

A HISTORY OF A PERFECT CRIME¹

By Talin Suciyan



SAMATYA (RAYMOND KEVORKIAN, *ERMENILER*, ARAS YAYINCILIK, 2012)

I spent my high school years in Samatya. The majority of my classmates were the children of the Armenians who had come to Istanbul from the provinces during the republican years.

We were allowed to go out during our lunch breaks. Many of the students lived in Samatya and could go home for lunch. Yet, in the early 1990's, when the political tension in the country reached its peak, because of the Kurdish issue, we were no longer allowed to go outside the school grounds during lunch breaks.

Although we used to work hard to not only be good citizens but the “best citizens”—we took compulsory national security classes taught by a high-ranking military officer, and would do our military exercises in the schoolyard so loud that half the district would hear our voices—it never guaranteed our security.

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In those years, constant bomb warnings were proof of our insecurity. After each warning, we would go out to the schoolyard until the entire school was searched. Sometimes we would be asked to go home early. We hardly had any idea why a bomb would be planted in our school. No one would put these bomb warnings into context. There was nothing to understand; it was just like that. And so we got used to these warnings, along with the changing security measures that were an ordinary part of our school life.

During my doctoral research, I read Armenian newspapers from the 1930's and had the chance to look at Samatya from a different perspective. Samatya was one of the districts where *kaghtagayans* were established. *Kaghtagayans* were *kaghtagan* (deportee or IDP) centers that hosted thousands of Armenians from the provinces. These centers functioned until the end of the 1930's. Armenian newspapers published in Istanbul in the 1920's and 1930's were full of reports on the *kaghtagans*' severe conditions in these centers, where they often had to live on top of one another. The community in Istanbul was responsible for providing food, work, and a sustainable life for these people. Yet, it was not easy, as the financial means of the community were shortened to a great extent, the court cases for saving its properties continued, and its legal status was in the process of complete eradication. And still, Armenians whose living conditions in the provinces were systematically decimated continued to come to Istanbul.

Armenians who remained in the provinces were threatened in several ways. Arshag Alboyaciyan referred to these attacks in his book *Badmut'awn Malatio Hayots'*:

'In 1924, Armenians were leaving en masse since a group of attackers—15 people—were raiding their houses asking for money and jewels, beating them up, almost to death. This organization was called Ateshglu Yildirim...



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They would put signs on the houses of Armenians and tell them to leave within 10 days . . . One day, they put a sign on the main church, giving Armenians five days to leave; otherwise, they said, ‘Ateshoglu Yildirim would burn you all.’²

Armenians understood that the organization was trying to intimidate them into leaving in order to obtain their properties, along with the other *Emval-i Metruke* (Abandoned Properties).³ In November 1923, two prominent Armenians, on behalf of 35 Armenians from Malatya, sent a letter to Mustafa Kemal, asking for security and the right to live in their houses. They wrote that if their citizenship was not recognized and they were required to leave, that this should be told to them officially, and not by raiding their houses.⁴ The letter did not have a positive impact; on the contrary, the signatories were asked to leave the country, and the 35 families had to follow them.⁵ Over the following months, Armenians continued to leave Malatya to Syria or to Istanbul. I first came across the Ateshoglu Yildirim cases through an oral history project I conducted for my doctoral research. My interviewee said there were others in Istanbul who could talk about this organization and its raids. He contacted one family, they said yes, but then changed their minds. It was during the same time that Maritsa Küçük, an elderly Armenian woman, was brutally killed, two others were severely beaten, and another attacked in Samatya. The atmosphere of fear was once again at its peak for the Armenians, and I decided to stall my research on the topic.

Yozgat, Amasya, Sinop, Ordu, Tokat, Kayseri, Diyarbakır, Sivas... And so it continued—Armenians were systematically forced out of Asia Minor and northern Mesopotamia throughout the republican years. They were essentially forced to come to Istanbul,

looking for shelter, food, work, and a secure life, following the Settlement Law of 1934; sometimes through extraordinary decrees ordering them to leave a certain place and be settled in another; through racist attacks that occurred on a daily basis; or simply through the state's refusal to open Armenian schools in the provinces, which was one of the "guaranteed rights" of the Lausanne Treaty of 1923.

Armenians who came to Istanbul remained at the bottom of all hierarchies. They were caught helpless between the institutional power structures of the Armenian community in Istanbul and the state. The latter cared about them the least. These centers were closed at the end of the 1930's; yet, Armenians continued to come to Istanbul from the provinces throughout the republican era, and their socio-economic problems occupied the agenda of the community for quite some time.

An Armenian suspect was recently arrested for the murder of Maritsa Küçük and for the other attacks on elderly women in Samatya. On the same day, the Turkish media covered the arrest with a news item, disseminated by the police,⁶ implying that since the suspect was Armenian, no racism was involved. Hence, the issue has been resolved.

We know that law has little to do with truth or justice. On the contrary, the mechanisms of law create substitutes for truth or justice. The cases of Pinar Selek, Hrant Dink, Sevag Balıkcı, along with the murder of Maritsa Küçük and the other attacks in Samatya, remind us of not only the impossibility of justice, but also the perfection of a crime, which continues to silence the witnesses.⁷ □

ENDNOTES

1. This article is a revised and expanded version of "Malatya, Yozgat, Ordu ve Samatya," published in *Radikal İki*, March 2, 2013.
2. Arshag Alboyacıyan, *Badmutiwn Malatio Hayots'* (Beirut: Dbaran Sevan, 1961), pp. 966–967.
3. For Emval-ı Metruke See Nevzat Onaran, *Emval-ı Metruke: Osmanlı'da ve Cumhuriyette Ermeni ve Rum Mallarının Türleştirilmesi* (Istanbul: Belge Yay, 2010), Uğur Ümit Üngör, *Confiscation and Destruction: The Young Turk Seizure of Armenian Property* (Continuum Publ., 2011), Taner Akçam and Ümit Kurt, *Kanunların Ruhı*, (Istanbul: İletişim Publ., 2012).
4. Alboyacıyan, *Badmut'ıwn Malatio Hayots'*, p. 967.
5. Ibid.
6. See the press release of the Istanbul branch of the Human Rights Organization of Nov. 3, 2013, after meeting Murat Nazaryan.
7. See Jean-Françis Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. transl. Georges van den Abbeele (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 14.



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