

**Armenian-Ontarian Migration and Community:
Life Before and After the Armenian Genocide, 1887–1930**

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Scholars of public history have noted that the drive to explore ethnocultural histories can come from an author's interwoven needs to both remind and to remember. This essay was born out of such a condition, and is the result of a newfound interest in Armenian-Canadian narratives, inspired by the recent designation of the Armenian Boys' Farm Home in Georgetown, Ontario, as a historically significant site by the Town of Halton Hills and the Government of Ontario. These coupled commemorative acts have created a new awareness of Armenian-Canadian history among those of both Armenian and non-Armenian heritage.

This essay will explore the evolution of southern Ontario's Armenian community over a period of forty years, engaging in both synchronic and diachronic analyses of the effects of the Armenian Genocide on Armenian-Ontarian migration and community life. The overarching argument will be that the Armenian Genocide caused a fundamental shift in Armenian-Ontarians' perspective on their future in Canada, from one of temporary inhabitation to one of permanent settlement.

The paper will first introduce the connections that existed between Canadians and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire since the 1880s, and will outline three proposals for mass migration put forth before 1914. It will be shown that almost all migrants were male sojourners, and that most did not regard their journey as having been permanent, as demonstrated through the principal characteristics of community life. Individuals and organisations established and maintained international networks during the period of initial settlement; these networks then facilitated new forms of migration after the genocide began in 1914. Increases in the influx of children and wives or fiancées during and after the massacres—in addition to the creation of new community organisations—will be shown to be indicative of a population accepting Canada as a permanent home.

Migration Before the Genocide

While the first Armenian known to have reached North America landed in Virginia in 1618 or 1619,¹ the narrative of Canada's Armenians did not begin until two-and-a-half centuries later, with the settlement of Garabed Nergararian in Port Hope, Ontario, around 1887.²

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Protestant Canadians played an important role in facilitating Armenian migration to Canada. By 1900, over thirty Canadian men and women were doing missionary work within the Ottoman Empire through the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Armenian Relief Committee of New York. Having found little success among Muslims, these missionaries shifted their focus to converting Apostolic Armenians to Presbyterianism, Congregationalism or Methodism, and quickly found that the best way to win the cooperation of their targets was to give them resources the Ottoman government would not provide: schools, hospitals and orphanages.³ These facilities put Armenians and missionaries in close and frequent contact, creating relationships and networks that had an important influence on migration and settlement patterns.

Following the pre-genocide massacres of 1894–96 and 1909, at least three proposals to relocate groups of Armenian agriculturalists to Canada were made. These efforts were aided by the decades-old network of Canadians in the Ottoman Empire and in Canada, but ultimately did not come to fruition. The first two were put forth by Rev. R. Chambers of Woodstock, Ontario, a Protestant missionary stationed in Turkey since 1880.⁴ His idea, recorded in an 1896 letter to the government, but first proposed “some years” previously, had been to create settlements of

¹ Vartan M. Malcom, *The Armenians in America* (Boston: 1919), 51–55; quoted in Robert Mirak, *Torn Between Two Lands: Armenians in America, 1890 to World War I*, Harvard Armenian Texts and Studies 7 (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1983), 35.

² Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains: A History of Armenians in Canada*, McGill-Queen's Studies in Ethnic History, 2nd series, vol. 17 (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2005), 40. Adjemian has recently identified the first Armenians in Canada as having been a group of 13 individuals who had listed their “creed” as “Armenian” on the 1851-1852 census. There are therefore three possibilities: that these 13 were Arminian Christians rather than ethnic Armenians; that they were migrants who returned to Ottoman Armenia or moved to the United States after a very short time in Canada; or that Adjemian is the first to have come across this datum. Province of Canada, *Census of the Canadas*, vol. 2, 1851-2 (Quebec: Lovell and Lamoureux, 1855), 44; quoted in Aram Adjemian, “Canada's Moral Mandate for Armenia: Sparking Humanitarian and Political Interest, 1880-1923” (master's thesis, Concordia University, 2007), 2.

³ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 36–37.

⁴ Adjemian, “Canada's Moral Mandate,” 14.

Armenian farmers in central Saskatchewan and in British Columbia, an endeavour which he believed would have resulted in “the greatest mutual benefit and blessing” for both the Armenians and for Canada.⁵ In its response, after noting that Chambers’ letter had provided no information on the potential migrants themselves (only an excerpt of his original had been forwarded to Canada), the Privy Council made it clear that it would not allocate funds for the initiative, and that should they migrate, these Armenians must not become “a burden on the community.” They were also sure to conclude their remarks with reference to the interior minister’s “grave doubts” about their ability to adapt, considering the differences in “climate and conditions of life” between the two regions.⁶ Although the Laurier government, and Minister of the Interior Clifford Sifton in particular, emphasised settlement of the West and did “everything possible” to facilitate the mass migration of other peoples,⁷ the ethnic hierarchy by which immigration was governed would not easily allow entry to Armenians.

The third proposal, which was received from the British consul in Batoum (Batumi) in 1905, suggested that 30,000 families of Ottoman Armenian migrants employed as tobacco planters in Russia at that time be settled in Canada, as they were expected to be exiled within the course of the following six months.⁸ The plan was rejected because, in the government’s ambiguous words, Ottawa could not “offer any special inducement for [...] the class of settlers referred to.”⁹ Deputy Minister of the Interior William Scott gave a much clearer explanation several weeks later: “From my knowledge of these people I do not think we want them in Canada.”¹⁰

⁵ Rev. R. Chambers to Sir P. Currie, 28 January 1896, PC 1896-1383 J, RG 2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/orders/index-e.html>.

⁶ PC 1896-1383 J, RG 2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/orders/index-e.html>.

⁷ Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540–2006*, revised edition (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2007), 93.

⁸ P. Stevens (British Consul at Batoum) to the Marquess of Lansdowne, 10 November 1904, PC 1905-0384 M, RG 2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/orders/index-e.html>.

⁹ PC 1905-0384 M, RG 2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/orders/index-e.html>.

¹⁰ Ministry of the Interior to the undersecretary of state in the Colonial office, 27 March 1905, RG 25, A 2, vol. 141, file C, 1/96, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa; quoted in Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, “Armenian Refugees and Their Entry into Canada, 1919-30,” *Canadian Historical Review* 71, no. 1 (1990): 95–96.

Leaving the Ottoman Empire at this time was illegal and had to be done in secret. Pressed by continuing oppression and massacre, many bribed their way out, but soon found themselves hard-pressed to meet stringent immigration requirements, possibly resulting in multi-step migrations covering longer-than-intended routes. Evolving out of previously existing criteria and spurred by the appointment of Frank Oliver as interior minister,¹¹ Canadian immigration policy became increasingly restrictive in the first decade of the twentieth century. By 1910, Armenians faced six hurdles when trying to enter the country: their classification as Asiatics, a passport requirement, the continuous journey ruling, money and labour qualifications, and the family reunification clause.¹² Some, such as a lawyer from Kharpert (Harput) with a son studying at McMaster University, sought to escape with the help of Canadian government officials contacted through family and professional networks.¹³ The majority, however, gained entry as migrant workers through the help of Armenians and non-Armenians already in the country.

These sojourners were overwhelmingly male peasants who had travelled from the interior of the Ottoman Empire expecting to return home after accumulating some wealth in the New World. Their settlement patterns in southern Ontario were guided by kinship and personal networks, and organised according to their village or region of origin; generally speaking, settlement conformed to the following schema: men from Asdghapert gravitated toward Brantford, those from Van to Galt, and those from Marash to St Catherines or Hamilton.¹⁴ These were the region's fastest-growing industrial towns, with Brantford being the largest and having the highest percentage of foreigners of any municipality in the country.¹⁵ There were also a small number of men and families from Constantinople who arrived with the intention of becoming permanent immigrants, and tended to set up shops and businesses in Toronto.¹⁶

¹¹ Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates*, 106–108, 121.

