

Author Spreads Awareness, Shares Story of Armenian Genocide

By **KERI ANN FLACCOMIO**
Staff Writer

Author Peter Balakian presented a riveting lecture on "Armenian Golgotha," his great-uncle Rev. Grigoris Balakian's account of the Armenian genocide, to students and fellow Armenians, in Friends Hall on Nov. 12.

Peter Balakian, with the help of his colleague Aris Sevag, has worked diligently to bring the two volumes of "Armenian Golgotha" together in an English translation of the memoir.

"So often," Balakian said, "we have come to define modernity as something exciting."

He then went on to describe how the mass murder of Armenians was the first genocide to occur in a modern era. It became the "greatest dimension of technological killing in history," with airplanes, tanks, machine guns and biological weapons providing "new ways of disfiguring and destroying the human body."

Karine Shnorhokian, Genocide Intervention Network 2009 Carl Wilkens Fellow, attended the lecture because she believes education is an important step in giving people a sense of what happens when denial exists, and in preventing anti-Semitism, bigotry and hate.

"I'm Armenian," she said, "and Peter's book, 'Black Dog of Fate,' was one of the first books I read on the Armenian genocide in high school. It's what inspired me to get involved with spreading awareness about the issue."

Balakian likened the significance of the Holocaust to World War II to that of the Armenian genocide to World War I. He described how Adolf Hitler was inspired by the Turkish government's success in

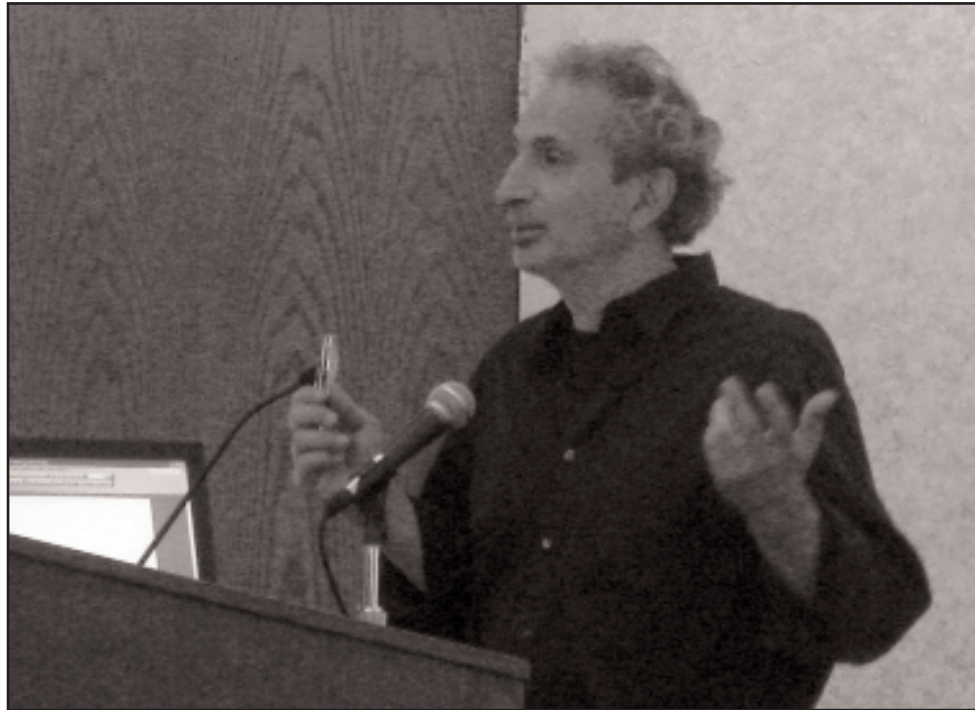


photo by Keri Ann Flaccomio

Author Peter Balakian lectures a Friends Hall crowd on the Armenian Genocide of World War I. His great-uncle witnessed the atrocities first-hand.

wiping out 1.5 million Armenians between 1915 and 1917, and the disappearance of the memory only two decades later.

Eight days before invading Poland in 1939 Hitler said, "Who today, after all, speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

The term genocide was coined in the 1940s by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew and a survivor of the Holocaust who lost 49 family members. Lemkin was angered upon learning that the perpetrators of the Armenian mass murder had been set free, and felt that states needed to be held accountable for mass killing.

Shnorhokian explained that genocide in Darfur and other areas continues today due

to a lack of severe consequences for perpetrators in the past, making corrupt leaders think they can get away with whatever they want.

"You have to assume," she said, "that when two genocide perpetrators get together in a room, they're not talking about planting flowers."

"Armenian Golgotha" follows the journey of Grigoris Balakian (1876-1934), a priest arrested along with 250 other Armenian intellectuals and prominent figures on the night of April 24, 1915. He adopts various disguises, including those of a railway worker and a German soldier, in order to acquire necessary information and survive.

One audience member was emotional in

expressing his surprise to see that the route followed by Balakian—shown in a slideshow—was almost identical to the route traveled by one of his ancestors.

Kevin Mathew, a student in a class of eleventh and twelfth graders from New Milford High School, made a personal connection to the lecture.

"My dad is a priest so it was cool to see that Balakian was able to survive and help people while the Turkish government was trying to persecute the Armenians."

Unique from other firsthand witness accounts, "Armenian Golgotha" possesses key elements that create a "powerful, haunting, complex" relation, transporting readers back to the second decade of the twentieth century. The memoir is a panorama of an epic survivor story, a book with multiple layers of voices that provide depth and range, an analysis of events and political and historical contexts, and a compacted view into the process and intent of genocide.

"When any culture is affected by genocide," Balakian said, "it's not just the bodies of people who die, but their culture is also lost."

Audience members got a glimpse of the vivid imagery in his great-uncle's account when Balakian concluded the lecture by reading excerpts from the memoir. A passage from the sixth chapter reads: "The night smelled of death, the sea was rough, and our hearts were full of terror. We prisoners were under strict police guard, not allowed to speak to one another. We had no idea where we were going."

Balakian believes his great-uncle's voice speaks for the history, land, blood and death of the Armenian genocide and is "a voice that will stay alive."

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