

Description of the Oral History Collection at the Zoryan Institute

by

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1. Historical Overview

As part of its founding principles, as embedded in its name, the Zoryan Institute for Contemporary Armenian Research and Documentation wanted to document the Armenian experience and have Armenians write their own national history, and not leave it to others, who tended to portray that history in a way that suited them. In particular, the Armenians had been largely written out of the history of Asia Minor in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In 1983, the Zoryan Institute undertook a major oral history program aimed at documenting on videotape the memoirs of the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. The project was begun when it became evident that time was running out for the generation of Armenians who had witnessed those events. While other groups had undertaken similar projects, the Institute was interested in utilizing the most scientific methods of interviewing. In addition, most previous interviews had been recorded in sound alone; the Zoryan project intended to add the visual dimension. It was felt that the legal validity and the historical value of a testimony would be enhanced tremendously when the sight of the witness was added to the sound.

A great deal of effort was put into the development of a questionnaire that would not only elicit information about the Genocide, but also provide details and valuable insights into the life of the Armenian people preceding the Genocide. A standardized set of questions would allow for cross-referencing and comparison of testimonies. After some initial questions to test the alertness of the subject, the survey was arranged under four broad headings: 1) City/Village Life in the Armenian Homeland, 2) Massacre and Deportation from the Armenian Homeland, 3) Experiences as an Immigrant, 4) Attitudes and Interpretations. There were fifty categories of questions, broken down into a total of 233 questions. There was a separate, additional set of thirteen categories of questions for those who remained in Turkey following the war, broken down into a total of 90 questions. These questions were designed to elicit as much detail as possible, covering such topics as describing your home, what was the function of each room, what types of furnishings were in your home, what games did you play, etc.

Special efforts were made to study the geography and history of the region where the survivor lived, in order to provide background information to the interviewers, to provide context for the story and improve the level of reliability of the interviews.

There were four interview teams: Toronto, east coast, west coast, and the rest of the world, including Europe and Armenia. Each interview team was composed of three people: interviewer, cameraman, and note-taker. Periodically, workshops brought together program coordinators, interviewers, cameramen and others, in order to do training, and refine and improve the results of the project.

Interviews were conducted in Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, Montreal, New Jersey, New York, Paris, Providence, San Francisco, Toronto, Washington, and Yerevan. Although Zoryan’s is the largest video collection, it could have done many more interviews, had funds been available. The limitation was

the cost associated with the camera and equipment, which in those days cost \$10,000-\$15,000 each, the equivalent of \$50,000-\$60,000 today. There were considerable travel expenses, and we had to have specially trained volunteer teams and paid staff who worked thousands of hours.

2. The Collection

The collection has two components—one is the recordings; the other is a variety of written information accompanying each video. There are 780 interviews in the collection. The catalogue provides basic data about each interview: name of interviewee, gender, year of birth, place of birth, region of birth, duration of interview, language, source of the interview in some cases, and occasionally notes.

A signed waiver was given by each interviewee to the Institute, which reads as follows:

I have voluntarily donated an audio or video recording to the Zoryan Institute Oral History Project, in connection with which a family member was interviewed by _____, on _____, at _____.

I understand that the Zoryan Institute is a non-profit, non-political, non-sectarian, educational and charitable organization. The interviews deposited in its archives will be assembled and organized in various forms and made generally available as research source material to writers, historians, social scientists and others who have need for this information for books, publications, thesis studies, and such other uses as the Zoryan Institute may find acceptable.

With the above objectives in mind, and without payment in any form, I am happy to authorize the Zoryan Institute to preserve and make use of the information I have supplied during the interviews, and I release any and all claims, including copyright, with respect to the same.

A Video Interview Information Form adds occupation, date of marriage, spouse's name, contact information, route travelled, important events, name of the interviewer, date and place of the interview, interviewer's comments, general subjects covered during the interview, and other information. A map indicating the route of deportation is included in many cases. Photos, passports, and other personal effects are sometimes found.

The interviews were recorded with the intention of providing raw data for future researchers, rather than for broadcasting or entertainment purposes.

Not all the interviews in the collection originated with Zoryan; other groups and individuals have contributed their recordings, which were done according to varying standards.

The recordings were originally made on VHS tapes. They were digitized onto DVD in MPEG-4 format, for preservation from 2000 to 2002. Since 2010, the collection has been backed up onto external hard drives, with a duplicate set of copies kept off-site.

