

Fresno Armenians mark 100th genocide anniversary with raw emotion, pledges to never forget

By Rory Appleton and BoNhia Lee

A community commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide is held at St. Paul Armenian Church in Fresno. THEFRESNOBEE

- *Evening service combines religious ceremony, political speech.*
- *Day dawned with a march through downtown Fresno to a flag-raising ceremony at Fresno City Hall.*

Themes of healing, forgiveness and wrath dominated the fiery speeches given by local Armenian religious leaders and an Armenian-American dignitary at St. Paul Armenian Church in central Fresno Friday night.

The remarks came in a community service marking the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide. The service was also the closing event of a day that began with a march and flag-raising at Fresno City Hall to remember the genocide that began in 1915 and did not end until 1923.

While many historians recognize it, the term “genocide” is not widely accepted by many countries — including the U.S.

Bruce Janigian, a Bay Area international business lawyer and adviser to the U.S. and European nations on various Armenian affairs, was the keynote speaker of the civic commemoration. He used much of his 15 minutes to criticize the U.S. and much of Western Europe for continued denial of the facts surrounding the genocide. He also shared many harrowing atrocities committed against Armenians since the genocide, which began on April 24, 1915.

“In law, crimes have accessories after the fact,” Janigian said. “For not officially recognizing the genocide and using the same language to describe it as those who perpetrated it, this great nation and many in the West are guilty of being accessories after the fact.”

Janigian said that the worst desecration of Armenian churches and artifacts actually took place in the 1950s. He highlighted several other, more recent slights against Armenians and their fellow Christians in Turkey and the Middle East. He said that ignoring these facts, as well as the genocide, makes the lack of worldwide recognition even more painful.

“They sought to destroy us all, but we don’t die so easily — do we?” Janigian said, inciting a wave of approving responses.

[Donald Munro reviews "Witness and Rebirth" Fresno Philharmonic concert Saturday night at Saroyan Theatre](#)

Hundreds packed the pews and lined the aisles of the beautifully decorated church. Another 100 or so sat in fold-up chairs at picnic tables just outside the church to watch a live stream of the ceremonies.

The night began at 7 p.m. with religious ceremonies. More than a dozen clergymen from seven local Armenian churches coordinated efforts for the service, which centered around the ways in which today’s Armenians can deal with the grief and anger over the massacre of their ancestors at the hands of the Ottoman Turks.

“The horrors of the Armenian genocide are unspeakable, but they must be spoken,” said the Rev. Greg Haroutunian of the First Armenian Presbyterian Church.

Haroutunian went on to urge parishioners to forgive any Turkish or Kurdish Christians who ask for forgiveness, despite the sins of their ancestors.

At 7:15 p.m., the congregation held a moment of silence while church bells rang out for one and a half minutes — representing the 1.5 million Armenians killed during the genocide.

Choirs from the seven churches combined for rousing choral renditions of Armenian spirituals, and sermons alternated between English and Armenian.

After the religious ceremonies, Fresno State sociology professor Matthew Ari Jendian led the civic commemoration. Armenian Homenetmen scouts carried both the American and Armenian flags and led the attendees in singing both national anthems.

The Mazmanian family, a clan of Armenian-American musicians from the Bay Area, played a mix of current and traditional instrumental pieces before and after Janigian’s speech.

One of the few uplifting moments of Janigian’s speech came while he was discussing, in great detail, the atrocities committed by the founders of modern Turkey — not the Ottoman Turks.

Emotional morning march

The day of remembrance began with a morning flag-raising ceremony at Fresno City Hall. It was punctuated by a number of emotions — sadness, anger and pride.

Marchers both young and old filled downtown streets before the 9 a.m. ceremony calling the Turks liars and shouting “1915 never again.” Participants held signs that read “Turkey guilty of a genocide” and “Armenian genocide, a crime without apology.”

Armenians worldwide have called for Turkey to publicly recognize the genocide, but it has yet to do so.

Hundreds attended the 11/2-hour flag-raising ceremony, which included songs by Armenian clergy and children. The Armenian Homenetmen scouts conducted the flag-raising.

The keynote speaker was Fresno-born lawyer Armen K. Hovannisian, founder of the Armenian Bar Association.

“Memory is our sacred duty, not simply to remember, however, but to act,” he said. “Let us tell the world not only how our people died, but how they lived, how they walked, how they dreamed and how they hoped.”

Hovannisian then told Valley Armenians that it is time to move forward and find redemption for the genocide in themselves, not by pinning it on others to do it for them.

Ani Mikayelyan of Fresno and her two sons joined other family members at the ceremony.

“I feel like it is our duty to remember and make sure our children continue to remember” what happened, said Mikayelyan, who with her sons created the poster about the genocide being a crime without an apology.

Her oldest son, Haroutiun Kglyan, 13, and his cousin, Alec Kglyan, 7, took turns holding the sign.

“I’m proud to be part of it,” Haroutiun said after the ceremony.

Fresno State noontime service

The Armenian Genocide Monument was dedicated Thursday night at an event that drew thousands to Fresno State; many returned at noon Friday for another commemoration filled with speakers and music.

At 19 seconds past noon, the carillon in the University Student Union clock tower played “The Bells of Peace” for 15 minutes, representing 1915.

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