

Ayse Nur Zarakolu, Padua, Nov 29 2001

Dear Friends, I am really sorry that my poor state of health has prevented me from taking part in this great day, which is a truly significant one for me.

Basically there is a logic in someone receiving a prize for having written a good book or painted beautiful pictures. But it is unusual for someone to receive a prize for having said "No". The city of Padua is accomplishing something very different, lending its name to a most original gesture.

As far as I am concerned, I have done my duty. I have done something that everyone should do. I have not kept quiet, I have spoken out. I have preceded those who wanted to speak and have accepted my responsibility for my own deeds, defending them in all circumstances. And I shall continue to do so, right through to that supreme moment...

But the fact that I have received an award for this just goes to show what a strange world we live in.

In truth, the prize you are bestowing on me makes me feel even more responsible, and better motivated. And yet it still seems strange to me to receive this prize. In actual fact, I have done nothing but my duty, I have done what needed to be done. And it is a great shame that this duty is still long overdue in my country.

I have to say that, from a moral point of view, this is the most important award I have ever received. It is the award that does me the greatest honour, and confers the greatest responsibility. But you may ask: why? Because this award has another dimension to it. A very important dimension.

The way to prevent yet more genocides, yet more tragedies from happening is through the communal experience of expressing heartfelt repentance for the shame of what has gone before. At the same time this is a preliminary condition for creating a collective conscience.

The Turkish poet Bedrettin Aykin expresses the tragedy of 1915 in his verses like this:

"Do not wait for me in vain, I shall not return
Exile snags the roses and is blood
Yesilmark, Kelkit suyu and the Euphrates
The rivers of my country bear witness

The wide eyes of my child mother Struck dumb with terror bear witness"

But what a shame that mankind keeps on suffering the same sorrows. Because starting from our own, the societies of the world shun any commitment to do what is necessary to educate the conscience of their people. Negating genocide merely paves the way for future genocides. Young deaths are still an open wound in my country.

Aykin writes again:

"In a long night with dawn not far away
Scattering victims from our blood
We walk with trained steps
To the encounter with our cross
We are guilty of loving you
Guilty of thinking of you
Photographs of pain at its most intense
On the weary old faces
New deaths await the mothers
The new lifeless brave ones
We are immersed in infamy deaf and dumb
We are on the edge of a cold and bottomless chasm"

So being able to say NO, following the dictates of conscience, is essential, for the victims too, if we are to restore our own sense of humanity. This is a responsibility that challenges us, out of a sense of duty not only towards "others", but towards "ourselves" too.

We are all children of Anatolia's cultural heritage. Acknowledging the shame of the events of 1915 will also mean reconciling ourselves with the geographical reality in which we live. Only then will our dead be able to rest in peace, and we shall all be able to mourn for them together..

In fact, negating genocide means prolonging it, and thereby implicating the new generations in it too. To this we must all say NO together. I say NO.

Ayşe Nur Zarakolu