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The World Was Silent

A study of the Armenian Genocide raises troubling questions of remembrance and responsibility.

By Sara Cohan



There aren't many Armenian Americans in Pensacola, so when two of my students and I discovered our common heritage, we eagerly compared family customs and stories. Tabouli, grape leaves and *choereg* were familiar foods to us, and drinking thick, sweet Armenian coffee while our grandparents discussed in Armenian what they didn't want us to understand was a common experience.

But greeting each other with "*Eench bez-es?* (How are you?)" or discussing Armenian culture didn't form my strongest connection with the Kayir sisters. The real bond came from two painful truths: that our families were victimized by one of the greatest atrocities of the 20th century, and that, for most people around us, the Armenian Genocide remains invisible.

While in the 8th grade, Alex Kayir entered a project about the Armenian Genocide in a history competition. When she informed her teacher of her choice, Alex was surprised and disturbed by the teacher's reaction.

"My history teacher hadn't even heard of this tragic event, nor had the other history teachers at my middle school," recalls Alex. "My topic was even foreign to most of the judges!"

Although I shared Alex's exasperation, I was not surprised. While in high school, I entered the same competition, also selecting the Armenian Genocide as my focus. I ran up against the same reaction. Like Alex and her sister, Karen, I was always more than willing to explain to teachers or friends what the Armenians endured almost 100 years ago and who they are today.

A few years ago, realizing how thin my understanding was of my own family's history, I sent my grandfather in Memphis, Tennessee, a tape recorder, some blank cassettes and a few guiding questions. Several weeks later, he sent back four tapes. Stretched out on a carpet that my grandparents had brought with them from Beirut, I loaded the first cassette into my tape player. In the comfort of my home, I listened as a nightmare unfurled around me.

The Legacy of the Armenian Genocide

Web Exclusive!

By learning about this often overlooked genocide, students can reflect on moral responsibility, identity and denial. [Go](#)

First Person

To Bring Destruction
[Go](#)

Dear Kristine, This is the story of my life ... A 4-year-old boy named Garo, in a village in Southern Anatolia, learns that his father — a minister and physician's assistant — has been beheaded by government forces. Garo is then displaced from all his cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles and, for several years, his mother, sisters and brother. Sixty-nine members of his family are brutally killed. Garo lives in orphanages, endures hunger, suffers through fevers, nearly dying. The orphanage officials give him a new, Muslim name — Mehmet. He works in fields, sleeps in filth, and starves for food and love.

Four years later he is reunited with two aunts, two sisters, a brother and his mother. They depart from Mercin in Cilicia by boat. They finally reach Beirut to start a new life, which will eventually lead him to Memphis. A letter from Garo's father, a photograph, two rugs and two water jugs are the only possessions they carry from their life in Anatolia.

I have never seen the village where my grandfather was born. I cannot speak the language of my ancestors, nor do I practice their Armenian Apostolic and Congregational Evangelical faiths. I have not known hunger, pain or the death of loved ones, as my grandfather has known them. My schooling wasn't appreciably different from that of any other middle-class American child of the 1970s. I learned about literature, mathematics, sciences, social movements and wars. I learned that the Ottoman was a great empire stretching across the Middle East and into Europe, but I never learned that racism became an institutionalized aspect of that empire — a hatred powerful enough almost to destroy my own culture.

Remembrance and Denial

The ancient homeland of the Armenian people straddles the Caucasus Mountains between Russia and Anatolia, or Asia Minor, which is a part of modern Turkey. Over the centuries, this region has been the scene of repeated conquests, annexations, independence movements and population shifts. By the late 19th century, more than 2 million Christian Armenians were living in the Muslim Ottoman Empire, to the west of Russian Armenia.

Fears of an Armenian separatist movement fanned the flames of anti-Christian hatred among Ottoman leaders and led to the first wave of massacres and expulsion of Armenians in 1894-96. The Ottoman alliance with Germany during World War I, after the "Young Turks" had seized control of the Ottoman government with the intention of modernizing the Turkish nation-state, once again aroused tensions between Turkish nationalists and the Armenians, many of whom favored Russia in the war.