3. Some Statistics of the Collection

There are 780 interviews, but in six cases, a husband and wife or two relatives are interviewed together, thus there is a total of 786 interviewees. The birth dates range from 1875 to 1922. One hundred and fifty-nine of the subjects were born before 1900, so they were old enough to have mature recollections. Males make up 442 (56.2%) of the interviews; females 344 (43.8%).

There is a large variety of villages, towns and cities of birth, and special efforts were made to have multiple interviews for many places. This can be useful for cross-referencing and comparison. Below is a listing of villages, towns and cities represented, along with the number of interviews from each. (Please note that not every interview provides this information.)

Aboghna	1
Adana	16
Afyon-Karahisar	1
Aikestan/Aykesdan/Aykestan	6
Aintab/Ayintab	24
Aksaray	2
Akshehir	4
Akshesh	1
Akzor	1
Aleppo	1
Amasia	6
Ankara	2
Ankegh	1
Antchertik	1
Antioch	2
Arabgir/Arabkir	10
Ardanoosh/Ardanoush	2
Arek	2
Arev	1
Arghanamad	1
Armash	1
Armedan	1
Artamed	1
Artekhan	1
Ashodavan	1
Asytem	1
Avants	1
Aznapert	2
Babik	1
Baghesh	1
Bardizag	1
Batum	1
Bayburt	1
Bazmashen	1
Bigha	2
Bighan	1
Bilijik	1
Bitias/Bittias	2
Bitlis	13
Bor	2
Bursa	3

Cebermusa	1
Chakmak	1
Chan	1
Chanakhchi	1
Charsanjak	7
Chengiler	1
Chicago	1
Chimishgad	4
Chimishgadzak	3
Chomakhlou	2
Delimili	1
Dikranagerd/Diyarbakir	11
Divrig	2
Dortyol	5
Dzovk	1
Edemish	1
Edirne	1
Egin	1
Endires	1
Ereğli	1
Erzenca/Erzincan/Erzinga	7
Erzerum/Erzurum	11
Eskisher/Eskishehir	3
Eudemish	1
Everek	15
Eybes	1
Farghin	1
Fedejag	1
Fresno	1
Gamarka	1
Garjgan	2
Garni	3
Garva	2
Gemerek	1
Gerasoon	1
Germir	1
Gesaria/Kaysari	16
Gorovank	1
Gurun	9
Habousi	2
Hacin/Hadjin	10
Hamide	1
Hamidie	1
Har	1
Harsek	1
Harsankale	1
Havari	1
Havav	1
Havus	1
Haygavank	2
Hoghe	1

Hornavil	1
Hozat	1
Hussenig/Hussenik/Husseinik	8
Iskender	1
Istanbul/Constantintople	4
Itchme	1
Iteli	3
Iamit	5
Jerma	1
Juberkegh	1
Kabilcauz	1
Kalecik	1
Kars	6
Kayseri (see Gesaria)	
Kecheyurt	1
Keghi	20
Keghitoon	1
Keler	1
Kemakh	5
Keserig	4
Keskin	1
Kessab	15
Kez	1
Khalakyugh	1
Khana	1
Kharapouni	1
Kharkhik	1
Kharpert/Harput	33
Khastor	1
Khenous/Khnoos	3
Khorokhon	1
Khortom	1
Khuylu	1
Kighia	1
Kilis/Kilisa	1
Kiremet	1
Konya	5
Kovtun/Govdoon	1
Kuraktar	1
Kutahia/Kutahya	1
Kuyu	1
Kzerchi	1
Leninakan/Gyumri	2
Lice	2
Malatia/Malatya	8
Manisa	1
Marash	19
Marsovan/Marzovan	3
Marzerdn	1
Mazgert/Mazgirt	3
Merdegivz	1

