

Mark Arax: California: Cradle of 'new Armenia'

By Mark Arax



Harry "Rusty" Rustigian, 93, stands next to his old water well with the last Thompson grapevine in the background. Rustigian cleared the 40 acres of grapes on his family farm and replaced them with almonds this year, as so many farmers are doing.

RIC PAUL ZAMORA — THE FRESNO BEE [Buy Photo](#)

I used to hear the stories in my grandmother's kitchen over bowls of her string bean and lamb stew.

I used to hear the stories at our red brick Armenian church in Fresno when the men, who left the worshipping to the women, gathered under the big pine tree to smoke their Sir Walter Raleighs.

I used to hear the stories at the summer picnic where we blessed the harvest of grapes. We kids would slide down the grassy knoll of the fairgrounds on pieces of cardboard while our parents danced to the oud player's strained song. "It's a lie. It's a lie. The whole world's a lie."

I used to hear the stories outside my bedroom door as my great-grandmother, bent and blind, stalked the hallway at night chanting her village curses at the Turks.

I used to hear the stories straight from my grandfathers, one a priest and the other a poet-farmer. It was gruesome, beyond belief, but all true, they said. The death marches across the Anatolian plain, the Armenian men whose heads

were sliced off and put on display, the Armenian women raped and then set to fire, the babies thrown in the air and impaled on the swords of the Ottoman gendarmes and their Kurdish helpers.

“Forty-two people on both sides of my family, and I was the only one who survived,” Rev. Yeghishe Mekhitarian, my mother’s father, told me. And then he proceeded to name each and every one of our “martyrs”: his father, mother, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins. “Forty-two of them. I don’t know how, but God saved me. Only me.”

The Armenian Genocide began 100 years ago, in late April 1915, when the leaders of Ottoman Turkey rounded up our writers and professors and civic and political leaders, and herded them away from the international city of Constantinople, away from the world’s witness, and into the killing fields of Anatolia, where the world had no eyes.

Two-thirds of our tribe, 1.5 million Armenians, were exterminated in their ancient homeland during the years 1915 to 1918, the first genocide of the 20th century, a crime that the state of Turkey to this day congenitally denies. Indeed, Turkey’s denial has become a genocide on top of “the Genocide,” the erasure not of flesh and blood but of memory.

The thing about a century-old crime is that it leaves no survivors, no storytellers of the first hand. In my family and every other Armenian family, the survivors are all gone. If there’s a story now to be told, it’s not in our Medz Yeghern, or “great calamity,” but how the Armenians, and all the other tribes who have ever outlived another tribe’s attempt to wipe them out, still laugh, sing and pray. “For when two of them meet anywhere in the world,” William Saroyan once wrote, “see if they will not create a new Armenia.”

And so a few weeks ago, I headed down Highway 99 looking for a fellow Armenian with whom I could mark this centennial day’s commemoration, an Armenian who could tell me a story not of our tragedy in Anatolia but of our rebirth in California. As it happened, I found him on the outskirts of Fowler, just south of Fresno, in the sandy loam of his farm.

Fowler was a raisin town before it became an apricot town and then a peach town and then a citrus town and now an almond town, like all the rest. The crops changed but the names of the growers endured. Bedrosian. Parnagian. Simonian. Gavroian. For centuries, the “ian” had been the way for a Turk to identify an Armenian. The “ian” literally means “the son of.” Thus, Housepian is the “son of Joseph” and Topalian is the “son of the crippled one” and Medzorian is the “son of fat ass.” The Turks and Armenians shared a sense of humor.

I was looking for a vineyard that belonged to the Rustigian family but as I pulled up to the address, I could see that the vineyard was no more. And then out came Harry “Rusty” Rustigian, 93 years old, in work shirt and work pants and work boots. He invited me into his ranch house.

“What do you do?” he asked.

“I’m a writer,” I said.

“I know that. But outside of that? That’s all you do?”

He had me laughing already. He was laughing, too.

He was built like a bull, and his hands were the size of old-fashioned baseball mitts. They had the same texture, too.

His wife, Virginia, nee Hagopian, led us to the kitchen table. Harry was born on these 40 acres, she said proudly. His bedroom in the old wood house — the house that burned down — was right where the kitchen now stood. Ninety-three years and Harry had never left.

