

ARPA International Film Festival
Armin T. Wegner Humanitarian Award
Presented to Dr. J. Michael Hagopian
October 27, 2006

It is a privilege to be among a dedicated, passionate, talented group such as yourself.

Armin T. Wegner was the very first of some 400 witnesses and survivors of the Armenian Genocide that I interviewed on film 40 years ago this month.

It is with distinct honor that I accept this distinguished award, and the burden of the Wegner legacy that is bequeathed to me.

Dr. Wegner had heard of my film, "Where Are My People?" the first informational film produced on the Armenian Genocide. He sought me out in Thousand Oaks and he and Mrs. Wegner came to our home. I rented a camera from Hollywood and filmed his story.

Six years later, in 1972, Toni and I spent several days with the Wegner's at their home in Rome and again I filmed an interview:

I did not have a sound proof camera, but had a pilotone synced up with a Nagra recorder.

So, I moved into a neighbor's apartment on the 2nd floor and filmed Wegner with a telephoto lens...

...through two open windows, 25 feet away across an alley in between us.

I copied many of his photographs on 16mm film.
Shortly afterwards he mailed to me master prints ...

Two defining stories:

My encounter with Armenian film making has been defined by two stories I have had no control over:

The desert was all around, the wind was blowing wispy clouds past a crescent moon in the Der Zor desert.

I walked up a narrow staircase to interview two Arab brothers

One question led to another:

Yes, we were told our grandmother was an Armenian orphan lost in the desert wilderness.

What was her name?

We think it was Noutiza

Where did her people come from?

A place called Gureun.

And then what happened?

They moved to Aintab. After that to the desert.

My heart was beating faster.

Their voices were quivering.

Were we on a precipice to discover a truth?

True, I had had an aunt. Her name was Nouritza. She had a brother, my father. Her ancestral home was Gureun; they had moved to Aintab.

Who were these brothers?

Were we related?

How horrible was the calamity of 1915 to tear asunder a family, a nation....to sprinkle the deserts with lost relatives!

What a loss it was in human terms. What treasures we lost!

Far away was another desert, in southern Texas. The Alamo was close. A man had died. People said he had come from a strange land far away. Armenia or Romania, they called it.

He had suffered much, we learned. He had lost his family, and he lived alone with a small pipe he called a “duduk”. He always played mournful tunes.

He lived with his tattered books, with many sheets of hand written paper, and a couple of blood stained memorabilia.

Three of us in LA hear about this unknown Armenian.

We appealed to a well known benefactor to underwrite a rescue operation. ... to save the trunks of material. He said he did not give money to such uncertain activities as film making, or research... ..or collection of old trunks.

After all, you can't enshrine your name on a trunk full of memoirs!!

Rather,

He gave his money, he inferred, to buy bricks, to build arches out of mortar, made donations to erect large buildings to display the treasures and reenact the ancient rituals of Armenian culture.

There was no Armenian Film Foundation then. So we gathered some funds among the three of us, and sent one of us to Texas, to pay back rent, and to retrieve from the attic the belongings and the writings of a survivor of the Armenian genocide.

We got there too late.

Three days earlier, everything had been hauled off from the attic and cast into a garbage dump in the deserts of Texas.

We rushed to the dump. Smoke was already arising.

In one desert we had lost over a million, in another part of the world we were losing their heritage.

These two disparate incidents have defined the corpus of my labors in making films about the Armenians---- 15 so far, 7 of them on the genocide.

For almost 60 years now, since 1948 there has been a struggle within me to preserve and transmit a culture.

Not only because it is mine, nor that it is Armenian—

But because our culture is a part of world culture. Preservation and transmission of our culture enhances world culture.

Conversely, civilization advanced in one part of the world advances our own small civilization.

The human race is one. Our destiny is together.

I have been at some detail to mention these things and taken your valuable time, because these are the themes of the Witnesses trilogy for which I am the recipient of the Armin T. Wegner Humanitarian Award.

The trilogy was conceived as an integrated unit, each part dealing with a different aspect of the Genocide:

“Voices”... doc. In a single town;

“Germany” deportation by rail, the Armenians of Western Turkey;

“Caravans” ...along Euphrates of eastern Turkey.

The overall theme of trilogy is the belief that the lack of human rights and the absence of democratic traditions and principles in the Ottoman Empire made possible a genocide.

When we finish the “Caravan”, the third film of the trilogy, we will have remaining the world’s largest, professionally filmed interviews of witnesses, survivors, and scholars. We are now negotiating with USC for the digitization and preservation of this irreplaceable treasure. Tests have already been made by USC to determine the best technical procedures by which to achieve our objective.

So, I look to the future as I stand before you.
Wegner passed to us a legacy of photographic documentation.
I pass to you a legacy of the most authoritative and comprehensive motion picture record of the Armenian Genocide.

There are no longer left any credible survivors.
In my lifetime all survivors will vanish.
The only visual materials remaining of the witnesses will be their voices and images on motion pictures.

Our intention is to make available on the internet to the world-to all mankind, and to you here today, these interviews, with accompanying film footage, still photographs, unfinished scripts and research--- placed on the internet.....

So that future generations of film makers, be they Armenian, odars, or Turks, will create new films,
Using new norms, new techniques, with new inspirations and passions.

This is a visual era. We are now carrying history in our hip pockets or in our purses.

I would be remiss to leave you tonight without trusting at you a challenge.

Allow me, finally, to open some vistas that have not been explored:

The completion of the trilogy and the digital preservation of our film archives is not the end of the road for me or for aspiring young film makers.

For example who has sought to search German attics to retrieve the diaries and photographs of 12,000 German soldiers who saw service in Turkey in 1915?

Who among the scholars and film makers of the world has conducted research in the dry water wells south of the current borders of Turkey to ascertain the genealogical content of human remains, and to investigate the DNA traces of victims of the

Armenian Genocide?

There are many subjects to pursue each worthy of a film.
But, who among us has ventured to make a film on the

The burning of Smyrna
The massacre of Adana
The defense of Van, Aintab...

or...to undertake the colossal task of producing a series of coordinated, curriculum oriented, educational films on the history, geography, economic development, the culture and architecture of the Armenian people, to serve as a course of study such as offered, in an earlier age, by corresponding schools...

to enlighten an Armenian living in a remote town, or to educate children in the Diaspora schools, or even to use in the public schools in the Republic of Armenia.

Parenthetically,

(I have already launched this last idea of a codified and unified educational library of 50 films, by providing materials to Dr. Peter Cowe, occupant of the Endowed Chair of Armenian Language and Culture at UCLA, to take to Erevan and to test the disposition of authorities in the Republic of Armenia.)

If funds are available, what better way than to enable participants in the Arpa International Film Festival, to undertake the creation of a film or two under such project.

That is the torch I pass to you.
That is the challenge before you.

J. Michael Hagopian