

Shoah Foundation to archive testimonies from Armenian Genocide survivors

[By Susan Abram Staff Writer](#)

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Steven Smith and Jerry Papazian work with SHOAH Foundation Institute at the University of Southern California, which is archiving eyewitness accounts of survivors of the Armenian Genocide. (John McCoy/Staff Photographer)

The question would forever link one crime against humanity to another.

"Our war aim does not consist in reaching certain lines, but in the physical destruction of the enemy," Adolf Hitler said in his 1939 speech to justify his proposed invasion of Poland.

"Only thus shall we gain the living space which we need. Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

More than 70 years after Hitler asked that question, the voices of Armenians who survived the Genocide that began in 1915 will join the testimonies of those who survived the Holocaust of World War II, as part of a collaboration between the Shoah Foundation Institute and the USC Institute of Armenian Studies Leadership Council.

"These testimonies exist because (the survivors) wanted the world to know that this happened," said Stephen Smith, executive director for the Shoah Foundation Institute, at the University of Southern California.

The voices and images not only strengthen evidence that such atrocities occurred, but also will show how crimes against humanity are born out of bigotry, prejudice, and intolerance if gone unnoticed, Smith said.

Founded by Steven Spielberg in 1994, the Shoah Foundation Institute includes more than 52,000 digitized testimonies of the survivors and witnesses of the Holocaust. It took more than 15 years not only to record the accounts, but also to index them properly so that scholars, journalists and those serious about learning could find specific stories by name, birth place or experience.

The foundation is now conducting a similar project with more than 400 films made by J. Michael Hagopian. He was a small child when his mother hid him in a well from Turkish soldiers who raided the village of Kharberd in what was then Western Armenia, now part of Turkey.

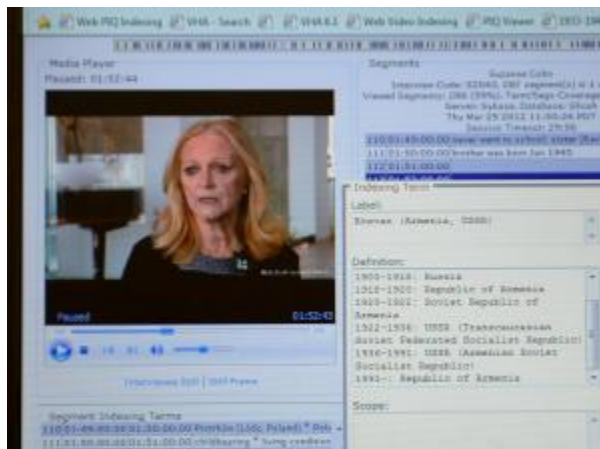
He survived and migrated to the United States and became a filmmaker who recorded the experience of Genocide survivors and witnesses.

Filmmaker Carla Garapedian, who worked with Hagopian and is leading the Armenian Film Foundation's effort to digitize the work, called the availability of the accounts significant.

"This is the first time that Armenian Genocide interviews will be made available on such a wide network, so that universities around the world will be able to access them," she said. "This is an important moment in terms of educating the public, from the point of view of survivors and witnesses. ... In understanding genocide in that comparative way, we may be able to prevent it."

An estimated 1.5 million Armenians died from 1915-23 in what has been called the first genocide of the 20th century.

The Turkish government maintains the deaths were a consequence of betrayal and civil unrest in what was then the Ottoman Empire.



This freeze frame of a computer monitor shows how 8 mm film is being digitized and re-formatted in a way that can be used by researchers. The films contain eyewitness accounts of survivors of the Armenian Genocide. The Armenia project will look much like this one of a Holocaust survivor. (John McCoy/Staff Photographer)

Armenians, however, say the killings involved the systematic cleansing of Christians, which included Assyrians and Pontic Greeks.

But the word genocide has become politicized, with both the United States and Turkish governments refusing to call it such. Armenian-American activists have said the U.S. government won't officially recognize the killings as genocide because it would hurt relations with Turkey, a NATO ally.

In an interview with the Daily News in 2010, months before his death, Hagopian said the accounts he filmed should be enough proof of what occurred.

"The evidence against Turkey is enormous," Hagopian said. "The Germans have admitted what had happened (during the Holocaust). The Turks have to admit it so that there is remorse, and after that atonement and then forgiveness.

"They can't kill babies and take wives and not face retribution."

Samples of survivor and witness testimonies include recollections of babies pulled from their mother's arms by Turkish soldiers then thrown into the air, and caught by a bayonet at the end of a rifle. There are memories of bloodied bodies floating down a river, and the systematic torture of intellectuals.

What makes Hagopian's films that much more connected to the testimonies to the Holocaust is that he was encouraged to record survivors' accounts by Armin Wegner - a German soldier. Wegner was an Army medic who was stationed in the Ottoman Empire during World War I. While there, he took hundreds of photographs documenting what was happening to the Armenians, which eventually resulted in his arrest. But he was able to sneak the photographs out.

Hagopian's first film that related to the genocide was an interview with Wegner.

Both of their contributions, as well as the Shoah Foundation, will be honored at a gala and fundraiser on April 15 by the USC Institute of Armenian Studies' Leadership Council. Funds raised will go toward the continued work of digitizing Hagopian's footage.

"Wegner is very much a real symbol for what we're doing," Smith said. "Wegner was Hitler's (symbolic) nemesis. He was there and photographed the Armenian Genocide. While Hitler is saying who now remembers the Armenians, Wegner says he remembers the Armenians."

The digitalization process, which includes indexing key words in Hagopian's films, should be completed in about two years, said Jerry Papazian, an advisory board member with the USC Institute of Armenian Studies Leadership Council.

"This (project) so defines who we are, this horrible thing that happened to our ancestors," Papazian said. "Our theme has been 'Don't let their voices be forgotten'."

The Shoah Foundation Institute also is working to archive witness accounts of the massacres in Cambodia, Rwanda, and Bosnia.

The goal is to make people aware of what can happen if the world closes its eyes and turns its back.

"I'm delighted that the Armenian community trusts us with their personal community legacy," Smith said. "Trust is the first step. When you don't trust, that's the breeding ground for bigotry, prejudice, and intolerance."

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