¹² *Ibid.*, 85, 92-93; Kaprielian-Churchill, "Armenian Refugees," 88; Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 163.

¹³ O. C. S. Wallace (Chancellor of McMaster University) to Governor General of Canada, 20 January 1896, PC 1896-0327, RG 2, Privy Council Office, Series A-1-a, Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/databases/orders/index-e.html>.

¹⁴ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 62, 501.

¹⁵ By 1908, the number of Armenians in that city had reached 520 – roughly 3% of the total population – of whom only about ten were women. Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 60–61.

¹⁶ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 59.

All in all, about 2,100 Armenians migrated to Ontario between 1887 and 1914.¹⁷ They were motivated by the promise of both economic opportunities and safety, but found it difficult to gain entry into Canada by a government which prioritised ethnic origin over agricultural experience or the dangers from which applicants were fleeing.

Community Life Before the Genocide

Being far from home, Armenians recreated family and clan-type relationships in North America. Their decisions to live as well as work together facilitated the formation and development of both fraternal and paternal bonds, with men of varying ages “protect[ing] one another from the corruption of ‘painted women,’ the compulsion of gambling, and the lure of coffee houses, pool halls, and saloons.”¹⁸ Kaprielian-Churchill argues that the Armenians of the Golden Horseshoe constituted a single community, as their bonds as co-nationals proved stronger than any sense of difference created by village of origin or Canadian town of settlement.¹⁹ Although political differences would lead to conflict in the ensuing decades, it is not clear whether they introduced sufficient heterogeneity to result in the development of multiple Armenian-Ontarian identities along political lines in the decades preceding the genocide.

Scholars have consistently made a case for the centrality of the Apostolic Church to Armenian identity.²⁰ Taking this into consideration, the 1910–12 conflict in Brantford over the construction of a church in that town becomes an important window for observing the divergent ways in which settlers viewed their own migration before the genocide. While those who considered themselves permanent immigrants in Ontario argued that it was necessary to build one to meet the spiritual needs of the people, migrant workers felt that the requisite fundraising would have been prodigal. It was preferable, they argued, to send available funds to their church

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56; Kaprielian-Churchill, “Armenian Refugees,” 106.

¹⁸ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁰ See Susan Paul Pattie, *Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community*, Smithsonian Series in Ethnographic Inquiry (Washington: Smithsonian Inst. Press, 1997); and Jenny Phillips, *Symbol, Myth, and Rhetoric: The Politics of Culture in an Armenian-American Population*, Immigrant Communities & Ethnic Minorities in the United States & Canada 23 (New York: AMS Press, 1989).

in Turkish Armenia (likely the village of Asdghapert), rather than squandering the sum in Ontario, as they were “here today, home tomorrow.”²¹

Possibly influenced by Western missionaries’ founding of several American colleges in the Ottoman Empire beginning in the nineteenth century, migrants established associations to support and encourage education in their native villages. This had been a growing trend among internal Ottoman Armenian migrants working in Constantinople, who had played important roles as modernisers by exporting knowledge from the capital of the empire to their home towns and villages to the south and the east.²² Following the establishment of the Keghi Educational Society in North America in Boston, some Brantford Armenians started a similar group to support their community in the village of Osnag in 1904. These organisations were international in scope, in that they had one chapter in the Old Country and several other chapters around the world, mostly in North America.²³

Unlike the building of a church, the creation of education associations was not incongruous with notions of return held by many (possibly most) migrants at this time. Through these associations, Armenians kept themselves engaged with what was happening back home, and were able to contribute to improvements in the quality of life of their immediate and extended families. Fundraising initiatives, then, can be seen as direct financial links to home running parallel to—and no different from—remittance payments.

