

USC News

Armenian Genocide Interviews to be Added to Shoah Foundation Archive

By Talia Cohen on September 2, 2010 1:03 PM

Decades before Steven Spielberg established the Shoah Foundation Institute, filmmaker J. Michael Hagopian interviewed survivors of the first major genocide of the 20th century - the attempt by the Ottoman Turks to annihilate the Armenian people in 1915.

Born to an Armenian family, Hagopian, 96, is a survivor of the Ottoman program of extermination in which 1.5 million people died. He has dedicated his life to the documentation of the Armenian Genocide, amassing an unrivaled collection of visual evidence. In 1979, he established the Armenian Film Foundation, a nonprofit organization that supports the documentation in motion pictures of Armenian heritage and life.

On April 13, the Shoah Foundation Institute signed an agreement with the Armenian Film Foundation, as well as J. Michael and Antoinette Hagopian, paving the way for interviews with Armenian Genocide survivors and eyewitnesses to become part of the institute's visual history archive.

“As a preliminary step toward including Armenian Genocide survivor testimonies in the archive, our agreement with the Armenian Film Foundation is a major milestone,” said Stephen Smith, USC Shoah Foundation Institute executive director. “This project will help preserve evidence of a genocide that must be acknowledged. It will honor the memory of those whose lives were taken, and it will ensure that future generations are able to learn from individuals who experienced the Armenian Genocide firsthand.”

Funds must be raised before individuals can digitize, index, preserve and disseminate the filmed testimonies collected by Hagopian and the Armenian Film Foundation between 1968 and 2004. Once the process is complete, the testimonies will become accessible through the visual history archive, which contains nearly 52,000 video testimonies of Holocaust survivors and other witnesses.

“We believe this agreement is the beginning of a long-term partnership with the USC Shoah Foundation Institute that will promote the study and prevention of future genocides,” Hagopian said.

“Inclusion of these filmed genocide survivor interviews, a ‘national treasure’ of the Armenian people, side-by-side with testimonies of Holocaust survivors in an archive that may be accessed and searched around the world, will finally help us fulfill our mission of disseminating these eyewitness accounts worldwide.”

Hagopian has long recognized the need to preserve the memories of Armenian Genocide survivors. He began filming interviews in 1968, and the Armenian Film Foundation expanded the project in 1982. The foundation's archive currently contains nearly 400 filmed interviews with survivors and other eyewitnesses.

The voices of these witnesses echo from all corners of the world. Although a majority of the interviews are in English or Armenian (some in rare dialects), others are in Arabic, French, German, Greek, Kurdish, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. The interviews cover experiences that took place in more than 30 cities and towns of Anatolia, in what is now eastern Turkey.

The Armenian Film Foundation's testimony project was in progress when the USC Shoah Foundation Institute was interviewing Holocaust survivors and other witnesses in the 1990s. The institute's visual history archive is now one of the largest video digital libraries — nearly 52,000 testimonies represent 56 countries and 32 languages — and a basis for education and scholarship around the world.

The institute recently began taking steps to broaden the archive by including memories of other genocides to be used for educational purposes alongside the memories of Holocaust witnesses.

In 2006, the Shoah Foundation Institute became part of USC. Not long after, Donald Miller, USC professor of religion and sociology and executive director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture, approached the Armenian Film Foundation with the idea that the institute might offer the most advanced capabilities for Hagopian's 400 filmed eyewitness testimonies to be disseminated worldwide.

With the help of Jerry Papazian, a member of the Armenian Film Foundation board of directors, a plan was forged to preserve the foundation's genocide archive and disseminate the 400 interviews through the institute.