When a small segment of the Armenian community responded to Russia's call for assistance, the Ottomans ordered the expulsion of the entire Armenian population. More than one million Armenians died in massacres or from starvation during the removal campaign. Roughly 600,000 escaped, fleeing to the new Soviet Union, to Europe and to the Americas in what became known as the Armenian Diaspora. The massacres themselves are widely recognized as the Armenian Genocide, though the United States government has avoided using the term, out of concern for Turkey's role as a NATO ally.

The will to destroy entire groups of people on the basis of their religion, race, ethnicity or political convictions has been the plague of the last 100 years, a period labeled by many historians as the Century of Genocide. During the 20th century, more than 50 million people perished in genocidal campaigns around the world — from the Armenians in Anatolia to the Jews in Germany to the victims of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia and, more recently, the Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda and Bosnian Muslims in the former Yugoslavia.

Many high school students today, however, learn about this phenomenon solely through its most massive example, the Jewish Holocaust. Not only do many teachers lack training in non-Western history, much less genocide studies, but available resources on the topic also focus primarily on the Nazi campaign.

Some educators believe we are doing our students a disservice by shielding them from the devastating toll genocides in other parts of the world have inflicted on humankind.

"The deep attention to Holocaust education has really opened up an avenue for thinking about human rights," notes Adam Strom of Facing History and Ourselves, a human rights education project that has been promoting genocide studies for more than 25 years. "If we focus only on Germany from '33 to '45, we miss the larger patterns of human behavior. There are threads connecting genocides, and as educators we need to recognize them."

The central thread is hate.

"Hate can happen anywhere," says Mercedes Metz, assistant principal at Wilson Middle School in Glendale, Calif., home to one of the heaviest concentrations of Armenians outside the Middle East. "That is one of the most important lessons we want students to understand from studying genocide — the pervasive problem of hate."

For Metz and a growing number of educators around the country, the Armenian Genocide serves as a portal to more universal human rights issues. Metz co-authored the *California Curriculum Guide to Genocide*, introduced in the mid-1980s and recently reissued, which places the Armenian Genocide in context with other mass killings of the 20th century to help students develop an overall awareness of how and under what conditions such atrocities occur

The Armenian experience is particularly instructive in a discussion of genocide because, as the first such event of the "modern" century, it set a model that other groups followed in carrying out similar campaigns.

The use of technology for mass killings was a decisive development. The Ottomans used trains to transport large numbers of Armenians out of populous areas and into the desert, where they faced either forced marches or mass graves. Also, the newly introduced telegraph permitted Ottoman officials, notably Talaat Pasha, to order massacres in multiple villages at the same time.

The question of what causes a nation or empire to turn against a segment of its own population is one that San Diego teacher Dale Griepenstroh finds especially relevant for today. Students in his middle school world history classes read Michael Arlen's *Passage to Ararat*, the story of the author's discovery that his father endured the Armenian Genocide.

"I want them to understand that the Armenian Massacres are examples of intolerance within a multiethnic society that had once been tolerant and dependent on its diversity but changed its course when faced with its own demise," Griepenstroh explains.

Another compelling reason to study the Armenian Genocide is the international controversy that surrounds the event. The Turkish government continues to deny that it carried out an expulsion and extermination campaign in 1915.

Many European countries, including France, Italy and Sweden, have formally acknowledged the Armenian Genocide, but the United States has yet to do so. Diplomatic concerns over U.S. military bases in Turkey, as well as the nation's participation in the international campaign against terrorism, have kept the United States from officially recognizing the atrocities.

Since the 1980s, Peter Balakian, a professor of literature and genocide studies at Colgate University, has been a forerunner in the Armenian American community's efforts to bring an end to both official and popular denial. Balakian received the 1998 PEN/Martha Albrand Prize for his memoir *Black Dog of Fate* (see [Resources](#)).

"What is morally important about understanding perpetrators' denials and attempts to cover up human rights crimes," notes Balakian, "is the lesson that the denial of genocide is the final stage of genocide. Judy Herman has written in her book *Trauma and Memory* that the last act of the perpetrator is always to cover up. Denial is an important aspect of the criminal pathology of both murder and mass murder." Balakian and others emphasize the contrast between Holocaust denial, which is roundly dismissed as an anti-Semitic fabrication, and denial of the Armenian Genocide, which continues to influence international diplomacy.

The United States' refusal to recognize the Genocide officially is of particular concern to Adam Strom at Facing History. "The dilemma for the U.S. at the time of the Genocide," he notes, "is that there was a deep awareness of the atrocity (see [First Person](#)), yet no direct action was taken outside of raising funds. The question arises: Does the U.S. react because there is an injustice taking place, or do we refrain out of respect for that country's sovereignty?"

