Armenian Genocide
100th Anniversary Talk
University of La Verne
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Parev, yev pari yegats ek. Togh polor Tseghasbanootian nahadakneroon hokinereh loosavorvin.

Hello and welcome. Blessed be the spirits of all the victims of genocides and the Holocaust.

This year is the 100th anniversary of the start of the Armenian genocide that lasted about 8 long years. Today and this month we, and many in the world, come together to remember, honor and give voice to the 1.5 million victims of the Armenian Genocide and the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust. In so doing we also honor and remember all genocide victims everywhere in the past and in the present. Genocides are crimes against all of humanity, and utter degradation of what it should mean to be human. Today is about justice as much as it is about remembering those whose lives were taken in so many cruel ways.

Today, I also would like to remember and honor all those who, at great peril to themselves and their families, had the courage and humanity to give shelter to potential victims who survived because of their generosity. I would especially like to mentions that during the Armenian Genocide and in its aftermath The Near East Relief an American Charitable Organization, and The Church of the Brethren (yes, our Brethren Church) were instrumental in providing material and spiritual support to survivors and thousands of orphaned children—my uncle’s wife and my wife’s grandfather were two of these orphans. I say thank you.

Scholars agree that the genocide of the Armenians was part of the Turkification plan of the Turkish territories during the waning years of the six hundred year old Ottoman Empire that once spanned the Middle
East, North Africa, and the Caucasus. The Committee of Union and Progress, under the leadership of Talaat Bey, Minister of Interior, and Enver Pasha, Minister of War, who ascended to the head of the Young Turk government, was intent on establishing an ethnically and religiously cleansed state for Turks. The Christian Armenians, Greeks, Chaldeans and Assyrians and other non-Muslim minorities like the Jews, in the Anatolia region were standing in their way. They were regarded disposable after hundreds of years of oppression, exploitation and subjugation.

The onset of World War I in 1914 provided unprecedented opportunities for the final solution to the “Armenian problem” in Ottoman Turkey. The government of the Young Turk party sided with Germany against the Allied forces of Britain, France and Russia, and earnestly began to implement their Turkification plan. On April 24, 1915, Turkish nationalist forces were unleashed to accomplish the extermination of the Armenians, and take care of the “Armenian problem” once and for all. On that day in the early morning hours the Young Turk government rounded up about 250 of the cultural, political and business leaders of the Armenian community of Constantinople (today’s Istanbul) and sent them to their deaths, thus decapitating the Armenian community.

In the following weeks and months the Armenian leadership in the eastern and central provinces met the same fate. Furthermore, as a pretext, the government accused the Armenians of collaborating with the Russian enemy on the Eastern Front, and sent regular armed forces and specially trained killing squads to massacre the Armenian population of countless villages in the area. By mid summer the genocidal plan was in full swing. After the elimination of the leadership, the able-bodied men were collected and forcibly enlisted into the Ottoman army to serve and die in labor battalions. My grandfather was one them – he did not die, but witnessed the death of thousands. Then, village-by-village, town-by-town, city-by-city, they collected the defenseless women, children, and the elderly, with no more than a days notice, formed human caravans who took what they could carry, and under the pretext of taking them to “safer” areas, sent them on endless death marches towards the Syrian
Desert around the Der Zor region. This is one of the regions where ISIS today is active, and their methods in cruelty sound eerily familiar. The instruments of death of the defenseless caravans were swords, daggers, axes, bullets, kerosene, starvation, drowning, heat, cold, disease, ordinary Kurdish and Turkish villagers, and criminals released from prisons. Caravans would start off with hundreds and sometimes thousands of individuals, and only a handful would reach their desert destinations.

Abductions, rapes, and forced conversions of children, women, and men to Islam were widespread and deliberate. My wife’s grandfather was actually circumcised as a teenager as part of his initiation into Islam, but was able to run away. In the last several years increasing numbers of Islamacised Armenians in the Eastern provinces of Turkey have come forward acknowledging their Armenian origins. We don’t need to get into the well-documented gruesome details and carnage of the atrocities that were perpetrated. Suffice it to say that they were creatively diabolical, beastly, and systematic. And unfortunately, I must say, religious fervor was used by the central government to motivate ordinary Turks and Kurds to accomplish its goals, pitting neighbor against neighbor, and providing justification to kill infidels - unbelievers, Armenians, and other non-Muslims. Numerous memoirs written by survivors have given voice to their personal suffering, to their murdered family members and strangers alike.

