the ex-president FranÃ§ois Mitterrand, approved the file. The document, requesting a reconsideration of the conviction of the Zarakolu couple, was presented to then prime minister, Tansu Å?iller, during a visit to France.

"There was no 'good Turk' for the Armenians, however, I was presenting a Turk who was risking his own life," said Hermonn. He said they invited the Zarakolu couple to the 80th anniversary of the events of 1915, "Even the Dashnaks were silent."

Hermonn's has summed up his 12 years dedicated to the cause, "I knowingly called out for dialogue from France. I acted via the French, which was very important. Otherwise, I would have faced even greater difficulty. I received lots of threats during the period. The Armenian diaspora was claiming there is no such thing as a good Turk," but they were wrong.
