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Survivor Testimonies and the Armenian Genocide: A New Perspective on the Importance of
Personal Stories

By

Sona Azatyan

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Abstract

Many scholars consider genocide survivor stories as a primary source of historical information, while others give very little attention to the subject. By taking the international experience of representation of oral history of different genocides which have happened throughout the human history, this research suggests a way new understanding of the importance of personal stories in the process of raising awareness and educating generations on the Armenian genocide. By conducting a number of interviews and other forms of research, the study gives the reader an opportunity to not only get familiar with fields in which oral history of a genocide survivor could be helpful, but also to understand the gaps that the educational system in Armenia has in terms of genocide education and representation.

Introduction

In the history of human beings, many atrocities and different forms of crimes against humanity took place which became a threat to human rights and peace around the world. Starting from the 20th century especially, it became common among large groups and nations to organize and implement cleansing of comparatively weaker groups of individuals. Although many of those events happened hundreds of years ago, there is still a desire among people to collect information about their older generations: they still want to research and find the truth, come up with new interpretations of the history of their nation, and most importantly, educate the upcoming generations in order to avoid historical repetitions. Information about the cleansing of different groups of people known as genocide (genos -“race”, “people,” -cide - “act of killing”) was taken from national archives, official documents, telegrams, and photographs. Along with those methods, there was another way of collecting information, which was mainly concentrated on the stories of genocide survivors. Mostly, survival stories were collected through oral testimonies and interviews, intergenerational transmissions, and literature written by survivors themselves.

In 1915-1923, human history experienced its very first genocide of the 20th century, which was the Armenian Genocide. More than 1.5 million Armenians out of 1.8 million were killed under the rule of the government of the Ottoman Empire, and those who survived managed to escape and spread throughout the world, giving a beginning to the creation of the Armenian Diaspora. Because of the illiteracy among the Armenian society of the period, not many Armenians got a chance to write down stories about their experience of horror and human rights

violations. However, many of them agreed to share their stories through interviews and oral testimonies. Although there are many stories of the Armenian genocide survivors that were collected, there are still very few books and projects dedicated to the subject. Most importantly, the books do not have a translation to foreign languages, which would bring them recognition and awareness in the international level. Along with some stories that are already transcribed and written down in forms of books and collection of documents, there are still many stories which have never been analyzed or reproduced.

Survivors are the representatives of the genocide itself — they are the ones who experienced it, and who can help raise awareness about a particular event if not a person who has gone through it? For this reason, there is a need to transform genocide survival stories into a powerful tool of fighting for recognition of a crime, especially, in the case of the Armenian genocide, which is one of those genocides in human history that experiences a state denial. Regardless of the work and studies done in the field, the Armenian genocide is not officially recognized by the Republic of Turkey.

The aim of this project is not only to suggest new ways through which oral history of the Armenian genocide could be used but also to provide the reader with a general understanding of the importance of survival stories based on international experience on the subject. The first part of the project will give the reader background information on the available literature on genocide survival stories — their importance, trustworthiness, and the effect they have on the society in general. Thereafter, after having a sufficient amount of information of genocide survival stories of different nations, the project will provide the reader with analysis of new perspectives on the survival stories of the Armenian genocide.

Key Terms and Definitions

Bystander - A person who is present at an event/incident but does not take part/action

Denial - In this paper, the term refers to the attempt to deny or minimize statements of the scale and severity of an incidence of genocide

Oral history - Information about a historical event or period that is told by people who experienced it

Perpetrator - A person who carries out a harmful, illegal or immoral act

Recognition - In this paper, the term refers to the formal acceptance of systematic massacre and forced deportations of Armenians committed by the Ottoman Empire from 1915 to 1923 as genocide

Survivor - A person who survives, especially a person remaining alive in an incident in which others have died

Testimony - In this paper, the term refers to the written or spoken statement by genocide survivors/witnesses which serve as a proof or evidence

Victim - A person that was harmed, injured or killed as a result of a crime, accident, or other event or action

All definitions are available at English Dictionary, Thesaurus, & grammar help | Oxford Dictionaries. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/>

Literature Review

There are many pieces of literature which are dedicated to the analysis of genocide survival stories in terms of their importance and trustworthiness. This section of the research is aimed at examining the effectiveness of written survivor stories and the benefits it may have on the process of writing down a human history.

The first literature that is going to contribute to my research process is *Encyclopedia of Genocide* edited by Israel W. Charny. The book gives a detailed understanding about every concept and term that is somehow connected to genocide, starting from the definition of the word “genocide” itself, ending with the history of genocides that took place throughout the human history. The book brings up the definition of the term genocide which was firstly brought up by Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin in 1944. In 1948, the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The Encyclopedia gives an explanation of the term genocide according to the Convention as follows:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group (Charny, 1999, Volume 1, p. 11).

The *Encyclopedia of Genocide* also provides information about the importance and history of first-person accounts of genocide. According to the book, first-person accounts provide a subjective perspective on the horrors and human rights deprivation during the times of genocide (Charny, 1999, p. 241). The statement fits perfectly to my argument of the importance of having records made by witnesses and/or survivors of genocide. As the book claims, they provide a fresh and immediate picture of what actually happened in this or that period of time. The book then goes on with the comparison of the available accounts on the Holocaust and the Armenian Genocide. After mentioning the fact that the greatest number of personal accounts is available on Holocaust, the editor says: “A much smaller but still relatively large amount (when compared with what is available in regard to still other genocides) is available on the Armenian Genocide” (Charny, 1999, p.242). This statement may be added to my claim of having a potential to improve and increase the number of survivor/eyewitness stories on the Armenian Genocide, and the relatively low number of accounts that we have compared to the Holocaust. While talking about the reasons to testify and the importance that the survival stories may have for humans, the book mentions the fact that survivor stories can through a light on important subjects such as humiliation, degradation, brutality and other actions to which they and others were subjected. Also, the survivor stories bring up unpopular stories of resistance, and point out the ones who endangered their lives in the sake of rescuing the victims. The Encyclopedia gives a perfect representation of important lessons one may get from the survivor stories and historical value that those stories may have. As the book claims, “First-person accounts also contribute to the corroboration of key points and facts in the historical record of a genocide, and also add new and unique information to the existing storehouse of historical data” (p. 242). As VerjineSvazlian also claims in her book “The Armenian genocide and historical memory,” testimonies of the

eyewitness survivors have a primary importance; every one of them has its evidential significance in the equitable solution of the Armenian Case and in the recognition of the Armenian Genocide (Svazlian, 2004, p. 7).

