

Description of the Oral History Collection at the Zoryan Institute

by

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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, 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.