

Alina spent eight years of her childhood in a war zone in Tehran, Iran in a close-knit Iranian Armenian community.

Back in 1980, after years of conflict, Iran's neighbor Iraq attempted to seize Iran's rich oil-producing region along the border of the two countries and to control the navigation rights along the waterway that gave both countries access to the Arabian Sea.

In addition, the Sunni minority that ruled Iraq had a history of oppressing its Shia majority. Sunnis in Iraq felt threatened by Iran's new Shia government, which had seized power in a revolution the year before.

In just fifty-two days of the eight-year war, Tehran was hit by 118 missiles.

"It was terrible," Alina says. "I was ten or eleven years old at that time. At our school, there was a siren when the enemy was attacking and we went to an underground place. I always felt we were going to get killed.

"At home, we had to turn off the lights so the enemy couldn't see us. We put a special tape on the windows so the glass wouldn't break when the bombs went off. Most of the windows in our house were cracked. I was always thinking that one of these enemies was under my bed or hiding in the house."

Alina's family is Armenian and Christian. Sixty-five years before the war, her grandparents had escaped to Iran from the genocide that began in 1915 in the Ottoman Empire, now Turkey.

In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, Armenians were a Christian minority in the Islamic Ottoman Empire. Although they were discriminated against and some wanted to live in an independent state, they fought for the empire against its Christian enemies: Russia, Great Britain and the Commonwealth countries, France, and the United States.

Armenians in Russia fought in the Russian army against the Ottoman Empire. When the empire lost an important battle against Russia, Turks blamed its Armenian soldiers and began to fear that Armenians were colluding with the empire's Christian enemies.

Beginning in 1915, Turks killed all the Armenian soldiers in their army, either by overwork or execution. They killed Armenian intellectuals and community leaders. They killed able-bodied men or used them as forced labor in the army.

They sent women, children, the elderly and the infirm on marches through the Mesopotamian desert without food or water, where most either dropped dead or were shot when they stopped to rest. They drowned Armenians in rivers, threw them off cliffs, crucified them, and burned them alive. They hunted them down as they fled to Syria, Greece, Russia, Iran, the United States, and other countries. They kidnapped Armenian children and gave them to Turkish families.

By the end of World War I, just three years after the genocide began, fewer than ten percent of Armenians remained in the Ottoman Empire. Approximately one and a half million had been massacred.

Most of Alina's and her husband's families escaped to Iran, where they already had family, and where Armenians have lived for centuries.

The majority of Armenians had adapted to life in Iran, learning Arabic, Farsi, and English. They also maintained their identity, living in a tight-knit community with their own churches, schools, and cultural centers. Every year, they marched on the anniversary of the genocide.

Most Iranians are kind and mellow, but the government discriminated against Armenians, Alina says. "We couldn't work in banks, the government, or public places. They paid poor Muslims to beat us, kill us, break our windows, and burn our churches."

Alina, her husband, and their young daughter emigrated to Southern California to live near her husband's family in a deep-rooted Iranian Armenian community. She began working in a hair salon owned by an Iranian Armenian hairdresser.

The family, which now includes two daughters, attends the local Iranian Armenian church. "Being Christian is really important to me," Alina says. "I want my children to have God in their life. Whatever else they have, to appreciate God."

She's also continued the Armenian tradition of piling her dining table high with cookies, squares, and dates for guests. "When Americans come to my house, they say I'm doing too much for them," she says. "I tell them, this is my culture. This is the way we show we care."

Alina's closeness to her family has influenced at least one of her American clients. "A client told me she was missing her daughter, who was away at university," Alina says. "So she bought her a plane ticket to fly home and the whole family got together for a big family dinner. They hadn't all been together for seventeen or eighteen years."

Although some Armenians stay among Armenians and send their children to an Armenian school, Alina worked hard to improve her English, with help from her American clients. Her children go to public school, where they're learning Spanish. Alina and her husband taught them Armenian.

"In Iran, Armenians were forced to stay with Armenians," she says. "I always wanted to get to know other people, and I want my children to get to know everyone. There are seventy different kinds of people in Los Angeles. My children should know everybody. This is the best we can do for them."

Sometimes, though, Alina worries that her daughters' exposure to people of different cultures might lead them away from the Armenian values she treasures, especially when they choose a husband.

"I can see some of my friends who married Americans and other kinds of people. Their life is totally different. I have a friend whose husband isn't Armenian. You know how important family is to us. He ignores her parents when they visit and goes to another room.

"When I talk to my kids, I tell them it's not bad to fall in love with someone from outside," she says. "You have to make sure he's Christian, for sure. And I remind them that they have relatives here who don't speak English, and how would their husband talk to them?"