Unknown Heroes of the Armenian Genocide
Stories of rescue from the world’s first modern genocide
Unknown Heroes of the Armenian Genocide: Stories of rescue from the world’s first modern genocide

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This booklet has been prepared as a supplement to Courage to Care workshops & programs. The information is based on current publicly available sources, and while all care has been taken and measures put in place to ensure the accuracy of the information presented, we do not represent it as definitive.

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Who are the Unknown Heroes?

Unknown Heroes are those ordinary men and women who demonstrated the ‘courage to care’ by protecting, assisting or sheltering victims of mass genocide. Such tales emerge from the darkest and most horrific events in modern history and are important moments in time upon which to reflect.

Faced with such large-scale brutality, it is all too easy to become overwhelmed by the horror. One cannot avoid the inescapable question: how can humans behave so inhumanely towards each other?

The stories of the ‘unknown heroes’ demonstrate that even in the darkest of times there will always be ordinary people who will stand up and place themselves at risk to protect others from prejudice and injustice, racism, bullying and discrimination.

The Unknown Heroes Project
The Unknown Heroes Research Project was launched by Courage to Care NSW to research and share stories of unknown heroes from the genocides of the 20th Century.

This booklet explores the stories of unknown heroes from the Armenian Genocide. It contains general information about the genocide, profiles of notable heroes, as well as shorter stories of bravery which demonstrate that even ‘ordinary people’ are capable of extraordinary acts.

The aim of this booklet and others in this series is to show the various rescuers as exemplars of ‘upstanders’, inspiring us all to take positive action in the face of prejudice, injustice and discrimination in our everyday lives.

What is Courage to Care?
Courage to Care is a non-profit organisation which aims to inform Australians of the dangers of bullying, discrimination, racism and prejudice through educational programs, exhibitions, workshops and school programs. Courage to Care strives to combat discrimination in all forms by inspiring and empowering each individual to become an
‘upstander’ and take positive action when witnessing prejudice or bullying. Our central message is that every person can make a difference, and that ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts.

A Note to Teachers & Students
Aside from the unknown hero stories, there are additional resources listed in the booklet, including suggested readings, films and websites to read survivors’ accounts. Please note, the additional resources listed may contain disturbing accounts of the genocide and are not intended for all age groups. Teachers should advise younger students as to appropriate resource selection.
Rescuers of the Armenian Genocide (1915–23)

Includes stories from the coinciding Assyrian and Greek Genocides.
In 1915, the Ottoman Empire, which had stretched across the Middle East, was facing World War I and internal revolution. With the dissent and tensions fomented in a campaign of arrests and executions of Armenian intellectuals in what would be termed the start of the first modern genocide.

By 1922, an estimated 1.5 million Armenians had been killed. As the same time, mass killings of Assyrian and Greek people took place, although these killings are usually referred to as the Assyrian Genocide and the Greek Genocide.

Discussions of the genocide often focus the political nature of recognition and denial. However, the incredible stories of courage and sacrifice must also be remembered.
Asa Kent Jennings
‘The Rescuer of Smyrna’

At the time of the Armenian Genocide, Asa Kent Jennings had left his work as a minister in upstate New York, arriving to the city of Smyrna (present day İzmir, Turkey) in 1922 as an employee of the YMCA to practise missionary work. He arrived near the end of the Greek and Armenian genocides.

On the 13th of September that year, the Armenian section of the city, where Asa and his family were living and working, was set in flames. The surviving people desperately fled to the edges of the city’s quay to escape the fire. Although there were several warships from Britain, France, and the United States close to where the refugees were gathered, very few were willing to help.

When the fire eventually died down, with 80 percent of the city collapsed and burnt to a crisp, the rescues stopped entirely. Only several thousand people had been rescued out of the 350,000 residents. Those survivors still stranded in Smyrna were left to die from exhaustion and hunger.

