

Genocide as History, Legal Flashpoint

A lawsuit questions how Massachusetts schools portray the Armenian tragedy. But for victims on the 91st anniversary, there can be no doubt.

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By Elizabeth Mehren

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BOSTON — She was only 3 when her family fled their Turkish homeland 91 years ago. Alice Shnorhokian and her brother were too small to walk the long road to safety in the Syrian desert, so their parents strapped them in boxes on the sides of a donkey that carried the family possessions.

On the eve of what came to be called the Armenian genocide, Shnorhokian saw fellow Armenians trying to escape from every village she passed. There was no food, water or shelter, she said. Babies and old people were dying along the way. Eventually, about 1.2 million Armenians would perish.

"In Turkey, in genocide times, we Christian Armenians had three options," Shnorhokian said. "We paid a heavy tax, became Muslim or died."

The retired nurse-midwife offered her recollections as this region's large Armenian community gathered at the Massachusetts statehouse Monday on the anniversary of the 1915-1918 massacres. The observance this year took on new weight in the wake of a lawsuit pending in federal court here that addresses how the Armenian genocide should be portrayed in Massachusetts public schools.

Griswold vs. Driscoll was filed last fall by high school senior Ted Griswold, two of his teachers and a Turkish-American advocacy organization. The plaintiffs contend that Department of Education Commissioner David P. Driscoll and other state officials violated the 1st Amendment by removing material from a human rights curriculum that questioned whether the mass killings nearly a century ago constituted genocide.

"It's a case of academic freedom," said Griswold, who lent his name to the suit to show his support for freedom of speech, and who admitted he knows little about Armenia or the genocide.

"A greater perspective makes the truth easier to find," he said, adding: "This is nothing personal about the Armenians. I realize it is an emotional issue for them."

Six years ago, the Massachusetts Legislature mandated that high schools offer a curriculum on genocide and human rights. Topics included the Holocaust, the Irish potato famine, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the genocide in Armenia.

At first, the syllabus about the Armenian genocide included opposing views from several Turkish scholars and organizations — many of whom dispute whether genocide took place. As recently as this month, when a public television show on the subject was aired, Turkish Ambassador Nab Ensoy called the events of 1915 "an unresolved period of world history."

In a statement from his embassy in Washington, Ensoy said: "Armenian allegations of genocide have never been historically or legally substantiated."

Several months after the curriculum was introduced, the Turkish interpretation was removed when a state legislator said the dissent opened the door to denial of a historical tragedy.

Harvey A. Silverglate, the Boston lawyer who brought the suit, said the case is about allowing all sides to be heard, not genocide denial.

"Whether there was or was not a genocide is of no importance in this case," he said. "Each of my clients has their own personal points of view. But this is not about their viewpoint. It's about the right to have other viewpoints expressed."

He said the case has special significance in an era of culture wars, "where each side would like to shut the other side up."

But UCLA historian Richard Hovannisian said the freedom-of-speech argument permits "rationalizing or relativizing of what happened." Hovannisian, author of many volumes on modern Armenian history, said the Armenian genocide had become an embarrassment to many Turks.

"They went through a long period of amnesia," he said.

He dismissed the suggestion that opposing camps are entitled to equal time in historical analysis. "This is about politics, and the geopolitical importance of Turkey," he said. "It is revisionism, state-sponsored and state-organized."

The case has drawn attention, especially in California, with the world's largest concentration of Armenians. Massachusetts has this country's second-largest Armenian population, with at least 25,000 residents claiming Armenian descent in the most recent U.S. census.

Shnorhokian remembered that as her family set off on its involuntary exodus, her mother hid money in her children's clothing. In case they became separated from the family, they would thus have the means to pay for food or shelter. Along the route of their journey, Shnorhokian related, her father prayed and sang, asking God's help.

Ultimately, Shnorhokian landed in Beirut, where she was educated and married. With her husband and children, she immigrated to Massachusetts, where her husband was a pastor.

The Armenian experience must be remembered, she said, "so it will not be repeated. That was the call, that we should remember always, and we should teach our children. And everybody should know. The whole world should know. Well, how can you forget?"

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