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ARS Armenian School students Nancy Sabounjian and Masis Sepan help Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette in laying a wreath in Cedarvale Park to immortalize the memory of the 109 'Georgetown Boys' who came here during the mid-1920s.

Photo by Eamonn Maher

Georgetown's role in Armenian tragedy remembered

By Eamonn Maher
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Two busloads of Grade 3-4 students from an Armenian private school in Toronto visited Georgetown recently to mark an historic period of time that was both tragic and a new beginning for dozens of orphaned children.

It's estimated that between 800,000 and 1.5 million Armenians were systematically exterminated by the Ottoman government beginning in 1915.

Thousands more women, children and elderly were also deported from the region on death marches into the Syrian desert over the next eight years, but a group of a few dozen orphans made their way to a farm in Georgetown that is now known as Cedarvale Park.

A ceremony was held at the park one morning recently involving students from the ARS Armenian School, who commemorated the occasion with the dedication of a plaque and a tree planting, along with singing the Canadian national anthem in both English and French.

Native Armenian songs were also performed to observe the 100th anniversary of the genocide and the catastrophic toll on its people.

"They lost their childhood and were under threat of losing their lives as well, but because of the efforts of the Armenian Association of Canada and the funds Canadians raised, these children rediscovered their childhood in the safety of Cedarvale Park," said Raffi Sarkissian, principal at ARS.

"The Georgetown Farm serves as a constant reminder of the Armenian genocide and the lessons we need to learn from history in hopes of preventing future cases of this crime. Canada's commitment to recognizing this historic reality has been exemplary."

From 1923-27, 109 Armenian orphans sought refuge in the Cedarvale Community Centre. A number of family members who accompanied the ARS students on their trip to Halton Hills mentioned the names of close relatives who came here in the aftermath of the genocide and who've become known as The Georgetown Boys.

"Fifty boys took three weeks by foot, by rail, by boat to get here and didn't know a word of English, let alone leaving their loved ones back home," said Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette.

"This is a really unique part of Canadian history. It was the first time ever that a young country, Canada, took non-British refugees. It's something we can be proud of."

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