

Description of the Oral History Collection at the Zoryan Institute

by

K.M. Greg Sarkissian and George Shirinian

The following is an expanded version of a presentation made at the “International Conference on Armenian Genocide Oral History Collections in North America: Development, Utilization, Potential,” held at the University of California-Los Angeles, April 2, 2011

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.