

## FIRST ARMENIANS IN AMERICA

The long history of the Armenian nation has been punctuated by triumphs over adversity. In 301 A.D. the small kingdom of Armenia became the first to adopt Christianity as its national religion, some 20 years before Constantine declared it the state religion of the Roman Empire.

In 451, when Persia ordered a return to paganism, Armenia's small army defiantly stood firm to defend its faith. At the Battle of Avarair Persia's victory over these determined martyrs proved so costly that it finally allowed Armenians to maintain their religious freedom. By the time European Crusaders in the twelfth century entered the Near East to "liberate" the Holy Land from the Moslems they found prosperous Armenian communities thriving among the Moslems, while maintaining the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and other Christian sites. Under 400 years of Ottoman Turkish rule (1512-1908) the Christian Armenian minority – industrious, educated elite within the Sultan's empire – had risen to a position of trust and influence. Once, such subject of the Sultan, Galoust Gulbenkian, later became the world's first billionaire, through negotiations with seven Western oil companies that sought Arabian oil in the 1920s.

During World War I (1915-1920), with the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the rise of Pan-Turkish nationalism, the Turkish government attempted to eradicate the Armenian nation in the First Genocide of the twentieth century. One and a half million Turkish Armenians were killed; another million survivors were cast from their Anatolian homeland into a global Diaspora that remains to this day.

Like ancient Phoenicians and Greeks, Armenians' affinity for global exploration stretches back to the eighth century B.C. By 1660, there were 60 Armenian trading firms in the city of Amsterdam, Holland, alone, and Armenian colonies in every corner of the known earth, from Addis Ababa to Calcutta, Lisbon to Singapore. At least one old manuscript raises the possibility of an Armenian who sailed with Columbus. More documented is the arrival of "Martin the Armenian," who was brought as a farmer to the Virginia Bay colony, Jamestown, by Governor George Yeardley in 1618- two years before the Pilgrims arrived at Plymouth Rock. Still, up to 1870, there were fewer than 70 Armenians in the United States, most of whom planned to return to Anatolia after completing their training in college or a trade. For example, one was pharmacist Kristapor Der Seropian, who introduced the class book concept while studying at Yale. In the 1850s, he invented the durable green dye that continues to be used in printing U.S. currency. Another was reporter Khachadur Osganian,

who wrote for the *New York Herald* after graduating from the New York University; he was elected President of the New York Press Club in the 1850s.

By the late 1880s the number of Armenians is estimated to be risen to 1,500. These were mainly artisans and laborers seeking economic opportunities. Then, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, over 12,000 frightened Armenians, fleeing the massacres and political unrest of the decaying Ottoman Empire, took refuge on American soil. The annual immigration figures peaked to 2,500 by the mid - 1890s.

The pace of immigration accelerated dramatically between 1900 and 1914. By World War I, there were some 60,000 Armenian in the United States. Both push and pull factors contributed to their increase. On the one hand, political and economic conditions were rapidly deteriorating in Ottoman Turkey. The most significant incident during the period was the Adana massacres in 1909 that killed between 15,000 and 20,000 souls. On the other hand the presence of relatives and friends in the New World triggered the migration chain and eased the process.

The prewar immigrants were predominantly from Asia Minor. They arrived in New York and settled in eastern cities. A much smaller number of Russian - Armenians, about 1,500, came between 1898 and 1914. They initially settled in Canada and then moved to southern California after 1908.

After World War I, emigration resumed. Survivors from the Armenian Genocide (1915) and the deportations perpetrated by the Young Turk Government continued to come to America in comparatively large numbers until quota system went into effect in 1924. For example, in 1920 alone, 10,212 Armenians, a record number, entered the US. Again, between 1920 and 1924 an additional 20,559 came. Unlike prewar Armenian immigrants, over half of these were women and children; many were widows and orphans who had maimed and psychologically scarred by the atrocities they had experienced.

During the period when the quota law was in effect, 1924-1965, some Armenians were able to bypass the restrictive barriers to immigrations. Initially, several Armenians entered with so-called Nansen passports; refugee documents supplied by the League of Nations. Then, ANCHA (American National Committee for Homeless Armenians), established in 1947, was instrumental in relocating about 4,500 Armenians, mainly from the Soviet Union, who had been stranded in settlement camps in Germany and Italy after World War II. In all, about 25,000 Armenians immigrated to America as refugees under the auspices of ANCHA.

The influx of Armenian immigration to the US picked up once again, after the liberalization of the quota law in 1965. This time the Armenians were escaping the political turmoil of the Middle East. The rate peaked as never before with the start of the Civil War in Lebanon (1975) and the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1978). Nearly three-quarters of Armenian immigrants from Iran settled in

Los Angeles. Nearly 160,000 Lebanese Armenians immigrated to the US. In the early 1960s, it is estimated that more than 120,000 Armenians lived in Istanbul. At present, only about 30,000 remain. Armenians from Istanbul have come to the US; Los Angeles alone is reputed to have received some 10,000 Istanbul Armenians in the last twenty years. There is also a sizable *Bolcetsi* population in the New York metropolitan area.

Starting in the 1970s and most recently in late 1980s, large numbers of Armenians were allowed to leave Soviet Armenia. These were mostly those Armenians and their descendants who had repatriated to soviet Armenia between 1946 and 1960 (an estimated 250,000) and had not been able to assimilate with the native population. Given a chance to leave, they did. More are coming. Their favorite destination remains Los Angeles. Estimates suggest that between September 1988 and September 1989, another 13,500 Armenians refugees came from Soviet Armenia and Iran.

With the exception of Fresno (CA), the earliest Armenian immigrants settled predominantly in urban industrial centers of the Northeast such as New York City, Providence (RI), Worcester (MA), and Boston (MA). Some moved soon to Midwestern cities such as Chicago, Detroit (MI), Racine (WI), and Waukegan (IL) where jobs were more plentiful. The immigrants' aim was to save as much money as possible to send back home or to finance the travel of other family members.

Compared to other immigrants of that period, the majority of the Armenians were literate, over a third were skilled artisans, and a few were businessmen and professionals. In spite of their skills and business acumen, most had no choice but become laborers in manufacturing industries because they did not have proficiency in English and their capital resources were almost nonexistent. For many though, that was just a stepping-stone for private ownership in a small retail store. Fresno again was the exception. There Armenians were engaged in agriculture production and packaging. Hard work eventually paid off, especially after World War II. Large proportions of the immigrants' children went to college, and entered white collar or professional occupations. The road success was also the move to suburbia in the 1950s and 1960s.

Recent Armenian immigrants, like other post-1965 immigrants to the US, do not conform to the stereotype of the poor, often illiterate peasant of earlier generations. For the most part, the newest arrivals come with greater resources than in the past. They are more likely to be proficient in English, have higher levels of educational attainment and occupational skills, and a few seeking political asylum from the turmoil's of the Middle East have brought with them their fortunes. The majority of refugees who received loans from ANCHA were able to repay their debts within a few years. Small business ownership was and continues to be the typical route to the American Dream for many Armenian immigrants.