ONTARIO HERITAGE TRUST
BRINGING OUR STORY TO LIFE

The Armenian Boys' Farm Home, Georgetown

On June 23, 2011, the Ontario Heritage Trust and the Armenian Community Centre of Toronto unveiled a provincial plaque at the Armenian Youth Centre – Hamazkayin Theatre in Toronto, Ontario, to commemorate The Armenian Boys' Farm Home, Georgetown.

The bilingual plaque reads as follows:

THE ARMENIAN BOYS' FARM HOME, GEORGETOWN

On July 1, 1923, a group of 50 Armenian boys arrived at this farm site from an orphanage in Corfu, Greece. The 'Georgetown Boys,' as they came to be known, arrived in Canada between 1923 and 1927 – 109 boys in all. The orphans were survivors of the Armenian Genocide (1915-1923). Their plight touched the hearts of thousands of Canadians, who raised significant funds and lobbied the Canadian government to bring them here. Under the care and supervision of the Armenian Canadian Relief Fund's Farm and Home Committee, the children lived at Cedarvale Farm located on this property and were taught English and farming skills. By 1928, the orphans were placed with farm families in Southwestern Ontario. As adults, most of the Armenians became Canadian citizens and chose to remain in this country. By providing assistance to non-British Commonwealth refugees, the Armenian Boys' Farm Home was the first humanitarian effort of its kind in Canada.

REFUGE AGRICOLE DES GARÇONS ARMÉNIENS, GEORGETOWN

Le 1er juillet 1923, 50 garçons arméniens arrivent dans cette ferme en provenance de Corfou, en Grèce. Les « garçons de Georgetown », comme on les appelle alors, arrivent au Canada entre 1923 et 1927. Ils sont 109 au total. Ces orphelins sont des survivants du génocide arménien (1915-1923). Leur sort émeut des milliers de Canadiens qui lèvent d'importantes sommes pour les aider et exercent des pressions sur le gouvernement canadien pour qu'il les accueille au pays. L'Armenian Canadian Relief Fund's Farm and Home Committee veille au bien-être et à la surveillance de ces enfants qui vivent à la ferme Cedarvale, située sur cette propriété, où ils apprennent l'anglais et les rudiments de l'agriculture. Peu à peu jusqu'en 1928, les orphelins sont placés au sein de familles dans le sud-ouest de l'Ontario. Une fois adultes, la plupart d'entre eux deviennent citoyens canadiens et décident de demeurer au Canada. L'accueil de réfugiés ne faisant pas partie du Commonwealth britannique au refuge agricole des garçons arméniens représente la première initiative humanitaire de ce genre au Canada.

Historical background

Introduction

On Dominion Day, 1923, a group of 50 Armenian boys arrived at a farm in Georgetown, Ontario. They had just endured a three-week-long journey by foot, road, sea and train. Their life experience to this point had been marked by unimaginable trauma, sorrow and dislocation. Unaware of their significance as the first wave of non-British, non-Empire child refugees to enter Canada, they began a new chapter in their young lives.

The Georgetown Boys, as they eventually became known, arrived in Canada between 1923 and 1927 – 109 boys in all. Twenty-nine Armenian girls also arrived in Ontario during this period. They did not remain with the boys, however, but worked as domestic staff in private homes. As refugees from the first large-scale genocide of the 20th century, these children (and their experience of hardship and war) captured the Canadian public's attention. Their plight "generated the beginnings of a new way of thinking among Canadians about our responsibility in international humanitarian [efforts] and international peace, and international intervention."[1] Today, however, we know little about this event; it has "not penetrated the consciousness of Canada's historians."[2]

Restrictive immigration rules in Canada during the 1920s kept many refugees out of the country. Thus, when Orders-in-Council gave permission for the entry of 100 orphaned Armenian boys "on an experimental basis" in 1923, it was an immigration first, and soon became known as "Canada's noble experiment."[3]

Background: the genocide and exodus

Armenia has, throughout its tumultuous history, "been the battleground of warring peoples."[4] As Christians within the Ottoman Empire, and under the pan-Turkish, pro-Islamist leadership of the Young Turks,[5] the Armenian people suffered waves of persecution. In the 20th century, this conflict culminated in the genocide of 1915-1923, during which approximately 1.5 million Armenians – roughly half of the Armenian nation – were either executed, died of disease or starvation, or were forced into exodus. Tens of thousands of children were scattered throughout institutions in Turkey, Greece, Lebanon and Syria.

