

The cost of reconstruction

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It takes many hands to reconcile two peoples so divided by history



So near but yet so far

FOR centuries, a stone bridge spanning the emerald green waters of the Akhurian River connected the southern Caucasus to the Anatolian plains: a strategic pivot on the Silk Road, running through the ancient Armenian kingdom of Ani. Today the bridge would have linked tiny, landlocked Armenia to Turkey. But war and natural disasters have reduced it to a pair of stubs—a sad commentary on the relations between the two states.

This grim image prompted an Ankara-based think-tank, called Tepav, to devise a plan to rebuild the bridge and in so doing to reopen the long-sealed land border by stealth. “The idea is to promote reconciliation through cross-border tourism,” explains Tepav’s director, Guven Sak. Turkey’s doveish president, Abdullah Gul, has embraced the plan. The Armenian authorities and diaspora Armenians with deep pockets are also interested. If all went to plan, the bridge’s restoration would only be the start of a broader effort to repair hundreds of other Armenian architectural treasures scattered across Turkey.

This semi-official stamp on a relationship in the absence of diplomatic ties (foreseen in an accord signed last October, but yet to materialise) would be a first. Yet academics, artists and journalists are striking peace on their own terms. Hardly a day passes without Turks and Armenians hobnobbing at a reconciliation event.

It is a tricky business because true reconciliation means confronting the ghosts of the past. For decades Turkey denied the mass extermination of the Ottoman Armenians in 1915. Under Turkey’s draconian penal code, anyone who dares to describe the Armenian tragedy as a genocide can end up in jail or even dead. In 2007 an ultra-nationalist teenager murdered Hrant Dink, an Armenian-Turkish editor who often wrote about the

genocide. Although Ogun Samast pulled the trigger it is widely assumed that rogue security officials from the "deep state" gave him the gun.

Dink's death was a turning point. More than 100,000 Turks of all stripes showed up at his funeral bearing placards that read: "We are all Armenians." Indeed if the murder was intended to stifle debate it had the reverse effect. A growing number of Turks are uttering the g-word. Ugur Umit Ungor, a young Turkish academic is one of them. His research aims to show how many Young Turk cadres involved in the massacres continued to thrive after the republic was founded in 1923.

Others allude to history in more subtle ways. Take Mehmet Binay, a Turkish film director. His documentary "Whispering Memories" tells the story of ethnic Armenians in a village called Geben, who embraced Islam (presumably to avoid death at the hands of Ottoman forces). Sobs were heard during a recent screening of the film in Yerevan, Armenia's capital.

Although today's inhabitants of Geben hesitate to call themselves Armenians, a growing number of "crypto-Armenians" (people forced to change identity) do just that. Their stories were collected and recently published by Fethiye Cetin, a Turkish human-rights lawyer, whose grandmother revealed her own Armenian roots shortly before her death.

Meanwhile, an army of humble if accidental Armenian ambassadors are helping to melt the ice. Turkey says that as many as 70,000 illegal Armenian migrant workers, mostly women, eke out a living as servants and nannies in Istanbul. A recent study by Alin Ozinian, an Armenian-Turkish researcher shows that such women arrive full of fear of "the Turk" only to return with stories of kindness. If the land borders were to be reopened some day, their wages would not have to be spent on long, pricey bus rides through Georgia