Soon a group of Turkish army officials arrived at the area to force the city’s (predominantly Greek, but also including of Armenian) residents out of the city and on a death march through the deserts.

Around this time, Asa was living nearby and had set up a First-Aid station for pregnant women in an abandoned house on the waterfront. He had also organised for the American Relief Committee to send flour and grain via Istanbul, to be transported on U.S. Navy ships. These supplies helped feed the starving refugees that had gathered in Smyrna from
other parts of Turkey. Additionally, Asa secured the support of wealthy Greek families who had safely evacuated Smyrna. These families offered Asa to use their homes to establish new orphanages, maternity wards, and safe houses for women.

Asa resolved to help the people stranded on the outskirts of Smyrna, taking action to protect them from the likely fate of persecution and death. Asa, a devout Christian, used bribery, lying and threats to convince the US Navy and Greek government to intervene and help evacuate the residents from the outskirts of the city. While he eventually succeeded in getting help from the US Navy and Greek Government, he had to first convince the Turkish leader of the city, Mustafa Kemel, to give the Greek and Armenian residents enough time to safely leave the city. Asa’s engaging and warm personality helped him to convince Mustafa to allow the Armenians seven days to leave the city before his men would intervene.

Asa’s dedication and compassion during the Armenian genocide is estimated to have helped save the lives of between 250,000-350,000 Greeks, Armenians and a small number of Jews in under two weeks. His heroic efforts
demonstrate how the acts of just one person can make a huge difference in the lives of many. Asa continued to help the Armenian refugees after the genocide, he did so by creating social relief and vocational training programs to raise their standards of living during their difficult time.

**Recognition:** For his rescue efforts during the genocide, Asa Kent Jennings was awarded the highest military decoration of Greece, The Medal of Military Merit, as well as the highest civilian decoration, the Golden Cross of St. Xavier. Asa was the first person in Greek history to receive both items at the same time.

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**How the genocide began**

The Armenian people had a long history of inequality under the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman leaders (primarily Muslim), subjected the Armenians (mostly Christian) to higher taxes and restricted political and legal rights. With the outbreak of World War I, the Armenians were accused of aligning with Russia against the Ottoman Empire. On 24 April, 1915, the Turkish government arrested and executed several hundred Armenian intellectuals. Soon afterwards, ordinary Armenians were tortured and killed. Many were forced to walk on ‘death marches’ through the Syrian desert, where they would inevitably die of hunger or exhaustion.
Armenian/Assyrian/Greek: 
The Complexity of Coinciding Genocides

‘The Greek experience, similar to the Armenian and Assyrian genocide, although officially recognised as genocide by the International Association of Genocide Scholars, is not widely known to the English-speaking world’.

– George Shirinian, author of Genocide in the Ottoman Empire: Armenians, Assyrians, and Greeks, 1913-1923.

Before the genocide began it is estimated that that there were around two million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. By the end of 1923 there were only 338,000 Armenians remaining, an estimate of over 1.5 million deaths.

The Armenians were not the only persecuted ethnic and religious minority within the Ottoman Empire. Assyrians and Greeks were also targeted and massacred at the same time. Around 150,000-300,000 Assyrians and 450,000-750,000 Greeks are estimated to have died from 1913-1923.

While in many cases these persecutions were intertwined, and occurred simultaneously, it is common for authors and scholars to refer to these events as separate genocides (i.e. the Armenian Genocide, the Assyrian Genocide, and the Greek Genocide). Others, however, refer to all of the events under the joint name of ‘the Armenian-Assyrian-Greek genocide’ (although sometimes smaller groups such as the Yezidis were targeted).

Religious tensions played a significant role, as the Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks were Christians and the Turks were Muslim. During the genocide, conversion to Islam was sometimes enforced which allowed the convert to be spared from further persecution. Some scholars refer to the events under the title ‘the Ottoman Christian Genocide’.

