

The Sky's the Limit

An Interview with USC President
C.L. MAX NIKIAS

Remembering Survival

BY CHRISTOPHER R.
BROWNING

Setting the Record Straight

BY OMER BARTOV

Emerging Insights:

*Testimony in
Academia*



Dr. J. Michael Hagopian, 1963

Documenting the Evidence

By Carla Garapedian

My documentation of *human-rights abuses* in Chechnya and Afghanistan was tough. But it was much harder for Michael—he had to find eyewitnesses from 85 YEARS BEFORE.

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FILMMAKER J. MICHAEL HAGOPIAN (1913–2010) was a survivor of the Armenian genocide, the first major genocide of the 20th century. For 40 years, Hagopian traveled the world to record survivors' stories on film, dedicating his life to preserving visual evidence of the tragedy; today, the nearly

400 interviews he filmed comprise the world's largest collection of filmed testimony from survivors and other witnesses of the Armenian genocide.

1975. High drama in Hollywood. *The Forgotten Genocide* is about to air on KCET in Los Angeles. The State Department wants KCET to pull the film, claiming it could damage the United States' relations with Turkey. Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley intervenes, telling the feds to butt out. This is America, after all. With that, the first documentary on the Armenian genocide is shown on U.S. television. With that, Michael Hagopian, the film's director, became my new hero.

I was a schoolgirl. To be honest, Michael didn't look like someone who could change history. He worked solo, producing and shooting his own films, lugging cameras around himself, editing out of a converted garage. Baking bread and pickling his own olives, he was the most unglamorous of independent filmmakers.

In 1975, I didn't know what I know now. Michael, at age 62, despite a rich career in educational filmmaking, had just begun a new journey: recording what would become the largest collection of filmed Armenian genocide interviews in the world.

Time was not on Michael's side. The survivors were dying. Born at the beginning of the century, most were children when the genocide started in 1915. They were spread out along five continents—some in old-age homes, faraway villages, living under new names. Many were orphans, who had witnessed the barbaric murders of their parents, sisters and brothers.

Michael filmed their testimonies as if they were legal depositions. He wanted them to be available to a Nuremberg kind of trial, which would one day hold the Turks accountable for their crimes against humanity. He always asked the same question: "What did you see with your own eyes?" A redundant question, but he didn't want hearsay. Despite being a survivor himself, Michael knew truth and justice had to go hand in hand—you can't have one without the other.

Helped by a reference from Michael in 1979, I started my own journey in Britain, first as a student, then as a filmmaker. I saw him again, years later, in London. It was 1988. He had just returned from Syria, where he had interviewed Arab nomads who had helped Armenians escape the killing fields in the Syrian desert during the genocide.

Michael, then a sprightly 75, had eluded the Syrian secret police. "I violated a long-standing rule of mine and checked the cameras in the hold so as to hand-carry the film on board the plane," he recounted. "That's how we got all the Der Zor and Arab interviews out of Syria."

He had filmed survivors who had seen thousands of Armenians thrown from cliffs into the Euphrates. He had filmed survivors who, as small children, had escaped being burned alive in desert caves.

I was impressed. I was beginning to make my own films for British TV. Documenting human-rights abuses in contemporary war zones like Chechnya and Afghanistan was tough. But it was much harder for Michael—he had to find eyewitnesses from 85 years before. No small feat.

In 1998, I started to work with him. I had only worked on video; he was devoted to film. But he was always open to new ideas. In *Germany and the Secret Genocide*, he examined the extent to which Turkey's wartime ally was complicit in the Armenian genocide. The film included a rare interview with Armin Wegner,

the German Red Cross officer who secretly photographed the killing fields. Wegner, whose images of the Armenian genocide are now iconic, would later defy Hitler.

I wondered why Armin Wegner traveled from Germany to Thousand Oaks, California, to meet Michael. Wegner was a “rock star” in the history books, and Michael was a humble filmmaker, quietly editing away in his converted garage. Later, I worked it out. Wegner knew who Michael Hagopian *really* was—the Simon Wiesenthal of the Armenian Genocide.

