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Preface

This preface was published in a book, edited by Richard Hovannisian, of selected papers on the Armenian Genocide that were presented at the First International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide in Tel Aviv in 1982. Regrettably, it is as appropriate as ever for a mankind that still “doesn’t get it.”

ONE IS EITHER FOR HUMAN LIFE OR NOT

Israel W. Charny¹

I am honored and pleased to have been invited to write the preface to this important volume, and gratified that much of the work it contains was first developed for and presented at the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide, held in Tel Aviv in 1982. Although in a basic philosophical sense the task is endless, I am sure that the excellent papers presented here constitute a major contribution to our knowledge of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenian Genocide was a cataclysmic event to the Armenian people—indeed, to all people—and to the very process we call civilization. To study the Armenian Genocide is to do honor to the Armenian people and their history, and it is also to affirm a commitment to protect and fight for the rights of all peoples.

I write this piece shortly after returning to Jerusalem from Boston, where I participated in a noteworthy conference on the theme, “Seventy Years after the Genocide: Lessons from the Armenian Experience.” I am impressed by the increasing range and depth of scholarship on the Armenian Genocide. I also sense an upsurge of pride in one’s Armenian heritage, a greater resoluteness in articulating the story of the injustice done to the Armenians. In

¹ This preface is reproduced, with permission, from Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1986), 5–7.

addition, it is very heartening that an increasing number of Armenian scholars and leaders are ready to join scholars and leaders of other ethnic, national and religious communities in studying the history of different genocides in a broad human rights perspective, and out of a shared concern for the future fate of all peoples.

I would like to think that the milestone conference in 1982 and the continuing work of our Institute of the International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide have something to do with these developments. If I have understood my Armenian colleagues correctly, the conference was the first time that the Armenian case was presented in an international forum of scholars. I remember vividly the deep concern and sometimes outright anxiety of Armenian participants when the conference organizers took a stand against the Turkish government's heavy pressures to have the Armenian topic removed from the conference and against the Israeli government, which, to the unending shame of many of us, succumbed to Turkish demands and attempted to close down the conference. It was a powerful lesson that Armenians and Jews and all other peoples- must stand together in a common battle against those responsible for past events of genocide, and against all those who seek to deny the truth of such past events.

I often wonder what it meant to Armenians to see some of us Jews, and our beloved Jewish state, bow to *realpolitik* and agree to suppress Armenian history. Even in 1985, upon returning to Israel from Boston, I found that the government had attempted to pressure the mayor of Jerusalem, Teddy Kollek, not to participate in a meeting at the Hebrew University on Mt. Scopus in commemoration of the Armenian Genocide. Happily, I have also been encouraged by a strong editorial in the *Jerusalem Post* (April 25, 1985) insisting that "no political considerations can supersede the imperative against joining the forgetters and distorters of the genocide of another people." This is the Israel I believe in, and the voice of human integrity that I am always thrilled to hear.

Nonetheless, it is a fact that among the people who experienced the Holocaust there are individuals who are willing to collaborate with the killer-apologists of another people because it serves their immediate sense of self-interest. This sobering restatement of truth about human nature and the potential evil that exists in people is not unrelated to the very dynamics from which sprang both the Armenian Genocide and the Holocaust.

Sadly, a readiness to court violence and to revel in power is present in all peoples. Thus, in the burst of a new Armenian pride these last years, there has

also emerged a terrorist movement that has claimed the lives of Turkish diplomats, their families, and other innocent people. Although many of us can readily understand the deep rage felt by the Armenians against the Turkish government, which is currently engaged in massive campaigns to obliterate the history of the Armenian Genocide, the killing of innocent people cannot be the way for those of us who believe that the essential evil in all genocide is the preempting of another human being's inherent right to life.

Similarly, the Jewish national experience in its reconstituted homeland instructs us again in the truth about human nature. Even a victimized people, with their deep sensitivity to suffering, must guard against the hubris of power, the corruption of pragmatism, and the lure of militarism.