While each group has their own history, it is important to note that these events were part of the same process, taking place in the same cities and towns, and often at the same time.
Karen Jeppe
‘The Danish Angel’

Karen Jeppe was a Danish woman who travelled to the Ottoman Empire for teaching and missionary work for the German Orient Mission. Karen lived in the city of Urfa from 1903. When the situation in the Empire worsened for the Armenians, Karen helped bring relief supplies from overseas and helped raise and care for 300 Armenian children staying in the Mission’s orphanage.

When the genocide began, Karen also helped organise food and water for the caravans of Armenian refugees who were being forced to walk through Urfa towards the Syrian Desert where they eventually collapsed or were shot by Turkish militia.

Although the events of the genocide were intensifying around her, Karen involved herself in assisting the Armenians, despite the personal risks involved. Karen sheltered many Armenian refugees in her cellar at home and helped others disguise themselves as Kurds and Arabs, allowing them to escape the country.

By the end of World War I, Karen had fallen ill and was forced to return to Denmark in order to recover from her illness. Within a short while, Karen resumed her efforts to assist the Armenians by campaigning on their behalf in Denmark.

Karen once again left Denmark in 1921 and settled in Aleppo (in present-day Syria) and with the backing of the League of Nations. She tracked down Armenian women and girls who had been trafficked and sold as slaves to Turkish families and businesses. With Karen’s help, the League of Nations was successful in freeing
around 2,000 Armenian women and children from slavery. They further succeeded in reuniting the majority of them with relatives that had survived the genocide. To rescue these women, Karen set up rescue stations in various locations in Turkey, and on some occasions also helped to buy back the freedom of the women and children from their Turkish owners.

Not all women could be rescued, however, as some chose to stay behind with their children who were still being held by the master. It was also a fairly common practice for Armenian women to be tattooed on their faces by their new ‘owners’ so that the Turkish people would know which tribes they belonged to in case they ran away (see image right).

Karen died of malaria in 1935 and was buried in the Armenian cemetery in Aleppo.

**Recognition:** Karen Jeppe was recognised for her humanitarian acts during the Armenian genocide and was awarded the Knight of the Legion of Honour, the highest Danish medal at the time. Karen was also awarded the Gold Medal of Merit in 1927. A bronze statue made in her honour which still stands in the State Library in Aarhus, Denmark.

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**The Young Turks and the killing squads**

The Young Turks, the ruling party during the Armenian Genocide, established special paramilitary units tasked with the mass killing of unarmed Armenian civilians. Many members of the militia were ex-convicts and murderers (often recruited as army irregulars) who were allowed to act brutally and sadistically.
Prior to the Armenian Genocide, Vehbi Efendi had retired from his job as the Postal Director for Istanbul & Diyarbakir. By the time he died in 1924, Vehbi had saved almost two hundred Assyrian and Armenian people from being deported or killed.

When Vehbi heard that deportations were taking place in his home town, Savur, he went about trying to rescue as many people as he could from being forcefully deported or killed.

On his first attempt to rescue those in need, he managed to save 87 Assyrian men and 8 Assyrian women from being taken by the deportation convoys, and hid them in his mansion; a mansion that became a refuge for many men, women and children during the genocide. Over the next few years, Vehbi continued to provide shelter for Assyrian and Armenian refugees, saving them from an otherwise grim and horrific fate.

Vehbi’s mansion was located along the deportation route of Sassoon and Siirt, which carried many convoys of Armenians and Assyrians to their doom. Dominican nuns and seminar students from Siirt were also targeted by the Turkish militia and similarly forced onto the convoys to be deported or executed. On one particular day Vehbi was made aware that a convoy had been stopped and attacked by gangs that were stoning the women and forcing the children to give them their clothes. Vehbi was able to rush to the aid of the injured women, and brought back twenty of them to his mansion and cared for them over many months until they regained their health.
During the genocide, the Ottoman authorities who had endorsed ethnic, religious discrimination toward the Christian minorities, offered that all converts to Islam would avoid persecution or death. Vehbi, on the other hand, treated those persecuted with dignity, regardless of their differences of faith.

Vehbi was very outspoken in defending those being persecuted. It became common knowledge in his town that he was protecting Assyrians and Armenians in his mansion, and that he had promised them that one day they would be able to return to their homes. This did not sit well with the local Turks who had seized the Armenian and Assyrian property. The locals reported Vehbi to the authorities on multiple occasions, but this did not hinder Vehbi in his efforts to protect them from raids. Instead he got more creative and began hiding people in nearby caves for periods of time. He also began hiding children inside large pots (called tandoors).

These acts of kindness and courage led Vehbi to quickly gain a reputation among the Sassoon Armenians as a ‘saviour’. He was given the title ‘Ebuna’ by the Assyrian refugees, a title usually reserved for priests, meaning ‘our father’.

When Vehbi Efendi passed away in 1924, many of the refugees still living in the region came to show their respect to his family and share their personal stories of Vehbi’s courage and his benevolence.
Righteous Turkish Acts

The following people were among the Turkish government officials who refused to assist in the deportation of Armenians within their provinces. These Turkish officials chose to act on conscience in the face of considerable political pressure.

Faik Ali Ozansoy

Faik Ali Ozansoy (1876-1950) was the governor of Kütahya, a central Anatolian province, at the time of the genocide. During the mass deportations of Armenian Christians, Faik refused to implement the deportation orders from Istanbul in his own province, and also gave orders to allow deported Armenians arriving into Kütahya to find refuge.

Faik also helped allow the Armenians to retain their religious faith, and fired the Police Chief of Kütahya who had threatened the Armenian people to convert to Islam or face deportation.

Hüseyin Nesîmi Bey

Hüseyin Nesimi Bey (1868-1915) was the mayor of Lice, a town near Diyarbakir, which was governed by Reshit Bey. Reshit Bey had ordered a massacre of the Armenians in the Diyarbakir region but Hüseyin refused to comply with the directive and took steps to protect the lives of nearly 6,000 Armenians who lived in Lice.

Hüseyin’s heroic actions include interfering with deportations by delaying caravan departures for as long as possible. He convinced older men in Lice to enter into fake marriages
with the Armenian women in order to protect them. He also personally accompanied Armenians from the first group of deportees to ensure they were not attacked or hurt along the way. Tragically, Huseyin was murdered a short time later by a militant guard under Reshit Bey’s orders.

Recognition and denial

In 1923, the Ottoman Empire collapsed giving way to the modern nation of Turkey. To this day, Turkey denies that the mass killings of Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians during and after World War I were a genocide, instead, Turkey describes the events in terms of a civil war. This denial to accept their nation’s pre-history continues to impact Turkish-Armenian relations both in Turkey and abroad.

Internationally, recognition of the genocide is quite complex. The International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS), passed resolutions recognising the Armenian, Greek and Assyrian Genocides. France, Switzerland, Greece, and Cyprus have passed laws outlawing the denial of the genocide. However, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that such denial is not a crime. Other countries, most notably the United States, have yet to recognise the genocide, due to fears of souring diplomatic relations with Turkey.
Ordinary People, Extraordinary Acts

Villagers of Hebsinas, Midyat

On the 19th of July 1915, Dr. Reşid, a former governor in Turkey, and one of the main actors in the genocide, ordered an attack on the Christians in many different cities and villages, including Hebsinas in the region of Midyat. Refusing to let this happen, the village people of Hebsinas (both Assyrians and Arabic-speaking Muslim Mihellemis) staged a collective resistance and decided to fight together against any Turkish militia which might threaten to attack.

Ordinary Turkish residents and leaders of the village (such as Hammetko and Haci Hasan) helped to hide their Assyrian neighbours in their homes, in caves and in wells. The locals would bring them food every night and ensured they would survive. This act of solidarity and compassion helped to foster a positive relationship between the Assyrians and Turkish Mihellemis that extended beyond the genocide.

