



Morning Edition

PROFILE: PHOTOGRAPHY EXHIBIT CHRONICLES SURVIVORS OF ARMENIAN GENOCIDE FROM THE FIRST QUARTER OF THE 20TH CENTURY

August 15, 2000

MADELEINE BRAND, host: Decades before Adolf Hitler rose to power, a different holocaust was taking place in southeastern Europe in what used to be known as the Turkish Ottoman empire. From 1915 to 1922, approximately a million and a half Armenians were killed in what historians call the Armenian genocide. Now a museum in Los Angeles is remembering what happened with a photo exhibit of genocide survivors. From Los Angeles, Nova Safo reports.

At 93 years old, the memories still bring tears to Sam Kadorian's(ph) eyes.

Mr. SAM KADORIAN (Armenian Genocide Survivor): On the shores of this Euphrates River, they picked out the boys, 5 to 10 years old—and I was seven, eight years old then—and they threw us all in a pile, and with their bayonets and with their swords, they start hitting, killing. I happened to be in the middle of the pile, and only the tip of a sword hit me, in the right cheek, right cheek, right here.

SAFO: Kadorian has lived in the United States for more than 80 years. He and his mother are the only ones of his family to escape the genocide. He is one of 11 survivors featured in a photo exhibition at the Downey Museum of Art, south of Los Angeles.

(SOUNDBITE OF VOICES)

SAFO: In a small exhibit room, people gather around a series of larger-than-life images, black and white photographs of genocide survivors. Most are in two parts—above is the face of a survivor, below is a close-up of their hands. Next to each picture is a paragraph describing their ordeal. The photos are so intimate, they show with clarity each crevice of the face, each hair follicle. Museum curator Sacha Long(ph) says the eyes are especially telling.

Ms. SACHA LONG (Curator, Downey Museum of Art): Their pupils are so large that they cover the entire eyeball, OK, to the point which the eyelashes are reflected back again in their pupils, which—you get this feeling of inward look. In the left eye, you can see the old age, but the eye on the other side, almost without exception on all of them, is the one you can see them seeing the film running, whether they were 7 years old, 10 years old, 15 years old; in the retelling of the story, it was ever fresh.

SAFO: And the stories are all so similar. Survivors from cities hundreds of miles apart describe nearly identical scenes of deportation, forced marches, brutal killings and slow death by starvation. Richard Hovannisian is professor of Armenian and Near Eastern history at the University of California in Los Angeles. He says the Armenian genocide was the first large-scale systemic massacre of the 20th century.

Mr. RICHARD HOVANNISIAN (Professor, UCLA): The Ottoman empire had gone through a long period of decline and loss of territories. The extreme nationalistic wing of a party known as the Young Turks takes over, with the belief that in creating a modern nation state, needs to be done by force, by making a homogeneous society, and extruding, excising those elements that cannot or will not be assimilated into the image of the perpetrator.

SAFO: It took a team of interviewers to chronicle the survivors' stories and two photographers working together to capture their pictures. Ara Oshagan and Levon Parian say they worked so closely, they can't tell who took which picture. Oshagan says the photos showed the faces behind the history.

Mr. ARA OSHAGAN (Photographer): Every portrait that we've taken is with a black background. The black represents death, represents the genocide, and these faces that are lit, usually sideways or from the top, come out of the blackness, so they have survived the death that was around them that whole time.

SAFO: Shortly after World War I, the Turkish government set up a tribunal to investigate and prosecute perpetrators. The current Turkish government denies the genocide ever happened, and that points to a broader aim of the photo exhibit, a political aim. Oshagan is also the founder of the Genocide Project. It's one of many Armenian organizations pressuring Turkey for recognition of the Armenian genocide. The project is sponsoring the exhibit and the collection of survivors' testimonies, all evidence, says photographer Levon Parian, against Turkey's denial.

Mr. LEVON PARIAN (Photographer): It becomes a lot harder to deny it when people see the reality. They see survivors talking about what happened to them.

SAFO: Parian wonders if the Jewish holocaust would have happened had the Armenian genocide been well-known. He's reminded of a now-infamous quote. When Adolf Hitler was asked how he expected to get away with implementation of 'the final solution,' Hitler replied, "Who does now remember the Armenians?"

Witness, a photo exhibit on the Armenian genocide, runs through August at the Downey Museum of Art. For NPR News, I'm Nova Safo in Los Angeles.