

Presentation for the RETIRED PUBLIC EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION,
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I am Armenian, born in Turkey, and an American citizen. Let me remind you that the country of Armenia was in ancient times a fairly large country, occupying all the land between the Black and Caspian Seas. It was just south of the Caucasus Mountains which separate Asia from Europe. Its claim to fame is that it was the first NATION to declare itself Christian—in 301 A.D.—when the king was converted to Christianity by St. Gregory the Illuminator. Over time, Armenia was conquered by many empires, and the people scattered to all parts of the world. In a way, it is surprising that Armenians retained their identity. What has held the people together is their language, which is not closely related to any other language, their religion and their cooking. I remember my father's telling me how one early king, realizing that there was no written language, called scholars together and told them to create a written language. They invented a symbol for each of the sounds, thereby making a really phonetic alphabet. (A similar situation occurred in the United States around 1800 when a Cherokee Indian from Tennessee saw that the white man could convey ideas by writing and took on the job of creating an alphabet for his people. It took him 12 years; and he finished it in 1821) Going back to Armenian, I found out that I can recognize it when I hear it, even though I had not heard it for many, many years. After our retirement, my husband George and I were in Jerusalem on a tour; and during some free time we went to the Old City to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. At the entrance we found a guide who took us all through that huge building. As we passed through a small room where some priests were intoning liturgy, we stopped to listen. I poked George and said, "I think they are speaking Armenian." We went on and then I asked the guide what language was being spoken. He replied, "Armenian." So that you may hear some Armenian, I will tell you an incident that my parents told me: When I was about 3 years old, my father was complaining about something and I replied, "Asank aghvor achik oonis, da inch geuzes?" which means "You have such a nice little girl, what else do you want?"

Since ancient times, there had been NO country of Armenia—only Armenian people—that is, until the end of WWI when the League of Nations created a small country in 1918 in the same general area as in the past. I was born at the end of December in 1918 and my father was so happy that NOW there was a country of Armenia, that he named me INDEPENDENCE—Angagh (And both my husbands have said that I was

well-named!) But independence lasted only 3 years. The USSR walked in and took possession—and that lasted until the Soviet Union collapsed. Armenia is now independent!

But I am getting ahead of my story. About 150 years ago, the Congregational Church in the United States decided to send missionaries to Turkey to convert the Turks. The Turks did not convert, but many Armenians converted from Orthodox Christianity to Protestant Christianity, including my mother's family. They lived in the large city of Adana, a port on the Mediterranean Sea. (In fact, the mission surgeon removed my grandmother's diseased kidney—a real miracle!) My maternal grandparents were very poor (he was a farmer) and had 4 children: a boy, 3 years later, a girl, 13 years later, another girl and 3 years later, another boy. (My mother was the younger girl.) When she was quite small, her older sister and brother went to the United States, thanks to her sister's fiancé who went to America, became a pharmacist, opened a drugstore, and sent for his bride along with her older brother. (No young lady could travel alone!!) And my mother was a day-student at the American School for Girls. One day in 1915 the Turkish government declared that all Armenians must prepare to leave their homes and be resettled elsewhere. Fortunately for me, the day the soldiers came to round up the people, my mother was in school—and her parents and 10-yr. old brother were marched out of town into the desert with no food or water. My grandfather soon told his son to run away, if he could, as people were dying all around them. He did, and had some hair-raising stories to tell when after the war, the Near East Relief Society picked him up, along with thousands of other orphans, and put them in orphanages. Their names were listed in the newspaper and my father went to the proper orphanage and claimed his brother-in-law and brought him home to live with us. During this Armenian Holocaust around 2 million Armenians died, but the Turkish government has never admitted that it ever existed. And years later, this situation encouraged Hitler to perpetrate a holocaust on the Jews.

My mother graduated from high school when she was 16, and having no parents, she was kept at the school and she taught French and was given odd jobs to pay for her keep. One day she went with a girlfriend to the store to buy some ribbon—to the department store where my father was a clerk. He saw her and liked her! He was the oldest son of a wealthy family and his parents had already picked a bride for him. He told his parents that he had found his own bride! His parents accepted the idea BECAUSE SHE WAS EDUCATED! (Few girls were educated at that time.) They asked the

school's principal for the hand of this young lady. The principal asked her what she wanted to do. What choice did she have? Without a family, she was a penniless nobody! She accepted. (Much later, she told us that she barely knew him when they married. She fell in love with him AFTER they married!)

