

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARA OSHAGAN AND LEVON PARIAN

An Exhibit by The Genocide Project and Accompanying Lesson Plan by The Genocide Education Project

Self-Guided Activities for Grades 7-12

Introduction

About The Genocide Education Project

The Genocide Education Project's mission is to help prevent genocide by assisting educators, students, and educational organizations with teaching and learning about genocide and other major human rights violations, with specific focus on the Armenian Genocide. It is a separate organization from the Genocide Project. For more information about The Genocide Education Project, please visit www.GenocideEducation.org.

About the Genocide Project and the Artists

Ara Oshagan and Levon Parian are artists working on long-term photographic projects. In 1995, they began documenting survivors of the Armenian Genocide, a project that evolved to also include oral history and is now called The Genocide Project with an exhibit called *iwitness*. Working with a team of oral historians, the photographs were exhibited at the Downey Museum of Art in 1999. This work was also published in the *LA Times Sunday Magazine*, in May 1999. Exhibits of this work are ongoing.

The Armenian Genocide

The Armenian Genocide occurred in the Ottoman Empire (now Turkey) during World War I between the years 1915 and 1923. 1.5 million Armenians were massacred—approximately half of the Armenian population living in their historic homeland—and those who survived were forced out of those lands forever. The perpetrators of the genocide were led by the Committee of Union and Progress, the political party with control over the Ottoman government at the time. News about this “crime against civilization” was reported in major newspapers and journals around the world. The Near East Relief and other humanitarian groups were formed to provide aid for the Armenians and many politicians also lobbied to protect the Armenians. The great tragedy prompted the American Red Cross to make its first international assistance program that of providing aid and services to the surviving, destitute Armenians.

In the end, the Armenians were forgotten as political alliances shifted and that chapter of history was closed. The hope of a Western-oriented Turkey by international governments overtook the need to rectify the crimes committed against the Armenians. Turkey did secularize, the remaining Christian populations were purged, and a campaign of denial ensued. To this day, the Turkish government denies that a genocide against the Armenians occurred. Their efforts to continue this denial includes a multifaceted international campaign and the severely enforced suppression of freedom of speech about the issue for Turkish citizens.

* For more information about the Armenian Genocide please visit www.TeachGenocide.com.

A Note from the Artists for Teachers

The black background... It was an important conceptual choice for the artists. Posing the subject in front of the black background disassociates the survivor from his/her current environment, that is, it wipes out any context referring to when or where the photos were taken. The context we want to create for the exhibit is the Armenian Genocide and the survivor's personal testimony. There is an effort here to transform the survivor 90 years back to the time of the Genocide. We wipe-out the current-day in the photograph and the reader replaces that context with what is told in the oral history, adding to the emotional impact of the exhibit. The visuals and oral history work in a symbiotic way in attempting to achieve this.

The black background also symbolizes the Genocide itself. It represents death and the obliteration of the survivor's former life, home, and in most cases, family. The single light that is cast onto their faces is the light of survival, the light of life, lifting them out of the darkness. They are survivors, rising above the Genocide and the death and darkness behind them. The word "survivor" comes from the French, *survivre*, literally meaning "to live above" or to "be alive atop." The light of survival and black of death - these two concepts give deeper meaning to the portraits. Though many viewers will not intellectually grasp this symbolic meaning in the work, they may respond to it emotionally, and that is the whole point.

The concentration on the eyes... Almost all the subjects are looking directly at the camera, that is, at the viewer. The "witnessing" of the Genocide was done with the eyes and we have concentrated our work on the "stare of the witness." The eyes are telling the story, because it was these eyes that saw it happen. They are staring at the viewer while re-telling their story, in a sense making the viewer a "witness to the witnessing" by the survivors.

