

TRACING THE HEIRS OF WWI ARMENIAN PRISONERS IN THE AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE

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Key words *First World War, concentration camps, POW (prisoner of war), racial survey, personal memory, family memory, social memory.:*

Abstract

In 2014, a huge variety of archival materials related covering First World War prisoners were found in Austria. It was discovered that Austrian anthropologist Rudolf Pöch conducted a large-scale racial survey across ten different POW camps of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy from 1915-1917. During these campaigns, around 5,000 men were anthropometrically assessed, photographed, plaster-casted, and additionally documented with phonogram and film samples. Among those prisoners, there were 191 Armenians, and there is little to no information known about them. Furthermore, there are no personal, familial, and social memory-related surveys about the Armenian prisoners. Although many oral histories were collected throughout the fieldwork process, it was discovered that World War I imprisonment memory was considered as too small of an episode as it is "covered" by memories of recent and more actual events, such as the memory of the Armenian Genocide, Stalin era repressions, and the Second World War.

In 2014, a huge variety of archival materials related to World War I prisoners were found in Austria. Austrian anthropologist Rudolf Pöch (1870–1921) conducted a large-scale racial survey across ten different POW camps of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy: Reichenberg (present-day Liberec, Czech Republic) in 1915, Theresienstadt (present-day Terezin, Czech Republic) in 1915, Bruck-Királyhida (present-day Bruckneudorf, Burgenland, Austria) in 1916 and 1917, Eger (present-day Cheb, Czech

Republic) in 1916, Grödigg (present-day Salzburg, Austria) in 1916, Wieselburg (present-day Lower Austria) in 1916, Hart (present-day Amstetten, Austria) in 1917, and Spratzern (Lower Austria, Austria) in 1917.

During these campaigns, approximately 5,000 men were anthropometrically assessed, photographed, plaster-casted, and further documented with phonogram and film samples. The prisoners-of-war were investigated under restrictive conditions of the camp and subjected to disgraceful propaganda wars. The Department of Anthropology of the University of Vienna still holds the majority of these precarious "anthropological" documentations today; other parts of the documentations are kept in the Museum of Natural History.

Among those prisoners, there were 191 Armenians. The Austrian government launched a project to:

“...research the identity and life history of all of 191 Armenian prisoners-of-war that were part of the Viennese racial survey in collaboration with their Armenian communities or descendants, to bring back their faces and voices to their place of origin, also by the way of an exhibition in Austria and Armenia to a broader public. Apart from being the first- time pilot study for ethically dealing with the larger anthropological POW archive, the project intends to explore a forgotten aspect of the Armenian history around 1915 - a year in the shadow of the tragedy of the Armenian Genocide.”¹

The Project team composition is the following:

- J. Dum-Tragut, Armenologist, University of Salzburg: Principal investigator (project leader) archival works in Vienna, Austria and in Armenia. Main coordination of archive work in Vienna and Armenia entails putting together the archival research results in Austria and Armenia and visiting families in Armenia for material on repatriation. Publication: planning the exhibition realization in Austria and Armenia.

¹ The Unknown Armenian Prisoners of War in Habsburg Austria, 1915-1917: The Anthropological Studies of Rudolf Pöch (project description), <http://www.uni-salzburg.at/index.php?id=205987&L=0>, 05.12.2016.

- K. Matiasek, anthropologist and artist-specialist for photography and cinematography, University of Vienna: archival works in Vienna, preparation, and restoration of archival material. Publication: planning and realization of an exhibition in Austria and Armenia.

- Hranush Kharatyan, Prof. of Ethnography, Pavel Avetisyan, Prof. of Archaeology, RA National Academy of Sciences: archival works in Armenia, publication and exhibition. Visiting families in Armenia for repatriation of belongings, publication, and realization of an exhibition in Armenia.

The project is implemented through the cooperation of the following entities:

- Dept. for Armenian Studies, Centre for Studies of the Christian East, University of Salzburg, Austria.

- Institute of Anthropology, University of Vienna, Austria.

- Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography of the RA National Academy of Sciences.

- Several Archives in Austria and the National Archive of Armenia.

Although the Austrian contributors were primarily focused on returning ancestral heirs and personal belongings, and making exhibitions in Yerevan and Vienna, the focus of this research is to collect oral histories about prisoners in order to identify the layers of personal, family, and social memories based on their imprisonment and the rest of their lives. The research problem also provides observations on situations when the heirs are made to artificially “face up to the past.”

How to Find the Heirs of a Century Far Away People

Only the prisoners’ names, living areas, and occupations were recorded in the documents. Even though the accessibility of information was sufficient, there was a high possibility that even in the event of successful returns, the prisoners may have migrated later; during the 20th century’s internal and external stormy replacements.

In the beginning of our survey we did not have answers to the following questions:

- Did the prisoners survive if they were left alive?

- Did they repatriate?
- Is it possible to find their heirs?
- Did they get married after being held in captivity and did they have children or not?
- What do their families and relatives remember about them?

One of the main goals of this study's fieldwork was to find the direct or indirect descendants of former prisoners (the phrase "indirect descendant" here is defined as any close relative of a prisoner.) It seemed obvious that few people would remember a man who lived one hundred years ago in Armenia. At the beginning, village municipalities were contacted and briefed on the problems this research seeks to address. They were asked to find any information about people who were captured during World War I one hundred years ago.

On this stage of fieldwork (2016,) all of the prisoners' stories were not found. However, all of the cases provided in this study generated successful findings.

All of the prisoners returned to their homeland, and then some of them emigrated later. It has been surprising to receive information on prisoners' relatives, even in cases when they were abroad (particularly in Russia.) The following contact information was found: telephone number, new addresses, etc., but occasionally, there were problems. In these cases, the researchers visited the villages and tried to find missing information solely by talking to locals. During the fieldwork process in every case, a direct or indirect relative of the prisoners were found. For instance, Sergey Davityants from Getahovit, Tavush region got married and moved to Baku, Azerbaijan after repatriating. However, Davityants and his always visited his village in the summer. After the Sumgait massacres in 1988, his grandchildren returned to their native village and now they have significant memories of their grandfather.

Following the Prisoners: Fieldwork in Vayots Dzor and Tavush Regions

58 of 187 prisoners were from eight regions in the current Republic of Armenia (49 villages and cities and sometimes there were two prisoners from the same village.) The prisoners' ages ranged from 20 to 45. 20 of them were already married and even had four or five children.

The Austrian researchers measured the families' wealth by the amount of land cultivated by the family and how many horses and cow herds they own. Among the Armenian prisoners, the three richest people were farmers (one of them had 20 cows and 50 dessiatines of land, the second one had 12 cows and 50 dessiatines of land, and the third one had 25 dessiatines of land and a stud farm with 25 horses.) In addition to one painter, one workman, one confectioner, one smith, one assistant to the smith, one salesman, one mechanic, and one secretary, the prisoners' occupations are as follows:

Farmer	Carpenter	Shoemaker	Cooker	Teamster	Servant
38	4	4	2	2	2

For this stage of our survey we have done fieldwork in Tavush and Vayots Dzor regions of Armenia.

Geography presents the following picture: Syunik region (Lichq, Ltsen, Kyurdamir (Kernadzor), Khot, Tegh, Agarak, Vachagan, Brnakot, Zeyva (Davit Bek), Ghushchi (Tasik), Khnatxakh villages), Vayots Dzor region (Khoytur (Getap)), Areni, Rind, Bardzruni, Gndevaz, Gnishik, Gladzor, Aznaburd (Nor Aznaberd), Zaritap villages), Kotayk region (Verin Akhta (Lernanist), Kaghsi villages), Aragatsotn region (Gharanagyug (Lusagyugh), Ghazaravan (Nazrivan), Garnahovit villages), Gegharkuniq region (Bashkend (Artsvashen), Karakaya (Dzoravank), Atdash villages), Tavush region (Ghoshghotan (Voskevan), Movses, Chinchin, Shamshadin (Berd), Tala (Getahovit), Dilijan, Alachugh), Lori region (Shahnazar (Metsavan), Kurtan, Hamamli (Spitak), Dsegh villages),

Shirak region (Meshidli (Nor Kyanq), Karnut, Pokr Sariar, Musayelyan, Bandivan, Ghazanichi, Geghanist, Gusanagyugh, Saratak, Gyumri).