Since the early 19th century, Protestant Christian missionaries from many Western countries had worked among the Armenians. They set up schools, churches and other institutions, and also witnessed repression and massacres. Touched by the missionaries' reports, Canadians raised money to help the "starving Armenians." Relief organizations, primarily the British Lord Mayor's Fund and the American Near East Relief (NER) Committee, set up orphanages in Europe. Other philanthropic organizations formed throughout North America.

"The plight of hundreds of thousands of widows and children captured the attention of Canadians and touched their sympathy. They held relief drives and Armenian tag days to help their Christian brothers and sisters in the east."[6] Schools and churches took up special collections, strengthening the "bonds of Christian brotherhood."[7]

The most significant public awareness campaign, however, was through the *Toronto*

Globe. The paper "supported the campaign of the Canadian National Association for Armenian Relief in January 1920 to raise money for Armenian refugees."[8] The campaign eventually raised over $300,000, which was sent overseas to assist with the feeding, housing and clothing of the refugees.

Coming to Canada

By the early 1920s, tens of thousands of Armenian orphans lived in institutions across the Near East. In response to this crisis, the Armenian Relief Association of Canada (ARAC), which was "created under the patronage of the then Governor General, Lord Byng (1921-1926), and other prominent Canadians, including Colonel Sir Henry Pellatt and church leaders,"[9] lobbied the Immigration Department of Canada to admit 2,000 children to the country.

During the 1920s, however, "no specific policies or regulations governed the entry of refugees and no concept of a shared responsibility to help the downtrodden overrode exclusionist immigration practice."[10] Under the 1923 Privy Council Order 182, Armenians were classified as Asiatics (Armenia was in Asia Minor), and therefore restricted from entry. As well, "the authorities insisted that Armenians come to Canada directly from their land of citizenship and that they carry a bona fide passport – terms which the refugees found difficult to meet."[11]

ARAC and the small Armenian-Canadian community lobbied relentlessly. Finally, on December 12, 1922, the Immigration Department relented. One hundred orphans were allowed into the country, provided ARAC assumed responsibility for them until they turned 18 years of age. The first 50 boys came from an orphanage in Corfu, Greece, in the summer of 1923. In October 1924, 40 more boys came, and during 1926 and 1927, 19 more boys made their home at what came to be known as the Armenian Boys' Farm Home. Twenty-nine Armenian girls were also brought to Canada during this time.

Life on the farm

Cedarvale Farm, in Georgetown, had been occupied for nearly 100 years when ARAC bought the property. John Freeman, a prosperous farmer, bought the 200-acre parcel in 1828. He sold the property to James Bradley, a millwright, in 1869. Bradley named his farm Cedar Vale. ARAC purchased 135 acres of the property in 1923.[12]

"In 1923, over $50,000, and in 1924, over $52,000, were raised to transport the children to Canada, to purchase a farmhouse for them near Georgetown, and to pay for their initial care."[13] The property comprised two buildings: two farm houses joined together by a summer kitchen, and a three-storey building, which was used as the school and dormitory. The United Church built a third building in 1928, once it took over the farm.

Dr. A.J. Vining, Secretary of ARAC, ran the Farm and Home Committee, which oversaw operations. Initially, none of the staff spoke Armenian. This changed in 1924 with the addition of A.L. Alexanian, who became a significant presence in the boys' lives. He was their translator, Armenian language teacher, and benefactor and champion after they moved off the farm.

The children were taught the English language and farming skills while at the farm.

"They were divided into task groups with assigned duties, rotating every week so that each boy gained experience in the many chores around the farm."[14] Besides planting and harvesting an array of produce, which was sold to the surrounding community or in Toronto, the boys also looked after animals. By 1925, the farm had 22 cows, six horses, 21 pigs and some poultry.[15]

The Committee also ensured that the boys became integrated into the community. "The boys were taught religion on an interdenominational Protestant basis, visiting a different church every week. Georgetown itself had four churches – Anglican, Baptist, Presbyterian and United – and each church specifically saved the front three pews of their [sic] sanctuary for their foreign orphan neighbours."[16] Local doctors and dentists attended to the children free of charge, and "well-wishing visitors from far and wide came to visit the boys and see the 'noble experiment.'"[17]

The boys set up their own elected mayor and committee at the farm, and a Junior Red Cross, which raised $50 for the Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU). In addition, one of the students' most significant achievements was the publication of a bilingual magazine, *Ararat*.[18]

Occasionally, integration efforts went too far. A proposal put forth by Vining to "anglicize" the boys' names was greeted with opposition by the boys and outrage by their Armenian benefactors. Their names, after all, were all they had left – and they remained unchanged.