The Encyclopedia also provides valuable information on the counter-argument about the survival stories: are they trustworthy or not? A number of scholars believe that the validity of survival stories should be questioned, because they have a subjective aspect and cannot be considered as a primary source of historical information. However, as the book says, “First-person accounts are valuable historical sources in that they provide unique personal insights into the genocidal process, the consistency of information found in various accounts about the same incident(s) provide valuable corroboration of facts” (Charny, 1999, p. 242). The book also does not forget to mention the fact that survivor stories may have inaccuracy in them because they were collected many years after the actual events happened. The survivors may confuse the reality with rumors; their memory may fade away, etc. However, as it is also mentioned in *Survivors: An oral history of the Armenian genocide*, interpretation is the very essence of human nature, but there is a difference between interpretation and falsification (Miller, 1999, p. 29).

The Encyclopedia ends the section of first-person accounts by saying that there is a need to collect as many survival stories as possible. Also, the book mentions: “There is the need to translate accounts into various languages so that the scholars will have greater access to the information” (Charny, 1999, p. 243). The claim of the importance of having the accounts translated only adds to the value of this research, as it is going to propose various ways through

which the survival stories may be valuable and important source of information and collection of knowledge.

The Second Volume of The Encyclopedia dedicates a separate section to the Literature about Holocaust. To stress the importance of Holocaust literature, the book brings up Milton Teichman's argument that it is impossible for the Holocaust to remain an abstraction to those who read a piece of literature about it. It becomes infinitely more than historical facts and theories. It becomes the experience the humans: of victims, perpetrators, bystanders (Charny, 1999, p. 407). The claim adds to my point about the importance of having a written form of stories of genocide, as the reader actually becomes part of the story while reading it. While reading a piece of writing on the matter, one gets a chance to actually feel every single word that the survivor/witness says. As Techiman claims, "One feels the tragedy; one is moved to anger, indignation, compassion" (Charny, 1999, p. 407). The book then points out literature of other genocides, by specifically bringing up reasons for having a few numbers of genocidal literatures. First of all, the book points out the illiteracy of people who lived during the times of genocide. Because of the lack of education and resources, survivors were unable to create pieces of literature that would depict the horror of genocide. Also, the Encyclopedia mentions the fact that during 20th century genocides, the main targets were educated people and intellectuals, who were the primary source of information and creators of literature. For example, in the case of the Armenian Genocide, on April 24, 1915, more than 250 Armenian intellectuals were arrested and tortured, 88 of which were poets. This act only added to the lack of having an actual written literature, as all the literate people were isolated from the community. Thus, the fact of having a high level of illiteracy only adds value to the survivor stories: as one of the few pieces of

evidence left, genocide survivor stories need to be collected, showcased, transcribed, and translated into various languages to bring the story to international level of recognition.

After understanding the term genocide and the importance of genocide survivor stories both in oral and written forms, it is important to understand what testimony actually is. The article *Engaging Survivors: Assessing Testimony and Trauma as Foundational Concepts* written by Henry Greenspan et al. (2014), gives an explanation of “testimony.” According to the authors of the article, testimony is more about learning from the survivors.

“Its gathering (particularly as recorded) is more likely to be concentrated in a single session than over the course of sustained conversation and acquaintance. It aspires to be as definitive as possible rather than evolving. As a genre, it is more like declaration – ‘this I witnessed’, ‘this I believe’ – than exploration” (Greenspan et al., 2014, p. 194).

From this statement, we can draw a connection with the statement provided by the Encyclopedia of Genocide which talks about the fact that survivor stories, while having subjectivity in them, depict the story as fully as possible, and give the reader/viewer an opportunity to feel the tragedy itself. “The survivor, reporting on his or her direct contact with the events related, brings us into contact, at one remove, with that immediate experience of the event itself” (Greenspan et al., 2014, p. 206). The article then draws a connection between understanding the term genocide and survivor stories by saying that knowledge of genocide cannot be gathered from documents alone. We need to know the human experience in order to really know what happened. Without it, our knowledge cannot be full. “We have no inner compass to guide us and may not recognize and be alert to history repeating itself” (Greenspan et al., 2014, p. 207). Here, the authors not only give a

credit to survivor stories as a historical evidence, but also mention the fact that without individual stories we cannot prevent the history from repeating itself.

After understanding the concept of testimony and the importance it has on the recognition of genocide as a crime against humanity, for my research, it would also be important to understand the concept of transcription, as one of the many ways of transmitting a memory of genocide is doing a transcription of the story that a survivor is telling. For this reason, it would be beneficial to know what Francis Good's article *Voice, Ear and Text* (2007) is suggesting, which is dedicated to examining, analyzing and explaining the proper way of doing a transcription of oral history. In the article, the author talks about the fact that sometimes the editor's decision to transcribe or not to transcribe a particular part of an interview may change the story path dramatically. The article talks about the importance of pauses and repetition of sentences during the interview, and how those little details can be a ground for analysis of the testimony. The article mentions other important aspects of the interview that should be preserved such as punctuation, syntax, and the actual words (changing the words) that the interviewee used. On the other hand, the author tries to give an alternative solution for the issue. According to Good, "Editorial intervention, at any level, only becomes problematic when the reader is not given information that explains the process and the source of changes" (Good, 2007, p. 370)

Another piece of writing that would have a contribution to this research is Kate O'Neill's article *The Decolonizing Potential of Local and Metropolitan Literature of the Rwandan Genocide*, which is dedicated to the examination of the role of literature in the process of raising the awareness of Rwandan Genocide. The article, by examining a number of writings on