Meeting With the Heirs of Prisoners

Prior to conducting fieldwork, there were certain anxieties with regards to meeting with the prisoners' heirs. One concern posed was whether people who live in financially bad conditions would be accepted because there was no financial compensation or incentive to provide a plethora of ancestral information along with asking too many questions. However, most of the families were informed about the fieldwork and what that entailed in positive anticipation. When visits were unanticipated, (as it happened in Getahovit,) there was also positive feedback. The following reasons are hypothesized to explain why the respondents embraced the visits and fieldwork:

- Some people are *suddenly* interested in their grandfathers; they bring photos and some artifacts. There were families who did not have a single photo of their ancestors. Therefore, the families were quite happy to obtain the photos and details in order to know more about their ancestral history, and to see what they looked like, etc.

- The desire to share positive or tragic memories of their families' past.
- The desire to tell someone about the positive impacts their grandfathers left in their living areas.

- The widespread notion that hosting foreigners (Jasmine Dum-Tragut and Katarina Matiasek) could be worth taking pride in among their relatives and neighbors:

"Hello, I can't talk now, some foreigners have come to us related with grandpa, we are too busy" (a woman is talking on the phone with one of the relatives with satisfied smile, village Kharberd.)

- The social pleasure to meet new people and enjoy cross-cultural communication.

- An overall willingness and pleasure to accept a guest.

What do the Heirs Remember?

One of the peculiarities of this study is that the oral history sources are mainly from prisoners from the third and fourth generations. Unfortunately,

The POW's children (or at least the third-generation children) are not alive or if they were, they would not be able to talk about their grandfathers due to age or health. If the archives were revealed a few years earlier, perhaps there would be a greater chance to meet them. For example, one of the prisoner's daughters died in 2004.

Typically, oral histories of the prisoners are not simply reproduced memories; they are well-constructed and consistent narratives. However, as seen in the meetings in Ijevan, Ararat, and Areni with the prisoners' grandchildren or great-grandchildren who saw their pope, communicated with him, and had personal memories.

One of the descendants did not know that his/her grandfather was imprisoned in Austria. In un-doubtable cases such as when the people in the camps are depicted in the family photos, some of these families did not keep imprisonment records. There could be number of possible explanations:

a) The more important events, mainly the tragic ones that happened to the family (in most cases, during the Stalin Repressions), became a priority to remember; a metanarrative that "overshadowed" other memories or made them less important.

b) It is also possible that the former prisoner did not want to discuss his imprisonment and that is why it did not remain in the family memory.

c) When discussing WWI with the heirs, often they could not talk about themes besides the Armenian Genocide. This demonstrates how the concentration of social memory on important and tragic events for society reduces the opportunity to reflect on the events related to the individuals' private life.

For example, in two families, interlocutors' memories of their grandfather's past could not be discussed; they stubbornly returned to the memories of relatives who were killed during World War II. In one of the families, the main memory was about an uncle who was a victim of Stalinism. In the second family, the victim of Stalinism was a prisoner who returned from Austria, and whose family was targeted as the "enemy of the nation" and lived in extremely poor conditions. Family members' traumatic

experiences were so strong that the fact of imprisonment was made insignificant and tertiary.

However, in most of the families' memory, the grandfathers' "Austrian past" was one of the main narratives. There is a notable fact that sometimes the "brides of families" have more vivid memory of their ancestors whom they have never met. M. Halbwachs explains this fact with the construction of family memory via sharing everyday life.² And as Armenian families are traditionally patriarchal, brides not only become their husband's family member but also start to care about family memory and reproduce it even in a better way than others could.