Merdin	2
Mezre/Mezreh	14
Mirzip	1
Morenig	1
Mouratja	1
Musa Dagh	1
Mush//Mus/Moosh/Moush	14
Nevshehir	1
New York	2
Nirzeh	2
Norkuygh	1
Ordu	8
Ouzoumyayl	1
Palou/Palu	17
Parehanj	1
Pera	1
Perkise	1
Perri/Peri	1
Pertak	1
Plovdiv	1
Rahva	1
Rasht	1
Rodosto	2
Rostov	1
Sabanci	1
Salmast	2
Samson	4
Sao Paolo	1
Sarikamish	1
Sasoon/Sasoun	2
Sepasdia/Sepastia/Sivas	19
Sis	1
Sivri	2
Sivrihasar	4
Smyrna	1
Spitak	1
Sungurlu	2
Tadeem/Tadem	2
Talas	3
Taron	1
Tarsus	5
Tenik	1
Terjan	6
Toghma	1
Tokat	10
Trabizond	2
Tsvsdan	1
Urfa	19
Urumieh/Urmiya	2
Vahka	1
Vakhcenk	1

Van	18
Veziir	1
Vordum	1
Vrnouz	1
Yalde	1
Yenihan	1
Yerebakan	1
Yozgat	11
Zangezour	1
Zeitoun	6
Zumbeck	1

The duration of the interviews ranges from 20 minutes to 13.5 hours.

The breakdown by language is as follows:

Armenian	597 (77%)
English	167 (22%)
Arm & English	1
Spanish	1
Turkish	8 (1%)

4. The Interviewees

The first interview was with Mariam Davis in April 1983. That interview inspired Ted Bogosian to produce the film, “An Armenian Journey.” Among the interviews can be found such notables as Aurora Mardiganian, the girl who was featured in the silent film, “Ravished Armenia,” the very first film on the Armenian Genocide, of which only a small portion survives. Another very interesting person interviewed is Eleanor Ussher, the daughter of Clarence D. Ussher, the American medical missionary at Van, upon whose book the film “Ararat” was based.

In 1984, a special sub-project was initiated to interview twenty-two Armenian Legionnaires who had joined the French Army during World War I.

We are still haunted by one interviewee in Toronto. He was 90 years old. It was as if he had waited his whole life to tell his story. His interview totalled ten hours of recording over several sessions, but was one continuous narrative. At the end of the last session, it seemed as if a great burden had been lifted from him. We were shocked when we learned that he passed away the very next morning after completing his interview.

5. Use of the Collection

As per its mission statement, “The Institute makes its collections and analyses available, and provides research assistance to scholars, writers, journalists, film-makers, government agencies and other organizations.”

a) Access Policy

Our collection is open and free to use to anyone who comes to the Zoryan office, where we provide the equipment and research assistance, if required. Researchers apply in advance, giving their affiliation and

the purpose of the research. An agreement is signed as to the use and limits of the material. Naturally, the collection can be used only on the premises, for security and other contingent liability issues.

b) Who has used the collection and for what purposes?

There is time to give only the briefest overview of who has used the collection and for what purposes. By 1985, within two years of starting the program, it was reported that the tapes were “being used increasingly by teachers, researchers, and writers; they are one of the most used resources of the Institute.”

Two of the survivors interviewed presented eyewitness accounts to the Permanent Peoples’ Tribunal in Paris, in April 1984, which was later published by Zoryan under the title, *A Crime of Silence*, in Armenian, English, French, and Portuguese.

The first publication based on Zoryan's collection is by Eliz Sanasarian, "Gender Distinction in the Genocidal Process: A Preliminary Study of the Armenian Case." *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 4, no. 4 (1989): 449-461. It was a pioneering study in the field now known as “Gendercide.”

Since 1999, we have had novelists, film-makers, historians, political scientists, students, and others, of various nationalities (such as American, Armenian, Canadian, English, Israeli, Turkish) come to Toronto to use the collection.

Some of these researchers are notable. For example, Elif Shafak, one of the best known journalists and novelists in Turkey viewed four interviews, all in Turkish. Elif was moved by viewing these Armenian survivor testimonies in Turkish and spoke about it in an interview in the *Washington Post* (Sep. 25, 2005). She mentioned that in researching about the Genocide, she had viewed these interviews, and she was excoriated in the Turkish press for allowing herself to be brainwashed by the Zoryan Institute. One Turkish scholar spent five days visiting the institute watching twenty-one interviews.

One researcher from the Refugee Study Centre at Oxford University spent several days at the institute. She wanted to utilize primary materials to write about all of the movements of peoples throughout the Middle East over the last hundred years and how that shapes the region today. According to her, the Zoryan Oral Histories are well known, and that her colleagues had all encouraged her to visit the Institute, where she could get a sense of what life was like for Armenians before the first refugees.

“For me, it was particularly valuable because I was seeing the individual and hearing them tell their story,” she said.