Rwandan genocide analyses the importance of literature in the process of providing Western culture by identifying information about Rwanda and its history of crimes against humanity. As the author argues, “Literature is a powerful social tool because it instigates consideration of another’s lived experience among a broad potential readership. Literary expression allows personal resistance to be shared within a community, enabling collective action” (O’Neill, 2012, p. 1). As in the Encyclopedia of Genocide, here as well, the author claims that genocidal literature may actually become a call for action for the reader. Genocide literature can serve as a bridge for readers who are historically, geographically, culturally, or politically removed from the violence under discussion. This literature is educational, supplementing the reader’s understanding of violent conflicts by providing accurate socio-political and historical context. By tracing the social and cultural shifts, which predated the genocide, this violence is rendered understandable. By bringing the example of Rwandan Genocide, the author also emphasizes the importance that the individual stories may have in the process of recognizing the events that took place. She states: “Many of the texts written about the Rwandan Genocide demonstrate a clear interest in decolonizing the representation of Rwandan by emphasizing personal experiences and memories that have consistently been ignored” (O’Neill, 2012, p. 124).

O’Neill also brings up the fact of Rwandan Genocide literature being written for the international reader, which is certainly not the case for the Armenian Genocide that not only has a few numbers of genocidal literature, but also has a fewer number of literature translated into other languages. “The texts produced during the “Écrire Par Devoir de Mémoire” project, like most of the literary texts that have been published about Rwanda since 1994, are not intended for Rwandan readers. These narratives taken written form and are intended for global audiences,

specifically those reading in English or French (O'Neill, 2012, p. 125). Similarly, another article that is dedicated to an examination of genocide survivor story is SanduFrunza's *The Memory of the Holocaust in Primo Levi's If This Is a Man*. By taking the example of the book which was written by a Holocaust survivor Primo Levi, the author talks about the importance of having a literature of genocide survivor not for the nation of the survivor, but for the humanity in general. As the author argues, "Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man* is a central work in understanding the way in which the subjective memory of a Holocaust survival receives a general meaning" (Frunza, 2008, p. 37). Also, the author points out the fact that Levi's documentation of his experience is not an autobiography, but rather it is the experience of humans in general. A similar situation can be found in the speeches of the Armenian genocide survivors. As one of the survivors stated in Svazlian's book: "My past is not only my past, but it is my nation's past as well" (Svazlian, 2004, p. 19).

As a process of international recognition, O'Neill gives a special attention to the process of collecting testimonies of the survivors of genocide. As she argues, reading the actual story of a survivor gives the reader a chance to get engaged with the text both intellectually and emotionally. The author goes on by, one more time, stressing the importance of having a literature for broader audiences by saying: "Literature attempting to generate reflexive national consciousness in its readers must encourage readers to understand the complexity of specific social, political, and cultural situations for specific foreign citizens (O'Neill, 2012, p. 302).

After understanding the general importance that genocide literature may have both for the survivors and the general public, it would make the image clearer if we take a specific example

of a genocide literature. *Bearing Witness to Trauma: An Analysis of Testimonies of Rape in The Men Who Killed Me: Rwandan Survivors of Sexual Violence* is an article focused on incidents of rapes during the Rwandan genocide and the influence it had on those who were affected. By taking an example of a book *The Men Who Killed Me: Rwandan Survivors of Sexual Violence* which is dedicated to the collection of stories of survivors of sexual violence, the authors analyze the effect that genocide literature may have both on the readers and the survivors of trauma. Before going to the examination of the book specifically, the authors talk about the scholarship on historical trauma and its representation both in oral testimonies and written literature. After applying the trauma theory to the analysis of testimonies of victims of sexual violence in Rwanda, the authors bring up an interesting point that while the survivors are the victims of similar atrocities and have many things in common, their opinions on reconciliation vary considerably. This brings to the confirmation of the argument that it is important to collect as many survivor stories as possible, because even though it might seem that few people are enough to tell the bigger story of the nation, proper examination of testimonies would help to understand that every single life story has something valuable to add to the general story. By examining the exact book which was dedicated to the collection of those affected by the sexual violence in Rwanda, the authors come to a conclusion that the book did help and contributed greatly to the process of both raising awareness about the issue and somehow “healing” the pain of victims. However, as the article mentions, the book has a number of ethical and editorial issues which should be considered and corrected, which only adds to the point that there is still a gap to fill in addressing and properly examining survival stories of victims of crimes against humanity.

After collecting and analyzing all the relevant literature on genocide and on the importance of writing down the survivor stories, the research now has a basis to examine the collection of Armenian Genocide survivor stories specifically. The Scientific Council of the National Archives of Armenia published a collection of documents about the Armenian genocide survivor stories (2013). The book not only transcribes the stories themselves (and what is more important, the transcription is in English), but also gives a scientific explanation on the trustworthiness of the documents. The editors of the book, while talking about the contribution that such stories can have on the process of collecting the history of the nation, also mention the fact that such stories give an opportunity to identify the immediate perpetrators of genocide (2013, p. 12). What the editors mean is that in the Armenian scholarship, for the most part, the importance is given to the actual organizers of mass killings, while those who implement the process often stay in the shadow. Thus, from the legal perspective as well, the genocide survivor stories can help to identify the perpetrators and implementers and hold them responsible for their actions. The editors of the book also dedicate a separate paragraph to admitting the fact that the testimonies of genocide survivors are not themselves enough to serve as a scientific or historical proof. As the editors argue, “The alleged facts should be compared with other corroborating evidence, such as official diplomatic correspondence, official state documents, information held in military and other archives and analyzed comprehensively, thoroughly and objectively as a whole” (2013, p. 14).

