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Stone, Wood, Fire: Remembering the Armenian Genocide in Binghamton and Yerevan

Linda Zheng
Sidney Dement

Introduction

It has been over a century since 1.5 million Armenian men, women, and children were deported and exterminated from the Ottoman Empire during the **Armenian Genocide of 1915**. Despite the amount of time that has passed, many stories of courage, sacrifice, or loss continue to be told behind closed doors. In the podcast *Stone, Wood, Fire*, some of these stories have surfaced through interviews with descendants of survivors in Binghamton, NY and Yerevan, Armenia. **The main objective** of this project was to establish a thoughtful way to learn about tragedies such as the Armenian Genocide. A **secondary objective** was to understand how commemoration has taken place amongst Armenians and the Armenian diaspora. The podcast was not intended to be a conclusive overview of the Armenian Genocide or its far-reaching impacts, rather it presents a humble yet powerful example of how oral story-telling can answer a few of the questions that have lingered since the Armenian Genocide.

Materials & Methods

Materials:

There were three different materials that were necessary for this project: 1. Literature, 2. Audio Equipment, and 3. Software. Literature review included works by the historian Taner Akcam, personal memoirs of survivors, and data collected from Newspapers.com and the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute website. Audio equipment included the Zoom H4N Pro field recorder, Lavalier Mics, etc. Podcast Software included Audacity, for editing the raw audio, and Anchor, for distribution to various platforms.

Methods:

Scripts were written for each episode and preliminary questions were prepared for each interview. All the interviews were around 1-2 hours. The main questions that were asked centered around family, commemoration, and recognition. Each complete episode was produced to be 20 minutes or less.

Example Questions:

- 1) How was your family affected by the Armenian Genocide?
- 2) How do you participate in commemoration?
- 3) Is recognition of the Armenian Genocide important?

Participants:

In Binghamton, interviewees were selected from members of St. Gregory The Illuminator Armenian Church, the main center for Armenian activities and gatherings in the area. In Armenia, the interviewees were selected at random, according to those who were willing to participate in the project. This included members of my host family, employees from my internship, and others that I met during my short stay in Armenia. Due to the sensitive nature of my project, there were some participants who could not be included in the project but who supported the project through insightful conversations I had with them.

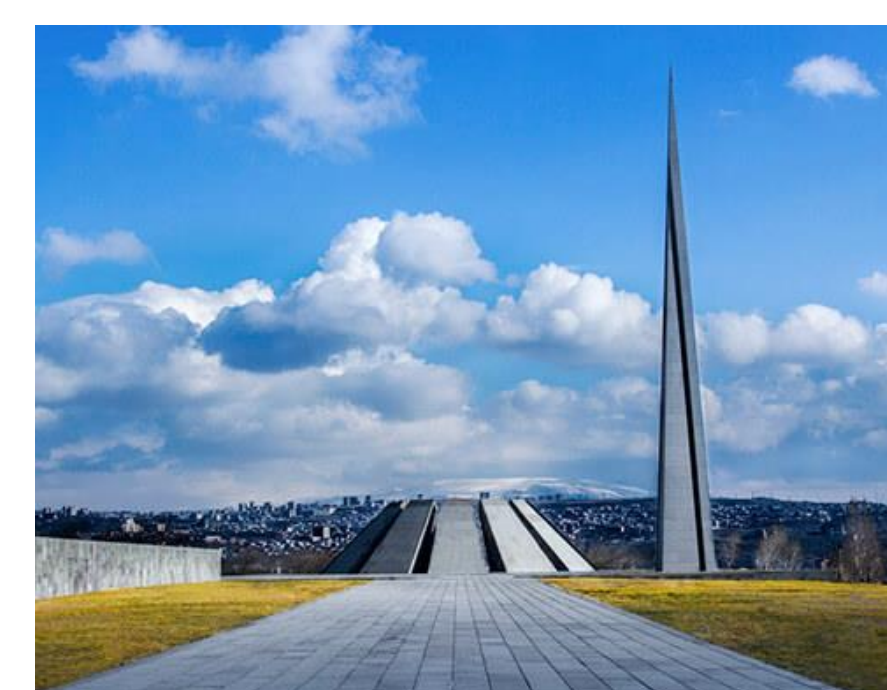
Binghamton

Armenians who survived the Genocide began moving to Binghamton in **1923**. Armenian charities, missionaries, and family members brought survivors over from orphanages and settlement camps in Syria, Greece, and Egypt. Many Armenians worked in **shoe factories** such as Endicott-Johnson, Dunn and McCarthy, and Gotham shoe company. In **1928**, the Armenian community purchased the former Ross Memorial Presbyterian Church to renovate it and convert it into an Armenian Church. The new Armenian Apostolic Church held its first service in August 1928 and was given the name "**St. Gregory the Illuminator Armenian Church.**" To commemorate the Armenian Genocide, trees were planted at the south entrance of the Washington Street Bridge on **April 24th, 2001** in the presence of the survivors and Armenian community members. Three years later, on **April 24th, 2004**, a black marble monument was added to the memorial.