“There’s a lot that you pick up that unless you have a really great transcription, you would miss. Because you watch the body language and you watch the individual and sometimes struggle with himself or herself to decide how much to allow, to be unlocked.... You could see that slowly they’re opening up, slowly the doors in their minds are being provoked, and called at task....

“But also I noticed in the interviews, that it would have been very hard to follow – I think – in print what was the relationship between people and this was something I was very interested in, and the intricate network and obviously the morbidity and mortality rates were very high everywhere in the world and obviously not just in Armenia. So many of these people came from complicated family backgrounds – in other words, in a number of interviews there was a widower with children and a widow with children marrying, having another group of children so you have three sets of upset children all living together with uncles in the United States, maybe with aunts in the United States – elaborate networks of relatives to call on for help because the first people who were alive to make these tapes were the people who

survived and also had a network – found a link, to get through a passage. I think you would have lost some of that – it would have been harder to decipher in print than watching it visually...”

Ryan Gingeras came to use oral history interviews for his PhD thesis at the University of Toronto, particularly for survivors from the Izmit/Adapazar region. The thesis was subsequently published by Oxford University Press as *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity, and the End of the Ottoman Empire 1912-1923*.

Last year, we were visited by a student from Columbia University, who was doing research for his Master’s thesis on the extent to which Armenians survived the Genocide through the help of Turks, Kurds and Arabs.

In 2011, we have had a student from the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto utilizing the collection for his Master’s thesis. The focus of his research is to construct an interdisciplinary framework between mnemonic theory, communication theory, and semiotic theory, for media interpretation and access. He is using the Oral Histories to assess the structure and value of orality as a medium. Also in 2011 an undergraduate from USC spent three weeks at the institute going through the oral histories looking for information on the role of women in the Armenian resistance to the Genocide.

The Institute makes copies of oral history recordings interview for immediate family and direct descendants of an interviewee only. Many children or grandchildren of the survivors ask for a copy of the interview, as a memento.

6. Future Challenges

- a) Transcription. Even though some of the immediacy and effectiveness of the audio-visual medium would be lost, it would be very handy for researchers to be able to work from written transcripts of the interviews. One of the teachers at the Armenian high school in Toronto has expressed willingness to have his students work on such a project over the years.
- b) Translation. The bulk of the collection, some 78%, is in Armenian, which is of limited accessibility. Translation to English and other languages could open up the use of this collection to others. Richard has indicated that this is a laborious and not inexpensive proposition.
- c) Indexing. There is a rough, hand-written index to the interviews in the dossiers. These could be typed up and put online, either in a word processing file, or an indexed database. If transcriptions and translations are prepared, full-text searching becomes possible. Finally, examples of audio searching exist, and may be applicable to both the English and non-English audio tracks of these interviews.
- d) Sponsoring research and publication. Research grants could be offered to stimulate research and publication, based on the collection.

7. Where Do We Go From Here?

The survivors are pretty well all gone now, but their legacy lives on for future generations to understand what they went through, what we lost, and what it means to be Armenian. Oral histories provide a direct and immediate link between the world of the survivors and future generations. For the historical, social and ethnographic information they contain, for the deep emotion they often convey, and for the preservation and strengthening of Armenian identity in our youth, these national treasures must be preserved, maintained, and made available as widely as possible. The challenge is how to make this a reality. It will involve a serious commitment of time and finances. For example, it would take thousands

of hours of specially trained people to index the keywords in the thousands of hours of interviews. Such a project could last many man-years, but is worth it as an investment in our nation's future.

We have made our collection open and freely available to researchers, scholars and students who come to the institute for that purpose, where they can be served by our staff in a controlled environment. But in order to realize the full potential of the oral history collections, we at Zoryan are committed to exploring ways in which the collections and the information they contain can be shared among the various educational and research institutions and made more accessible for researchers, educators, film-makers, and others.

Therefore, we strongly recommend that a group of experts be formed, with representation to be determined later, to investigate the complex legal, technical and financial issues involved in dealing with the Armenian oral history collections and make carefully researched recommendations going forward. The ideal result would be that the various collections could be housed in a permanent building, environmentally controlled, secure, with adequate space for storage and use, dedicated staff to ensure the preservation, utilization and dissemination of these materials, with permanent funding. This national treasure should be controlled by an entity that has the expertise, knowledge and transparency, with a sense of accountability to our nation.