Another book that is dedicated to the survivor stories of the Armenian Genocide and was mentioned before in this research is *The Armenian genocide and historical memory* written by Verjine Svazlian in 2004. The book is based on the oral testimonies and songs directly recorded

from the generation that survived the Armenian genocide. As the author argues in the book, there have been many studies and collections of documents dedicated to the Armenian genocide, which were translated to a number of languages, but none of those had the actual voice of people, their memories and experiences of those times. Moreover, the book gives a completely different perspective about the Turkish people. Many survivors talk about the relationship they established with Turks, and interestingly, they got only positive things to say about their neighbors. "...not all the Turks were bad; there were nice people among them too. That was the work organized by the Young Turks; otherwise, the people were good and we were constantly in good relations with the Turks" (NektarGasparian, *Survivor from Ardvin*, p.12).

Another study about the Armenian genocide survivor stories is the book *Survivors: An oral history of the Armenian Genocide* written by Donald Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller in 1999. In the book, the authors not only write down the testimonies of Armenian genocide survivors, but also dedicate separate sections to examining people's lives before, during, and after the genocide. Just like in Svazlian's book, here as well, the survivors have a lot of good things to say about their relationship with their Turkish neighbors. A survivor from Konia stated: "Our Turkish neighbors were very good people. They cried so much at our departure" (Miller, 1999, p. 61). Also, several survivors stated that if there had been no good Turks, none of the Armenians would have survived. Thus, while the victim nation may sometimes understandably generalize about the nation of a perpetrator, the survivors themselves are often more careful to distinguish between "good" and "bad" Turks.

Genocide survival stories are an important part of the process of raising the awareness about the atrocities that took place throughout human history. Both oral and written testimonies have a potential of becoming a primary source of information about a particular nation and its history.

The aim of this research is to understand and highlight the influence that oral history about genocide can have on the process of bringing crimes against humanity to the level of international recognition. By using a number of scholarly articles, international experience, and research, the study aims to find the gaps in the case of the use of oral history of the Armenian Genocide literature specifically. Compared to the literature on Holocaust, for instance, the Armenian genocide has much fewer literary pieces on the topic, especially ones with a translation in other languages. As a final destination, this project aims to analyze the various ways through which survivor stories of the Armenian genocide can become a further step towards making the story of one nation a story of the general public.

Research Questions

As one of the main goals of this project is to analyze and examine the importance of individual stories of genocide survivors, the following question would be answered: *How can survival stories contribute to the process of raising awareness and recognition of the Armenian genocide?*

Also, the research aims to suggest examination and analysis of international experience of using the genocide survival stories as a means of education and raising awareness. For this purpose, the following question would be answered: *What are some new perspectives through which we can look at the stories of the Armenian genocide survivors?*

Methodology

In order to understand the role of individual stories in the process of raising awareness on the Armenian genocide and finding new grounds on which those stories could be used, the main research was constructed, first of all, on individual interviews with 5 representatives of different age groups and backgrounds. One of the ways for looking at survivor stories that this paper is going to suggest is connected to education. In order to understand the possible ways through which oral history could be used in educational system, I have chosen 5 representatives from different age groups and backgrounds who would help me to answer the following questions: **1) How is the subject of Genocide being taught in the schools in Armenia?** If the research is going to suggest the usage of oral history and individual stories of the Armenian genocide as a means of educating students, we should first of all understand the details of how the students in schools were and still are presented to the theme of genocide. **2) Are the studies going beyond the topic of the Armenian genocide?** It is also important to understand whether the school system provides the students with an opportunity to research other instances of genocides that happened throughout human history. **3) Are the students in the Armenian schools being introduced to personal stories of individual people who survived the genocide? If not, would they be interested in doing so?**

In order to answer these questions and find gaps and space for improvement in the educational system, the interviews were conducted with one representative from each of the following age groups: 15 years old; 18-23 years old; 24-27 years old; 30-50 years old. The reason for this kind of an age division is to get different insights on the topic from those who are still in school and may be just starting to examine the theme of genocide, those who already graduated from high

school, those who may already be doing a graduate degree, and one representative of older generation who may give a whole new perspective of what education do students get now compared to the educational system in Armenia 20 or 30 years ago.

Another new perspective that would be suggested in this paper is the usage of available stories of the Armenian genocide survivors as means of representation in the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute based on the international experience on the subject. For this reason, there were two research methods used. First of all, in the following section of the paper three instances of international genocide museums which have successfully used oral history of genocide survivors are identified. All museums mentioned in the following section used individual stories as ways of attracting audience, educating visitors on the subject, raising awareness on the particular genocide, and creating a personal connection between the museum visitors and genocide survivors. Furthermore, as the reason for this part of the research is to make some suggestions to the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, I have also conducted an interview with the Former Deputy Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute, Head of Department of Genocide Studies at the Yerevan State Museum (YSM), Member of Advisory Board at the International Association of Genocide Scholars (IAGS) Dr. Suren Manukyan, who not only provided information about the available archives on the Armenian genocide survivor stories, but also contributed to the research by sharing his thoughts and experience on the importance of genocide education and oral history.

Research Findings and Analysis

In the following section I would identify four themes and issues that came up in all of the conducted interviews by bringing relevant quotations and examples from the actual interviews. The further analysis in the paper would help the reader get a detailed insight of some major problems and gaps that I was able to identify in all of the interviews.

Limited time in the Curriculum for Genocide Studies

One of the things that came up in all of the interviews was the fact that there are only two or three hours in the public education curriculum dedicated to the examination of the theme of genocide. All of the interviewees were able to recall that they had an opportunity to study the topic very briefly, as there was not enough time devoted to the subject. As Ani Grigoryan (23 years old, Ararat region) claimed, “Our school curriculum dedicated only two or three classes for covering the topic of genocide. We had a number of events and concerts on April 24 and that is where all of the information I know about the Armenian genocide comes from, not the history class.” The interviewee also mentioned the fact that she got more information about the Armenian genocide from her Armenian Language and Literature classes. “My Armenian literature teacher tried to connect history with literature. We covered the themes of genocide in literature class more.” But still, as she said, the information was not enough because they did not have an opportunity to have more fruitful discussion about the topic, and two or three classes, as the interviewee claimed, were very little for covering such a broad topic. Another interviewee,

Armine Melikyan (26 years old, Yerevan) shared her own perspective on the problem of having limited class time for studying the concept of genocide. As she said, “The problem I see here is with the curriculum itself. The Ministry of Education or the school gives the teacher a certain schedule and the teacher needs to fit to it. There is no room for the teacher to improvise.” Here the interviewee brought up another important issue of teachers being under pressure of fitting a certain type of criteria, in this case, the criteria of following the schedule directly. Whereas, if we think about it, as the topic is both hard and important to cover, the teacher should be provided with some sort of a flexibility to exercise his/her knowledge and skills to cover the subject in the most effective way possible.