One can but hope that the ethical traditions of Judaism and the basic democratic structure of the State of Israel, along with the never-to-be-forgotten legacy of the Holocaust, will prevail in reestablishing the Israeli commitment to "purity of arms," that is, a commitment to power only for self-defense, and never for inflicting or cooperating in a reckless destruction of another people. We who have been victims have a profound responsibility to guard against wanton violence even in our struggles against our oppressors. Each and every human being, at any given time in human history, has a connection with all the genocides that have taken place in the past, and with the potential for genocide against any people whatsoever in the future. One is either for human life or not. There is no such thing as indifference on this issue.

The new forms of mass murder available today on our planet threaten the continuation of human existence. It is the responsibility of us all to be aware of the dangers of nuclear holocausts, multiple genocides, or omnicide that can obliterate millions of human beings belonging to many different groups.

We should not forget Pastor Niemöller's brilliant epigraph to the Holocaust:

*First they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out—
Because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the communists
And I did not speak out—
Because I was not a communist.
Then they came for the trade*

*Unionists and I did not speak out—
Because I was not a trade unionist.*

*Then they came for me—
And there was no one left
To speak out for me.*

Foreword. Who Really Lied? The Turks, Armenians, and Jews Revisited

Yair Auron, Professor Emeritus, Open University of Israel

"We Zionists look upon the fate of the Armenian people with a deep and sincere sympathy; we do so as men, as Jews, and as Zionists."

—Shmuel Tolkowsky, 1918 (Tolkowsky was secretary to Chaim Weizmann, who later became the first president of Israel—Ed.)¹

This book is a major contribution to the study of the Armenian Genocide and the process of denial of known genocides altogether. Three major scholars of genocide also contributed to the writing of the book: Ragip Zarakolou (a Turk); Richard Hovannisian (an Armenian); and Michael Berenbaum (a Jew). Bringing in these three leaders in their various ethnic groups is a very symbolic, meaningful and wise decision, each of them being a distinguished representative both of their identity groups and of the quest for human decency.

A big part of the book deals with issues concerning the 1982 conference in Tel Aviv. Charny was probably the first one to use the concepts of "Holocaust" and "genocide" together, instead of the concepts of "Holocaust" and "genocide" separately. This new notion is meaningful in the study of the Holocaust and in the study of genocide, as well as in the interrelations between them. By using comprehensive new sources and newly declassified government documents, Charny gives new perspectives on the hostile attitude of Turkey and Israel towards the conference. He analyzes the development of the pioneering international conference on genocide that was a milestone event in the struggle against denials of historically known genocides. Charny has been dealing with the domain of individual denial and collective denial for many years.

¹ Cited in Yair Auron, *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2003, reprinted, Routledge, 2004).

Charny originated the idea of the conference and also played an important role in its organization as well. He took a stand, successfully, against the Turkish and the Israeli governments. When he encountered heavy pressures to have Armenian topics excluded from the conference, and even demands to exclude the participation of Armenian scholars, he stood firm and his efforts were outstandingly successful. The book also describes and provides new sources of information about the hostility of various Israeli government leaders who succumbed to the Turkish demands and attempted to close down the conference, and it presents a particularly fascinating in-depth picture of Elie Wiesel's complicated role in the process.

Over the years, the Turkish government has attempted to disrupt academic conferences and public discussions of genocide many times and has even intruded in some Holocaust conferences in response to spontaneous audience comments about the Armenian Genocide. Charny once told me about a Holocaust conference in London organized by the late publisher Robert Maxwell, where, after a denier had finished his shpiel, Charny proposed that the chair, who had allowed the denier's comments entirely civilly, censure the denier, and what then happened is that the audience spontaneously rose and left the session. As we know, the Turkish government has devoted itself to bizarre denial for decades and is currently still engaged in a massive campaign to obliterate the Armenian Genocide.

The 1982 conference took place even though some of the speakers canceled their participation due to Israeli and Turkish pressures. The conference was an important "target" for the Turks. This was due to the papers presented at the conference. This was many years ago when there was much less recognition of the Armenian Genocide. These papers constituted a major contribution to the knowledge of humanity about the genocide. They described the injustice that had been done to the Armenians. The significance of that knowledge was not just to Turkey, Armenia, and Israel, but also for all humanity in a world where a significant portion of the population did not recognize the Armenian Genocide and tried to avoid the injustice that had been done to the Armenians.