(Here are the two memoirs in my family that bear witness to the killings)

The historical record including official archives from Germany, Austria, United States, Britain, France, Turkey (yes, Turkey) and others, provide abundant evidence that the genocide and the ethnic cleansing was centrally planned and executed with military precision. Moreover, eyewitness accounts of countless missionaries, foreign-service officers from many countries, including then United States Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, himself a Jew, and survivor eyewitness accounts document
in excruciating detail the planned annihilation of Armenians and other non-Muslim minorities in the Ottoman territories of Analtolia.

Yet, today the succeeding Turkish government vehemently denies that what took place was genocide, and tries to actively rewrite the history of that period. Raphael Lemkin, a polish-Jewish scholar coined the word “Genocide,” translate from Greek and Latin means the killing of a race. In 1948, in the wake of the Holocaust, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Modern day Turkey has engaged in historical revisionism defying growing world-wide recognition of the genocide by genocide scholars and historians, including Turkish academicians and historians, as well as many Holocaust experts and scholars.

Governments of many countries have also recognized the Armenian genocide, such as France, Sweden, Greece, Canada, Argentina, Uruguay, and most recently as of yesterday, Germany, to mention a few. Also, 43 States of the United States have recognized the Armenian genocide. In spite of the well-documented and pervasive evidence, the government of the United States, my government, has failed to recognize the Armenian Genocide because of political expediency, not to jeopardize the cozy relations with Turkey, a geopolitical ally.

I say, “Mr. President, and my beloved representatives in congress, don’t hesitate to use the word “GENOCIDE” along side the word “ATROCITIES” as many of you prefer to call the events of that period. It is long overdue.” Recognizing the genocide is the first step in achieving justice for the victims and the future generations. Elie Wiesel, a survivor of the Holocaust, author, and activist, has said that those who deny the genocide kill the victims twice.

At the start of the WW II, just before the invasion of Poland when Hitlers henchmen feared the world’s response to his proposed war against the Jews, he emboldened them with a rhetorical outburst: he said, “Who remembers the Armenians.”

I have sometimes imagine what it would sound like if all the 1.5 million murdered souls arose from the dead in their skeletal forms and gathered as a “Flash Mob” of sorts, on the streets of Istambul (former
Constantinople), and all together screamed in pain at the top of their voices; would it be loud enough for the Turkish governement and the world to hear them?

Just last week, it was encouraging to hear that The Europian Parliament adopted a bill urging Turkey to recognize the gencide and come to terms with its past. It was also great to hear in the news that a small group of courageous Turkish lawyers have come forward and apologized to the Armenian people for the genocide. An unusual sight indeed. I hope they keep their jobs and stay out of prison.

It was most uplifting to hear Pope Francis speak candidly about the genocide during a special Mass held on 12th of April. Of course Turkey discounted his words, called them serious mistakes, and promised dier consequences: indeed the Turkish emabassador was called home, and the Vatican website was hacked and shot down briefly.

He said:

“In the past century our human family has lived through three massive and unprecedented tragedies. The first, which is widely considered ‘the first genocide of the 20th Century’, struck your own Armenian people, the first Christian nation, as well as Catholic and Orthodox Syrians, Assyrians, Chaldeans and Greeks. Bishops and priests, religious women and men, the elderly and even defenseless children and the sick were murdered. The other two were perpetrated by Nazism and Stalinism. And more recently, there have been other mass killings, like those in Cambodia, Rwanda, Burundi and Bosnia. It seems that humanity is incapable of putting an end to the shedding of innocent blood…. Dear Armenian Christians, today, with hearts filled with pain, but at the same time with great hope in the risen Lord, we recall the Centenary of that tragic event — that immense and senseless slaughter — whose cruelty your forefathers had to endure. It is necessary, and indeed a duty, to honor their memory, for whenever memory fades, it means that evil allows wounds to fester. Concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it!”
Finally, I would like to leave you with the thought that peace will come to the hearts and minds of the children and grandchildren of the perpetrators as well as the victims when justice is served and the right to a dignified life for every human being is affirmed. Genocide of one people is genocide of all peoples. It is a crime against humanity. Ordinary everyday good people can do evil when the conditions are right. The evil potential of genocide is ever present, and each one of us carries a minute kernel of this potential within us. Constant high vigilance as individuals and collective entities and governments is imperative if we are to prevent future genocides.

On behalf of all victims, survivors and the generations that follow, we should continue to demand justice.

Thank You