

Anzac Commemoration and the Turkish Perspective¹

Muzaffer Orel

Biographical Details

Muzaffer Orel migrated to Australia in 1971 from Turkey. After working in a number of different factories he was Employment Officer for Leyland Australia. He then completed a Diploma in Education at Sydney University and taught for 15 years in Sydney's inner city schools. He has been involved in voluntary community work since 1972; first with the Good Neighbour Council as a contact worker and later as president of the Turkish Welfare Association. During this time he was influential in introducing Community Languages in Primary schools and in arranging for Scripture teachers in schools where there were significant numbers of Turkish-speaking students. He was president of the NSW Council of Turkish Associations which in his time united 32 other associations under its banner. He chaired the Australian-Turkish Day Organising Committee for 4 years and is a founder member of the Turkish Chapter of the Auburn RSL Sub-Branch. He founded the Australian-Turkish Scholarship Fund which transferred funds to the Turkish Education Foundation to help underprivileged but academically successful students in Turkey using funds from a permanent account, named From Australia with Love.

He could not have achieved this without his wife, Ann. They celebrated their 50th anniversary last year. Ann's unconditional support and encouragement kept him going. Both of them are now retired from teaching but involved in helping children with Mathematics and Reading on a voluntary basis.

Text of Presentation

This presentation was made at the 'Remembering Conflicts: Gallipoli, Coniston and the Frontiers of Violence' Conference, held at Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Conference, University of Technology, Sydney, on 28 August, 2014. It is a reflection on the commemoration of ANZAC Day and the involvement of the Turkish Community, and emphasizes mutual respect in the understandings of cultural diversity.

¹.Statement delivered at 'Women Against Rape in War: Gallipoli to Coniston' Conference, Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Research Centre, University of Technology, Sydney 29 August 2014 and published here as a non-refereed contribution.

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Good morning everyone,

People with a Turkish background, started to migrate to Australia, in 1968 after the agreement signed between the governments. Naturally, they were exposed to a new life. New environment, new place to live, to work, new school for the children, new language to learn ... They had a mammoth task ahead of them.

Initially, most of them were thinking of returning as soon as they saved enough money. Some of them did go back, only to find that money is not everything. After all, Australia is their new homeland. They realized that this is the right place to provide a better future for their children.

A lot of things changed within the last 46 years. The first generation to arrive in Australia worked very hard to reach their goal; namely to provide a better future for their children. At the start, they were all factory workers; but the second and third generations are in a lot better place: there are doctors, teachers, solicitors, engineers, you name it. Some of them own their own businesses and even provide employment opportunities for others. But, they are a bit slow in getting involved with politics.

Naturally, during this time, Turkish immigrants also participated in other aspects of social life. They joined the clubs, took part in multi-cultural activities and annual events like the Anzac Day March.

From time to time, some people from our community came together and marched on Anzac Days, carrying flags and a banner with some friendly messages on it. One day at a function, I met the late Rusty Priest, at the time President of the NSW RSL Branch. When I mentioned what our people were sometimes doing, he said, "Oh, it's not fair; the Anzac Day March is for the members only."

I took it from here and applied for membership of the RSL. Because Diggers and Mehmetts fought side by side in the Korean War, Turks now are considered allies. We then became a member of the RSL State Branch on the 15th of April 1998. We regularly march on the day, in a more formal manner, we have done so from that year onwards. We also joined the Auburn RSL Sub-branch and became their Turkish Chapter, a few years ago.

Initially, there was criticism from many sections of the Turkish-speaking community about participating in the March. Some were against an event they perceived as glorifying war. Some were unwilling to take part in an event with descendants of those who had killed their grandfathers. So, in interviews on the SBS Turkish Language Program – the live broadcast segment – and in an article in Ethnic Turkish newspapers published in Sydney – I explained that, though both nations had fought against each other in Çanakkale, a great mutual respect and a lasting friendship had developed from the conflict.

I pointed out: if our ancestors were the ones who fought and forgave; what concern is it of ours now? Furthermore, the Turkish Community has been living in Australia for over 40 years. We chose this country as our second homeland and if some of us still see Australians as our enemy, what the hell are they doing staying here?

We veterans are not in favour of glorifying war. On the contrary, war is a prescription for suffering, destruction, hardship and loss of life. Think about war's adverse effect for each country involved: loss of a trained workforce; loss of young lives in their prime. In some instances, the skills of an entire generation were lost. For example, in Istanbul University, there were no graduates from Medical school in 1915; because the Gallipoli campaign had interrupted their education.

As I mentioned in the newspaper article, “Those who died, had an easy exit. Those who returned from the conflict with their visible and/or psychological injuries, suffered along with their families for the rest of their lives... There is no way anyone who has experienced the traumas of war would glorify it.”

An Overview Of WWI From My Own Point Of View

The Ottoman Empire, known by the European Powers as the “sick man of Europe”, was manipulated into the war by Germany's hidden agenda. Directions to involve Turkey in the war were given to the German commander in charge of the whole Ottoman Armed Forces. The plan was to prevent the Allies from assisting Russia and compel them to commit large forces of manpower and resources against the Ottoman Empire.

