

APRIL 23, 2015, 11:44 PM

LAST UPDATED: THURSDAY, APRIL 23, 2015, 11:57 PM

Armenian genocide, 100 years later: Turkish denial keeps scars alive for Bergen County families

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Andrew Torigian's eyes still well with tears when he tries to make sense of the long scar that streaked down his father's back, or the burn marks that were seared into his mother's skin.

"It's like a wound that won't heal," Torigian, 91, of Paramus, said, recalling his father's harrowing account of an Ottoman soldier's taking a sword to his back in a failed attempt to kill him and his mother's tale of being thrown into a roaring fire and being rescued by bystanders.

Torigian's parents emerged alive, but emotionally and physically scarred, from the Armenian genocide, a series of massacres and other atrocities that began with the rounding up by the Ottoman Turks of 250 Armenian intellectuals on April 24, 1915. The wounds remain raw, even a century later, among Armenians around the world — and the thousands of Bergen County residents who claim Armenian heritage — in the face of the insistent refusal by Turkey, the modern successor to the Ottoman Empire, to accept responsibility for the bloodshed.

"I remember sitting on my mother's knee as she would tell me what happened to her. I was 7 or 8 years old," Torigian, the president of the Armenian Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Emerson, said this week, "and I would say, 'I'll get them for this!' because, you know, I never had a grandfather. I never had a grandmother. I don't know what it means to be cuddled by a grandfather or grandmother."

Millions are expected to gather at public events across North Jersey and around the globe in the coming days to mourn the slaughter of an estimated 1.5 million ethnic Armenians. They were killed in the course of what many historians describe as a plan devised by the Ottoman Empire amid World War I to systematically eliminate the Armenian people from their homeland.

Even as firsthand memories of the atrocities fade — Armenia itself counts only 28 residents as survivors — demands that the slaughter be recognized as a genocide continue to gather momentum. The European Parliament did so earlier this month, as did Pope Francis, who described it as "the first genocide of the 20th century" — a statement that prompted Turkey to recall its ambassador to the Vatican.

Those events were felt deeply in Bergen County, where just under 1 percent of residents claim Armenian heritage — by far the largest percentage of any county in the state, according to 2013 estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau. Today, hundreds of Armenians reside in Fort Lee, Oradell, Paramus and other towns in the central and eastern portions of the county.

For these North Jersey residents, the genocide remains a central part of their identity. And Turkey's insistence that the deaths were, at most, an unavoidable part of a messy war is the primary source of an almost visceral pain that they say has been passed down from their parents and grandparents.

"We inherited their scars and their pain," said Rita Simonian, 69, of Emerson. "Quite frankly, it's become our scars and our pain. Until the Turks admit the historic truth of what happened, every future generation of Armenians will remember and keep the flame burning for these 1.5 million victims."



MICHAEL KARAS/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Parishioners leaving flowers during an outdoor service Thursday, April 23, 2015, at St. Leon Armenian Church in Fair Lawn in honor of those who died during the Armenian genocide, when 1.5 million Armenians were killed by Ottoman Turks, starting with a roundup on April 24, 1915.

Simonian's father, Hagop, was 5 when the genocide began — too young to be targeted by the Ottomans. According to the notes he left for his family, a video interview, and the stories he told his children, 27 men in Simonian's father's extended family were murdered on the same day.

Her father recalled venturing into his village's town square the day after the bodies of his relatives and countless others were buried in a mass grave. The Ottoman soldiers had removed the clothes from those they had killed and were selling them in the town square, she said.

"My father remembered seeing his father's shoes being sold by the Turks," Simonian said, noting that he recognized them because he had polished them regularly.

"Those kinds of wounds never heal," she said. "Those memories are burned into your mind. My father was very open about his memories because he wanted to make sure we would never forget what happened. I tried to put myself in his shoes, and it haunts me to this day, it will haunt me forever. How do you live with something like that?"

Aram Suren Hamparian, the executive director of the Washington-based Armenian National Committee of America, said Turkey's denial of the genocide is a "critical component" of the Armenians' struggle with grief.

"If this crime was acknowledged, there might be some element of closure," said Hamparian, who grew up in Demarest. "The denial is why this strikes such a raw nerve."

Diran Bohajian, a pastor at St. Leon's Armenian Church in Fair Lawn, agreed. He likened the mass killing to the Holocaust — but added that Germany has made an effort to come to terms with its Nazi past, allowing Jews and other groups that were targeted for extermination during World War II to begin the healing process.

"The genocide is such a deep wound," Bohajian said. "The Holocaust, which of course was a terrible tragedy in itself, had the Nuremberg trials, where German officials responsible for their crimes were put on trial. Armenian people have never had that kind of justice take place."

Dr. Meline Karakashian, the author of "The Trauma of Genocide and National Identity" and a practicing psychologist in Monmouth County, said an acknowledgement of responsibility from Turkey would be a critical first step toward atonement, even if the memories of survivors will continue to have currency with future generations.

"The denial is certainly an aspect of it," Karakashian said. "But the horror, that inhuman horror of the whole experience will always be passed on."

Torigian has made it his life's calling to make sure that the genocide is never forgotten. He has spent years educating others about it and promoting the survival of Armenian culture in North Jersey.

"We as Armenians feel that it is important to get the younger generations to understand all of this," he said. "We will forgive the Turks if they accept that they did in fact commit a genocide. But we will never forget."

Parishioners who gathered for a service at St. Leon's were handed forget-me-nots, the official emblem of the 100th anniversary. The purple-and-black flower represents the past, present and future of the Armenian people.

"It all has to do with identity," Bohajian, the pastor, said. "Armenian people are very proud of who they are and proud that their relatives survived and rebuilt."

Simonian said the genocide has become a common thread — one that not only bonds the survivors and children of survivors she grew up with, but also one that holds the Armenian culture together.

"This additional bond added to the closeness of our people," she said. "We all felt for each other. This genocide defines who we are as Armenians, it's in our blood. This is who we are."

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