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

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Definition of the Term

Genocide is an *intentional action* to destroy ethnic, national, racial, or religious group, *in whole or in part*, both in peace and in war time (Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 9 December, 1948, United Nations)

How Information on Genocide is Collected?

- Official documents
- National archives
- Telegrams
- Photographs
- **Stories of survivors**

The Aim of the Project is to

- Research and understand the importance of survivor stories based on international experience
- Point out the gaps in the Armenian educational system on the subject of Genocide
- Suggest new perspectives of on using survivor stories based on the experience of other genocides

Literature Review

- *Encyclopedia of Genocide* edited by Israel W. Charny offers a detailed information on any subject related to the topic

“First-person accounts provide a subjective perspective on the horrors and human rights deprivation during the times of genocide.”

- *The Armenian genocide and historical memory* by Verjine Svazlian is a collection of survivor testimonies of the Armenian genocide

“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.”

- The Scientific Council of the National Archives of Armenia published a collection of documents about the Armenian genocide survivor stories (2013)

“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.”

For more information on the literature please see the Reference list.

Research Questions

1. How can survival stories contribute to the process of raising awareness and recognition of the Armenian genocide?
2. What are some new perspectives through which we can look at stories of the Armenian genocide survivors?

Methodology

Interviews with representatives of different age groups and background (public vs private schools, Yerevan vs regions, etc.)

Interview with Dr. Suren Manukyan, Former Deputy Director at the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute

Research on international genocide museums which have successfully used survivor stories as means of representation

Research Findings

Limited time in the curriculum for Genocide Studies. Two or three class hours in the public education curriculum are dedicated to the examination of the topic both in Yerevan and in regions.

Extreme focus on the Armenian genocide, lack of discussion of other instances. The concept of genocide is discussed within the subject of the Armenian History, without any mentioning of other examples of genocides such as the Holocaust or the Rwandan Genocide.

No discussion on stories of survivors. No devotion of class time to discuss stories of individual people who were able to survive the Armenian genocide, even in schools named after Armenian intellectuals executed in 1915

Research Findings

Many students develop their interest towards the topic based on their love towards intellectuals who lived in the time of genocide

Individual stories have a potential of creating an emotional connection between the reader/viewer and the subject

Approximately 3,000 recordings of Armenian genocide survivor stories

New project initiated by the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute to write down the recordings for wider audiences

Research Findings

Canadian Museum of Human Rights

Rights of Passage: Canada at 150 (December 2017 - March 2019) -

Exhibition dedicated to stories of 33 people.

The aim of the project was to encourage people to share their stories.

Visitors were able to see posters and newspapers from a specific time period, listen to historic radio broadcasts, choose 13 survivor accounts

In a special hall called “Defending Sovereignty” visitors watched survivor interviews and films about the indigenous peoples of Canada

Research Findings

Montreal Holocaust Museum

To Learn, to Feel, to Remember, to Act -

An ongoing exhibition at the Museum

Dedicated to representing the stories of Jewish people before, during, and after the Holocaust

United Against Genocide: Understand, Question, Prevent -

April 8-26, 2019

The aim of the project is to compare and contrast four major genocides by using rare archived photos and survivor stories

A separate panel devoted to discussion of the importance of survivor stories

Research Findings

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

The Holocaust -

An ongoing exhibition at the Museum

Concentrated on narrative of Holocaust through artifacts, historical documents, personal objects and stories

Not only gives a visual representation of life before and during the genocide but also illustrates the effort that survivors put in rebuilding new lives

The exhibition concludes with screening of the film “Testimony,” in which survivors of Holocaust share their stories and experiences

Research Findings

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Also gives the visitors an opportunity to meet survivors of Holocaust

The website of the Museum provides a detailed information about every survivor who volunteered to participate in the process

Remember Me? -

Project conducted by Museum researchers to find out what happened to those young people who survived the Holocaust with the help of friends and family members of survivors

The website provides photos, names, and personal stories of all identified survivors

Research Findings

United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Digital collection of records in forms of photographs, documents, films, survivor stories

Access to digital digital transcripts of available stories

Both digital and a real-life access to objects of survivors (dresses, toys, jewelry, etc.)

Concluding Observations

Education is the most powerful tool to prevent future genocides

Having a limited knowledge on the topic may create a distorted perception in the learner, who may think that genocide is something that happened to his/her nation only

Even in private schools, the curriculum does not go beyond discussion on the Holocaust

A need of well-educated professionals to present the topic to the upcoming generations

Lack of interest towards the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute

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