Melanie: Emotional-Romantic Stories

In one of the families, one of the prisoners – a grandfather who embarked on a "romantic adventure" – stories were shared in a pleasant tone. The prisoner who was working in a rich Austrian farm was urged to stay at their home, marry the farmers' daughter, and inherit his property. According to the family narrative, the prisoner refused to stay there, arguing that he had to return to Austria because he had a "home, family, and children." However, it was revealed later that at that time, he was not even married. This interlocutor was obviously enjoying telling the story of his grandfather's refusal, and it is possible that the grandfather's "*home, family, and children*" argument is the narrator's own interpretation. Of course, it is also possible that the prisoner himself gave that argumentation, which he considered to be softer and more acceptable. On the other hand, it seems quite possible that the prisoner had romantic feelings for the "German bride," since after repatriating he named one of his newborn daughters Melanie, which was the Austrian "bride's" name.

In general, there are many such stories about prisoners of World War I and World War II. If the fact that most of the men were in war fronts and there was a "lack of men" is taken into account, perhaps indeed these stories are true.

²Хальбвакс М. Социальные рамки памяти / Пер. с фр. и вступ. статья С.Н. Зенкина. –М.: Новое издательство, 2007, р.185.

"German Discipline"

In one of the families, when asked whether they are aware that their grandfather was captured in Austria, they “corrected” that account and said that it was in Germany, not in Austria. In another family, one of the prisoners’ relatives was told that the owner of the farm where his uncle was working once got angry because “during the works in the field, he accidentally dropped a little bit of soil on the neighbor's land. They were so disciplined”. The cousin also proudly told us about his Uncle's consistency, attentiveness, and punctuality, “like Germans”. It is hard to distinguish whether they were really impressed by the positive Austrian arrangements, or if it was due to the “German discipline” metaphor.

It is quite possible that in this case, the “actual” memory is about thousands of prisoners of the Second World War, and the word “war prisoner” is directly associated with the “German captivity” template. The Prisoners’ “Austrian” memories seem to become “German” as seen in the descendants’ interpretations. Here is an example of reconstruction of family memory by “social memory terms,” which M. Halbwachs explains by the willingness to be part of a common history.³

"Anti-Memory"

The families visited in this study seem to have an inclination not to reveal anything about the negative effects of captivity. It is not hard to guess if there should also be negative events or memories.

One of the explanations that was not met through negative storylines could be prisoners' desire not to talk about unpleasant experiences. However, the conversation heard in one of the families revealed otherwise. The family was met in a friendly and pleasant atmosphere. During the conversation, a grandchild of the prisoner discussed the extremely abhorrent conditions of captivity: “The prisoners have been so hungry that they had no other choice than to eat barley from a horse dung.” The

³Хальбвакс М. Социальные рамки памяти / Пер. с фр. и вступ. статья С.Н. Зенкина. –М.: Новое издательство, 2007, р. 202.

brothers immediately became angry at him and rebuked: "bad things should not be said, and you don't have to spoil everything."

It can be interpreted that apart from the fact that people tend to erase negative memories, in this case, it is also possible that they are afraid of spoiling "warm and friendly" relationships they gained with the research group. It is possible that the tradition of hospitality also plays a major role, which accordingly it is not allowed to talk about negative memories with a guest.

"Stoned" Memories

All of the families visited built tombstones and/or gravestones for the deceased prisoners. There is such a case: Atvatsatur Hakobyant's (from Gndevaz village) heirs were afraid of landslides, which could damage their grandfather's grave, but they moved to Dilijan where they live now and they still take care of it. Even though the prisoners' families did not know anything about their grandfather, they still take care of the tombs, keeping them clean and safe. Making gravestones is one of the most common ways to commemorate ancestors even though there is nothing known about them.

