

JEAN AICARD'S PROTEST AGAINST THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE OF 1915

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Jean Aicard, ca. 1900.

In 1917 a small book entitled *Armenia, the Lamentation of Armenia* was published at the printing house of the Mekhitarists' Congregation of Saint-Lazarus Island of Venice¹. The epigraph of this book is "Armenia will revive her sweet and pacific days, under the shade of vineyards and olive woods of her martyred ancestors". The author of the book is Jean Aicard (1848-1921), poet, member of the French Academy².

One can see in the book, as an inset, the photograph of Jean Aicard, officially dressed, with a cross shape order on the left side of his chest.

The small poem *Armenia* of Jean Aicard has a short, but eloquent preface. He writes that the cry of pain of a criminally exterminated nation attracted the attention of numerous people all over the world, including poets who wished that the whole world could hear the voice of truth muffled in the throat of tortured Armenia. No nation suffered as Armenians did. Their houses were destructed, their roofs came down and their hearths died out, but they never stopped hoping peace and freedom.

Jean Aicard believes that Armenia will revive from ashes and ruins, like the legendary Phoenix, to be more glorious and more powerful. This is our wish. «Parmi les désolations, parmi les ruines, même parmi les cendres renaîtra le phénix de l'Arménie plus glorieuse et plus puissante. Voici ce que nous désirons»³.

¹ Jean Aicard, de l'Académie Française, *Arménie, la plainte arménienne*, Venise, St. Lazare, 1917. (Jean Aicard, from the French Academy, *Armenia, the Lamentation of Armenia*, Venice, San Lazzaro, 1917).

² Jean Aicard (1848-1921) was born in Toulon. He was poet, writer and dramaturge. In his works he used to celebrate children and Provence. He is the author of many works (see *Dictionnaire encyclopédique Quillet*, Paris, 1939, c. 67).

³ Jean Aicard, *Arménie...*, p. 5.

Jean Aicard holds up to shame the First World War begun in 1914. It focused forces of evil, which horribly and inhumanly appeared in a spot of the world. The world suddenly stood stupefied by the strength of egoism and crime. The Christian world was horrified by war and death. But the Christian world will win and Armenia will revive. The verse was written on May 6, 1917. It is full of profound meaning and written in the spirit of Christian philosophy. The author presents Armenia as a Christian martyr. Armenia is dripping with blood, but the victim is beautiful in her silk garment and the blood streaming from her heart is shining as a ruby.

Jean Aicard describes the image of crucified Armenia according to the criteria of Christian hagiography.

Some parts of the verse are like a mournful Mass, as the victim, Armenia, is dolefully parting from her beloved real life and is leaving the wax candle burning with fire of earthy life to join eternal life on the Heaven, she is going to meet the Creator, she is following behests of the Holy Gospel and she is sure that although she was constrained to leave early her earthy life, Jesus Christ is waiting for her in the Heaven. With this fate of her and reckless torment Armenia is thundering with awful remorse in the hearths of the whole human kind. The cross is everywhere, it is in the hand of Armenians and the entire world will bend down before Armenians' cross, full of deep faith in the spiritual courage of this nation and the firmness of its faith.

The poet believes that Armenian people will live in peace and Christ will give them Resurrection as He did a miracle to resurrect Lazarus⁴.

O dead - alive Armenia,
I believe in your eternal Glory,
Your long martyrdom will win the time,
Passing through your solitary torment,
You will revive among peoples of the world,
... Your forehead will be crowned by a sacred diadem.
By he who resurrected Lazarus from the grove.

⁴ Lazarus was the disciple and the friend of Christ, the brother of Martha and Maria. They were living in Bethany, not far from Jerusalem. Christ loved a lot this family and went often to meet them. Lazarus was sick and his sisters sent unto him saying, Lord, behold, he whom thou love is sick. Then when Jesus came, he found that he had lain in the grove four days already. Then Martha, as soon as she heard that Jesus was coming, went and met him. Martha said unto Jesus, Lord, if thou had been there, my brother had not died. But I know that even now, whatsoever thou will ask of God, God will give it thee. Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection and the life: he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die. And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus, come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes. Jesus said unto them, Loose him and let him go (John, 11, 1-44).

... And nations will say: "Behold how he loves her".

Of course, in the original text by Jean Aicard this part is much more artistic and impressive:

Ô morte - vivante, Arménie,
Je crois à ta gloire infinie,
Ton martyre si long triomphera du temps.
Après avoir souffert ton tourment solitaire
Tu revivras parmi les peuples de la terre,
...Ton front sera cerclé du sacré diadème.
Par Celui qui fit sortir Lazare du tombeau.
... Et les peuples diront: « Vous voyez comme il l'aime. »⁵.

The verse of Jean Aicard is written in the spirit of hagiography and canticles praising medieval martyrs. These literary genres were proper to almost all Christian nations for whom the supreme hero was the one who was martyred for his faith. It is well known that during the Genocide of 1915 numerous Armenians were constrained to adopt Islam. Recently, in 2013, a voluminous monograph was published in the United States of America; its author is Samantha Power. The book has 620 pages and it is entitled *A Problem from Hell*.

The book tells about the age of genocides and considers the Armenian Genocide, organized by Young Turks in 1915, as the first in the world. The book contains the photograph of national avenger Soghomon Teylerian and the history of his trial⁶. In the part of *Annotations* Samantha Power mentions the book *The First World War* by Martin Gilbert, published in 1994, in which the author gives evidence by facts that besides slaughtering more than one million Armenians, Turks forced 200,000 Armenians⁷ to convert to Islam.

These facts were evidently known to the poet who states that problems of confession are proper to the essence of genocide in general. He considers all cruelly slaughtered classes of Armenians as innocent martyrs.

Beginning with the 19th century the French intellectuals, especially those who visited Western Armenia, noticed with pain that Armenians living on their native lands had turned into slaves. In books published in Europe, mostly in France, one can read anxious descriptions of the painful situation of Armenians, bearers of ancient civilization.

⁵ Jean Aicard, *Arménie...*, p. 5.

⁶ Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell, America and the Age of Genocide*, Perennial, 2003, p. 3.

⁷ Ibidem, p.518. See Martin Gilbert, *The First World War: A Complete History* /New-York: Henry Holt, 1994, p. 167/.

Such opinions were even more frequent after massacres organized by sultan Abdul Hamid in 1895-1896.

In 1917, while Jean Aicard wrote his moving verse *Armenia*, another interesting work was published in Paris: *Essai sur les nationalités (Essay on Nationalities)* by J. de Morgan. In this book the author tells about his observations during his trip to Constantinople. He writes: "Beginning with the reign of the deposed sultan and at the time of Young Turks the Turkish public opinion is shamelessly against Armenians and one can hear everywhere exclamations of hate addressed to them. In fact, Turks consider among themselves that the massacres of Armenians were well done, that it was a sacred duty, something done for the glory of the Prophet, i.e. Muhammad"⁸. He describes an eloquent episode to confirm what he said. "I was myself the witness of a scene of criminal cruelty in one of Istanbul streets. Two young boys were fighting. An old Turkish man having a splendid white beard was watching them, no longer paying attention to the rosary in his hand. He was encouraging one of them with voice and gesticulations and seeing that he was defeated, he began to shout loudly: "Vour! Vour! Erméni dir" ("Hit him! Hit him! He is Armenian")⁹. What more can we expect of such people? asks J. de Morgan.

As Jean Aicard puts it so rightly, Turks were not killing a few persons, but the entire Armenia. For the author 'Armenia' is a collective personage of a hero-victim whom the Christian worlds ought to know, has to be proud of him and support him.

In 1896 a little book was published under the title of *Armenia (Arménie)*. It was a short essay about past and present events of Armenia. The author was R. Badiron. He spoke about the perseverance of the Armenia nation and about its creative capacities. The book was written on the occasion of massacres organized by Abdul Hamid in 1895-1896. According to this French writer, Armenian peasants are able to cultivate the soil with ability, while in towns, thanks to their exceptional mind, Armenians are bankers or well known oriental merchants and the sphere of their activities is extending from Eastern Africa to China¹⁰.

The author explains why he is supporting Armenians and what his goal is. At first, he wants to inform his fellow compatriots who don't know how Turks are slaughtering Armenians, to stir up sympathy towards their unfortunate brothers, as they could accomplish their human duty helping the innumerable orphans wandering in the deserts

⁸ J. de Morgan, *Essai sur les nationalités*, Paris-Nancy, 1917, p. 82. (de Morgan J., *Essay on Nationalities*, Paris-Nancy, 1917, p. 82).

⁹ Ibidem, p. 83.

¹⁰ Badiron R., *Arménie, coup d'œil général et explicatif sur son histoire et les derniers événements*, Paris, 1896, p. 5. (Badiron R., *Armenia, A General and Explicative Glance on its History and Last Events*, Paris, 1896, p. 5).

without bread, often completely naked. And when the evil will finally be eradicated, all possible means must be used to compensate the torments of numerous sufferers who are yet locked up in prisons or places of detention¹¹.

The translation into Western Armenian of Jean Aicard's verse *Armenia* was done by Arshak Chobanian and published in the same book. The book contains another verse in French called *La plainte arménienne (The Armenian Lamentation)* which is the paraphrase of Jean Aicard's *Armenia*. Its author is Simon Yeremyan (1871-1938), a member of the Mekhitarist Congregation of Venice, who was the editor of the journal "*Bazmavep*" for a whole year.

This is also a kind of funeral chant devoted to "our dead".

In this mourning lamentation S. Yeremian is speaking about the hour of revenge and the victory of justice.

Justice will come, o slaughtered nation,
We shall see the laurels flourishing,
Justice will come on the wings of years...
I am tired of dying.

O Martyrs! People will see how friends of my nation
Are sowing white lilies, full of charm, on the river banks,
And hanging, as offerings, garlands on the wall
Stained with our innocent blood¹².

La justice viendra, race déracinée :
Nous verrons le laurier fleurir.
La justice viendra sur l'aile des années...
Je suis fatigué de mourir.
O Martyrs! On verra les amis de ma race
Sur les rives semer le lys blanc, plein de grâce,
Et suspendre, en offrande, une guirlande au mur
Rouge encore de votre sang pur.

The verse *Armenia* of Jean Aicard is a small but eloquent episode of the general wave of indignation which is defending all over the progressive world the rights of Armenians mercilessly slaughtered by dark satanic forces.

¹¹ Ibidem, p, 16.

¹² Aicard Jean, Arménie, p. 13.