True, Michael wasn’t hunting Young Turks, in the way Wiesenthal hunted Nazis. But he was doing all he could to undermine their denial, recording the testimony of their victims, corroborating the very history that was already in the diplomatic archives of Europe, America—even Germany, Turkey’s ally.

It was a heavy responsibility. Once Michael started, how could he stop? He couldn’t let these survivors die before filming their testimonies. That would be like ignoring evidence of murder. Because that’s what genocide is—the mass murder of individuals, one at a time.

By 2010, most of the survivors were dead. Michael had interviewed close to 400 survivors and witnesses. Their testimonies would be included in three films, which would cap Michael’s career as the foremost documentary filmmaker on the Armenian genocide.

In May 2010, Michael and Antoinette Hagopian signed an agreement to include Michael’s unique collection in the Shoah Foundation Institute’s Visual History Archive. Michael was proud and, I think, relieved. His genocide testimonials were in safe hands, ready to be shared with universities around the world. Moreover, Michael could now think about his *next* film. Amazingly, at 97, he hadn’t retired.

On December 9, before embarking on a filming trip to India, Michael was due to meet Steven Spielberg at the Ambassadors for Humanity banquet. I was going with him, along with Jerry Papazian, vice chairman of the Armenian Film Foundation and a former USC Trustee, who was instrumental in bringing Michael’s collection to USC. Michael asked me what I was planning to wear. No longer the schoolgirl, I asked him why he wanted to know. He smiled. He wanted to give me a flower to match. Always concerned with detail, always the director.

Hours before the event, he bowed out, blaming a cold. He wanted to be well for India. He died that night. Noble mission completed, legacy intact. Proof that one man can indeed change history—by simply making sure it is told. ■

Resisting the Path to Genocide

By *Wolf Gruner*

Experiences and theoretical approaches from different scientific fields will help us gain a *better understanding* of what RESISTANCE is.

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THREE YEARS AGO, sitting in a German archive and exploring Berlin police records, I was surprised to find a story unlike anything I—as a historian—had come across in 15 years of research on the Holocaust. The event occurred during the war in Berlin, in February 1941, when a judge

evicted 36-year-old Hertha Reis from the small sublet room she shared with her mother and son. Standing in front of a courthouse, Reis, who was a forced laborer, exclaimed: “I got baptized; nevertheless I was an outcast. ... We lost everything. Because of this fucking government we finally lost our home, too. This thug Hitler, this damned government, this damned people. Just because we are Jews, we obtained injustice.”

After eight years of Hitler’s rule, a Jew still had the courage to speak out and protest in the streets of the capital of the Third Reich; if we consider that public opinion and most historians tend to emphasize passivity as the common response of German Jews toward Nazi persecution, this is a truly remarkable act.

After discovering Reis’s story, I started looking for other such incidents. Surprisingly, more and more similar stories emerged about actions that ranged from buying at a bakery during forbidden shopping hours to sabotaging forced labor, even to collecting weapons and forging documents as part of an underground survivor network.

After my arrival at USC, I had to prepare an inaugural lecture for the Shapell-Guerin Chair I was taking over. For this very reason, I started to explore the rich video testimony material housed at the USC Shoah Foundation Institute. Again, after a closer inquiry, these interviews produced surprising evidence of defiance and opposition of German Jews against Nazi oppression—such as the spectacular case of a 16-year-old girl imprisoned in an SA retraining camp, who stabbed one of the SA men with a knife in self-defense when she and other inmates were attacked.

The forgotten existence of a more widespread individual Jewish opposition than we hitherto assumed triggered many thoughts about the range of Jewish response to Nazi oppression, as well as questions about resistance in general. What enabled Jews, who had already experienced years of Nazi persecution, to protest? Broadly speaking, what factors facilitate individual resistance to per-