Where there is denial the Armenians are victims twice. Their first victimization is the genocide itself. The genocide had a beginning and an end, whereas their second victimization is the process of denial. This process has continued for many years, its damages can last for generations.

The genocide of the Circassian people is another good example. The Circassians suffered from a long genocide for 101 years. That genocide was committed by the Russians (1763–1864). It ended 156 years ago. Actually, today's generations are the seventh and eighth generations after the genocide. Nevertheless, the young generations of today continue the struggle for the recognition of the

Circassians' genocide. We have to admit that it does not have any real chance to be recognized. It is a forgotten and denied genocide. Nevertheless, it is a very significant element in the identity of their younger generations today. These young people struggle for genocide recognition. Even more, they struggle for their survival. The same is true for the third and fourth generation of Armenians. They struggle for genocide recognition. It is a significant element in their identity.

Let us quote some sentences from the remarkable and landmark book of Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, published in 1982. Herman is a professor of clinical psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a scholar of trauma, dealing with the aftermath of violence. She points out the difference between a natural disaster, an "Act of God," and "Human Disaster, committed by human beings." This analysis has great relevance to our discussion here. This is what Herman wrote: "When the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator. It is morally impossible to remain neutral in this conflict. *The bystander is forced to take sides* (my emphasis)."²

The main part of the book deals with the political and moral behavior of the State of Israel. With intellectual integrity, Charny criticizes the disrespect of the State of Israel to other genocides. When you deny another's genocide, you betray your own genocide; when you deny genocide of the present or of the past, you prepare the ground for a new one. Therefore, the significance of recognition or non-recognition of the genocide of the past or the present is not only related to the past, but also to the present and the future. Those who would be future perpetrators understand that genocide can be committed, in most cases, without any real punishment.

The State of Israel is selling weapons to other governments that commit genocide while these governments are still committing genocide. This is a huge moral failure that also betrays the legacy of the Jewish Holocaust.

Charny also shows the closeness or similarities between the Jewish Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. He does this by showing the difference between the two events. The attitude of the book towards the Armenian Genocide and the Jewish Holocaust is the closeness between the two, forming a paradigm of genocide and evil in our world in the twentieth century and in the present century.

In this regard we have to mention the role of the "third party," for example, those people and states that remained indifferent while facing the genocide.

2 Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1982), 1.

In many cases, Israel is one of the countries with an attitude of indifference. This is another serious moral issue. Charny quotes Pastor Niemoller's brilliant epigraph to the Holocaust to show the similarity between the situations of the two peoples, the Armenian and the Jews:

*Then they came to me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me [Armenian or Jew—Y.A.]*

This book is truly a significant text. Moreover, it is quite probably an unexpected one for many people in Israeli society, especially due to its dealing with unrevealed events that took place during the war of 1948. Charny is one of the rare academics who risks speaking about Israeli crimes toward the Palestinian people during the War of Independence—the Nakba, the catastrophe of the Palestinians. This complex and painful issue has not been sufficiently studied and discussed. Its influence is perhaps more subconscious than conscious and affects Israeli attitudes toward other genocides, including the Armenian Genocide. Charny is a brave scholar to use the terms “genocidal killing” and “genocidal expulsion” of the Palestinians that only a few Israeli academics would use. In my opinion, Charny can be proud of it. One of his claims is that Israel denies its own actions—this is another moral failure. For him, it is one aspect of the road that had led Israel from being the “good guys” to become the “bigger liars.”

The essential evil in all genocide, writes Charny, is preempting other human beings' inherent right for life. For Charny, the most basic choices in life are: for human life or against life. This is a decisive example of the “human attitude” in the author's writing about genocide. He cares about human life more than about the politics of it all even as he sheds a great deal of light on the political maneuvering, strategies, and lies.

To sum up: **this is a very important, courageous, and original book.** This important work is based on Charny's humanistic approach. He proposes new perspectives while analyzing people and states that commit crimes that they deny. It is a significant text that will probably be of wide interest in the world, and at the same time it will probably be an unexpected text for many people in Israeli society.

In 2003, I wrote in *The Banality of Denial: Israel and the Armenian Genocide*:

Over the years I have been troubled by a sense of oppressive discomfort and criticism of the evasive behavior, verging on denial of the various

governments of Israel regarding the memory of Armenian Genocide. I decided to examine both the overt factors and deeper and more complex factors leading to such behaviour, which to me seems morally unacceptable, particularly since we Jews were victims of the Holocaust. As an Israeli Jew, I aspire in my academic work to describe, analyze, and comment on the attitude of my state and society as honestly as I can, and in so doing, to change this attitude. My goal in writing this book, as in the first one, is to uncover the truth—with as much precision as possible.³

3 Yair Auron, *The Banality of Denial*.

Introduction

SUMMARY: THE “GOOD GUYS” (ISRAEL) TURN OUT TO BE THE BIGGER LIARS

Previously classified and secret documents have now revealed clearly how extensive Israel's role was in the Turkish and Israeli governments' ruthless efforts to suppress historical truth and academic freedom in the famed First International Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide in Tel Aviv in June 1982.

The newly available documents from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs (henceforth IMFA) reveal that Turkey indeed pressured Israel to remove the subject of the Armenian Genocide from the conference. However, the startling fact that has now been exposed is that repeated statements by Israel's Foreign Ministry that Turkey was actually threatening to harm Jewish lives were made up by Israel itself. It was Israel that set out on the cruel juggernaut effort to cancel the conference based on entirely fabricated stories of Turkish threats to Jewish lives. At first the threats were defined as aimed at Jews in Turkey and this is what appeared in early *New York Times* stories, but then the Ministry clarified—though at first as top secret until this too became international news—that the most serious threat was that Turkey might stop giving safe passage to Jewish refugees escaping from Iran and Syria through Turkey and therefore their lives were at risk.

This conference was the first known international academic conference on genocide ever; it introduced the first known linkage of “Holocaust and genocide” ever; and it was the first ever to host Armenian scholars—including famed Profs Richard Hovannisian and Vahakn Dadrian—speaking of the forgotten and denied Armenian Genocide.

The IMFA indeed may have been seeking to protect the Jewish refugees and Israel's relationship to Turkey in general, but Israel went ruthlessly far in its efforts to suppress any mention of the Armenian Genocide and even to demand cancelling the participation of Armenian scholars, and if not then to close the conference down entirely.

In a later chapter we will also describe and analyze the complex and surprising history of Elie Wiesel's responses to the pressures to remove the topic of the Armenian Genocide and/or close the conference down in entirety. Beginning with his role as official president of the conference and continuing with his initial adamant refusal to remove the Armenian Genocide from the program, Wiesel proceeded to waffle his positions. He resigned his role as president and then, more than disappointingly, proved to be an aggressive opponent of the conference who influenced many people not to attend and not to provide financial support they had promised. He himself "did us dirty" quite directly when he cancelled the financial grant he had promised from his foundation—and he knew all too well how hard we were working and the range of expenses we had undertaken.

Without taking away from Wiesel being a hugely heroic symbol of Holocaust agony and survival, as well as his going on to be a courageous promoter of the meaning of the Holocaust as calling for the life safety of *all* peoples everywhere, we report here the extensive damages Wiesel's actions did to the conference, and our own hurt, frustration and anger, but we still offer a thoughtful and not entirely unsympathetic analysis of his motivations in doing so and of his basic greatness.



Four Israeli leaders (in the middle right to left: Prof. Israel Charny, Prof. Yehuda Buer, MK Yossi Sarid, and Prof. Yair Auron) paying homage at the Eternal Flame at the Armenian Genocid Museum in Yerevan.



Figure 1. View of a conference session at the Tel Aviv Hilton. The microphone is in the hands of conference chair, Israel W. Charny.

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