Extreme focus on the Armenian genocide, lack of discussion of other instances

All of the interviewees expressed a deep concern about the fact that in school there were and still are covering the topic of only the Armenian Genocide. Although the Armenian genocide is considered to be the first genocide of 20th century and for us as Armenians it is very important to have a deeper understanding about this particular part of our history, is it justified to include only the Armenian genocide as part of the school curriculum? Dr. Suren Manukyan expressed his deep worry that the Armenian schools are covering only the Armenian genocide:

“It’s a very big problem because it creates an impression within the Armenian society that genocide is something that only happened to us. And it’s a huge problem, I believe, because it also creates hardships and unnecessary complexes for young generations, as kids start thinking about questions such as ‘why us?’ ‘maybe it was our fault?’ ‘maybe we did something wrong?’”

As Dr. Manukyan went on explaining, lack of education creates a sense in students that they should avoid the subject of genocide. However, as he stated:

“When you show them that genocide is something that can happen to any nation, happened to many, is still happening, and could happen anytime, you help them overcome that complex. And you also show them that genocide is a humanly made thing which means that we can fight against that as we fight against any disease or disaster. This is why I find it very important to enlarge the scope of kid’s knowledge by going beyond the Armenian genocide and showing the general context of the subject. I really think that we should educate the upcoming generations about genocides such as the Holocaust or the Rwandan genocide which happened only 25 years ago, to make the kids understand that genocide is not a historical thing and it can happen anytime and they need to be prepared to fight against it.”

As Dr. Manukyan mentioned, it is very worrying that we do not cover enough material on genocides besides the Armenian genocide. In all of the interviews I conducted, the only case when an interviewee mentioned about studying other genocides as well was with David Harutyunyan (15 years old) who studies in a private, not public school in Yerevan. As I studied myself in the same school from 2004 to 2015, I was able to identify a number of improvements in the field of genocide education in the school. Here I will also be able to base this particular part of the research on a comparison between my personal experience and the experience of the interviewee mentioned above. During my years of studies at the school, we devoted only three or four classes to the subject of genocide, and the study was concentrated on the Armenian genocide only. However, as David Harutyunyan claimed in the interview, starting from last year, their curriculum not only extended the hours dedicated to covering the subject to one month, but also they covered topics such as the Holocaust, definition of the term genocide, and the

preventive mechanisms one should know. Although the private school in Yerevan provided the students with more or less a general understanding of the concept of genocide, Armine Melikyan, who studied in a public school, said: “We did not even study to understand what is the concept of the term genocide itself. We immediately moved to the Armenian genocide only.”

No discussion on stories of survivors

Throughout this capstone I have had various occasions to talk about the importance and effectiveness of individual stories and how oral history of genocide survivors can potentially become a way of raising awareness and educating people on the subject. For that reason, the questionnaire I used for the interviews included several questions developed to understand how people/students perceive individual stories? Do they find them effective and important? Did/do they study individual stories as part of their class material? As Ani Grigoryan admitted in the interview, she got interested in the subject of genocide because of her love for Komitas who was an Armenian priest, composer, singer, and musicologist. “A lot of information I know about the Armenian genocide, I know because of my love towards Komitas and other Armenian intellectuals of the period.” However, she also mentioned the fact that the information about Komitas and others was not thoroughly covered in the school curriculum, she rather got interested herself and did her own research. In contrast, Manushak Aslanyan, while talking about the importance of individual stories and oral history of the Armenian genocide, found problematic the fact that during her school years, the two or three hour class devoted to the subject was concentrated only on the Armenian intellectuals who were deported. Moreover, she

mentioned the fact that even those stories were not covered in detail. By going on, the interviewee admitted that their school program did not dedicate any time to discussing and studying stories of survivors of genocide. Armine Melikyan, on the other hand, although studied at the school named after Ruben Sevak (an Armenian poet, prose-writer of the Ottoman Empire) also recalled very little information that was provided to them on stories of individual people. David Harutyunyan, on the other hand, admitted that although they also dedicated a little time to studying stories of individual people, still they got an opportunity to discuss the life of survivors such as Aurora Mardiganian.

Are individual stories important?

Another theme that frequently came up in all of the interviews was the importance and effectiveness of personal stories of genocide survivors. In the literature review section of this paper, I brought more than ten sources which gave a detailed explanation on how individual stories can be a priceless tool of raising awareness and triggering action in the society. And as in all of the interviews the concluding part was dedicated to the oral history specifically, I want to bring up some interesting and thought provoking things that the interviewees said during the conversation. As it was mentioned above, one of the interviewees saw a deep connection between her love towards the subject and Komitas. As she argued, she truly felt what the person went through only after understanding the meaning of Komitas' songs. As she admitted, "I felt the sorrow in his songs and had a personal connection with the person who saw a Genocide with his own eyes." Another interviewee brought up a very interesting idea about the importance of individual stories and how they can help in the process of raising awareness on a certain topic.

She brought an example of famous movie and story of Titanic. As she claimed, if we think about it, the whole theme was developed on the love story between two people. And this leads people to being even more interested in all the details of the story. As she said, “even if you’ve never heard about what happened to the Titanic, you surely find out more about it after watching the movie, because you get interested in the personal love story between the two characters. But, at the same time, you learn more about the event itself as well.” The interviewee also brought up an interesting comparison between the example of Titanic movie and the French movie “Mayrig,” which, as she claimed, also contributed to raising awareness about the Armenian genocide by keeping the viewer emotionally connected to one family’s story. As the interviewee analysed, even if one is not concentrated on the topic of the Armenian genocide in the movie, he/she still gets to know more details about it, and feel emotionally connected to characters who went through such thing. Manushak Aslanyan, the oldest among the interviewees, shared her own interpretation of the significance of survival stories. As she argued, survival stories not only keep people emotionally attached to the subject, but they also provide them with an opportunity to get familiar with the historical context in which the events are taking place.

