

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

2 Every Wednesday through June 11, we hope you'll join us for **Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide**, exploring past and present atrocities through the oral histories of genocide survivors in our region. Produced in partnership with the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center.

Chapter Two

MANNIG'S STORY: THE ARMENIAN GENOCIDE

Spoken by Mannig Dobajian Kouyoumjian, a survivor of the Armenian Genocide and written by Aida Kouyoumjian, Mannig's daughter

Between 1915 and 1923, the Ottoman government, led by the Turks, systematically targeted and killed Armenians in the Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, 1.5 million Armenians — half of the Armenian population — were murdered. This period is now widely regarded as the first genocide of the 20th century.

Below is the story of one Armenian woman who survived the genocide, immigrated to the United States and came to live in Seattle.

Mannig, my mom, and her family of eight suffered through the Armenian Genocide. Only Mannig and one older sister survived to tell their stories.

When my mom became a U.S. citizen in 1982, my siblings and I celebrated her achievement with 150 friends and relatives on Mercer Island. The atmosphere was colorfully festive with Armenian-Arabic-American cuisine, folk songs and dances.

Then, Mannig took the microphone and told her story.

Mannig's Story

"I was six years old when we were deported from our lovely home in Adapazar, near Istanbul. I remember twirling in our parlor in my favorite yellow dress while my mother played the violin. It all ended when the Turkish police ordered us to leave town.

"The massacre of my family, of the Armenians, took place during a three-year trek of 600 kilometers across the Anatolian Plateau and into the Mesopotamian Desert. I can't wipe out the horrific images of how my father and all the men in our foot caravan were whipped to death; my cousin and all other males 12 years and older were shoved off the cliffs into the raging Euphrates River. My grandmother and the elderly were shot for slowing down the trekkers. Two of my siblings died of starvation; my aunt of disease. My mother survived the trek only to perish soon after in an influenza epidemic.

"Of my family, only my sister and I were still alive. The Turkish soldiers forced us, along with 900 other starving



PHOTO: Mannig Kouyoumjian. Printed in the *Journal-American*, April 20, 1985.

children, into the deepest part of the desert to perish in the scorching sun. Most did.

"But God must have been watching over me. He placed me in the path of the Bedouin Arabs who were on a search and rescue mission for Armenian victims. They saved me. I lived under the Bedouin tents for several months before they lead me to an orphanage in Mosul. I was sad about our separation, but the Bedouin assured me that the orphanage was sponsored by good people.

"To my delight, I was reunited with my sister at the orphanage. She, too, was saved by the Bedouin. The happiest days in my life were at the orphanage. We had soup and bread to eat every day and were sheltered under white army tents donated by the British.

"Above all, my sister and I were family again.

"There, I met the love of my life — one of the Armenian philanthropists who visited us often and provided education to the orphans. He was kind, generous and very handsome.

"Marrying him turned my life around like Cinderella. Overnight, I went from the meagerness of the orphanage

into the affluence of his mansion in Baghdad, Iraq. We raised three wonderful children and lived a good life."

In 1958, Mannig's husband died suddenly from a heart attack.

"With my daughters in college in the United States and my son in Germany, I was once again without family.

"When my daughters became U.S. citizens, I was able to immigrate to America. I was 60 years old when I settled in Seattle.

"I 'started from scratch' in this country, as you Americans say. I worked as a housekeeper and later in the cafeteria of the UW Undergraduate Library. It was there that I 'was discovered' and hired as a tutor at the UW Foreign Languages Laboratory. For 10 years, I taught and conversed with graduate students who needed to improve their language skills in Armenian, Arabic or Turkish.

"Because I was born in Turkey, people think I'm a Turk. Since I've come from Iraq, they think I'm an Arab. But I say, 'No, I'm an Armenian,' although I've never been to Armenia (in 1982 it was still part of the Soviet Union). I have lived under many flags. None of those banners belonged to me. Neither did I belong to them.

"But now," [Mannig waves the postcard-sized American flag.] "Now, I can say I'm an American and I live under the banner spangled with stars."

Aida Kouyoumjian., the daughter of Mannig, is an active member of the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center's Speakers Bureau. For more information on this story or others in this series, please contact the Holocaust Center at www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

THINK ABOUT IT

- ❖ Define "hope," "faith" and "perseverance" and determine how they were applied to Mannig's story. What other life skills did she encompass in order to rebound from a devastating situation and be able to live a fulfilling life? Can you find an example of these life skills in a story from today's newspaper? Compare and contrast the stories, and discuss.
- ❖ Mannig stated, "I started from scratch in this country, as you Americans say." Do you believe that Americans do start from nothing and work their way up? What outside influences and personal traits influence whether people are successful or not? Think of several people you know and their personal and financial situations; does "starting from scratch" ring true in their personal stories?