Restorative Memory: Eternalizing and Empowering Narratives of Syrian-Armenian Refugees
Armenia
Claremont McKenna College
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Section I
Project Goals: The aim of our project was to collect the testimonies of Syrian-Armenians who have resettled in Armenia due to the Syrian Conflict. We wanted to preserve whole histories of this community from stories of their ancestors’ experiences around the Armenian Genocide, to their own lives in Syria, their experience of the war, and finally building new lives in Armenia. We will archive these oral histories of the community’s 100-year history of displacement and also prosperity in order to preserve them for future generations. Furthermore, we hope that these testimonies can humanize the aggregate statistics that are thrown around when speaking of refugees, and inform research analyses, potential court cases, or advocacy efforts that seek to help these refugees and others now and into the future.

Fundraising: None. However, as we maintain our archive, we may to apply to more funding as needed.

Project Implementation: Once we arrived in Armenia, we spent the first three weeks meeting with partner organizations to gain a better understanding of how our project could be implemented on the ground. These organizations connected us to potential interviewees and provided us countless other types of support and advice. They include Aleppo Compatriotic Charitable Organization, Mission Armenia, Mission East, IDEA Foundation, the National Armenian Students Association, Ana Kamay (an art curator/journalist), Creative Armenia, UNHCR, American University of Armenian, Birthright Armenia, USC’s Shoah Foundation and Institute for Armenian Studies, and further individual contacts. Additionally, from the US we had the support of Carla Garapedian and her Pomegranate Foundation who will help us archive the interviews online, as well as the UCLA Oral History Research Center with whom we worked to prepare ourselves through their oral history trainings.

In the next four and a half weeks we conducted our interviews, and collected 65 interviews with 82 individuals in total, passing our goal of 40 interviews. Our aim was to collect the interviews on video, as we did with 40, and we recorded the remaining 25 with voice or transcripts as the interviewees felt comfortable. About half of the interviews came from connections through the Aleppo NGO who also provided us space to conduct the interviews, and the other half came from our other partners and connections. We interviewed a diverse cross-section of Syrian Armenians including business owners, vulnerable families, students, the elderly, scholars, and an equal representation of men and women.

While we were unable to conduct the weekly workshops as we planned in our original proposal due to logistical difficulties, we still found ways to connect to our interviewees outside of the interview times. One of the best examples of this, was with the women of the Zoravar Asdvazazin Church who welcomed us to their church group and coffee hour every Friday. These moments getting to talk with our interviewees further were some of the most enriching elements of the project as they helped us build trust and interest regarding our project in the community and also impacted how we planned the project.

Project Impact: During the interview process we heard and noticed in our interviewees that telling their own stories and their families’ stories was meaningful and beneficial to them. For some, it was part of a healing process to speak out about difficult moments, and for others, it was important to speak to make sure their stories were heard and spread. We found that many interviewees saw great importance in the historical documentation aspect of our project because they regret that so many Armenian stories from the Genocide had been lost, and by telling their stories now they were themselves were helping to reverse that trend. As for the long-term impact, in the next months, we will transcribe all of the interviews so that videos can be edited and subtitled. Then, we will archive the interviews with the Pomegranate Foundation and create our own website that will be more for interactive and educational purposes. Even beyond these steps, Anoush plans to return to Armenia in February and will add more interviews to archives and websites. Additionally, she plans to write either a children’s book or a play highlighting several of the stories in a way that can allow people to resonate with these individuals in a humanizing
way. We will also reach out to different news outlets, university research centers, and organizations like Human Rights Watch or the UNHCR to spread the message about the interviews so that people can use them for their own initiatives and projects. For example, the Aleppo NGO already has plans to use the videos in their “Adopt a Family” project as fundraising materials. We hope our archive continues to grow and that others hopefully will not only use it, but even contribute as well.

Section II
Definition of Peace: Peace can be defined abstractly or concretely. Peace, in its most abstract and ideal form, would be a state where people live at ease, without worry of the dangers of prejudice. It is a state in which societies lack the need to destroy the other—when the people who make up the society see themselves as equals without inferiors—when there is no dehumanization or discrimination by one group or person onto another. But, if we define peace more concretely or practically, we can think of it as the eradication of violence, fighting, destruction, and armed animosity. It is the coexistence of different groups or different ideologies, without fighting or outright tension.

We believe that for peace to be achieved there must of course be a cessation of violence, concretely, but there must also be deeper changes to the original systems and conditions that created the violence in the first place. In other words, the abstract definition of peace must be realized. Peace requires that justice be found for the victims/survivors, and that all of the victims, survivors, and perpetrators find a new balance that rights the wrongs of what occurred. This definition of peace is particularly informed by our experience as ancestors of Armenian Genocide survivors. We no longer experience the violence our great-grandparents did, but we know that we must keep fighting for reconciliation and recognition from the Turkish government regarding what happened 100 years ago.

Contribution to Peace: Our project contributes to peace because it archives people’s memories and lived experiences to spur conversations, research, or even court cases about how to (re)create a Syrian-Armenian/Syrian/Armenian community that can heal from the past and solve some of the underlying structures that caused the war. Our testimonies on their own, and especially alongside other diverse testimonies out of Syria, are an important part of such rebuilding work. To outside audiences, this project can teach generally and specifically about the refugee crisis, with Armenians as a prime example. For Syrians (Armenian or not) themselves, we hope this project can preserve Syrian-Armenian traditions and culture, which are threatened because more than half of the Armenian population in Syria has been dispersed, and also allow for examination of both the positives and problems found in pre-war Syria.

Personal Impact: Through this project we realized that while it is easy to group and categorize people based on recognizable external identities like ethnicity, as to make it easier for us to understand their actions and behavior, it is also divisive and often inaccurate to do so. We found that oral history is a way to combat generalizing and to reveal all the detailed textures and differences within a community that make each group and individual unique. Foreign media coverage of Syria, especially tends to make broad statements based on sectarian or political assumptions, and we hope that our archive can combat these biases for our general audience as it did for ourselves.

Personal Statements: “Everyone has a story to tell and everyone has the power to move another person to feel something, and in effect, do something. So much of our action is motivated by what we feel and these stories have the power to move people to act...they are the human element that is represented in every refugee story past and present, and they just need an outlet to be heard. There is a cliché that describes this type of work as ”giving a voice to the voiceless” but what’s beautiful about storytelling is that there are no voiceless, only those whose voices must be shared.” -Anoush Baghdassarian

“Working on our Syrian-Armenian oral history project opened my mind to a reexamination of the ideas of homeland, Diaspora, and belonging, on both a personal and political level. In this way, I think our project explores one of the deepest issues facing humanity, particularly in the broader Middle East: how to build societies that fully respect the diversity of individuals and communities while still forging unity and understanding across those differences.”- Ani Schug
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Anoush and Ani dancing to Armenian music with Antranik, a Syrian-Armenian

Some of the best Syrian-Armenian friends we made, who also are incredibly talented and inspirational business owners!

From right to left, Anoush, Ani, and Hagop, pre-interview with Rita