

## In their words: Armenian genocide centennial stories from Valley residents



A collage of images saved by Diane Boyajian including a November 1914 Fresno Bee article about her aunt, Persape Yegavian, who was kidnapped by Turks in 1914 and reunited with her family in Fresno; a portrait of Diane Boyajian's mother and a family photo that shows her mother holding a doll at front center.

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- Armenian genocide: The 100th anniversary

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

- April 17 and 18, 7:30 p.m.; April 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](http://agcfresno.org).

They remember relatives killed and lives uprooted while trying to escape invading soldiers. Some were captured and carried away and never seen again. The Armenian genocide remains fresh in the memory of the central San Joaquin Valley’s Armenian community.

April 24, 2015, marks the 100th anniversary of the start of the genocide. On that day in 1915, several hundred intellectuals were arrested and later executed. By its end in 1923, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians were dead at the hands of Ottoman Turks.

The Valley’s Armenian history began decades before the genocide. Now the community of an estimated 50,000 people boasts local educational institutions, religious organizations and a yearly cultural festival.

Local Armenians say every person in their community has some connection to the genocide. On March 29, The Bee kicked off monthlong coverage reviewing how the Armenian genocide has shaped the history of the Valley. Readers were invited to share their stories, asking for their connection to the Armenian community, to the genocide and what the 100th anniversary means to them.

We chose three responses to share with others.

Diane Boyajian, 79, Fresno

*Editor’s note: Diane Boyajian’s aunt was featured in last month’s Bee story, [“Armenian Genocide: 100 years later, history not forgotten.”](#)*

*In November 1958, Mrs. Persape Yegavian, who had been 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. One of those sisters was Boyajian’s mother.*

*Yegavian was quoted by The Bee as saying in Armenian, “My god. My god, I’m free.”*

My mother was born in Erzerum, Armenia and was 7 years old when the genocide came to her city. She was the youngest of six children and lived with her mother, father, brother, and three sisters. One sister had already come to the U.S.

When my grandfather and uncle, age 12, went out to see what all the commotion and gunfire was about, they were immediately killed. My grandmother dressed her girls in boys clothing and fled with others who lived nearby. Persape was the known beauty of the family and a Turkish official had asked to marry her. My grandfather had refused and she was kidnapped while fleeing. Erzerum is in the mountains and it was very cold. My grandmother kept giving her clothing to her daughters to keep them warm.

During the night my grandmother died of exposure. They buried her at the side of the road. Later in the day the Turkish army captured the group and took them to their camp and put them in a corral-type enclosure with the intention of killing them the next day. During the night there was an earthquake and it caused a large chasm to open between the soldiers and the Armenians. Being very superstitious people they felt it was a sign and let the group go. My mother was taken to an orphanage in Aleppo, Syria. My aunt who was here found her and made arrangements to come to the U.S. She landed in Vera Cruz, Mexico, and then went to Mexico City, where she lived for one year. Marriage arrangements were made and she was married by proxy in 1924. She then traveled here.

Of my other two aunts, who were in their late teens or early 20s, one went to Marseilles, France, and the other somehow made her way back to Yerevan, Armenia.

Shirley Kalashian-Collins, 64, Prather

I was born in Fresno. I grew up in Fresno until I was 18 years old. My parents are both Armenian from Eastern Turkey.

My mother and her family immigrated to America from Eastern Turkey during the genocide. My father's family also immigrated, but a few years earlier. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents were Armenian and came from the same area in Eastern Turkey. Both families suffered greatly and lost many members of their family at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

My paternal grandmother, Mary Okoomian (Kalashian-Herogian), was born in Turkey. I don't have the exact chronological events down, but the story is still amazing. She and her sister and brother immigrated to America when they were young teenagers around 1909-1912. Not long after they left, during the 1915 genocide, her parents were killed by Turkish soldiers. The children remaining were carted off. One sister went with a gypsy tribe (this is what I was told — could have been Kurdish) and the other, Margaret (or Methiye in Turkish) was taken by the Turkish soldier who later married her when she became of child-bearing age.

