

Armenian genocide: 100 years later, history not forgotten

By Andrea Castillo

- Armenian genocide: The 100th anniversary

Today's story kicks off monthlong coverage by The Bee reviewing how the genocide has shaped the history of the central San Joaquin Valley.

Here are upcoming events organized by the Armenian Genocide Centennial-Fresno Committee:

- April 9, 10, 17 and 18, 7:30 p.m.; April 12 and 19, 2 p.m., "Nine Armenians," a play by Leslie Ayvazian, Fresno Art Museum's Bonner Auditorium.
- April 23, 5 p.m., Requiem Service, Ararat Cemetery's Memorial of the Unknown Armenian Martyr, 1925 W. Belmont Ave.
- April 24, 9 a.m., Flag Raising Ceremony, Fresno City Hall, 2600 Fresno St.
- April 24, time to be announced, Monument Unveiling, Fresno State Maple Mall.
- April 24, 7 p.m., Traditional Community Commemoration, St. Paul Armenian Apostolic Church, 430 S. First St., and Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church, 3767 N. First St.
- April 25, 7:30 p.m., Fresno Philharmonic Concert, "Witness & Rebirth: An Armenian Journey," Saroyan Theatre.

For a complete listing of events, go to: agcfresno.org.

In 1958, the years-long massacre of Armenians by Turks well finished, Fresnans were still being reunited with family members lost during the struggle.

That November, Mrs. Persape Yegavian, who was kidnapped by the Turks in 1914, stepped off a plane at the Fresno Air Terminal and into the arms of two sisters she had not seen in nearly 45 years.

"My god," she said in Armenian, "My god, I'm free."

San Joaquin Valley Armenians next month will mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the genocide: [April 24, 1915](#), the day several hundred intellectuals were arrested and later executed. By its end in 1923, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians — two-thirds of the population — were dead, many children left orphans.

Nearly 100 years since it started, Fresno Armenians, rejoicing in the same freedom Mrs. Yegavian first tasted in 1958, are ensuring their history is not forgotten.

Longtime history

The Valley's Armenian history began decades before the genocide. The first Armenian settler came in 1881: Hagop Seropian moved from Massachusetts for his health. Later immigrants were attracted to the area's farmland and climate.

In 1894, there were 360 Armenians living in Fresno County, according to Wilson Wallis' 1965 book, "Fresno Armenians." By 1918, the population was estimated at 10,100.

Those who made it to Fresno alive did so after arduous journeys. From a 1922 story in *The Bee*: “After four years of struggle in the wilderness, through famine-infested Russia, and with the Soviet at its best and worst, and then through immigration offices at Ellis Island with a hairbreadth escape from deportation, the Agajanian family, consisting of 11 members, arrived in Fresno yesterday.”

Their pain didn't stop simply by stepping foot on American soil. The early Armenian-American story would sound familiar to many other immigrants.

[Barlow Der Mugrdechian](#), coordinator of Armenian studies at Fresno State, said housing and employment discrimination were widespread in the early days. He said Armenians were restricted from living in places like Fig Garden or Sunnyside for a long time, and it was years before the first Armenian was hired as a teacher or policeman in Fresno.

In 1923, naturalization officers questioned in court whether Armenians might be of the Mongolian race and therefore ineligible for citizenship. “The stake at issue is tremendous, for in the San Joaquin Valley an adverse decision against the Armenians would create a chaos as concerns property, which they could no longer legally hold, and uproot families established for decades,” a *Bee* story said.

And when the Fidelity Bank building (now the Pacific Southwest Building) opened in 1927, Armenian businessmen were refused office spaces.

Over time, Armenians in Fresno went from poor laborers to successful merchants and farmers — pioneers of the fig and raisin industries. Once one of the nation's largest Armenian colonies, many left Fresno for Los Angeles and San Francisco when the Great Depression hit in 1930.

Armenians continued immigrating to the Valley following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Republic of Armenia. The community of an estimated 50,000 people boasts local educational institutions, religious organizations and a yearly [cultural festival](#).

“The attempt to eliminate the Armenians was unsuccessful,” said Der Mugrdechian. “That's a mark of pride, in a sense. They did not only survive, but did well.

