

THE HEROIC ARMENIAN LEGION

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Press Release, Armenian Rights Council of America, Altadena, 13 January 2010

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On Sunday, Jan. 3, a large audience gathered at the Pasadena Central Library, to attend a program dedicated to the 4,000-member Armenian Legion of World War I, of which 1,200 volunteers were from the United States. The Armenian Legion is often remembered for having successfully defeated the Turkish and German forces at the Battle of Arara, north of Jerusalem, in Palestine in September 1918.

The exhibit's appearance at the Pasadena Central Library was generously sponsored by Bill Paparian, the former Mayor of Pasadena, and Ed Aghjayan, the former Deputy City Manager of Pasadena. Paparian, serving as master of ceremonies, introduced Aghjayan, the son of Armenian Legionnaire Kegham Aghjayan. Aghjayan's father, who was born in the Yozgat region and immigrated to Boston, participated in the historic Battle of Arara. In particular, he recounted a story in which the Armenian Legion treated the 300 captured Turkish soldiers with civility, after the Battle of Arara. Aghjayan spoke with great appreciation for the recognition now bestowed upon the Armenian Legion, whose members have been unsung heroes for far too long.

The Armenian Legion lost 23 volunteers at the Battle of Arara. Pasadena Police Officer Vasken Gourdikian read the names of the seven martyrs from the Battle of Arara who were from the United States. A moment of silence in their memory then followed.



L to R: Mr. Carl Bardakian, Dr. Zaven Arslanian, Dr. Raffi Balian & Mr. Bill Papanian - Former Mayor of Pasadena

The Hon. Grigor Hovhanisyan, Consul General to the Republic of Armenia, addressed the audience. He congratulated ALMA and the organizing committee. In particular, he indicated the value in the exhibit reaching Armenia one day.

Dr. Zaven Arslanian, corresponding secretary of ARCA and a member of the western district of the Armenian Democratic Liberal party (A.D.L. / Ramgavar) and the grandson of Armenian Legionnaire Caspar Menag, spoke eloquently of the leaders of the Armenian Legion. Caspar Menag was a native of Chunkoush, who immigrated to Lawrence, Massachusetts. Dr. Arslanian noted that Captain Jim Chankalian and Mihran Damadian were great influences on his grandfather. The renowned A.D.L. leaders Chankalian, Damadian and Caspar Menag valiantly strived to establish an autonomous or independent Cilicia with the help of the French, but their dreams were thwarted. Dr. Arslanian read a famous quote by Caspar Menag, which was also featured in the exhibit. It stated: "We are asked: Why when life in the United States was so comfortable, did we leave and come to Cilicia where we knew we were going into the jaws of death? Our response remains the same: What true Armenian would prefer a comfortable life when his family was under the yoke and being massacred by the Turks; when our entire nation was humiliated by the Turks and into the throes of the last moments of life? Of what use is the life of an individual when his entire nation is being murdered?"

Papanian introduced the next speaker, Carl Bardakian, as the grandson of the late Ann Nahigian, one of the original benefactors and a former member of the Board of Trustees of ALMA. Both are relatives of the A.D.L. leader Hratch Yervant. In 1917, Hratch Yervant traveled from Boston to Paris to do organization work, public speaking and fund raising for the Armenian Legion. Bardakian emphasized the importance of Captain Jim Chankalian of New Jersey and Roupen Herrian of New York in the history of the Armenian Legion, as well as the A.D.L. Bardakian noted that Chankalian, along with three other Armenians from Paterson, New Jersey, served in the Spanish-American War. Almost twenty years later, under Chankalian's leadership, Paterson, New Jersey became the initial training ground for the Armenian Legion in the United States, before they departed for France. Chankalian and Herrian both participated in the historic victory of the Battle of Arara. Chankalian, often referred to as the "Leader of the American-Armenian Volunteers," served the A.D.L., Armenian Legion, Armenian Church, A.G.B.U., as well as the United States, with great distinction and honor. Herrian, known as the "Father of the Orphans," was instrumental in freeing Armenian boys, girls and women who had been kidnapped and abducted during the genocide. Through the financial support of the A.D.L. and A.G.B.U., Herrian successfully travelled into the Syrian desert and elsewhere, often in disguise, in order to gather Armenian orphans and place them in orphanages.

Dr. Raffi Balian, as chairman of the Armenian Rights Council of America and a member of the A.D.L.

Central Committee, highlighted the pivotal role of the heroic Armenian Legion. He also recognized the contributions of three members of the ALMA Board of Trustees in attendance: Joan Agajanian Quinn, Laurel Karabian and Caroline Tufenkian, as well as the Pasadena Central Library commissioners, all of whom made this exhibit a tremendous success. He also indicated that earlier in the day, at St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Church of Pasadena, a solemn requiem service was held for the souls of the 4,000 member Armenian Legion.

On behalf of the Armenian National Committee, Pasadena Chapter, Chairman Raffi Hamparian delivered his remarks. He stressed the importance of the Armenian Legion to the youth in the audience.

Former Mayor Bill Paparian concluded the program with words of appreciation to those in attendance who had come to recognize the heroic Armenian Legion.

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