

**DiverseCity: A Record special report on multiculturalism in
Waterloo Region
In a new land, old prejudices are left behind**

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Every year on April 24, Ara Baliozian pauses to reflect on the past with other members of his family.

For Baliozian, 68, an Armenian-Canadian living in Kitchener, the date is important. In 1915 it marked the beginning of a genocide in which 1.5 million Armenians living in Turkey were slaughtered while living under the Ottoman Empire.

Among those killed were Baliozian's grandfather and some of his uncles.

This year, Armenians commemorated the 90th anniversary of the mass killings. In Canada they took out ads in Canada's major newspapers to call attention to the massacre.

In March, the Ontario vice-president of the Armenian National Committee, Aris Babikian, spoke to local students about the genocide during an anti-racism gathering at Kitchener City Hall.

Some countries, including Canada, have formally recognized the mass deaths. The House of Commons recognized the genocide last year and denounced the Turks for committing atrocities, but the United Nations has not yet acknowledged the deaths.

Inci Kuzucuoglu, a freelance interpreter, said Canadian politicians hastily accepted the American position but she says she too, is a Canadian and feels attacked.

"The politicians should not be involved. Let the historians decide," said Kuzucuoglu, who emigrated 36 years ago.

“It’s bothersome to see politicians siding with one group of people against another,” she said.

For some local Turks, the commemorations stir up deep-rooted grievances.

You won’t see public displays such as protests in the streets or violent retaliations, but the collective hurt is felt by some local Turks.

Some immigrants carry longstanding conflicts with them when they come to Canada, says Rich Janzen, research director for the Centre for Research and Education.

The past pains sometimes simmer, flare up, but eventually peter out, says Janzen.

Similar animosities have existed for centuries between some groups such as the English and the Irish and still continue today.

Three historical conflicts are a delicate subject and some people like to avoid them altogether.

Augie Fleras, sociology professor at the University of Waterloo, said it’s idealistic to think immigrants can discard or park their hostilities and get on with being a new Canadian.

“In a democratic society, there is a continuum of opinion where you should be able to voice your concerns without violating others,” he said. We can’t be too cavalier with a history of hurt, dispossession or annihilation.

Myrta Rivera of the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre, said animosities between groups must be addressed in order to create a country of acceptance.

Many cultures come with historical baggage and as Canadians we can’t expect they can “leave the bags at the door and come here and do things differently.”

We need to acknowledge historical conflicts but then encourage the immigrants to talk about what is beautiful about their countries and cultures, Rivera said.

“How long do we carry the hurt?” she said. “What are we going to unpack, the good things or the battles?”

But in most cases, immigrants choose to come to Canada to live in peace and harmony and work hard at living side by side.

Yakup Baykan and his family came to Kitchener nearly four years ago from Turkey.

As a young boy, Baykan recalls playing with children in his neighbourhood in Turkey. Some were Armenians, some were Turkish but as a child he never knew the difference.

“We never called them Armenian. He spoke Turkish and I saw him as Turkish,” he said.

Baykan said the problem lies with the politicians because members of the general public get along. In fact, in the short time he has lived in Canada he has made friends with local Armenians, including his mechanic.

Baykan said he hopes the past hurt gets resolved.

“We feel sorry for our history, our culture. It makes me feel sad, but we can’t do anything now,” said the 43-year-old father of two children.

But these are occasions when animosities come to the surface.

About two months ago, hostilities resurfaced after two fundamentalist Sikhs were found not guilty of the 1984 Air India bombings in which 331 people died.

Some Canadian Sikhs said justice had been served after 20 years involving a lengthy criminal trial, while some members of the Canadian East Indian community felt evidence had been suppressed in investigating the terrorism.

During the trial, the prosecution argued that the two men were motivated by revenge for the Indian military’s 1984 raid on the Golden Temple in Amristar, Sikhism’s holiest temple.

In another example last month at a summit in Indonesia, Japan apologized to its Asian counterparts for its wartime behaviour.

The apologies to China have been aired in the past, but some Chinese say Japan's remorse is insincere and the bitter hurt continues.

China is opposing Japan's bid for a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council.

In China, there are public protests and earlier this week Chinese Canadians took to the streets in Vancouver.

Locally, Turks and Armenians say they live peacefully and that many are friends because they share the same culture.

Although their perspectives on history may differ, they say they remain united despite a major historical fact they can't agree on.