“I think that's the best you can say, that an immigrant came with very little and was able within two or three generations to achieve success.”

Genocide's toll

Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, coined the term “genocide” in 1943, meaning the deliberate killing of a racial, ethnic, religious or national group. Lemkin applied his investigation to the Nazi massacres of Jews as well as the Turk massacres of Armenians.

Indeed, Adolf Hitler reportedly concluded a speech in 1939 by saying, “Who, after all, speaks today of the extermination of the Armenians?”

Turks reject the conclusions of historians and the term genocide. It remains a crime to insult the Turkish nation by disagreeing with the country's stance on what happened to Armenians.

In 1985, Turkish officials told *The Washington Post*, “It was a great tragedy, but it was not a genocide.”

It started with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, whose ruler was also the leader of the Islamic community. Ottoman Turks historically discriminated against the Christian Armenians.

With that power decline, plus later military losses experienced early in World War I, the Ottoman government used Armenians as scapegoats for their problems, blaming all Armenians for the guerrilla nationalists who cooperated with

the Russians. Armenians were seen as a threat to the state.

Thus, the genocide began.

The accounts are tragic: Armenians massacred by Turkish soldiers in their villages; driven on long “death marches” to concentration camps in the scorching Syrian desert; beaten, starved, burned alive. As exiles grew more desperate, children were abandoned on the road or drowned.

Local survivor Sarkis Boghossian told his story in Bee articles in 1995 and 1997, recalling how Armenians ate from garbage cans to survive. He also recounted how his siblings, weak from hunger, were picked up by a carriage driver who mistook them for dead.

“I lost all my family, my sister, my brother,” said the 90-year-old Boghossian, who was 10 at the time of the slaughter. His siblings were 7 and 5. “They picked up all the children and took them to a dump. How can I forget my live brother and sister who gave their last breath in the dump where I saw from far away?”

Seeking justice

Armenians now permeate every local industry. William Saroyan, the Pulitzer prize-winning author and playwright, and Leon S. Peters, a leading businessman and philanthropist, both were Valley natives. George Deukmejian, though not from Fresno, became the pride of California’s Armenian community when he was elected governor in 1979.

Visalia native Monte Melkonian is a different kind of celebrity. Melkonian was lauded as a martyr for going to Armenia, organizing much of the army in Nagorno-Karabakh, leading them to victory over Azerbaijan, then dying in battle in 1993. Nagorno-Karabakh was historically ruled by Armenia, but the breakup of the Soviet Union left the area officially under the rule of Azerbaijan. The two states have wrestled over control of the province, where many Armenians live.

Other acts committed in the name of Armenian justice were not regarded with pride.

In the 1970s and 1980s, several high-profile instances of violence were committed against Turkish people by Armenian underground groups seeking retribution. In 1973, an ex-Fresnan shot and killed two Turkish diplomats in Southern California.

The efforts to seek justice continue. Earlier this month, 40 lawmakers from the House of Representatives [relaunched the latest effort](#) to officially recognize the Armenian genocide, which has always faced political and diplomatic opposition. Valley representatives have long headed the resolution attempt, at least since 1979 when Fresno-area Republican Rep. Charles “Chip” Pashayan introduced a version that, like those following, went nowhere.

Other commemoration efforts, large and small, have taken place through the years. Several documentaries about the genocide were filmed in Fresno. Books on the topic cover the Valley’s Armenian colony. For 40 years beginning in 1969, UCLA professor Richard Hovannisian’s students interviewed more than 800 survivors, many in Fresno, for an oral history project.

Allan Y. Jendian, a member of the [Armenian Genocide Centennial — Fresno Committee](#), said recognition of the Armenian genocide could serve to ensure future massacres do not take place. He has been involved for most of his life with various commemoration committees, working above all for acknowledgment.

Jendian is a child of survivors — his father walked the desert during the death marches of 1915 and watched his own mother die of starvation.

“The scars are on our bodies yet the Turkish government, to this day, has not acknowledged it,” he said.

But Jendian said Armenians will never forget what happened, with or without recognition.

Contact Andrea Castillo: acastillo@fresnobee.com, (559) 441-6279 or [@andreamcastillo](https://twitter.com/andreamcastillo) on Twitter.