Summary

In previous decades, numerous scientific studies questioned the basic methodologies of historiography. Guy Beiner who is a historian and researcher from Israel found out that "during 1998-2008, the index of publications and research on "collective/cultural/social/state/national memory" is 11,800. Google Scholar contains a list of approximately 41,000 points."⁴ Modern historiography considers the individual and collective memories collected through oral history as a major source. According to Connerton P., in order to get more or less of a complete story of a historic period, it is ideal to have the combination of historical reconstruction and

⁴Guy Beiner (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel), in *Anticipation of a Post-Memory Boom Syndrome, Cultural Analysis, Volume 7, 2008.*
(http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~caforum/volume7/vol7_discuss1.html)

social or collective memory.⁵ However, the results show that collective memory is not a simple linear sequence of events.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, a memory of the past is always constructed within the social models of the construction moment.⁶ This study shows people discussing their imprisoned grandfathers, and interpreting the construction moment within the scope of nowadays' social memory terms, which also reveals how memory is socially constructed. On one hand, the collective memory consists of different family memories, and on the other hand, collective memory forms family memories and it is difficult to determine the basic source of memories. As seen in this research, despite the pleasure for third and fourth generations to talk about their grandfathers, the existence of captivity during the First World War became too small of an episode as it is "covered" by memories of recent and more actual events. The recent events are also actual by the influential capacity on peoples' private lives. It is notable that not only is the family memory about prisoners is weak, but the entire First World War collective memory revolves around the "European part." The Armenian Genocide and Stalin Era Repressions have such a significant influence on collective memory that the episodes occurred during WWI are "forgotten."⁷ This is a matter of different volumes on collective memory.

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⁶Хальбвакс М. Социальные рамки памяти / Пер. с фр. и вступ. статья С.Н. Зенкина. –М.: Новое издательство, 2007:

⁷Kharatyan H., Shagoyan G., Marutyan H., Abrahamyan L. *Stalin Era Repressions in Armenia: History, Memory, Everyday Life*, Yerevan, 2015.

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**ԱՎՍՏՐՈՆ-ՀՈՒՆԳԱՐԱԿԱՆ ԿԱՅՍՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՈՒՄ ԱՌԱՋԻՆ
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***Բանալի բառեր.** Առաջին համաշխարհային պատերազմ,
համակենտրոնացման ճամբար, ռազմագերի, ռասսայական
հետազոտություն, անձնական հիշողություն, ընտանեկան
հիշողություն, սոցիալական հիշողություն:*

2014 թվականին Ավստրիայում բացահայտվել են մի շարք արխիվներ, ըստ որոնց պարզվել է, որ ավստրիացի մարդաբան Ռուդոլֆ Փյոխը 1915-1917 թվականներին լայնածավալ մարդաբանական (ռասսայական) հետազոտություններ է արել տասը տարբեր Ավստրո-Հունգարական ճամբարներում, որոնց ընթացքում տարբեր ժողովուրդներից մոտ 5000 տղամարդիկ մարդաբանորեն ուսումնասիրվել են (լուսանկարվել, չափագրվել, ձայնագրվել և այլն): Նպատակը եղել է ֆիզիկական

մարդաբանության մեթոդներով էթնիկական առանձնահատկությունների ուսումնասիրությունը: Հետազոտվող մարդկանց թվում են եղել նաև 187 հայ ռազմագերի, սակայն նրանց հետագա ճակատագրերը մինչ այժմ հայտնի չէին: Այդ ռազմագերիների վերաբերյալ հետազոտություններ չեն արվել՝ ներառյալ նրանց մասին անձնական, ընտանեկան և սոցիալական հիշողության առանձնահատկությունների ուսումնասիրություններ: Չնայած դաշտային աշխատանքների ժամանակ այդ ռազմագերու վերաբերյալ հավաքվել են բազմաթիվ բանավոր պատմություններ, պարզվեց, որ Առաջին աշխարհամարտի գերության թեման դարձել է շատ փոքր էպիզոդ, այն «ծածկվել» է ավելի ակտուալ կամ առավել ուշ շրջանի այնպիսի հիշողություններով, ինչպիսիք են Հայոց Ցեղասպանության, ստալինյան բռնաճնշումների կամ Երկրորդ աշխարհամարտի մասին հիշողությունները: