

**Alan Whitehorn**, holder of the J.S. Woodsworth Chair the Humanities at Simon Fraser University from 1994-1996, now at the Royal Military College in Kingston, presented a lecture hosted by the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University in June 2003.

The text below is an abridged version of this lecture, and is based on a keynote presentation given to the Armenian Community Centre in Toronto commemorating the Armenian genocide of 1915. A shorter version of this speech was also published in the web edition of the *Globe and Mail*, April 27, 2004.

### *The Armenian Genocide: A Canadian Perspective:*

The April 24 genocide remembrance day is one of the three most important days in the contemporary Armenian calendar, along with Christmas and Easter. This year the commemoration is particularly poignant with the passage in the House of Commons this past week of Bill M-380 recognizing the Armenian genocide of 1915.

Genocide is a sombre subject which generates an enormous sense of responsibility for a writer to try to do justice for each and every victim. In the absence of a vast sea of tombstones, our shared memory must be the collective marker denoting their intertwined fate. It is somewhat intimidating to try to summarize the vastness and the complexities of the Armenian genocide in the grim counting of the vast number of dead. Statistics, as important as they are, are numbing. Often it is more effective to draw a few personal examples.

My family, like so many others, is part of the Armenian diaspora. My father, an Anglo- Canadian, met my mother, an Armenian, in Egypt half a century ago. We, like so many came to Canada as immigrants. We are part of this wonderful multicultural heritage. We share many new experiences in our adopted home, but we also remember our ancestral roots. Both are key to our identities.

The year 1915 is a long time ago, but for many it still bears its bitter fruit. There is virtually no Armenian family that does not share its own personal accounts of family members who were slaughtered, beaten, robbed or sent into forced exile. My grandmother was an orphan of the genocide. She never knew her real name or age and spent many years in refugee camps.

As a grandchild of an orphan of the genocide, I have often thought about how we try to understand such enormous suffering, such terrible coercion, such sinister plots, and such vast indifference by too many.

Our reactions to genocide inevitably shift over time. Initially, enormous shock, trauma and deep anger are the primary responses. Later, a search for personal and international recognition and justice comes to the fore. Still later, there emerges an attempt to understand both the particular and the more universal aspects of genocide.

In some ways these perspectives reflect the trilogy of the past, present and future.

It is sometimes helpful to think in terms of key persons when trying to understand the grand epic accounts of history. In this case, I think of three men that symbolize three different responses to genocide. Each individual was profoundly troubled by genocide, but differed in his deeds. One was a young wounded victim, the second was an aspiring law student (later an influential professor) and the third is a brave army general. Each person was cited in Samantha Power's Pulitzer Prize winning book A Problem from Hell.

The first is Soghomon Tehlirian, a young Armenian victim of the 1915 genocide. At the age of 19, he was the sole survivor in his family. His mother, father, brothers and sisters were all killed. He himself was shot in the arm, wounded in the leg by a sword and beaten in the head unconscious. Many hours later he awoke to discover a horrific nightmare. The entire caravan of thousands of Armenians from his home town had been slaughtered. It would take him a long time to recover and flee the killing fields. Eventually, he meandered through the Near East and the Balkans to Western Europe. Several years later, in 1921, he was in Berlin, Germany. This lonely survivor was still distraught and now suffering from epileptic seizures. One dramatic day he recognized an exiled Ottoman official. It was Talat Pasha, the former Minister of the Interior in the Ottoman Empire. Talat Pasha was one of the key figures in the triumvirate that planned the genocide.

Tehlirian, a scarred and troubled young man, who claimed to hear his dead relatives call out for vengeance and justice, shot and killed Talat Pasha on a street in Berlin on March 15, 1921. He was immediately arrested and a sensational trial took place in June of that year. Could surviving the mass murder of so many countless people (the term "genocide" had yet to be born) drive a person to such unspeakable grief so as to commit an act of violence? Was he guilty or not of murder? Or was he exercising personal clan justice for the death of his entire family? Is the murder of a tyrant ever justified? Or were his acts those of a terrorist?

Raphael Lemkin, an aspiring law student in Poland, read about the trial and wondered 'how could we have a law for the murder of one person, but not for the murder of one million persons?'. Increasingly we live in a global community, but there was an enormous lapse in international law. Conceptually, there was no word for such a crime. Thus, there was no way for applying, let alone enforcing, collective law and justice. Lemkin wrestled through the 1930s with the need for a legal term to convey the magnitude of this massive crime.

Following the Nazi invasion of Poland, Lemkin, as a Jew, was at grave risk in the Holocaust that was unfolding. Fleeing Nazi-occupied Europe, he eventually found his way to sanctuary in the United States. Amidst World War II, he wrote a monumental book exhaustively documenting the Nazi record. It was in this account where the world became aware of the term "genocide". Lemkin would become an advisor to the Allies at the Nuremberg Tribunal, which attempted to introduce justice after the fact. But most importantly, he became a one man crusade to oversee the passage in the UN on

December 9, 1948 of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The very next day the UN Charter of Human Rights, drafted by Canadian John Humphrey, was passed. Together these two documents provided the underpinnings for a charter of rights for all humanity.

The roots for the birth of the term genocide go back to the slaughter of Armenians in WWI and were articulated amidst the Holocaust of WWII. Two individuals are a key part of an important story that we all should know. The young traumatized Soghomon Tehlirian searched for personal justice through an individual act of violence. Raphael Lemkin sought collective justice through international law. However, it was not sufficient to introduce a new term for an unthinkable crime. It was not enough to pass a new and pioneering convention in international law. The failure of the League of Nations was a harsh reminder that there was a great need for a more powerful world government to enforce international law and ensure justice for the world community at large. It also would require a more robust UN military force.

This leads us to a third person. Romeo Dallaire was a rapidly rising Canadian general who left the comfortable confines of Canada to serve others overseas. Ten years ago in 1994, he was working for the UN peacekeeping force in Rwanda. Like so many Canadian citizen-soldiers, he was part of a heroic tradition.

Rwanda, like much of Africa, was a fractured polity. As nationalistic hatred rose, as violence escalated, and as political leaders in the state urged the Hutu majority to annihilate the Tutsi ethnic minority, General Dallaire pleaded for more troops and greater authority to intervene militarily. His pleas were ignored by Western governments, the UN headquarters, most of the Western media and, tragically, even by survivors of earlier genocides. The plight of the Tutsi being slaughtered by Hutu was initially ignored by the rest of the world. The grave result was 800,000 Tutsis and moderate Hutus were mutilated and killed.

Meanwhile elsewhere in the world, too many of us succumbed to the “sin of indifference”. We had not learned sufficiently well the lessons of the Armenian genocide of WWI or the Holocaust of WWII. General Dallaire and his fellow peacekeepers paid a very heavy price for being abandoned. To this day, he suffers from severe bouts of post-traumatic stress syndrome, much like others who had witnessed the Armenian genocide decades earlier.

As more of our citizen-soldiers serve with the United Nations to protect human rights and foster world peace, we need to recognize the heavy psychological toll on our peacekeepers. We must not belittle or deny what General Dallaire and his fellow soldiers have witnessed and continue to endure in flashbacks. Genocide has many victims. Not all of them lay strewn on the killing fields. Some return home to Canada as our fellow citizens.

For Armenians who remember their ancestral roots, we have a common bond in our respective suffering. As JS Woodsworth counselled ‘We must resist the “sin of

indifference”.’ In the historic debate on the Armenian genocide in the House of Commons just concluded this week, one of the poems cited counselled the following:

We must remember.  
Remember and learn.  
Remember and tell.  
But also remember and live.  
And some day, remember and forgive.