Yerevan

Before gaining its independence on **September 21, 1991**, Armenia was a member of the Soviet Union. In Soviet Armenia, it was **prohibited** to practice a national ideology which made commemoration of the Armenian Genocide taboo. On the **50th Anniversary** of the Armenian Genocide, after decades of silence, 100,000 protesters gathered for a demonstration that would last 24 hours to call for the **official recognition** of the Armenian Genocide by the Soviet Union and for the construction of a **memorial** in honor of the victims of the Genocide. An event of this scale was unheard of in the Soviet Union and marks a unique turning point in history. In 1966, a year after the protests, construction of the memorial began and was completed in November 1967. The **Tsitsernakaberd Memorial** is the official memorial in Armenia dedicated to the victims of the Armenian Genocide. Every **April 24th**, Remembrance Day for the Armenian Genocide, people across Armenia come together to walk towards the memorial. Over time, **non-traditional forms** of commemoration have also developed in Armenia, marking a shift in how remembrance is taking place.



Results



Episode 1: The Armenian Diaspora in Binghamton: Part 1

The Armenian Genocide of 1915 dispersed many Armenians all around the world. A few of them ended up in Binghamton, a small city in Upstate New York. In this episode, we talk to descendants of the survivors in Binghamton to hear more about how religion brought them together as a community.

Episode 2: The Armenian Diaspora in Binghamton: Part 2

After Armenians settled in Binghamton, they formed a small community through their shared religion and collective trauma. For years, the survivors could not talk about the Genocide, but now that the children and grandchildren of these survivors have grown up, the descendants have taken it upon themselves to commemorate their national tragedy.

Episode 3: Commemoration in Armenia: Part 1

Armenians openly commemorate the Armenian Genocide today, but this has not always been the case. Under the Soviet Union, they were forced to remember their tragedy in silence. To practice commemoration the way they wanted to, Armenians had to fight for it themselves.

Episode 4: Commemoration in Armenia: Part 2

More than 100 years have passed since the Armenian Genocide and in that time, commemoration has taken on many different forms. In the beginning, remembrance started off very traditional, but since then it has evolved. In this episode, we hear from Armenians who have participated or played a hand in shifting commemoration.

Podcast

If you would like to listen to *Stone, Wood, Fire*, the podcast can now be accessed on Anchor, Spotify, Breaker, and RadioPublic with the links or QR Codes below. Thanks for your support!

Anchor: anchor.fm/linda-zheng

Spotify: open.spotify.com/show/7uEKzQuBvcAg4n3zFptvVg

RadioPublic: radiopublic.com/stone-wood-fire-WP95Dv

Breaker: breaker.audio/stone-wood-fire



Anchor QR Code



Spotify QR Code

Conclusion

The main objectives of this podcast project were to establish a considerate way to teach the Armenian Genocide and learn about how commemoration has developed over time. The key locations for this project were Binghamton, NY and Yerevan, Armenia, places where the Armenian diaspora and Armenians have settled, respectively. In creating the podcast and interviewing descendants of the survivors, my hope was that story-telling would lead to greater understanding for people who had briefly read about the Armenian Genocide in textbooks but wanted a deeper connection. I hope that listeners will be inspired to continue learning about the Armenian Genocide or other mass atrocities in a way that doesn't reduce suffering down to numbers, but does the difficult job of saying the names, hearing the music, and telling the stories of loss.

"I should like to see any power of the world destroy this race, this small tribe of unimportant people, whose wars have all been fought and lost, whose structures have crumbled, literature is unread, music is unheard, and prayers are no more answered. Go ahead, destroy Armenia. See if you can do it. Send them into the desert without bread or water. Burn their homes and churches. Then see if they will not laugh, sing and pray again. For when two of them meet anywhere in the world, see if they will not create a New Armenia."

- William Saroyan

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