International networks were also maintained through Ontarian chapters of popular Armenian political parties. By the turn of the century, there were three main political-ideological groups operating in Turkish and Russian Armenia: the Armenagan Party—later reformed as the Armenian Democratic Liberal Party (ADL), which was established in Van in 1885; the Social Democrat Hnchagian Party (SDHP), created in 1887 in Geneva; and the Armenian Revolutionary Federation (ARF), established in 1890 in Tiflis (Tbilisi). These organisations were

²¹ H. Tashjian, interview by Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill; quoted in Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 81.

²² Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 82. A very similar trend is seen with Mexican communities, and probably with other ethnic groups as well. In the Mexican case, hometown associations were first established by internal migrants in the 1940s, then by transient labourers in the United States some decades later. See David Fitzgerald, *A Nation of Emigrants: How Mexico Manages its Migration* (Berkeley: U of California Press, 2009).

²³ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 85, 87.

instrumental in guiding and serving the needs of Armenians in Asia Minor, the Armenian Highland and the Caucasus, but were also important in creating international networks which influenced the trajectories of Canada's Armenian communities before and after 1914.

The first ARF chapter in Canada was established in Brantford in 1903–04, with sister chapters appearing in Hamilton, St Catherines, Galt and Guelph by 1907. The SDHP had established chapters in the same towns by 1907 as well, while the ADL didn't make its entry into Canada until the 1960s.²⁴ While these groups had been born primarily out of a need to address the political aspirations of Armenians in their occupied homeland, they took on a spectrum of sociocultural responsibilities in Canada, as in the East. In the absence of a church, the ARF and SDHP became fora for the expression and resolution of internal disputes, and took on important roles as managers of the Armenian community's external image. As in the East, members were barred from drinking, gambling and other "immoral" behaviour.²⁵ While tensions existed between the two groups, members were instructed "not to argue with the Armenian opposition in the presence of Canadians, and to get along amicably with Canadians."²⁶ They rented space or used facilities owned by their members to set up clubs and small libraries, the establishment of which can be seen either as an acceptance of permanent settlement in Canada, or as a necessary, though temporary, investment in the quality of life and effectiveness of their members. Both conclusions would probably have held true depending on the individual asked.

Like the education associations—participation in which was probably not mutually exclusive with membership in the ARF or SDHP—they also organised fundraising drives to meet the needs of the homeland. The money collected was used for education, the creation and maintenance of party organs, revolutionary activities, and the Canadian war effort.²⁷ Through these two organisations, Armenian-Ontarians hosted some of the most well-known names in

²⁴ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 94–95, 425, 505–506.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁶ Records of the Armenian Revolutionary Federation of Guelph, ARF Archives, Montreal; quoted in Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 97.

²⁷ The Archives of Ontario include a letter received by the provincial government, in which the St Catherines community requests permission to donate the proceeds of a play to the Red Cross Society of Caucasus Russia, in benefit of the Armenian forces fighting there. St Catherines ARF Committee to W. J. Hanna (Provincial Secretary), 10 March 1915, Armenian Relief, Premier E. C. Drury Correspondence, RG 3-4-0-28, Archives of Ontario, Toronto.

Armenian politics of the day. The example of Khatchadour Maloumian's (who went by the *nom de guerre* Edgar Agnoui) 1910 visit to over fifteen North American cities is useful for demonstrating the international reach of these political networks, and the influence they may have had on individuals' acceptance of their migration.

As part of a three-month continental tour, Agnoui called on Armenian-Americans and Armenian-Canadians to spare no effort in raising funds for the legal fees of 250 imprisoned Armenians in the Caucasus, and the continuation of public education projects and self-defense campaigns in the Ottoman Empire.²⁸ He also advocated for migrants' return to Armenia, calling on them to "remember [...] the Garden of your Fatherland which is waiting for you, for the longed-for return of its exiled sons, so they may come and bring life with them, bring knowledge with them, and bring song and happiness."²⁹

Although it was in neither the ARF's nor the SDHP's favour to demand that all migrants return "home," the feeling was clearly shared by some of the leading elements, as well as a portion of Agnoui's audience. Indeed, in the quarter century preceding 1914, most Armenian-Ontarians continued to consider their presence in Canada a sojourn from which they would return "home" sooner or later.

