

Remarks at Armenian Awards Banquet

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The commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Armenian genocide is a historic event with deep meaning for every person of Armenian origin.

We all have our personal narratives that together make the mosaic of the suffering and redemption of the Armenian people.

As a first generation Armenian born in the United States from parents who escaped the horrors of the events in 1915-1918 and who succeeded in coming to America to seek political refugee and to remake their lives, I was deeply influenced by their experience—the loss of parents and family members; the tribulations of the death march in the Syrian Desert and the struggle to survive untold hardships.

My father lost both his parents in the town of Hadjin and somehow got to Aleppo where a Syrian Arab family gave him refuge in their home and had him tend to the horses in their stable. They were “saviors” and, in turn, my father became a “savior” by freeing two Armenian girls who were in a Turkish officers’ harem and taking them on horseback to one of the Armenian churches in Aleppo.

These girls had an elder brother in Worcester, Massachusetts who brought his sisters to the United States. When the girls relayed the story of what my father did, he was intent on finding where my father was and sponsored him to immigrate to the United States.

My mother lost her father in Harpout and her mother succeeded in getting her and her sisters to Jbeil in Lebanon where they were given safety in a Danish orphanage for Armenian girls. She, eventually, was able to travel to Cuba where my father went to bring her to the United States to marry her.

Whenever I faced hardships in my own life, I would remind myself that whatever problems I had paled in comparison to what my parents had to endure, and this gave me courage to persevere.

But most importantly, their experience inculcated in me a sense that because they had survived, we, the children of the survivors, had a great obligation to excel in whatever pursuit we followed in life and to give back to the communities and countries in which we reside. For me, this was by becoming an American diplomat and representing this great country that gave my parents refuge and a new life.

In fact, when I presented my credentials as the United States Ambassador to Syria to the then President Hafez al Asad in 1988, he noted my Armenian name and asked me about my family origins. I related my story of my parents’ ordeal and how they found refuge in Syria and Lebanon and eventually made their way to America. “So you see,” I told Asad, “It is because of my father’s deeds in Aleppo that my brother and I were born in America.”

“If someone had told that young Armenian boy in Aleppo during those tragic and desperate times, that one day he would have a son who would become the American Ambassador to Syria, my father would have considered that person to be out of his mind.”

“This is the greatness of the United States of America,” I continued. “I am the son of refugees. We are a country of immigrants and a land of great opportunity.”

The autocratic strongman of Syria was actually moved by my remarks, and this first official meeting helped me establish a working relationship with him that facilitated the conduct of our successful diplomacy with Syria during the Administration of President George Herbert Walker Bush. Asad, subsequently, joked with a delegation of Armenian clergy that visited him that he understood that the United States government was taking Syria seriously when it sent an Armenian-American to Damascus.

Now, as we commemorate the 100th anniversary of the genocide and look ahead, it is equally important that we do whatever we can to assure the peace, security and prosperity of the Armenian people in the republic of Armenia and in Nagorno-Karabakh. This means working toward normalizing diplomatic relations between Armenia and Turkey on the basis of justice, opening border and resolving the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict through negotiations.

This could be the most meaningful legacy to honor of all those lives that were sacrificed during the genocide. This is the compelling task ahead and it will take strong political will and courage on the part of all the leaders and people in the region and in the diaspora.