Dr. Manukyan provided a scientific view and information on oral history of the Armenian Genocide. As he claimed, we have approximately 3.000 recorded stories of survivors, which he believed are very important and worthy of using. “I think it is important to educate people with such stories, because in many cases, when we talk about genocide, people perceive it as something abstract and they fail to understand that when we say 1.5 million, we really mean 1.5 million people with 1.5 million personal stories. And when you approach the theme from the perspective of personal stories, it makes the subject even more effective, and the student starts to value the individual who went through all of these stories.” Dr. Manukyan also talked about the

conditions in which those stories were collected. As he mentioned, the problem with oral history collections of the Armenian genocide is in their quality in terms of the level of professionalism. “When I myself listen to the recordings, I see a lot of gaps in the Q&A process. When the interviewer gets an answer to his/her question, he/she rushes to the next question, without realizing that the answer that the survivor gives can bring to another, even more open question. I am saying this in order to stress the fact that when those stories were collected there was no fixed technique and manner of interviewing a person, and oral history was not as developed as it is in our days. But still, there are people like Verjine Svazlian and Richard Hovanissyan who collected a huge number of interviews of the survivors of the Armenian genocide. “If we think about it, the fact of having collection which have been done regardless of all the hardships and problems only strengthens their value”. Dr. Manukyan shared an information about the new project that the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute is starting, which is aimed at transcribing the available stories in order to use them for purposes such as education and raising awareness. “It is a huge, but important work, because it will give those who are interested an opportunity to find anything they are interested in by searching with keywords. And this is something that has not been done before in the case of Armenian Genocide.”

And this discussion leads us to another question: how could a genocide museum use individual stories as part of its exhibition and mission of raising awareness? The next section of the paper will provide the reader with examples of genocide museums in different corners of the world which were very successful in showcasing and using oral history as part of their organization.

How Museums Use Oral History as a way to Represent Genocide

Canadian Museum of Human Rights

The Canadian Museum for Human Rights, located in Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada, at the historic Forks, is the world's first museum dedicated to human rights. The purpose of the museum is to explore the theme of human rights by taking the example of the Canadian community on the subject. The mandate of the museum is to promote the understanding about the importance of human rights and the priceless contribution it could have to the process of making a significant change in the world. Despite of organizing educational programs and a number of exhibitions and events on human rights issues, the museum's website provides a number of published articles on the importance of individual stories, particularly, stories of genocide survivors (available at <https://humanrights.ca/story/the-power-of-individual-stories>)

One of the exhibitions in the museum called Rights of Passage: Canada at 150, which ran from December 2017 to March 2019, was fully dedicated to the stories of people, particularly, stories of 33 people. The aim of the project was to empower and encourage people to share their stories with the world. 2017 marked the 150th anniversary of colonial regime established by Canadian Confederation, which created an aim for a museum of human rights to try to address the stories of violence and abusive relationship. One of the approaches that the Museum took on was to create a special space for an oral history exhibition in a form of short

videos in order to make sure that the community and individuals are sharing their thoughts and experiences on the subject. As one of the curators of the exhibition mentioned, in order to ensure the proper representation of the stories, he asked the interviewees to personally review their transcripts and highlight the parts that they thought were important. Overall, the exhibition was separated into groups that covered different periods of Canadian history such as the period between 1867 to the present times. The exhibition space was separated into years (i.e. 1867-1914; 1915-1960; 1960-1982; 1982-present). For instance, in the space dedicated to the period between 1867 and 1914, the visitors got an opportunity to observe a wall full of newspaper effects and posters from that specific time period. In the period between 1915-1960, people got an opportunity to go back in time by turning the dials on a radio in order to listen to historic broadcasts of the period. If we think about it, the Museum gave people an exclusive opportunity to hear voices of people and what they had to say in the times in which they lived. In the space provided for the period of 1960-1982, visitors were able to choose and select 13 stories that would help them to catch the spirit and know more about the time. In special space called “Defending Sovereignty,” visitors got to watch a number of oral history interviews and short films about the indigenous people of Canada (more information available at <https://humanrights.ca/exhibition/rights-of-passage>).

Montreal Holocaust Museum

The Montreal Holocaust Museum, established in 1979, is Canada's first and the only recognized Holocaust museum. With the aim of educating people from a diversity of backgrounds about the history of the Holocaust, the Museum engages in a number of educational activities which help to promote respect for diversity and human rights and fundamental freedoms. An ongoing exhibition at the Museum called "To Learn, To Feel, To Remember, To Act" is dedicated to representing the stories of Jewish communities before, during, and after the Holocaust. Throughout the exhibition space, the visitors are getting an opportunity to see samples of Jewish clothing during the genocide, the yellow stars that distinguished them from Germans, and of course, the testimonies of the survivors.

Another important exhibition organized in the Montreal Holocaust Museum which ran from April 8 to 26 of 2019, is called "United Against Genocide: Understand, Question, Prevent." The aim of the project is to give the visitors an opportunity to compare and contrast four genocides: The Armenian Genocide, The Cambodian Genocide, The Genocide against Tutsis in Rwanda, and the Holocaust. The exhibition is all about presenting rare archived photos and historical documents, interviews with experts, and of course, testimonies of the survivors. The exhibition is divided into six parts. First of all, it defines the stages of genocide. The next section of the exhibition is dedicated to the demonstration of the role of survivors in the process of transmitting a memory. The panel talks about a number of themes such as the dilemma that the survivors face of whether to speak up or to stay silent, what we can learn from the survivors, and

how the process of sharing history and memory is conducted (more information available at <http://genocide.mhmc.ca/en/>).

