

Family tree tied to forgotten genocide

By Terri Jo Ryan

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The images are almost iconic:
Naked corpses piled high. Starving children with their skins hanging on skeletal frames.
Grinning executioners with grisly "trophies" of human body parts.

But the photographic evidence of crimes against humanity are not from the liberations of the Third Reich death camps – but from a much lesser known mass murder called the Armenian Genocide.

The extermination attempt on the Armenian people – which was launched 90 years ago today with the slaughter of thousands in Constantinople – is family history for Baylor University graduate student Art Tonoyan.

Tonoyan, 29, born in Soviet Armenia, is the grandson of two genocide survivors. It was his late grandfather Grigor Tonoyan's tales of the terrors of 1915 that colored his decision to use his life studying genocide in the hopes of preventing it.

Grigor was 8 years old in 1915 when Turkish soldiers burst into his family's home in an Armenian village. They slashed his father's throat, raped his mother and older sister in front of him before killing them and an older brother. The assailants deliberately left him alive, they told the young shell-shocked witness, "so you can see what we are capable of."

Others in the village were herded into a church and burned alive. Missionaries found Grigor wandering a road and took him in, Tonoyan said.

The woman who would become Art Tonoyan's grandmother, Almast Yeghiazarian, had no memory of the carnage that destroyed her family because she was only 3 when it happened.

"She was too young to be scarred. All she could remember was growing up in the orphanage," Tonoyan said. "She was brought in with a sister, and they somehow got separated for more than 40 years."

Grigor and Almast grew to adulthood in an American-run orphanage. They married and settled into what was then known as Soviet Armenia.

"Our family tree was obliterated by the genocide," said Tonoyan. "That's where our family begins."

---- Backdrop to tragedy ----

Armenia was the first nation-state to declare its state religion to be Christianity, in 301 A.D. Its location at the nexus of the Anatolian peninsula, bridging Europe, Asia and what is now called the Middle East, meant it was overrun in ensuing centuries by a variety of conquerors, eventually including the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

For several centuries, Armenians were a tolerated minority within the empire, said Tonoyan, who is studying for his doctorate in religion, politics and society. But the empire began to crumble in the early 19th century with many of its subjugated people – Albanians, Bulgarians and Greeks – seeking independence.

Tonoyan, who came to Baylor in August after five years in America, said that Ottoman Armenians weren't seeking full independence, just better treatment and more autonomy in their region. The area saw recurring violence and turmoil throughout the 1800s.

Meanwhile, a Turkish intellectual movement began at the turn of the 20th century. A group calling itself the Committee of Union and Progress, also known as The Young Turks, sought the "homogenization" of the empire by cleansing it of religious and ethnic minorities. They seized power in 1908 and deposed the last Sultan, Tonoyan said.

The declaration of World War I in August 1914 plunged Europe into warfare, and provided cover for the systematic elimination of the Armenian people, he said. First, the Armenian men and teenagers who had been conscripted into the army were disarmed, placed into forced labor camps and then worked to death or executed, he said.

On April 24, 1915, on orders of Talat Pasha, interior minister of the Young Turks regime, some 300 Armenian leaders, writers, thinkers and professionals in Constantinople (present day Istanbul) were arrested and killed. Also on that day in Constantinople, about 3,000 defenseless Armenian citizens were killed on the streets or in their homes.

Finally, the remaining Armenians – women, children and the elderly – were rounded up, told they would be "removed from the theatre of war" and then marched off to concentration camps in the Syrian desert, where they eventually died of starvation or thirst. Along the way, the army shot those who could not keep up and raped the women and girls.

"Kurdish brigands kidnapped children and the pretty women for their harems" and the boys as slaves, Tonoyan said. Some 60,000 Armenians were drowned in the Black Sea, on barges the authorities ordered loaded and sunk.

The world took some notice. Humanitarian agencies and religious groups raised \$100 million (about \$3 billion in today's dollars) to rebuild villages, resettle survivors, transport others into exile and help raise the thousands of orphans created by the ethnic strife.

But it was the lack of lasting international repercussions against the perpetrators that later gave a certain Austrian corporal with delusions of grandeur the courage to target his own despised minority.

"Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?" Adolph Hitler reportedly quipped to his military commanders a week before his invasion of Poland that launched World War II.

Despite the horrific precedent it set for mass murders to come, George Gawrych, a military historian and Middle East specialist at Baylor, says "the Armenian case is a bit more complicated" than most genocide scholars report. Gawrych, who taught for 20 years at the Combat Studies Institute of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, studies the waning last century of the Ottoman Empire.

He struggles with the term "genocide" (race-murder) to describe what happened to the Armenians. He said he prefers "massacre," which he considers a more powerful term, to describe the conditions that allowed for violence without repercussions.

"We need better terms," Gawrych said. "With 'ethnic cleansing,' you don't feel the human agony, do you?"

The Ottomans were fighting the growth of nationalistic fervor among its peoples, not just the Armenians, said Gawrych.

An Armenian guerilla movement was fighting for statehood, and massacres happened on both sides: Armenian insurgents killing soldiers and wiping out Muslim villages, and soldiers killing Armenians and wiping out their villages. Gawrych said it was hard to sift through the carnage.

But was an extermination of Armenians ordered? Gawrych said the official Ottoman position was that no such order existed, and that the bloodshed was just a series of unfortunate massacres in reaction to nationalistic fervor and ethnic tensions.

"But too many women and children died. Too many old people. There was some government involvement," he said, at least in creating the atmosphere of lawlessness that allowed the worst to happen.

---- Ugly lessons unlearned ----

"Brutalization is a part of history," Gawrych said. "If we believe we are all created equal, or all made in the image of God, genocide would be an unthinkable crime. A Holocaust is possible because there are better means to accomplish systematic slaughter."

The painful lesson about genocide is that the United States itself is not immune from the kind of fear that grips a government or society that feels threatened. A nation can start

turning against its own people and oppressing minorities when it thinks survival is at stake, he said.

Americans "shouldn't be smugly complacent that it can't happen here" because it has, Gawrych said, with the massacres and forced migrations of Native Americans. "I don't think humanity has learned much at all about genocide; it keeps happening – often under the term 'ethnic cleansing'," said Truett Seminary theology professor Roger E. Olson. "The only effective means of stopping it would be an international force trained and equipped to swoop into any country where it is taking place and stop it immediately."

However, this is unlikely as long as various countries continue to undermine the United Nations, Olson added.

Baylor University religion department chairman Randall O'Brien shares that harsh assessment.

"The cold, hard truth is that America has been fast with rhetoric, but slow with real measures to stop genocide," he said.

"American policy-makers will change American policies when we citizens demand change, and not until then," O'Brien said. The U.S., the world's only remaining superpower, cannot possibly police the entire planet alone, he added.

"The United Nations, NATO, and others must work with us to combat global evil. In the face of genocide, indifference and 'neutrality' are themselves forms of evil. Nor will rhetoric alone stop ethnic cleansing. The eyes of the world must fall on the murderer," he said.

Jerry Smith, a Baptist minister in Clifton, said the "human depravity" of such mass murders has left scars on some survivors and their offspring that breeds "a hatred that sometimes is unthinkable." "On any given day you can take your pick of places and peoples in the world that need help," Smith said. "Decisions have to be made to help those that we can and hope and pray someone else helps those that we can't."

---- A family begins ----

The boy left alive by Turkish soldiers in 1915, nurtured by missionaries when his family was cut down, started the Tonoyan family tree anew.

The genocide scholar now studying at Baylor was born in 1975 to Grigor's son and daughter-in-law in the Soviet Union. Art Tonoyan and his wife, Lydia, have a 17-month-old daughter, Ani, born in the United States.

But the endless sorrow of his family's history still tugs at his conscience, Tonoyan said.

"I will never forget my grandfather's eyes," he said. "He was a very sad person. I rarely remember him smiling. He never got over seeing his family murdered."

The Armenian massacres, a stain on the world's soul 60 years before he was born, has colored Tonoyan's entire life, he said. He hopes to work for a think tank that detects genocidal situations and raises an international alarm.

"I want people to see it and understand it as a lesson. If a full account had been made and action taken when it happened," he said, "maybe Hitler would have thought twice before thinking he could get away with the Holocaust."

Like the boy left alive, the grandson "can see what we are capable of."