



Fleeing World War II, Armenian massacre survivor built new life in U.S.

Raley the daughter of Armenian, Italian immigrants

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IMMIGRANT STORIES

GLENWOOD SPRINGS, COLORADO CO

Annig Agemian Raley has lived in Glenwood Springs with her husband, Howard, since 1981. They have been married for 46 years and have two daughters, one son and three grandsons. Raley teaches piano and yoga.

Annig Agemian Raley: My dad was an Armenian born and raised in Bursa, Turkey. When he was about 11, he witnessed the massacre of his father and other Armenian men by the Turks. He was rescued by the Mekhitarist monks (see notes below) and taken to Italy to study medicine, but the monks soon learned that my father fainted at the sight of blood.

He was transferred to Venice to begin studying for the priesthood. During the seven years that he was there, my father developed a fascination for art and began spending more time painting and drawing.

The monks finally told him that he was going to have to choose between God and his art, and after some thought my father decided that he could study God through his art. Eventually the monks were so impressed with his religious paintings that they agreed to continue to fund his education if he agreed to paint religious murals for the school. So that is what he did.

Immigrant Stories

Immigrant Stories appears two Tuesdays per month. Walter Gallacher is a Glenwood Springs native and a retired marketing director with Colorado Mountain College. His father was a Scottish immigrant and his mother descended from Irish immigrants. Anyone in the community with an immigrant story to tell about themselves or relatives is invited to contact Gallacher: wjgallacher@gmail.com. To read past Immigrant Stories go to www.immigrantcolorado.blogspot.com.

Gallacher: Your father was caught up in the Armenian massacre by the Turks?

Raley: Yes, it is still not acknowledged by the Turks, but my father had very vivid memories of the atrocities, and the Armenians that I have met will not soon forget the genocide that devastated their families and their culture.

The Armenians were a very cultured and successful people in Turkey, and their religion and their presence posed a threat to the Turks. So the Turks began to systematically rid their country of all Armenians.

Gallacher: How many people were killed?

Raley: Somewhere between 1 million and 1.5 million people were murdered.

Gallacher: Did your father talk about that time?

Raley: He did, and it came out in his paintings. He painted a very vivid depiction of the massacre. I think that experience colored his life. It is still on the minds of most Armenians and is one of the first things to come up in conversation whenever Armenians get together. There are still very vivid memories and they are not forgetting or forgiving the harm that was done to them.

Gallacher: How do you think that experience influenced your father's life?

Raley: I think he became more religious and looked for hope through his faith. He tried to trust in God that there was a reason why wars happen.

Armenians are a resilient people, and I think my father's childhood experience made him more resilient. He was

very social and loved being with people, but he also loved being alone with his art and creating. He had his scars from the genocide, but he never let it affect him to where he was deeply depressed.

Gallacher: Why did the monks take your father?

Raley: The Mekhitarists rounded up the Armenian boys because the men were being killed. They tried to save as many boys as they could and took them for an education because they felt that was the only way to save the Armenian culture. My father and his brother were both taken to Italy to be educated.

By the time my father was 21, he had earned a doctorate in philosophy and a reputation as an accomplished artist. He left Venice for Paris because he was commissioned to paint a mural on a cathedral dome 50 miles outside of Paris.

A few years ago, I visited that church. I knew my father had paintings there but I had no idea it was the entire dome. When I walked in and looked up, I was overwhelmed by this sacred work my father had done as a young man.

During my visit, I met the priest who was my father's friend, and he walked me through the church and the gardens and told me stories of my father. Apparently my father took time out from painting to come help him pull weeds in the garden.

My father eventually set up a studio and took a job as a professor at the Mekhitarist monastery near Paris. He painted every day and had a collection of 150 paintings. That's when he received an invitation from the Armenian community in New York City to come to America and exhibit his work. He accepted and chose 25 of his favorites for the exhibition. He would never again see the paintings he left behind.

It was 1937 and the war had begun in Europe, and then his uncle who was an archbishop in the Armenian church committed suicide. These two events brought the memories of his childhood up and nearly put my father over the top. But I think he reassured himself that because there was no war in America he would be safe.

He came to New York City to show his work, but he also wanted to study the American people through his art. He wasn't as much interested in selling his work as he was just showing it and returning home to Europe.

But then he met my mom. They were married in 1939 and my brother was born in 1941. In December of that same year the U.S. declared war on Japan and Germany, and I think that's when my father decided to make New York City his home.

Gallacher: How did your parents meet?

Raley: My father was teaching art classes, and my mother was his student. My mother came to America from Milan, Italy, with her parents when she was 2. She was an accomplished artist in her own right. Her father was the opera coach for the Metropolitan Opera Company and her mother was an opera singer from the Neapolitan Conservatory in Italy.

I can remember as a kid being surrounded by art and music. We had opera singers dropping by. Our living room was my parents' studio. My dad was always painting, and my mother was sketching. There was music playing and books and papers stacked everywhere. It was an amazing environment to grow up in.

Gallacher: Was it just you and your brother?

Raley: Yes, but my brother was born with cerebral palsy, which left him severely delayed. Watching my brother struggle to speak and walk made me so thankful for my health. But there were times as a child when I was jealous of the constant attention that he needed just to function. I craved attention growing up, and as a result I was the class clown who got attention, negative and positive.

We lived in a very close-knit Italian-Catholic neighborhood, so every Sunday we were Italian. My mom's parents came to the house for an Italian feast of pasta and meatballs. But when it came time to celebrate the holidays, my father packed us up and took us to Boston, Philadelphia or Watertown to visit all of the Armenian communities and celebrate with them.

Gallacher: What was that celebration like?

Raley: Oh, it was wonderful. Celebration was in order every time we went. First of all it was a reunion and second it was a holiday. There was endless food and dance. Those visits were also part of an effort to keep the Armenian culture thriving. I was encouraged to marry within the Armenian community.

Gallacher: So what is the difference emotionally between Armenian and Italian culture?

Raley: They blend pretty well, but I must say, whatever the idea is, Armenians feel like they thought of it first. My father tried to convince me that Saint Patrick was Armenian, and I know better. He tried to teach his in-laws about opera. But all in all, the Italian and Armenian cultures were well represented in my house. My parents loved each other very much.

We celebrated life in our home, but I'm sure some people looked at our family and wondered, "What's to celebrate?" We were poor, we couldn't go anywhere, my brother couldn't talk, my father was frustrated, my mother was constantly busy taking care of my brother. But there were so many wonderful times that outweighed the difficult ones. We had the best of all worlds.

Notes: Mekhitarist monks are a congregation of Benedictine monks of the Armenian Catholic Church founded in 1717 by Abbot Mekhitar. They are best known for their series of scholarly publications of ancient Armenian versions of otherwise lost ancient Greek texts and their research on classical and modern Armenian language.

The Armenian Massacre was the systematic extermination of Armenian people from their historic homeland by the Turkish government. It took place during and after World War I and was implemented in two phases: the wholesale killing of the able-bodied male population through massacre and forced labor, and deportation of women, children and the elderly in death marches to the Syrian desert.

Raley's father, Ariel Agemian, was a well-known artist in his time. Learn more about him at wikipedia.org/wiki/Ariel_Agemian.

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