

Calendar

Great Escape

Armenian Cultural Festival

The writing on the wall? It's a phrase you often hear when speaking to immigrants.

Somebody got the message: the situation looked bad. Things would go from miserable to lethal. That's why they left.

Nabour Markarian's prescient family left its ancestral homeland before the Armenian genocide of 1915-1923 at the hands of the Ottoman Turks. That's why the Markarians missed it and survived in various parts of the Middle East.

But they knew they couldn't stay there long, Markarian said one evening in La Jolla while his wife, Maida, was busy ordering the tables for the upcoming

festival. (She is co-organizer.) "A lot of people made up their minds that there was no future for them in that part of the world, either." They looked toward the West. "Whether it be South America, North America... I had some family here, and through those connections, we were able to come. I entered through Canada. We thought we could find nothing as hospitable as the United States and arrived in a country that was started by other immigrants like us, isn't it true?"

That was in 1970, when he was 23. Los Angeles was his first stop, where he met Maida, an Armenian who was born in Egypt.

After their marriage, the Markarians settled in La Jolla, and Nabour became an entrepreneur. (He is today part owner of Carpeteria San Diego.) The couple raised three children, now in their 20s. ("They know how to value what they have," said their father.) And the family helped get the Armenian



Dancing at last year's festival

church established in North Park.

The property on 30th Street was acquired when Markarian and another parishioner guaranteed the loan, says the church history. "I have been involved with the church since 1977," Markarian said more generally. "It used to be a Jewish temple, when there was a large Jewish community in the area. But as their population thinned out, moving elsewhere, they had no need for the temple. So they put it up for sale, and we bought it."

A church gets established where its church members live. Do many Armenians still live in North Park? "Not that many. In 1990, there was an influx of new immigrants from the Soviet Union. They were of Armenian ancestry, but they had been living in Azerbaijan, where they were attacked. There was a pogrom. They were considered foreigners among the majority of non-Christian Muslims."

This occurred as the Soviet Union was collapsing. Although the end wouldn't come until 1991, the ethnic fighting had already begun. "Somehow the United States sponsored the refugees' departure and brought

approximately 150 families here to San Diego," said Markarian, "where they were led to our church."

Like every immigrant, they experienced culture shock. But it was compounded for them because they didn't speak the language even of their own, welcoming, fellow ethnics.

"They spoke Russian or they spoke Azeri. Except for the fact that their heritage was Armenian and they spoke maybe a little Armenian, they just were really... How shall I say it? They were foreigners!" He paused to reflect on the irony. "Yes, despite their being Armenian! But we have a fine parish priest [Father Datev Tatouljan], who took it upon himself to make them feel at home while they became familiar with our culture."

Most of those Baku Armenians, as they are called, no longer live in North Park. "Initially, they did, because that's where they found affordable housing. Now they have moved away, to other sections of San Diego. It's not like the old days of ghettos and quarters. You're free to live where you want."

And so they, too, will return to the old neighborhood this weekend for the music and dancing and the homemade food. The Markarians, for their part, are making *mamoul*, a decorated pastry of crushed dates and semolina flour. It's a specialty of Maida and her mother-in-

law, said Markarian.

So Markarian's mother is here, too? "Oh, yes. Actually, my mom and dad arrived before me. It was just a flow of people coming on a continuous basis. The whole clan. I was born in a horrible, horrible part of the world, and we've always known that we would have to move on."

Does he have any feelings about the people who remained in the "horrible, horrible" place?

"You know what it is? We feel close to a lot of different people we left behind," he said. "And many of them were not even of our own ethnic origins. Actually, you see, I was born in Palestine." Another thoughtful pause. "And I feel badly for them. I feel badly for everybody... Except that, you know, you do the best you can."

— Jeanne Schinto

22nd Annual Armenian Cultural Festival
Saturday, November 2,
Noon-10:00 p.m.
Sunday, November 3,
Noon-6:00 p.m.
St. John Garabed Armenian Church
4473 30th Street, North Park
Cost: Entrance donation, \$2
Info: 619-284-7179 or
www.geocities.com/stjohngarabed



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