Migration During and After the Genocide

Much changed as a result of the Genocide. Under the fog of war, the Young Turk government of the Ottoman Empire unleashed a concerted campaign of annihilation against its Armenian citizens in 1914. While the 1894–96 and 1909 massacres had largely been means of political control, this genocide was an attempt at the ethnic homogenisation of a rapidly disintegrating empire, which resulted in the death of two thirds of the indigenous Armenian population, and the permanent displacement of many hundreds of thousands of survivors.

²⁸ Kevork Donabedian, *H[ay] H[eghapokhagan] Tashnagsoutyunuh Hyusisayin Amerigayi mech* [The Armenian Revolutionary Federation in North America], vol. 2, 1910-1923 (Boston: Hayrenik Association, 1995), 31–52.

²⁹ E. Agnoui, "Kalifornio bantoukhd Hayerin" [To California's exiled Armenians], *Hayrenik*, 22 November 1910; quoted in Donabedian, *H. H. Tashnagsoutyunuh*, 38.

During the war years, the trajectory of Armenian migration between Canada and Turkey reversed. Armenians were classified as enemy aliens for a short time and became identified as refugees, all the while retaining their unfavourable status as “Asiatics.” This combination made their entry into Canada virtually impossible, possibly resulting in a greater net migration of Armenians leaving Canada rather than entering. Those journeying eastward left in order to join with Canadian, French, Greek and Russian forces, or with Armenian guerrillas resisting the genocide from within the Ottoman state. Of at least 150 Armenians who joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force,³⁰ at least one—Private S. Scroonian of Brant County (probably the town of Hamilton)—returned as a decorated veteran, having received a Military Medal for his service.³¹

The genocide caused an upheaval of traditional concepts of family as individuals lost their relatives and sought to re-create these relationships in an effort at bringing peace and normalcy to their lives. In his unpublished history on the village of Asdghapert from where most Brantford Armenians had come—Baghdoian writes that of that village’s 864 inhabitants, only 45 women and 71 men survived; 70 of these men lived because they had been sojourning in North America.³² Coming to realise the widespread death caused by the Ottoman government, Armenian men scrambled to bring relatives and future wives to Ontario.

In the absence of a national Armenian-Canadian press, New York’s *Hayrenik Weekly* (Fatherland Weekly) and Boston’s *Yeridasart Hayasdan* (Young Armenia) would have played central roles in creating international networks that facilitated the sharing of information on missing family members across the globe.³³ The repairing of families was not an easy endeavour, as many were ultimately unable to locate their loved ones. Others did so only after several decades.³⁴ When incapable of locating their own children, some chose to adopt. Garabed

³⁰ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 150.

³¹ F. Douglas Reville, *History of the County of Brant*, vol. 2 (Brantford: Hurley Printing, 1920), 504, <http://www.ourroots.ca/e/toc.aspx?id=4503>.

³² Dickran Baghdoian, “History of the Village of Astghapert” (unpublished manuscript); quoted in Kaprielian-Churchill, “Armenian Refugees,” 87.

³³ Eugenie Shehirian, “Genocide: 1915-22,” in “Armenians in Ontario,” ed. Isabel Kaprielian-Churchill, special issue, *Polyphony: The Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 4, no. 2 (1982): 42, <http://www.multiculturalcanada.ca/node/5198>.

³⁴ Jack Apramian, for example, was not reunited with his mother until 1962, when he met her in Soviet Armenia. Jack Apramian, *The Georgetown Boys*, revised edition, ed. Lorne Shirinian (Toronto: Zoryan Institute, 2008), 3.

