

David Mas Masumoto: Forget-me-not: honoring the history of Japanese and Armenian Americans

By David Mas Masumoto

Forget-me-not. A small, delicate, five-petal flower. Legend says when this tiny flower was created, color was missing. The flower cried out, "Forget me not!" and a small dash of blue was added so all will remember. Prefers moist habitats where not native. Chosen as the flower to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide.

While growing up in a small Japanese American farm community south of Fresno, I had lots of Armenian friends. I did not know it at the time, but we all carried secrets and wounds that our families spoke little about. There were no communitywide recognition events, each family bore the weight of history privately.

During World War II, Japanese Americans had been rounded up, forced to evacuate and were interned in relocation camps. My family spent years behind barbed wire, because they looked like the enemy.

In 1915, Armenians began to flee a reign of terror in their native homeland in Eastern Europe; hundreds of thousands were killed and displaced. Many families fled to the Central Valley of California to start anew.

I grew up in wounded communities. Japanese and Armenian Americans could never escape the scars of the past. For years, we carried the burden of history privately.

This is a story about remembering never to forget. Many Valley residents share a past too often ignored. Feb. 19 has been declared a Day of Remembrance for the Japanese American internment. April 24 is proclaimed Remembrance Day of the Armenian Genocide, and this year, 2015, marks the 100th anniversary.

In the 1980s, Japanese Americans received some recognition when a redress campaign was launched. My family received an official letter of apology from the U.S. government and President George Bush. But for many Armenians, they still wait; some politicians even deny the genocide occurred.

That's why I pause to remember the meaning of Feb. 19, the day President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942, which granted authority for the military to arrest and intern all Americans of Japanese ancestry. And that's why this year, for this special anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, I also stop to remember. Our two communities share a tragic history and a burden of a past we should never forget.

"Remember and demand" was chosen to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide. April 24,



1915, the date when hundreds of Armenians were rounded up and killed, marking the beginning of the first genocide of the 20th century. Historians estimate that 1.5 million were murdered, in addition to the rape and beatings of countless others.

Genocide is the targeting and killing of a specific people, often by race or ethnicity. During the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900s, the Young Turk movement seized power and sided with Germany during World War I. Armenians were deemed the enemy, because they had supposedly sided with Russia in that war. A campaign of mass executions and massacres unfolded for almost a decade.

The government of Turkey has rejected this history, claiming no premeditation in deaths and no systematic attempt to destroy a people. Complicated by international politics and strategic military geography, many in our own government have refused to acknowledge the genocide, often citing the need for an ally in the Middle East.

Acknowledgment and recognition. For decades, my family carried the secret of Japanese American internment. My family had been shamed: It took public recognition to free themselves of this burden.

Likewise, the Armenian Genocide must also be remembered. There are few, if any, direct survivors of the killings. But their stories enable us to relive this history and make it real. Then we can put our personal family histories in context — why one community, traumatized by atrocities, left a homeland in order to begin new lives.

This is all part of a hidden history when wounded families were compelled to privately carry a dark, unspoken tragedy. This silence can dismiss history. Or it can demand we remember.

By instilling memory and repeating the story of this past, we can reclaim this history. Japanese and Armenian Americans are descendents of a tragedy, and we bear the responsibility to remember. Only with stories can we become living monuments to a past that forever changed our communities.

Acknowledge history so that it may never be repeated. Honor those before us by repeating their stories of struggle and survival. By bearing witness, we are able to confirm true our family's private and personal stories and shine a public light on their proper place in history. I hope we can demand nothing will be forgotten.

This month I will plant forget-me-not flowers in honor of Japanese Americans who endured evacuation and internment. In the spring, they will bloom and commemorate the Armenian Genocide. I dream of our two communities filled with thousands of these delicate flowers, a crescendo of whispers united in a single cry: Forget me not.

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