The pairing of the faces with the hands... Just as the eyes tell the story, a person's hands also tell a story. We use these second images to expand the narrative not only by the presence of the hands themselves but by what the hands are actually doing. Sometimes the hands reflect an action that the survivor talks about in the oral history (for instance, Haig Baronian makes a cutting gesture to echo the way his grandmother was killed in front of his eyes). Sometimes, we show the tattoos (for instance, with Edward Racoubian) with which survivors were branded during the Genocide. Sometimes the hands will reflect something about the person in general (as in Arpiar Missakian, who holds military medals earned over his long service to the US).

Activities for Students

Activity: Identifying Themes in Oshagan and Parian's Work

Look at each photograph. Now, view the photographs for a second time and pay particular attention to all of them and read the accompanying survivor testimonies. After you have read each testimony and studied the photographs, answer the questions below.

1. When were the photographs taken?
2. What time period is discussed in the text?
3. Why was the title "*iwitness*" used for this exhibit? Discuss the subject matter of the photographs and the text beside the photos in answering the question.
4. Why do you think some of the portraits are paired with hands? What do the hands tell you that the faces may not?
5. The survivors were between 80 and 100 years old when the photographs were taken. They are speaking of events that happened to them when most of them were less than 10 years old. Can you remember anything from when you were 5 or 6 years old? Why do you think survivors remember so many specific details from so long ago?
6. What could be a unifying theme for all the photographs and testimony in the exhibit?
7. How do you think Oshagan and Parian felt about their subjects? What did they want the viewer to know about their subjects?

Activity: Investigating One Photograph

Pick one photograph and write the name of the person pictured on the top of a piece of paper and then answer the questions below.

A. Without reading the accompanying text answer the following questions.

- 1) What do you first notice in this picture?
- 2) Who is in this picture?
- 3) Look at how the image is cropped or "framed." What is included in the picture? Can you tell if anything was left out?
- 4) Look at the person's expression, posture, and hands. How do you think the person feels?
- 5) What do you think Oshagan and Parian wanted us to think or feel when looking at this picture?

B. Read the testimony (text) with the photograph.

- 1) What do you think and feel after reading the testimony?
- 2) What new thoughts do you have about the picture now that you've been looking at it for several minutes as opposed to when you first saw it?

Activity: A Closer Look

Choose a new photograph to study and write the person's name on your paper and then answer the questions below.

Write a brief paragraph describing this person. What does he or she look like? What might the person be feeling? Much of the testimony in the exhibit is assembled in short fragments from this person's experience. In the space below, imagine and write about what you think may have happened to this person after the story he/she tells?

If you could ask this person three questions, what would those questions be? And, how do you think the survivor would respond?

1: Question:

Answer:

2. Question:

Answer:

3. Question:

Answer:

At School or Home

Activity: Thinking Back on the *i*witness Exhibit

Imagine you are going to be photographed and that the purpose of the photograph is to describe who you are, the times you live in, and reflect an experience or experiences that are important to you. Write a paragraph that would include your "testimony" or life story. Also write out instructions for the photographer including the following information:

- The location or setting for the picture
- Any objects the photographer should include
- Where objects should be placed in location to you (ex. You should be holding a picture or diary)
- Whether the photograph should be a close-up or not
- Decide if the photograph should be in color or black and white and why
- Describe the overall mood that should be conveyed.

i witness

An Exhibit By The Genocide Project Oral and Visual Documentation of Survivors of the Armenian Genocide PHOTOGRAPHS BY ARA OSHAGAN AND LEVON PARIAN

The exhibit is also available online at www.teachgenocide.com/survivoraccounts

EDWARD RACOUBIAN

born 1906, Sepasdia (Sivas)



We walked for many days, occasionally running across small lakes and rivers. After awhile we saw corpses on the shores of these lakes. Then we began seeing them along the path: twisted corpses, blackened by the sun and bloated. Their stench was horrible. Vultures circled the skies above us, waiting for their evening meal.

At one point, we came upon a small hole in the ground. It was a little deeper than average height and 25-30 people could easily fit in it. We lowered ourselves down into it. There was no water in it but the bottom was muddy. We began sucking on the mud. Some of the women made teats with their shirts filled with mud and suckled on them like children. We were there for about a half hour. If we hadn't been forced out, that would have been our best grave.