Palnetzian of Brantford, for example, was put in touch with a man from his native village through an impoverished uncle who had just returned to the United States from the Caucasus, where he had been fighting as a volunteer. This man agreed to bring Palnetzian and a young girl to Brantford, where they were raised as his children. He also tells of another man who was returning to Canada from the war with a boy to raise as his son. When authorities heard about the unofficial adoption, they barred the man from returning to Canada and he was forced to settle in Marseilles, France.³⁵

From 1920 to 1931, there were 309 men, 310 children and 658 women who entered Canada through ocean ports or from the United States.³⁶ Many of these women were wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, but also newfound fiancées. Using an existing tradition of arranged or semi-arranged marriages facilitated through parents or friends, Armenian-Ontarian settlers corresponded with young women in the Near East and arranged to marry, all by letter mail.³⁷ These changes in migration patterns are indicative of a population prioritising the creation of families in the “New World” over plans of returning to their towns or villages of origin.

Migration conducive to the creation of permanent Armenian communities was probably nowhere more obvious than with the resettlement effort that brought 138 Armenian children to Georgetown and Toronto between 1923 and 1932.³⁸ In the lead-up to the project, Canadians had been witness to the development of child-rescue programmes which had accepted impoverished British children, placed them in rural settings, and trained them in agriculture.³⁹ This, coupled with widespread public support for the suffering Ottoman Armenians during the 1910s and

³⁵ Garabed Palnetzian, interview; quoted in Shehirian, “Genocide,” 38, 42.

³⁶ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 179.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 182–183. This was a practice also common among Japanese migrant communities in California in the early twentieth century, and probably among other communities as well. While the parallels are striking, an important difference is seen in that while Armenians were attempting to heal after the Genocide, Japanese community leaders organised picture marriages in order to bring “moral reform” to mostly male sojourner settlements in the western United States. See Kei Tanaka, “Japanese Picture Marriage and the Image of Immigrant Women in Early Twentieth-Century California,” *Japanese Journal of American Studies*, no. 15 (2004): 115–138.

³⁸ Jack Apramian, “The Georgetown Boys,” in Kaprielian-Churchill, *Polyphony*, 45. The Georgetown Armenian Boys’ farm home is very likely the only “Armenian” building in Canada to have received historic designation from any level of government. The building was added to the Town of Halton Hills’s heritage register on 25 May 2010, and to the province’s list one year later. Heritage Halton Hills, “Heritage Register,” Town of Halton Hills, last modified 11 February 2011, accessed 21 December 2011, www.haltonhills.ca/heritage/pdf/heritageregister.pdf.

³⁹ Neil Sutherland, *Children in English-Canadian Society: Framing the Twentieth-Century Consensus* (Toronto: U Toronto Press, 1976), 172–179.

1920s, led to the creation of the Armenian Relief Association of Canada (ARAC)—an offshoot of the Armenian Relief Fund established in 1917—which was successful in gaining permission for these children to be brought in.⁴⁰

The project was a unique accomplishment because it involved the government's waiving of several barriers put up against the entry of Asiatics and refugees; as well, whereas the mass relocation projects from the turn of the century had been rejected outright, the Georgetown experiment was allowed to take place, albeit on a smaller scale. Ottawa agreed to admit an initial group of fifty boys—a far cry from the 2000 male and female children ARAC had aimed for⁴¹—on the condition that they take lessons in English, religion and agriculture, and eventually be placed on farms as farmhands and labourers.⁴² Indeed, in a letter to Canada's Secretary of Juvenile Immigration, the Secretary of the Armenian Relief Fund summarised the emphasis on Canadianisation and nation building by writing, “[...] the day the children arrive at Georgetown, they will be taught to salute the British flag, and that will be a daily privilege and duty.”⁴³

From 1914 to 1930, Canada accepted roughly 1,500 immigrants of Armenian background, most of whom settled in Ontario. As the twentieth century unfolded, migration and settlement patterns would change dramatically as new waves of migrants arrived, and as Canadian immigration regulations changed. Building on the post-genocide atmosphere, most would come expecting to make Canada their permanent home.

