

# Father tells survival story

## Man builds monument to memory of relatives killed in genocide

By Gariné Tcholakian

Savvas Xanthopoulos doesn't like to see his father in pain.

It happens every now and then, when his father retreats into quiet reminiscence, remembering the stories told by his own father who lived in Pondilla, a village on the south shores of the Black Sea that is now part of northeastern Turkey.

From 1916 to 1923, at least 350,000 Christians in the area were massacred as part of a genocide planned by Germans and ordered by the leaders of a Turkish nationalist movement called the Committee of Union and Progress.

Among the victims were Savvas's ancestors. The first-year chemistry and applied biology sciences student listens as his father, Steve Xanthopoulos, tells the story as it was told to him.

On a cool September afternoon in 1917, Savvas's great-grandfather was returning home from the mountains where, like other village farmers, he cut wood for the winter. He came back to find his brother, sister-in-law and 17-year-old niece in front of the house, tied up on a post for hitching horses.

At this point, Steve breaks down for a moment. "It is painful," he says with a faraway look, thinking of the beautiful 17-year-old. "She was like an angel."

The attackers stripped her clothes to the waist. One of them grabbed a sword and cut off her breasts. "She was screaming and blood was squirting all over the place," Steve says. Two attack-

### My parents told me ...

In the weeks before a concert at Ryerson in memory of 20th-century genocides — and the events of Holocaust Education Week — The Eyeopener presents stories told to students about their relatives' sufferings in genocide. These are the tales your classmates hold inside.

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ers danced and drank Turkish liquor from her mutilated breasts. They then dumped her on the ground, molested and raped her until she died. Her parents, forced to watch the torture, were also killed.

Steve takes a deep breath. "It is very painful," he repeats, his voice cracking.

Steve's grandfather was later imprisoned for killing a Turkish military officer who had threatened to kill his last surviving brother. He escaped and returned to his village, only to discover that no one had survived. That was when he decided to immigrate to Canada.

Before he died, Savvas's grandfather urged his son to tell the world about the genocide of his people. He said the best way would be to create a monument.

That monument now stands on the corner of Memorial Park Avenue and Roosevelt Road in North York. After five years of legal and political battles, as well as fundraising efforts by the Pontian Brotherhood of Toronto, Steve succeeded in erecting the classical column he designed in remembrance of the Pontian genocide.

Savvas's grandfather passed away this summer. He lived, however, to see his son unveil the Pontus monument last May.

Savvas says he is proud of his father. Although the story of the atrocities against his ancestors bothers him, he is even more bothered by the fact that no one knows anything about them. For this reason, Savvas says, he rarely discusses the matter.

Both Savvas and his father say they are happy the Pontian people's suffering will also be noted as part of this year's Ryerson Theatre Company performance, *Requiem*, which remembers the genocides of the 20th century.

"I'm proud that my son is part of the Ryerson university family," Steve says. "They are making the truth be told and that makes me very happy."

Still, Steve is baffled about why powerful nations didn't intervene at the time. He also says he's confused by Israel's political alliance with Turkey, since Israel's people have suffered similar injustices.

"There are so many unanswered questions and it kills me. Slowly, it kills me."

