

Attacked Turkish Pastor Joins Memorials for Slain Christians

After a memorial service for three Christians who were murdered in Malatya, Turkey five years ago Wednesday, an Istanbul pastor who was attacked over Easter weekend said he's experienced hostility from Muslims nearly all his life.

Semir Serkek, 58, pastor of Grace Church in Istanbul's Bahcelievler district, said he personally knew Turkish converts to Christianity Necati Aydin and Ugur Yuksel and German Christian Tilmann Geske, who were brutally murdered by five young men in the southeastern city of Malatya on April 18, 2007.

"I looked at their fate with some envy, because they were young and I am old, but they left—I have gone through many things," he said. "But they were so young, so young."

On a day when memorial services were held for the three **slain Christians** in Malatya, Izmir and Elazig as well as the ones Serkek attended at both the Kozyatag Cultural Center and Gedikpasha Church in Istanbul, the pastor said the physical violence on him the evening (April 7) before Easter Sunday surprised him.

"I've been verbally abused for being a Christian many times, but this was the first time I was hit, so this was surprising and made me sad," Serkek said.

Serkek was alone at Grace Church finishing preparations for the next day's Easter celebration when at around 9 p.m. he heard frantic pounding at the door, he said. Opening it, he found four young men in their late teens who claimed they had questions and demanded to enter.

The men, whom Serkek said appeared to be about 18 years old, were agitated, and when he refused to let them in they used insulting language, he said. They threatened to kill him if he didn't recite the Islamic testimony of faith.

"This made me uneasy, and I told them that this was a church and they should come back in the morning," Serkek told Compass. "'This is a Muslim neighborhood, what business does a church have here?' they asked me, and told me again and again that if I didn't accept the final religion I would die."

Finally one of the men kicked Serkek in the chest. The blow threw the pastor down the entrance steps to the ground. The Muslims ran away laughing, Serkek said.

Born to a Syriac Christian background family in the southeastern city of Mardin, Serkek said that while the violence surprised him, he has known verbal abuse since childhood and especially since he started serving God and began openly sharing his faith 35 years ago.

"To be honest, I've experienced these things from my childhood," Serkek said. "I know these things closely. I'm from Mardin, and I'm a Syriac Christian. We are serving actively, and we have to spread the Word to be a source of blessing. This is what we are called to do, to bless. This is how God will use us, and I believe this with all my heart."

Two days after the attack, Turkish Director of Religious Affairs Mehmet Gormez called Serkek from Denmark, where he was traveling, to express his disappointment about the attack on him, according to local press.

"I don't want to be ungrateful, but I also told him that these men are trained in the mosques," Serkek said. "At least 10 times they repeated their demand that I say the *kelime-i shahadet* [Islamic testimony of faith]. They pressured me. They told me I will die. They had violence in them. They didn't even know me. They used insulting language. Their goal was to

provoke me.”

Serkek said he is convinced the four Muslims who attacked him did not pass by his church site by accident or impulsively. He said the attack was planned, and that if police catch them he would like to know who put them up to it.

On April 15, 17 activists from a non-profit organization known as Dur De, which fights racism and hate-crimes, came to Grace Church in a show of support to Serkek. Earlier last week, a delegation from a Muslim non-profit called Damla Nur Dursun also visited Serkek and brought him flowers.

On Easter weekend, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul issued official statements wishing the country’s Christians a Happy Easter. Gul stated that “regardless of ethnic origins, language, faith and political views, everyone is an equal citizen in Turkey and equal owners of the Turkish state,” according to the Anatolian Agency. Erdogan wished Christians peace and well-being.

The attack on Serkek, however, came as a bitter reminder to the nation’s Christian community that Turkey has a long way to go in giving equal standing to non-Muslims.

Along with the memorial services around Turkey today, Geske’s family published an announcement in *Taraf* newspaper.

“While remembering with deep love and respect my husband, our father and our brothers, we pray and invite our beloved country’s people and government to a new level of tolerance,” the announcement read. “A new tolerance that brings peace and alleviates pain from this country where thousands have been killed in the name of religion, race, political opinion and differences of tradition. We invite every child and every citizen to choose life instead of death, good instead of evil and blessing instead of curse.”

Aydin, Yuksel and Geske worked for Zirve Publishing Co.

distributing Christian material, as did Serkek for many years. The pastor said that he himself was nearly lynched in the northeastern town of Artvin for handing out Christian materials.

Because of Turkey's long-term and systematic limitations on non-Muslim communities, the United States Commission on International and Religious Freedom recommended that Turkey be designated as a "Country of Particular Concern" this year. There are an estimated 4,500 Christian converts in Turkey.