Some Turks deny the deaths.

Instead, they believe the Armenians were forced to leave the Ottoman Empire because of civil war and were not equipped and died of starvation and sickness, said Koray Kuzucuoglu, president of the local Turkish Cultural Association.

Deputy Chief Matt Torigian with the Waterloo regional police is of Armenian ancestry. He was born and raised in St. Catherines, far from the homeland of his grandparents, who fled the former Soviet republic in the 1920s.

But as a child, he recalls his family members talking about battles and events his family had lived through.

"On Jan 6 we acknowledge Armenian Christmas. We focus on food, family and the music," said the father of two. "Our history was important but the genocide did not play a prominent role."

"We were never raised to have animosity or hatred towards the Turkish people," he said. "The message was treat everyone else the way you want to be treated."

Inci Kuzucuoglo said she has translated for many Armenians and feels no hate towards them.

“I trust them and they trust me,” says Kuzucuoglo, the former board chair for the Kitchener-Waterloo Multicultural Centre.

“I’m a Canadian and then I’m a Turk. I choose this country and I want to live in peace and harmony,” said Kuzucuoglu, 55, who has two adult daughters.

“This has been put on our shoulders and we must defend ourselves,” she said.

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Araxi Baliozian was two years old when the deaths of the Armenians began. Her father tried to get his family, which included Araxi, two brothers, a sister and her mother, out of Turkey.

Today the 91-year-old Kitchener woman says very little about the past. Her son, Ara, says his mother’s father was killed and his widow was left with four children.

Araxi and her sister were sent to Beirut to be raised by French nuns. Araxi was there until she was 17.

She then moved to Greece, where she was reunited with her mother and later married.

The Baliozian’s came to Canada in 1957.

“All my life, I suffer so much,” said Araxi. “I have two children and they are angels.”

Ara Baliozian said he remembers his father, who died in 1962, speaking about a Turkish neighbor who had saved his life.

After living in Canada for more than 25 years, Baliozian said he doesn't carry grudges. "We need to be friendly with the Turks. Many of them have Armenian blood," he said.

Baliozian, who has written many books on the genocide, said he isn't political and hopes differences among the Armenians and Turks can be resolved.

Some conflicts may have occurred 90 years ago and others continue to this day.

Fourteen-year-old Makey Gany is used to watching his back. The Kitchener teen lived in a refugee camp with his mother and eight siblings. The thieves were his own people. But for Gany its not a grudge he holds against them.

Civil war is something he has lived with all his life. Its what he knew. Today, life is very different. But the pain of the past still comes to him daily in his thoughts.

"It's stamped in my heart," said Gany, a Grade 9 student at Eastwood Collegiate Institute in Kitchener.

"Here I can go to school and I have lovely teachers and students who help me," he said.

"I would never believe I would be happy. There I thought what was I going to eat, what was going to happen next," Gany said.

Eastwood principal Agnes Dufournaud said the high school has one of the largest English as a Second Language programs at a public secondary school in the region.

In September, there were 110 ESL students. Now there are 150 and it's projected that the number will rise to 200 by next fall.

Carolyn Vander Schaaf, a guidance counselor at Forest Heights Collegiate Institute in Kitchener, said many of the ESL students she sees speak with respect about their peers from other cultures.

“They themselves are the ‘others’ in the North American culture and they are grateful for the acceptance,” she said.

Wendy Weinburg, principal at Winston Churchill Public School in Waterloo, said there are 34 languages spoken at her school.

Weinburg said at the school level, students are more open to talk about racism and prejudice and how stereotypes can typecast some groups.

“The more we can see beyond the stereotypes, the more we can continue with people and understand people,” she said.

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Illustration(s):

Photo: PHILIP WALKER, RECORD STAFF

Araxi Baliozian, 91, shares a home in Kitchener with her son, Ara, and daughter, Dianna. Her father was among those killed in the 1915 Armenian slaughter.

Photo: PHILIP WALKER, RECORD STAFF

“I’m a Canadian and then I’m a Turk,” says Inci Kuzucuoglu. She says she objects to Canadian politicians taking a stance on Armenia’s genocide claims, but says she personally feels no hate towards individual Armenians.

Photo: Myrta Rivera, of the K-W Multicultural Centre, says it’s unreasonable to expect immigrants to leave all their historical baggage behind.