Community Life During and After the Genocide

The decade following 1914 had fundamental effects on community life; not only did the destruction of the genocide continue for several more years, but new tensions surfaced as a result of politics in the Caucasus. In the aftermath of the First World War, Armenia had become an independent republic from 1918 to 1920, at which time it was annexed by the Bolsheviks;

⁴⁰ Lorne Shirinian, introduction to Apramian, *Georgetown Boys*, xiii.

⁴¹ Apramian, *Georgetown Boys*, 10.

⁴² Unknown author to Dr H. Zivickian, 5 May 1928, folder 27, box 14, UCC Board of Evangelism and Social Service collection, United Church of Canada Archives, Toronto.

⁴³ Dr. A. J. Vining to G. Bogue Smart, 31 May 1923, part 1, file 89616, reel C-7366, vol. 215, RG 76, Immigration, Library and Archives Canada; quoted in Shirinian, introduction, xxxvii.

although all Armenians had rejoiced in the creation of an independent state in 1918, its subsequent sovietisation caused conflict among Ontario's Armenians. On the one hand, the SDHP, ADL and their sympathisers viewed the Soviet Union as a welcome protector, and felt obliged to support the new Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic; on the other, the ARF remained committed to its goal of establishing a "free, independent and united" Armenia, and was suspicious of Soviet machinations. This dichotomy effectively divided the Armenian-Ontarian community between two worldviews: one pro-Soviet, the other anti-Soviet. While it would be inaccurate to characterise this split as a clean and complete separation into two independent halves, opposing views did have significant ramifications. For example, it influenced settlement patterns in the province; while those affiliated with the ARF tended to live in the northern part of St Catherines and the southern section of Brantford, SDHP/ADL supporters coalesced in the opposing halves of these towns.⁴⁴ Also, the sudden independence, then quick and unexpected loss of Armenian statehood proved a traumatic blow to the ARF in North America, one that the organisation struggled with until at least 1923.⁴⁵

Although Armenian-Canadians continued to work hard to sponsor the immigration of their family members after the genocide, funds which would have been sent eastward in the form of remittance payments were now used to develop community life. Acculturation became an important focus, and—coupled with the post-genocide atmosphere—lent itself to increased attention being paid to the retention of Armenian language and culture. The realities of permanent settlement were reflected through the establishment of new, youth-centred organisations, the first of which was the Canadian Armenian Young People's Association (CAYPA), created in Toronto in 1926 to provide a supportive social forum for refugees of sixteen to twenty-eight years of age.⁴⁶ By the early 1930s, ARF-affiliated youth groups had sprouted in several American and Canadian communities, and these were federated under the banner of the Tseghagron (Young Pledgers) movement in January 1933.⁴⁷ Tseghagron chapters officially opened in Galt and Hamilton in 1934, and St. Catherines, Brantford and Windsor

⁴⁴ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 63, 501.

⁴⁵ Donabedian, *H. H. Tashnagtsoutyunuh*, 618.

⁴⁶ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 444.

⁴⁷ The movement would later come to be known as the Armenian Youth Federation (AYF). K. Merton Bozoian, "The Birth of the AYF," in Armenian Youth Federation, *The AYF Legacy: Portrait of a Movement in Historical Review, 1933–1993* (USA: Armenian Youth Federation, 1994), 58.

shortly thereafter.⁴⁸ These organisations served several purposes: they sought to prevent the cultural assimilation of the new generation; to give young Armenians a sense of pride in their heritage; and to counter the threat of permanently losing the nation's oral histories, language and traditions.⁴⁹ Over the course of the ensuing five years, its repertoire of initiatives expanded to reflect the multifaceted needs of a permanent diasporan population: a scholarship fund, the purchase of a campground, educational and athletic programmes, and charitable work.⁵⁰