Many days later we reached the Euphrates River and despite the hundreds of bodies floating in it, we drank from it like there was no tomorrow. We quenched our thirst for the first time since our departure. They put us on small boats and we crossed to the other side. From there we walked all the way to Ras-ul-Ain.

Of a caravan of nearly 10,000 people, there were now only some of us 300 left. My aunt, my sisters, my brothers had all died or disappeared. Only my mother and I were left. We decided to hide and take refuge with some Arab nomads. My mother died there under their tents. They did not treat me well—they kept me hungry and beat me often and they branded me as their own.

KRISTINE HAGOPIAN

born 1906, Smyrna (Izmir)



We had already been deported once, in 1915, sent towards Der-Zor. But, my uncle's friend had connections in the government and he had us ordered back to Izmir.

Orders came again that everyone must gather in front of the Armenian church to be deported. My father refused to go and told us not to worry. He didn't think the Turkish government would do anything to him, since he was a government employee himself.

Twelve Turkish soldiers and an official came very early the next morning. We were still asleep. They dragged us out in our nightgowns and lined us up against the living room wall. Then the official ordered my father to lie down on the ground... they are dirty the Turks... very dirty... I can't say what they did to him. They raped him! Raped! Just like that. Right in front of us. And that official made us watch. He whipped us if we turned away. My mother lost consciousness and fell to the floor.

Afterwards, we couldn't find our father. My mother looked for him frantically. He was in the attic, trying to hang himself. Fortunately, my mother found him before it was too late.

My father did eventually kill himself—later, after we escaped.

SAM KADORIAN

*born 1907, Hüsenig, Kharpert
(Harput)*



They took us from Hüsenig, to Mezre, to Kharpert to Malatia and then, after a couple of days walk, to the shores of the Euphrates River. It was around noon when we got there and we camped. For a while, we were left alone. Sometime later, Turkish gendarmes came over and grabbed all the boys from 5 to 10 years old. I was about 7 or 8. They grabbed me too. They threw us all into a pile on the sandy beach and started jabbing us with their swords and bayonets. I must've been in the center because only one sword got me... nipped my cheek... here, my cheek. But, I couldn't cry. I was covered with blood from the other bodies on top of me, but I couldn't cry. If had, I would not be here today.

When it was getting dark, my grandmother found me. She picked me up and consoled me. It hurt so much. I was crying and she put me on her shoulder and walked around.

Then, some of the other parents came looking for their children. They mostly found dead bodies. The river bank there was very sandy. Some of them dug graves with their bare hands—shallow graves—and tried to bury their children in them. Others, just pushed them into the river, they pushed them into the Euphrates. Their little bodies floated away.

SION ABAJIAN

born. 1908, Marash



The crowds were huge in Meskeneh. We were in the middle of a vast sandy area and the Armenians there were from all over, not only from Marash. We had no water and gendarmes would not give us any. There were only two gendarmes for that huge crowd. Just two. Wasn't there a single man among us who could have killed them? We were going to die anyway. Why did we obey those two gendarmes so sheepishly?

The word was that from Meskeneh, we were going to be deported to Der-Zor. My father had brought along a tent that was black on one side and white on the other. Each time gendarmes approached us to send another group to Der-Zor, my father would move the tent. He would pitch it on the other side of the crowd—as far away as possible. We were constantly moving. He bought us quite a bit of time that way.

Eventually, we crossed the Euphrates River to Rakka where we found an abandoned house—with no doors or windows—and we squatted there. But we still had no food. We used to eat grass. We used to pick grains from animal waste, wash them and then in tin cans fry them to eat. We used to say: "Oh, mommy, if we ever go back to Marash, just give us fried wheat and it will be enough."