In the early 1950s Margaret's husband died and she was free to find her family in America. She put an ad in an Armenian language newspaper and found her sister Mariam (or Mary). My grandfather had died and Mary had remarried so she was now Mary Herogian. Another sister, also in Fresno, was Elizabeth Bogosian. They brought Margaret to America to a grand and tearful reunion. She spent about six months here but returned to Turkey to be with her children.

(The genocide) means everything to me. I heard the stories all my life while growing up — from everyone in the community. Not one Armenian family was unaffected. My grandmother would suddenly break down and start crying. Because she spoke Turkish, I would ask my mother what she was crying about. The answer was always the same — “she is crying about the genocide.” My grandmother lost five children due to starvation, lack of care and being without services, marching through the desert. The fact that our government does not recognize the genocide, the pain only deepens. We Armenians need closure and validation.

Philip Tavlian, 61, Fresno

I am a fifth-generation member of the Armenian community and secretary of the Ararat Armenian Cemetery Association.

Three of my four grandparents lost loved ones in the genocide. My two grandfathers were working in the United States when the genocide occurred; my maternal grandmother actually experienced and survived the genocide.

My maternal grandmother, Noyemzar Manoogian Israelian, was born to Katchatoo and Meriam Manoogian on Aug. 15, 1888, in Vazir Copru, a district in the Samsoun Province of the Ottoman Empire. In the early days of the 20th century, she met and married a young seminarian named Hagop Israelian, who was called to the pulpit of the Armenian Congregational Church of Erzingan, a city in northeastern Anatolia. In the years leading up to World War I, my grandmother served as a “pompish,” or pastor’s wife, and raised three children, sons Haigazoon and Vaigazoon, and daughter Nevart.

On April 24, 1915, Ottoman authorities ordered the removal of the Armenians of Erzingan. In less than 24 hours, the life my grandmother had known was totally transformed. My grandmother was knocked unconscious during the turmoil of the forced evacuation. When she awakened, her minister husband had vanished, her three children had disappeared, and her parishioners were nowhere to be found. She climbed a tree and hid to avoid a roaming band of Ottoman soldiers.

When the soldiers left her area, she walked untold miles until she wandered, dazed, into a Red Cross camp for displaced persons. A kindly miller named Melkon Kurkjian and his wife, Rebecca, befriended my grandmother after hearing her story of loss. For the next three years, the Kurkjian family and my grandmother worked and traveled their way eastward across Russia. At the start of their journey, Russia was ruled by the Tsars. At the end of the journey, Russia was ruled by the Communist Party.

The Kurkjians and my grandmother eventually reached Vladivostok via the Trans-Siberian Railway. From Vladivostok they traveled by ship to Kobe, Japan, and then by ship to Honolulu, and ultimately to Angel Island in San Francisco Bay. The Kurkjians departed for Massachusetts, where their descendants live to this very day. When my grandmother arrived in Central California, she literally knew only two people — her sponsor, the Rev. M.G. Papazian of Fresno’s Pilgrim Armenian Congregational Church, and her late husband’s cousin, Lucy Basmajian Ailanjian of Dinuba.

Several years after her arrival, my grandmother married my grandfather, Nazareth Kaltakian, who had lost his wife, Naringule, and two sons, when the genocide reached Yozghad, his native mountain village east of Ankara. In the summer of 1924, my grandmother gave birth to my mother, who was given the name “Nevart,” after the daughter lost in the genocide. My grandmother passed away on July 8, 1959, en route to a specialty hospital in Stockton. In the Old World she had known a life of privilege and service. In the New World, she encountered economic hardships and prejudice so common to the American immigrant experience.

Only a handful of people recall my grandmother today. Two who knew her well — neighbor Karnig “Kay” Cloud of the Fresno Distributing family and John Ailanjian, the youngest son of Lucy — passed away earlier this year. My grandmother’s mortal remains are at rest on the Belmont Avenue side of Ararat Armenian Cemetery. Yet, her legacy lives on through the lives of her daughter, four grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.