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), established in 1993 in Washington D.C., is the United States official memorial dedicated to the Holocaust. The mission of the Museum is to both educate generations about the human tragedy that took place and preserve the memory and stories of survivors. Also, the Museum tries to give food of thought to its visitors about questions such as What are some moral and spiritual themes connected to the Holocaust? What responsibilities do the people have on the subject as citizens of democracy? The Museum reaches its goal by not only organizing events and exhibitions, but also by conducting research and publications, collecting and keeping material evidence, as well as pieces of art and artifacts related to the subject of Holocaust. One of the permanent exhibitions taking place in the museum under the name “The Holocaust” is concentrated on the narrative of Holocaust through artifacts, historical documents, film screening, personal objects and stories. The exhibition not only gives the visitors a visual representation of the life before and during the Holocaust, but it also emphasizes the efforts the survivors put on building new lives and communities in Europe, Israel, and the United States. The exhibition concludes with a screening of the film “Testimony,” in which the survivors of Holocaust and the rescuers share their stories, thoughts, and experiences.

The Museum also gives the visitors an opportunity to personally meet survivors of Holocaust who have voluntarily agreed to participate in the process of connecting and talking with the visitors, sharing their stories and the tragedy that they went through. On the website of the Museum, the visitors have an opportunity to get a detailed information about each and every survivor who have volunteered to be a part of the Museum's oral history projects. The website provides a detailed information about important dates, stories, incidents, and photographs related to a specific survivor. Moreover, whether the survivor is still alive or not, the visitors can still find information about them on the website in form of an article/a story.

Another interesting project conducted by the Museum dedicated to the survivor stories is "Remember Me?" The researchers of the Museum tried to identify the young people who survived the Holocaust, and tried to understand what happened to them after the events were over. The research was conducted with the help of friends and family members of the survivors. The website of the Museum provides photos along with the names and personal stories of all the identified survivors.

The website of the Museum also provides visitors with an opportunity to have an exclusive access to the collections of records of the Museum in forms of photographs, documents, films, and oral history. With the help of a user-friendly website, the visitor could easily find any information available at the museum about the event, its victims and survivors. Not only the collection provides written documents and stories of the survivors, but it also gives visitors an opportunity to get digital transcripts and stories available in the Museum Collection.

Also, visitors have a chance to get both a digital and real-life access to objects of the survivors such as dresses, clothes, jewelry, toys, etc.

Also, every Wednesday and Thursday from March to August, 2019, the Museum organizes a session of a conversation between a Holocaust survivor and visitors. Each hour-long session includes an interview between journalist Bill Benson and one of the survivors. At the end of the meeting, the visitors get an opportunity to be engaged in a Q&A session with the survivor (available at <https://www.ushmm.org/>).

What is this analysis leading us to conclude?

Educating people on a theme such as genocide is a very important thing to do. As Dr. Suren Manukyan mentioned in his interview, “ I always repeat that genocide is an unexpected thing. It always happens unexpectedly, like natural disasters happen. For example, earthquakes also happen unexpectedly, but at least, people are prepared for it. At the very least, they know what to do and where to go and how to act in such situations. Obviously, people cannot prevent an earthquake from happening, but still they know how to deal with it. Genocide is a disaster like this, obviously, not a natural one, but rather, human-made. And I think that the mission of genocide education is to train people to be able to know how to act if such a situation occurs.” Educating generations on genocide can potentially be one of the most effective preventive measures we can use. And first of all, in order to make the process as effective as possible, we

shall first identify the gaps and issues that are present in our educational system. Interviewing different people from different age groups and different backgrounds revealed a number of problems that should be corrected. In our schools, the students are unable to get a deeper understanding of the subject of genocide. They spend a very little amount of time on studying the concept, whereas scholars dedicate years of work to understand the field better. Having such a short period of time dedicated to the topic may create an impression that the subject is either irrelevant or unimportant. Also, as it came up during the interview with Suren Manukyan, another huge problem in the system is the curriculum dedicated to the Armenian genocide only, and what types of hardships and complexes this may lead to in the upcoming generations. Even in the case of the interviewee David Harutyunyan, who claimed that in the private school that he is studying they had an opportunity to discuss the Holocaust, there was still a gap of not having information about other genocides such as the Rwandan or Cambodian Genocides, which did happen relatively late. Studying genocides that happened not that long time ago will create an understanding within the society that genocide is not a historical subject. It is something which could come up any time, as Dr. Manukyan mentioned, very unexpectedly. And the most important mission of educating people on genocide is to prevent future ones from happening. and even if they happen, to have a well-educated society which would know how to prevent them effectively.

Another thing that we should take into consideration is the need of well-educated professionals who could potentially deliver the topic in a comprehensive manner. As it came up in all of the interviews that were discussed above, the history teachers were, for the most part, unable to give a full and detailed knowledge on the subject. Most of the interviewees admitted that if it was not for the combination of History classes with the classes of Armenian Language

and Literature, they would not have had a deeper understanding about the Armenian genocide. Thus, there is a need to both train the available teachers, and also, encourage other professionals such as university instructors and scholars to take part in the process of educating younger generations.

One of the very surprising things that came up in all of the interviews was the fact that none of the interviewees ever visited the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute. This may lead us to a perception that although there is a huge interest in the subject of the Armenian genocide, there is still a room for development for the Museum to become as interactive as possible. As it appeared in the interviews, one of the ways through which we can reach this goal is by using the oral history archives that we have. It was mentioned both by the interviewees and in the literature review of this paper that individual stories have a huge potential of binding the reader/viewer even more to the topic. As soon as the person gets an opportunity to walk in other person's shoes, he/she gets a deeper understanding of the topic, and becomes even more involved in the event itself. In the case of the Armenian genocide, the Genocide Museum-Institute could use the international experience as an example of how to use oral history in various ways and how it could be a powerful tool of both raising awareness and educating people on a subject. International museums that are mentioned in this paper are just a small number of examples of effective use of oral history and personal stories of genocide survivors. As one of the interviewees suggested, "Our museum can create workshops and lectures where they can provide the visitors with videos and stories of the survivors." This could lead us to a conclusion that if we manage to use them effectively, those 3,000 recordings can become 3,000 possible ways of raising awareness and making individual voices heard.