EDWARD BEDIKIAN

born 1902, Sepasdia (Sivas)



There was a girl, a girl who I had befriended on the road, earlier. Her name was Satenig. I remember her very well. She was not too strong. I saw her again in that basement. In the basement of the school where they had thrown us. She was there. She had a little bit of money and she gave it to me. "Don't let them take me," she said. "Don't let them take me." They would come around everyday and take whoever was dead or very weak. She was not in good shape, she was very weak. I stood her up and leaned on her. Held her up, so. They came. I was holding her up, leaning her up against the wall. But they saw her and took her... took her...

HAIG BARONIAN

born 1908, Papert (Baiburt)



I do not remember how many days our decimated caravan marched southward toward the Euphrates River. Day by day the men contingent of the caravan got smaller and smaller. Under pretext of not killing them if they would hand over liras and gold coins, men would be milked by the gendarmes of what little money they had. Then they would be killed anyway.

Days wore on. We marched through mountain roads and valleys. Those who could not keep up were put out of their misery. Always bodies were found strewn by the wayside. The caravan was getting smaller each day. At one place, my little grandmother, like Jeremiah incarnate, loudly cursed the Turkish government for their inhumanity, pointing to us children she asked, “What is the fault of children to be subjected to such suffering.” It was too much for a gendarme to bear, he pulled out his dagger and plunged it into my grandmother’s back. The more he plunged his dagger, the more my beloved Nana asked for heaven’s curses on him and his kind. Unable to silence her with repeated dagger thrusts, the gendarme mercifully pumped some bullets into her and ended her life. First my uncle, now my grandmother were left unmourned and unburied by the wayside.

We moved on.

ARPIAR MISSAKIAN

born 1894, Kessab



In 1909, during the Adana massacres, Turkish soldiers attacked Kessab. I was merely a boy then. They were 20,000 strong with Mausers and other artillery. The men of our town fought back, my father among them, with ancient hunting rifles. We lost 50-60 men before we fled. We returned 5-6 days later to find all our houses burned to the ground. It took us months to rebuild.

In 1915, we were the last to be deported out of Kessab because we were Protestant. The American Ambassador in Bolis had apparently secured guarantees for our safety, but we were deported anyway. They took us toward Der-Zor—the interior Syrian Desert. Our whole family: my father, mother, four brothers, two sisters. I was 20-21, at the time. We loaded everything we had on mules and horses and set out under armed guards. They took us to Meskeneh on the Euphrates river. Meskeneh was a huge outdoor camp where ten of thousands of Armenians had been deported—bit by bit they were sent to Der-Zor, to their death. We were there for awhile. We lived under tents along with a lot of others from Kessab. Most of the time we had nothing to eat. Sometimes my father would buy bread from the soldiers but they had mixed sand with the flour—so we ate this hard bread and sand crunched under our teeth.

Meskeneh was a horrible, horrible place. 60,000 Armenians had been buried under the sand there. When a sandstorm hit, it would blow away a lot of the sand and uncover those remains. Bones, bones, bones were everywhere then. Wherever you looked, wherever you walked.

**HAYASTAN MAGHAKIAN
TERZIAN**

born 1903, Pazmashen, Kharpert (Harpoon)



My brother-in-law was American Consul Davis' body guard in Mezre and the consul himself saved my father's life. There was a Turkish gendarme by the name of Shadhe who wanted to kill my father. Consul Davis came all the way to our door in Pazmashen. My father was hiding in the back, in the wood shed. He came on his horse and took my father back with him to the consulate.

When the deportations began, I went to Mezre to say goodbye to my father. He cried. The consul saw him and told me to stay. Later, my mother escaped from the deportation and also came to the consulate. We were in the American consulate during the deportations. Consul Davis saved us. Everybody else, my sisters, my maternal aunt—all of them, all of them—were deported. Our whole village was wiped out.

We lived in the consulate until 1922. On September 7, 1922, our family left Kharpert along with 250 Armenian orphans on horses and wagons. My father was asked by the Near East Relief to oversee the transportation of these orphans from Kharpert to Aleppo.

From Aleppo we went to Beirut, then to Marseille and then by ship we came to Providence, Rhode Island.