The villagers of Hebsinas were not the only group of Turkish Muslims that banded together to protect their Assyrian and Armenian neighbours. Collectively these individuals recognised the cruelty and immorality of the genocide and refused to be a part of it, choosing instead to uphold the sanctity of human life without discriminating based on race or religion.

The stories live on

Though the Armenian Genocide occurred during a chaotic time in world history, with few records available, researchers have collected close to 80 individual rescue stories as well as a list of an additional 160 names of rescuers of whom little to no information is available.
Sources


Photo Credits

- ‘Tattooed Armenian Women in Turkish Captivity.’ *The Danish Peace Academy*.
- ‘Savur, Turkey’. Photo by Muge Soydan. 2014.

Further Resources*

**Educational Websites:**

- Armenian Genocide Education Australia

**Books:**

- *100 Years... True Stories* by European Integration (2014)
- *The Burning Tigris* by Peter Balakian (2003)
- *The Black Dog of Fate* by Peter Balakian (1997)

**Movies:**

- *The Promise* (2016)

**Survivor Accounts:**

- The Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute (AGMI)
  [www.genocide-museum.am/eng/personal_histories.php](http://www.genocide-museum.am/eng/personal_histories.php)
- The Genocide Education Project
  [www.genocidedeeducation.org/resources/survivor-accounts](http://www.genocidedeeducation.org/resources/survivor-accounts)

*Additional resources may contain intense accounts of the genocides and may not be suitable for all age groups; teachers should advise younger students should for appropriate resource selection.*
What have we learned?

**Learning from history:** What challenges did the heroes in these rescue stories face? Are there elements of these stories relevant to situations experienced by students in Australia today — at home, at school and in the community?

**Developing empathy:** What basic elements of human nature can be observed in the actions of the heroes, the victims and the perpetrators in these stories?

**Taking personal responsibility:** What were some of the difficult choices faced by the heroes in these stories? How were these choices affected by personal background, other individuals, families and communities?

**Appreciating and welcoming diversity:** What reflections on the concepts of tolerance, mutual respect and acceptance can be gleaned from these stories? How has the acceptance of cultural diversity become part of a modern, democratic society, like Australia?
What does it take to be a hero?

What is hero? We typically think of someone with extraordinary abilities, rescuing people who face danger, but is this really the case?

At Courage to Care, our programs refer to rescuers during genocide calling them ‘upstanders.’ In referring to the genocide, the general tendency is to focus on the perpetrators and the victims, the people doing the killing and those being killed. But there are also bystanders who witness the killings and do nothing to protect victims. And finally, there are the real heroes who stand up to injustice and help where they can.

At the heart of the Courage to Care program is the lesson we can learn from the most significant events of the 20th century, the genocides, teaching all of us a universal precept: one person can make a difference, and even ordinary people are capable of extraordinary acts.

Their stories are an enduring example of the power of the individual to make a difference, and a poignant reminder that it is our own choices that determine if we remain bystanders, or become upstanders who take positive action in the face of prejudice and discrimination in our everyday lives.

The message of Courage to Care is to be aware of the dangers of prejudice and discrimination, and to strive to combat discrimination in all forms by inspiring and empowering the individual to become an upstander and take positive action.

Being an upstander means being a hero in your own private life, even if no one will learn how your actions made a difference in someone else’s life.

Being an upstander is part of everyday life, not just in times of great turmoil, like a genocide. Standing up and speaking out takes courage and compassion.

In what areas in your life can you make a difference?

What does it take for you to be an upstander?
Learn More

To learn more about Courage to Care, go to our website at:
www.couragetocare.com.au

Additional resource materials and links are available on our website:

Student Resources: www.couragetocare.com.au/students

Do you have feedback you’d like to share about the stories in this booklet?
Please email us at: info@couragetocare.com.au