A combined British and French fleet, attempted to force a way through the Straits, to provide a supply line to Russia, to occupy Istanbul and force the Ottomans to surrender. These Çanakkale Sea Battles began on the 19th of February 1915 and concluded with the British-French fleet abandoning the mission on the 18th of March 1915.

The Çanakkale Land Battles began on the 25th of April 1915. Sixteen battles later, the evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsular started. The first on the 20th of December 1915 was from Arıburnu and later on the 9th of January 1916 from Seddülbahir. This brought an end to the Çanakkale campaigns.

In Turkey, the Naval victory in the Dardanelles and recognition of those who died in wars are commemorated on the 18th of March while Australia commemorates their day on the 25th of April each year. In Turkey, as well as State organized ceremonies, schools and media always have their own programs on the day. Mosques hold special evening services. Hocas, that is Moslem clerics, give a historical background talk about the events of Çanakkale. They finish off by reading passages from the Koran and saying special prayers for all who died in wars anywhere.

In these services, there is no sign of hatred towards invaders who came to fight on Turkish soil. It is a purely spiritual approach, remembering all those who lost their lives in war.

Gallipoli was only one part of WWI conflict. Some people refer to it as the Great War. There is nothing great about any war. According to Google, in WW1 more than eight and a half million people were killed and 37 and a half million were injured. In the Çanakkale campaign alone, the Ottomans had more than 251,000 casualties. These include the dead; the wounded; those who were missing; those who died from illness developed in the trenches.

Whenever I am asked to speak at schools in connection with Anzac Day, I always make the point that war is an extreme tragedy. War means suffering, destruction and the loss of many lives without distinguishing young or old, men, women or even children. It's an immense human disaster.

Dialogue is a better way of managing disagreements. At a personal level this is something we can practice at home, at school and in the street... Talk things through. Avoid using force or

resorting to violence. People must learn and educate themselves in these skills in the early part of their lives when they are in school. If we achieve this, our world will be a lot safer and a better place to live in.

Some Comments Regarding Cultural Sensitivity

More recently, citizens in Sydney with Turkish background have been disappointed, at some events that have occurred. In 2012 we invited Professor Mete Tunçoku from Çanakkale University to speak at a seminar organised by the Sydney Consul General of Turkish Republic and the Turkish Chapter of Auburn RSL. One of the RSL sub-branches was presented with a plaque, containing Atatürk's words to ANZAC mothers (more on this later) to go on the new cenotaph they were building. The Turkish Chapter was to be invited to attend the opening ceremony of the cenotaph which will coincide with the 2015 centenary commemorations. We have recently been told that we would not be welcome at this event, because a majority of committee members did not wish to have descendants of Turks who killed their grandfathers present at the ceremony. This is hurtful and regrettable. Let's be fair, Turks were not the aggressors; they were simply defending their homeland.

Another recent incident of insensitivity concerns, the 'Evacuation' art work in the Australian War Memorial Museum in Canberra. I first found out about it from an article published in the Turkish Ethnic Press, entitled: "DISRESPECT TO CANAKKALE SPIRIT. Looking at the picture of the statue, I was disturbed to see an Anzac sitting on the Turkish flag with part of the flag under his boot. In the eyes of a Turk, the flag is not just a piece of material. It is a sacred symbol for the whole nation. It deserves the highest respect one can show to it and is carried above head-height at all times. In some countries, people don't worry about wearing a pair of shorts, swimmers or even thongs made in their flag's design. This would not enter a Turkish person's mind; not even for a second. The red colour, the crescent and star on the flag have a significant meaning from the Nation's long history.

I accept that 'Evacuation' statue is an individual's work. If Wallace Anderson, instead of fighting on the Western Front, had experienced the respect that developed between the combatants in Gallipoli; or if Atatürk's letter to Anzac Mothers had been written before 1926 instead of 1934, I wonder whether he would have created the same art work. I doubt it.

Now, I will ask my wife, Ann, to read Ataturk's words to ANZAC mothers as I become very emotional when I read them.)

“Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives... You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country; therefore rest in peace. To us there is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehmets where they lie side by side now, here in this country of ours... You, the mothers, who sent your sons from faraway countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are in peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.”

I raised the matter about the ‘Evacuation’ statue being shown on the Australian War Memorial’s web site with Dr. Nelson. He replied to my letter and said that the art work was how people saw things then and assured me it was not a statement of ‘attitudes’ today. However, I strongly believe, Evacuation’s display anywhere is insensitive.

On a happier note, we now march with a band to ourselves on ANZAC day!!!

With more than 10,000 people marching on the day, we found it impossible to hear the closest band and keeping in time was out of the question. Redeemer Baptist School were approached and asked if they would be interested in joining the March. They agreed enthusiastically and this year, 2014, they marched in front of us. Everyone was very happy with the outcome, in spite of the drenching rain.

They played the Turkish Youth March for us, at the conclusion in Hyde Park. The marchers joined in singing along with the musicians. It was a moving experience. We have requested they include Waltzing Matilda in their repertoire for the next year.

I would like to conclude by saying that, although we have different backgrounds, ANZAC Day helps unite a nation by bringing diverse cultures together and allows us to show respect for all who made the ultimate sacrifice for their countries.