The process of adapting to permanent settlement in Canada was not without conflict. While Armenians involved with the Georgetown orphans project and donors of Armenian heritage wanted to ensure that these orphaned survivors received a level of instruction in their native tongue, non-Armenians in ARAC did not necessarily agree.⁵¹ In line with the tradition of naming migrant British orphans after their benefactors, an effort was made at doing the same to the Georgetown boys. Indeed, a 24 December 1924 article in *The Toronto Daily Star* lists some of their names as Armen Winchester, Bruce and Gibson S. Inkster, Aaron T. Pedley, etc.⁵² The bestowing of Anglo-Saxon names was a mixed effort at both anglicising foreign-sounding, difficult-to-pronounce names, but also at granting identity to some children who could not recall having had surnames. A few years later, and as a result of protests from some donors and from the boys themselves, all or most of the boys' names had been reverted to their originals, but many did choose to readopt the English versions later in life.⁵³

It is interesting, then, that possibly the first Armenian periodical published in Canada was produced by the Georgetown Boys themselves. Named *Ararat* after the omnipresent mountain so central to Armenian identity, this short-lived (January 1926–June 1927) newsletter served as a regular bulletin of the goings-on at the farm. It was 14–16 pages in length, published in both English and Armenian, and had a peak circulation of 2,000 subscribers in thirty-four countries.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 445.

⁴⁹ A. Parseghian, "Tseghagron sharjoumuh" [The Young Pledgers movement], *Asbarez*, 10 Nov 1933; "The AYF at 60: A Pictorial History of the AYF," in Armenian Youth Federation, *AYF Legacy*, 3–5.

⁵⁰ "AYF at 60: A Pictorial History," 7–8.

⁵¹ Apramian, *Georgetown Boys*, 50.

⁵² "Armenian Orphans Find Joy in Sanctuary at Georgetown," *Toronto Daily Star*, 24 December 1924.

⁵³ Apramian, *Georgetown Boys*, 76, 78.

⁵⁴ John Apramian, "Ararat Monthly: The Only Armenian Publication in British North America," *Polyphony: The Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario* 4, no. 1 (1982): 58–59.

Perhaps the clearest indication that Armenian-Ontarians had accepted Canada as their new home came in November 1930, with the opening of St Gregory the Illuminator in St Catherines, the first Armenian church in Canada.⁵⁵ Its consecration stands in stark contrast to the discord that had shaken Brantford twenty years previously, and demonstrates an important change in the community's perception of its future. Not only was it expected to serve the regular, week-to-week spiritual needs of the people, but was also needed in order to facilitate new marriages and baptisms—growing needs for a permanent settlement expecting to expand in the ensuing decades.

Conclusion

The years 1887 to 1930 were a formative period for southern Ontario's Armenian population, one which saw the arrival of the first settlers as transient workers, the establishing of roots, and their eventual growth into a full-fledged community complete with families and institutions. The majority of those who arrived between 1887 and the onset of the Armenian Genocide were male workers who had come to Canada in pursuit of personal safety and economic opportunity. The eastward flow of remittance payments, the lack of women and children, the migrants' inability to come to a consensus on investing in a church, and their establishment of education associations meant to help their communities in the Ottoman Empire were all indicative of a community which, by and large, was not expecting to remain in Ontario permanently. The Armenian Genocide initiated in 1914 caused a fundamental change in this regard. After a period of reverse migration where there were more Armenians travelling eastward to participate in the war effort than there were entering Canada, migration to this country increased again. These individuals continued to use international networks already in existence, but their demographics were fundamentally different from what was seen before 1914. Spurred by the need to protect and reconstruct families after the destruction of the genocide, Armenian-Ontarian men placed new emphasis on bringing their children and wives to Canada; where one or both could not be found, many arranged for picture brides, or adopted orphaned children. Community life took on a new spirit as well, as time and resources were invested in retaining the ethnic language and culture, especially through the foundation of new youth organisations. These

⁵⁵ Kaprielian-Churchill, *Like Our Mountains*, 277.

changes culminated in the November 1930 consecration of St Gregory the Illuminator in St Catherines, the first Armenian church in Canada. In this way, the four decades in question, bifurcated by the Genocide, came to a close, and the history of Ontario's Armenians began a chapter full of new challenges, arrivals and growth.

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