It was the custom for newlyweds to live with the groom's family; and because of the war, his sister and her husband and his parents—and two younger brothers were all living in the same house—10 people! For a whole year my mother said nothing—but after that she complained that she did not feel like a married woman, but a servant—and wanted to move out. My father agreed. They found an apartment and set up housekeeping. (Apparently, my father received his inheritance from his father when he married and by this time had his own dry-good store.) Grandparents were extremely angry!! And the next year when I was born, they would not come to see me!!

About this time a wealthy relative of my Dad's, living in England, came to Turkey to look for someone to manage a factory he was planning to build in Russia—and he chose my father who happily accepted his proposal. But, being modern, he needed my father's signature on a contract as well as that of his WIFE. The wife said NO!!! “Neither of us speaks Russian, neither knows anything about Russia, etc. etc. Let's go to the United States. I have a brother and a sister there. AND I SPEAK ENGLISH!!” GOOD IDEA!! So my mother wrote to her sister and eventually all the necessary papers were signed. It was now 1922 and the British and French mandates ceased and their troops left. Many, many Armenians left, fearing persecution. But there was a problem: Mother was 9 months pregnant! So—we took a ship to Istanbul, which was a large, cosmopolitan city and things would be safer there. We landed on a Thursday and my sister Peggy was born on Sunday!! Fortunately, relatives there helped us to find a place to live and a place to work. My father learned how to buy and sell oriental rugs and my uncle learned how to repair them. One year later we boarded a ship for New York; but half way there, the ship sprang a leak! By the time the leak was corrected and the ship reached Ellis Island, it was the end of the month—and the quota for citizens of Turkey was full. The ship now turned east and landed in Greece and had to refund the fares paid by the passengers because it had not fulfilled its obligation. Two weeks later all the passengers boarded another ship. The captain, taking no chances, headed for Providence, Rhode Island. There, we took a train to New York and another

train to California. (By the way, 2 months ago when Dee and I were in New York, we visited Ellis Island which is now a museum and we found my name on the Wall of Immigrants {to which I had contributed} on Panel 266.)

We lived in Venice, California, and it was there that I entered kindergarten, knowing only 2 words of English: Yes and No. Naturally, I flunked kindergarten and had to take it over again. But by the time I reached the 5th grade, I was skipped so that I was in my proper class.

I forgot to tell you that we arrived in October of 1923 and in January of 1924 my sister Betty was born—Mother was seasick throughout the whole ordeal! And 13 years later another daughter was born: Harriett, named after my father Harry as he had given up hope of ever having a son!

As we children learned English, we forgot Armenian. The grownups all spoke Turkish to each other. And after we moved from Venice to Los Angeles, my parents still spoke Turkish to each other—and I listened, and listened, and listened. By the time I grew up, I could understand Turkish very well—but could not speak a word! Around 1960 I told my children that I could understand Turkish—but they didn't believe me. "Wait until Grandma comes over and she can test me." When she came, I asked her to say something in Turkish. She did—for 2 or 3 minutes. Then I translated everything. My children were impressed!

After 43 years of marriage, I was widowed in 1990 and began to travel with girlfriends—and I wore out 4 of them. I kept looking in the travel brochures for tours of Turkey to see if any of them stopped in the city of my birth: Adana. None did; and I found out that there was nothing of interest for a tourist in that city. Finally, in 1995, I found a tour called "In the Steps of St. Paul" which invited the traveler to cities where St. Paul founded churches—and his home base was the ancient city of Antioch. In order to reach Antioch (a Turkish city only since 1934, before belonging to Syria) the tourist had to stay in hotels in ADANA! That was for me! And by this time I had met Dee Elwood and he, too, wanted to visit Turkey! So—I would not have to travel alone, after all!

I'll let Dee tell you all about our trip to Turkey.