Limitations and avenues for future research

One of the limitations that are present in this research is the interviewees that were chosen for analysis. Although the representatives were all from different ages, backgrounds, and professions, a few limitations are still present. First of all, there were only five people who were interviewed. Although there were a lot of common grounds, concerns, and gaps that were revealed based on the interviews mentioned above, one avenue that I can suggest for a future study is to involve even more interviewees in the research process to make sure that diverse voices and opinions are being heard. Speaking of diversity, there was only one interviewee who was from regional schools, whereas other representatives were from schools in Yerevan. What I would suggest here is to do further research on all of the educational systems in Armenian regions. Also, there was only one representative from a private school, whereas it could be even more beneficial to have a larger number of interviewees from different private schools in Armenia. Another ground for future research that I see is the need to analyze the Armenian History textbooks. Although in this research I have frequently talked about the gaps in the education of genocide, it would be even more revealing if another research is conducted on content analysis of the Armenian History textbooks with the purpose of understanding how the concept of genocide is represented in the context of history and what further improvements could be made. Also, the research could include interviews with history teachers from different corners of Armenia, which would provide another perspective on genocide education in the country.

Conclusion

There is a huge underestimation of the power that genocide survival stories have in terms of raising awareness about injustice, different types of crimes against humanity and atrocities. As living witnesses of horror, abuse, and neglect of human rights, genocide survivor stories, as discussed multiple times in the paper, have a potential of not only raising awareness about the crime of genocide, but also triggering action within the society. In the literature review section of this paper, I wanted to make it vivid the effect that the written stories of genocide survivors (if we consider to write them down) may have on the reader of different ages. As it became evident, the international literature on the subject shows that one of the most effective ways of letting the world know about a particular atrocity that took place is by literature specifically. The reader, by getting familiar with a literary piece or transcript of the story of a genocide survivor is not only getting an information about the event itself, but feels even more emotionally connected to the subject. Further study of the research also contributed to the argument of the importance of survivor stories and oral History in different aspects of life such as education and museums. With both identifying the gaps in genocide studies education in Armenia and international experience on the subject, the research suggested a number of possible ways through which oral history can become a crucial part of genocide education and prevention. In Armenia, as the research established, there is a lack of representation of survivor stories both in the school system and in museums. With both identifying the problems and analyzing the current state of affairs, this study suggests a new perspectives through which the oral history of the Armenian genocide could be perceived and used.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Generic Consent Form Sample

Consent to participate in an interview conducted by **Sona Azatyan**. This is to state that I agree to participate in the following interview under the supervision of Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

PURPOSE: I have been informed that the purpose of the interview is to make a contribution to interviewer's Capstone project to understand and evaluate the importance of oral history in genocide education.

PROCEDURES: I understand that the interview will be conducted in participants' homes or another appropriate place, and recorded on audio and/or video. As a participant I will be asked to share my thoughts and suggestions regarding the topic by using my personal experience as an example. I have been informed that interviews may take approximately an hour, however the participants are free to stop at any time, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the project at any given point. I understand that if I wish to extend the interview for more than an hour, I will be provided that opportunity.

RISKS AND BENEFITS: I understand that this interview involves sharing my personal beliefs and ideas regarding the subject, which will be treated with the utmost care and consideration.

CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION: As a participant, I will have access to all the recorded and interpreted data for verification purposes. Throughout the project, if and when the material produced is in Armenian, I will have the opportunity to review and verify the English translations.

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.

I understand that the data from this project may be published in print or digital format for academic purposes.

In terms of **identification and reproduction** of my interview(**please choose one**):

I agree to **disclose my identity**. I understand that my identity may be revealed in any publications or presentations that may result from this interview.

I agree to the reproduction of sound and images from this interview by any method and in any media for academic purposes, which may include webpages, documentary clips, etc.

OR

__ I understand that my participation in this study is **confidential** (i.e., the student-researcher and the course instructor will know, but will not disclose my identity).

__ I agree that while data from my interview may be published, no sound or images from it may be reproduced.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT.

I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

INTERVIEWEE:

NAME:

SIGNATURE _____ DATE: 19/04/2019

INTERVIEWER:

NAME:

SIGNATURE _____ DATE: 19/04/2019

If at any time you have questions about your rights as an oral history project participant, please contact Dr. Hourig Attarian of the College of Humanities & Social Sciences at AUA (tel.: 060 612769, email: hourig.attarian@aua.am).

Appendix B: Interview Questionnaire

1. Do you like history? Are you particularly interested in the subject of the Armenian History?
2. What do you know about Genocide as a subject for studies? About the Armenian Genocide specifically?
3. What have you studied about the Armenian Genocide? Starting from which age? Do you feel like that was the right time to study the subject?
4. Did you face any psychological difficulties or changes after studying the subject?
5. Have you heard about the Armenian Genocide before studying in school?
6. What do you know about other genocides that happened throughout human history?
7. What was the material you were covering in school? For how long did you study the subject? Do you feel like it was enough to get a detailed information on the subject?
8. Did you talk about individual stories of Armenians during the Genocide? If yes, was it interesting? If no, would you want to include individual life stories in the school curriculum?

Appendix C: Questionnaire 2 (Interview with Suren Manukyan)

1. What do you think about the importance of teaching Genocide? The Armenian Genocide only? What about other genocides?
2. What do you think, from which age students should start learning about genocide? Why?
3. What do you think about genocide being as a separate subject in schools? What about universities?
4. What can you say, as a scholar, about the heritage of oral history on the Armenian Genocide?
5. Do you find the literature and stories on the subject important? Why? Are individual stories important? Can they become a part of teaching process?
6. What do you think, how can a museum contribute to the process of making individual stories and oral history of the Armenian genocide more visible and attention-worthy? What about the international experience of other museums? Anything you can recall?
7. Do you imagine oral history being used in textbooks? Why?
8. Do you think that reading individual stories may help one during the process of learning about a history of a particular case of genocide? Why?