After the farm

By 1925, the next phase of the boys' integration into Canadian society began: the placement of each boy into a farm home, where he would live, work and attend school. Between 1925 and 1928, all the boys were sent out to live on other farms.

With wages of between $160 and $240 a year (plus room and board), the boys provided an inexpensive, reliable source of labour for farmers. Yet, while the farmers' contracts stipulated that the boys were required to continue attending school until they were 16 years old, some farmers kept them out of school to work. The farm placement program continued until the winter of 1927. "By this time there were only a dozen or so boys left at Georgetown, and the program appeared to be a huge success."[19]

On January 1, 1928, the Armenian Boys' Farm Home was sold to the United Church of Canada, and became the Cedarvale Home for Girls.

By the 1930s, many of the boys had moved from the farms and into southern Ontario towns and cities. The onset of the Great Depression, however, made the transition to city life challenging. Language barriers, bigotry and a lack of work skills made life hard. Many experienced hunger for the first time since their arrival in Canada. Eventually, however, all of the boys survived the Depression; many served in the Second World War.

Conclusion

In 1966, the United Church of Canada sold the property to the Town of Georgetown. The community turned the space, Cedarvale Park, into a public recreation area as a Canadian centennial project. In 1967, the YMCA opened the Maple Nursery School in the former dormitory; the daycare still operates as a non-profit venture. Halton Hills Recreation and Parks also runs a variety of programs out of the building.

Cedarvale Park was designated an Associative Cultural Landscape under Part IV of the Ontario Heritage Act in May 2010. It was granted this designation due to its multi-layered history, and specifically for providing refuge first to the Georgetown Boys and then to girls at the Cedarvale Home for Girls, and because of its use, since 1966, as a community recreation and learning centre.

The Armenian Boys' Farm School in Georgetown marks Canada's first involvement in international humanitarian aid by providing assistance to non-British or non-Commonwealth refugees.

The Ontario Heritage Trust gratefully acknowledges the research of Carol J. Anderson, MA, in preparing this paper.

[1] Isabel Kaprielian, "The Georgetown Boys: Canada's Noble Experiment," *The TorontoHye* 5, no.9 (56), 18.
[2] Robert F. Harney, "Preface." *Polyphony* 4, no. 2 (1982): 1.
[3] Kaprielian-Churchill, Isabel. *Like Our Mountains: A History of Armenians in Canada*. Montreal & Kingston, London, Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.
[4] Isabel Kaprielian, "Armenians in Ontario." *Polyphony* 4, no. 2 (1982): 5.
[5] Isabel Kaprielian, "Armenian Refugees and Their Entry into Canada, 1919-1930," *Canadian Historical Review* 71, no. 1 (1990): 80-108; Peter Adourian, *The Armenian Genocide and the Canadian-Armenian Identity: A Case Study of Mampre and Mary Shirinian*, BA (Hons) thesis, Tyndale University College, Toronto, Ontario, 2010.
[6] Kaprielian, "The Georgetown Boys."
[7] Kaprielian, "Armenian Refugees," 81.
[8] Rev. Harold J. Nahabedian, "A Brief Look at Relations between Canadians and Armenians: 1896-1920." *Polyphony* 4, no. 2 (1982): 33.
[9] Kaprielian, "The Georgetown Boys."
[10] Kaprielian, "Armenian Refugees," 88.
[11] Nahabedian, 34.
[12] John Mark Rowe, *Heritage Halton Hills, Cedarvale Heritage Designation Report*, January 20, 2010, 3.
[13] Kaprielian, "The Georgetown Boys."
[14] Jack Apramian, "The Georgetown Boys." *Polyphony* 4, no. 2 (1982): 44.
[15] Adourian, 65.
[16] Ibid., 61.
[17] Apramian, "The Georgetown Boys," 45.
[18] At its peak, *Ararat* had 2,000 subscribers in 34 countries. Mount Ararat, in eastern Turkey, is said to be where Noah landed his ark, in the Old Testament.
[19] Jack Apramian, *The Georgetown Boys*, second edition (Hamilton, ON: J. Apramian, 1983), 115.