"I think it's the dilemma all of us face right now," Strom continues, "as we watch human rights atrocities occur across the world. When do we respond, and when do we say, 'Oh, that's not our responsibility — it's too complicated?' "September 11 is a reminder that New York City is not that far from Central Asia, and we are all connected. The choices we make at one time, they come back, and so we need to think about responding to each other as human beings."

Engin Akarli, professor of modern Middle East studies at Brown University, is one of the few Turkish scholars who publicly acknowledge the Turkish extermination campaign against the Armenians. Especially in light of recent events, he cautions against interpreting genocide itself in racist terms. "I have seen the attitude so often that Western democracies are incapable of genocide, and therefore genocide must be the result of something which is to the east." In this view, he says, "Hitler is an anomaly of Europe, but when Turks do this, it becomes characteristic of Turks."

"This becomes a kind of hegemonic model — 'I have seen one Turk; all Turks are the same.' 'I have seen one Armenian; all Armenians are the same.' Everyone fits into these general categories, and nobody has the ability any longer to distinguish among the complexities. If you conclude that Turks are all the same, that Turks are barbarians, what are you doing? You are repeating the cause of the problem."

Another Kind of Urgency

On a spring morning at the Rose and Alex Pilibos School in Little Armenia, a section of Hollywood, the courtyard and playground are a swirl with children in plaid uniforms, laughing, running and speaking in Armenian.

The bittersweet aroma of Armenian coffee, served to me in beautiful demitasse cups, lingers in the air as principal Viken Yacoubian discusses with passion why the 13 Armenian heritage schools scattered throughout metro Los Angeles are such a necessity: Armenian language and culture must survive, and what happened to the Armenians must not be repeated.

"In the elementary grades," Yacoubian explains, "the Genocide is not specifically addressed, but the students have a basic understanding even at that point, because they participate in the commemoration of April 24, the day designated by Armenians to remember the Genocide."

On that date, Armenian heritage schools close, churches hold special services, and students participate in citywide marches to mark the day in 1915 when more than 300 Armenian men were rounded up and executed in Constantinople, now Istanbul.

While a primary aim of the heritage schools is for young Armenian Americans to develop a comprehensive understanding of their own history, Yacoubian and Varktes Kourouyan, principal of Arshag Dickranian School, want their students to be well-versed in other histories as well. Like Yacoubian, Kourouyan believes that it is important to study mass extermination campaigns, including the Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide and the current persecution of the Kurds in the Middle East.

"Students must learn the history of non-Armenians as part of the process of learning tolerance for other groups," explains Lora Kouyoumjian, a veteran teacher at Dickranian. By their senior year at Pilibos, students take on the most difficult and controversial aspect of the Genocide: the denial. Yacoubian places great emphasis on teaching students to respond to the denial in a constructive manner.

"Denial is a major dimension of all sorts of psychological issues that subsequent generations such as mine have faced and that Pilibos kids now face," says Yacoubian, whose grandparents were survivors. "In my younger days I went through almost a post-traumatic stress syndrome after my grandfather and grandmother told me stories about the Genocide and the fact that it was consistently denied."

Teachers and students at Pilibos address the denial in a more activist way than those at Dickranian. After learning about the denial, some students want to take a personal role in helping to end it. Yacoubian and his colleagues encourage them to engage in non-violent protest and to volunteer for politicians dedicated to gaining recognition of the Genocide.

In just a few years, the last of those who survived will be gone. Educators at Armenian heritage schools find that teaching about the Genocide not only promotes historical awareness and intergenerational understanding but also regenerates the pride in Armenian culture that genocide and denial themselves threaten to destroy.

"What our students learn in their coursework at Pilibos," Yacoubian explains, "is often so unique from other curriculums that when they attend college, they teach professors about the Genocide." His words remind me of what the Kayir sisters have taught me.

"When I tell people my heritage," Karen says, "they usually ask, 'Who are the Armenians?' I'm proud to be an Armenian, and I will patiently explain to the curious who Armenians are, and maybe some day my explanation won't be needed."

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<http://www.tolerance.org/teach/expand/mag/features.jsp?p=0&is=30&ar=323>