His father and mother had come from the same Armenian province on the vast Anatolian peninsula in what is now eastern Turkey. Their kin had lived there for centuries, side by side with the Turks, friend and foe. A Turkish neighbor in 1912 told the Rustigians that bad times were coming for the Armenians. “Get your sons out as soon as you can.” He didn’t need to say more. The Rustigians had already gotten lucky once, outlasting the massacres of 1895.

So Harry's father, a hard worker, landed in the U.S. in 1913. Drawn by the promise of vineyard life, he settled in the good earth of Fowler. This is where Harry's father and mother met in 1921.

"She had gone someplace and he had seen her, and he told this fellow, 'If she'll marry me, I'll marry her right away.' This fellow told my mother, and I guess that's all it took. They got married right away."

There was no dawdling back then. When you go through the things his parents had gone through, you don't wait on life. And so life happened. Harry was born in 1922, the first Rustigian raised outside historic Armenia. The planting of muscats by his father was a transmission of culture. The Armenians had been a grape people going back 3,000 years. Harry wonders if the muscats were more than that, if his father was telling the Turks "nice try, but we're still here."

There was little talk of the past, but Harry got glimpses. His mother, stronger than strong, would sometimes cry for no reason. His father, mostly a gentle man, could turn fierce out of nowhere. There was the day in the early 1930s when the thugs from Sun Maid Raisins pulled up to the farm in five Model T Fords. They were looking to sign up growers who were sending their raisins to independent packers — at gunpoint if need be.

Harry, 12, and his mother and little sister were cutting nectarines to dry. All of a sudden, his father grabbed a huge wooden grape stake and told the Sun Maid boys to move no farther. "My little sister was crying and my mother was shouting 'No,' and all I could do was stand there. My father told them, 'You come one step more, and I'll lay this grape stake over each of your heads.' He wasn't a big guy, but boy was he mighty.

"These guys looked at each other and turned around and walked back to their cars. Before they took off, one of them shouted, 'We'll be back!' My dad told them, 'Next time, they'll be a gun in your face.'"

Once, Harry got his mother to tell him about the massacres. On the march across the desert, she had to eat grass and put her lips to the ground to drink what little water puddled in the hoof prints of horses. She kept on walking only to learn that her parents, three sisters and one brother had died.

"She told me she lived because her mother had given her some gold, and she had used this gold to buy herself out of harm's way. I might have asked another question or two, but she started to break down. She lived to 93 but every time she talked about it, she had to stop."

To honor his father, Harry stayed an independent raisin grower. It tugged at his heart in 1950 to pull out his dad's muscats and plant Thompson seedless. The Thompson grape made a good raisin and could always be sold to the wineries in raisin bust years. He and Virginia raised two boys and a girl and built a nice brick house on those 40 acres. With his oldest son, Dennis, beside him, he did the tractor work and sulfuring, and most of the pruning, too. In the good years — and there were plenty of them — they put away \$30,000 or \$40,000 at each harvest's end.

After the harvest last summer, Dennis' son was walking to his car one night in Arroyo Grande when a man out of nowhere sucker punched him. He died of a brain hemorrhage. Dennis had no more hahvas, the Armenian notion of life force, for farming. Harry had gotten too old to battle the ups and downs of a raisin market turned even more volatile by the supply of raisins from Turkey, of all places.

Dennis told Harry they needed to pull out the vines and plant almonds. Because the profit margins on almonds made sense. Because nuts, unlike grapes, could be picked by machine. Because it was time, after a century, for a change.

A few weeks ago, Harry stepped outside, hesitantly, as the Caterpillar D-9 took to his field. Vine after vine, row after row, the big angled blade made easy work of it. "I didn't lose sleep, but boy, it was hard on my heart. Because you think back to what you had to go through, what your father and mother had to go through, to keep it alive. The grape, you know, goes way back in our blood."

As the new trees went in, he started to laugh at the sound of it: Harry "Rusty" Rustigian. Almond grower. For old time sake, he kept one gnarled Thompson vine standing next to the old water pump. "That's all she wrote," he told himself.

Mark Arax, author of "West of the West," is working on a book about California's water wars to be published by Knopf.