



NEWSLETTER 8



Holocaust Memorial Day - January 27th.

It has become our custom to include a film that links with this important date in the calendar, the date 73 years ago when the death camps at Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau were liberated. For our choice of film, much depends on what has been released in the U.K. that reflects the subject with a movie of significant quality. This year we have opted to go further back than the events of World War 2 and the times leading up to the Nazi persecution of the Jews and other victim groups. Sometimes referred to as the forgotten genocide, the events that took place in Armenia from 1915 to 1917 are less well known to the public. The Ottoman government systematically exterminated up to 1.5 million Armenians, most of whom were citizens within the Ottoman Empire and its successor state Turkey. The details of the genocide remain largely unresearched, yet it was quite clearly an historical event that should not be glossed over so easily. It remains something of a political embarrassment for the Turkish government, which refuses to acknowledge the truth about the genocide. **The Promise** sets itself in 1915, and thus at the imminent end of the Ottoman Empire ...

Testimony about the Armenian genocide is very hard to come by, partly because the events occurred over 100 years ago. Before tonight's film, we are showing a short documentary in which Astrid Aghajanian, a little girl when the Ottoman Empire began its systematic destruction of its Armenian population, describes what happened to her father, and how she and her mother survived deportation into the Syrian desert.



Satenig Eهرانjian

Satenig Eهرانjian was born around 1897 in Erzurum to Armenian parents. She grew up in the Armenian community of around 20,000 men, women and children. Armenian life was very much centred round the church and the family. Armenia was the very first country to adopt Christianity as a national creed in around 301 AD. Community life was vibrant with schools, hospitals and churches forming the town centres. Citizens spoke Armenian, a distinct Indo-European language with 38 characters to its alphabet. One of the key characteristics of Armenia lay in education. Education was and is still regarded the most important gift an Armenian parent could give to their children and Satenig's early life was dominated by school.

As the First World War broke out, Satenig had just completed her secondary education and wanted to become a teacher. In 1915, she was engaged to be married to a fellow Armenian when he, alongside almost all of the Armenian adult male population were conscripted by the Turkish authorities and sent to fight in the war against the Russian army. Armenian soldiers were disarmed and disappeared, and her fiancé never returned.

In June 1915, along with those Armenians who remained in Erzurum – predominantly the elderly, women and children – Satenig was forced to leave her home as the Turkish government required the removal of all Armenians across the Ottoman Empire, and were prepared to commit mass murder in order to get their wish. Conditions on the journeys out of Erzurum, like those faced by Armenians across the Ottoman Empire, were atrocious. Given little to no warning, people like Satenig were forced out of their homes with little or no possessions or food. Forced to walk many miles under armed guards, violence and abductions became the norm. After a few days walking south west toward the deserts of Syria, Satenig was separated from her sister and her mother. Her mother was too ill to continue on the torturous journey and her sister was abducted. Satenig never saw her mother, sister, or fiancé again.



During the trip, Satenig was wounded after resisting the advances of one of the Turkish soldiers who was escorting the fleeing refugees. Her left arm was struck by a bayonet and a deep wound was opened. In some ways, this terrible injury was a blessing. On arrival in Diyarbakir, her wound needed medical attention and she was treated by a Danish Charity who, after administering to her wounds sent her to Aleppo in Syria ahead of the convoy she had been a part of. She never saw anyone from that convoy arrive and she assumed that they were killed crossing the Tigris river. In Aleppo, Satenig joined a Danish refugee camp and worked as an assistant and later as an administrator for them. Still living in Syria, at 21 years of age Satenig married an Armenian refugee

and they had a daughter. A time for celebration was turned to one of sorrow when her husband died suddenly. She remarried in 1924 and built her family with Khatchik Hoonanian, also a refugee from Erzurum.

Khatchik and Satenig had three children; their first child died aged two. Her two sons Diran and Rostom were born in 1931 and 1933. Today, Satenig's son says 'I felt I must tell this tragic tale for the sake of my grandchildren so that they

in turn learn and know their own background.' He recalls that her parents did not speak about their experience very often, as, particularly for his mother, they would become understandably emotional when reminiscing. It was only when World War Two erupted that she would hear her parents discuss the events which happened as they were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands within present-day Turkey. They would speak about the suffering of those in Europe and reminisce in their home in Iran about what had taken place only 24 years beforehand. It is important to know that the atrocities in Armenia did not begin nor end in 1915 to 1918 and the impact of the massacre and deportation of Armenians from their home lands are still felt today. The Turkish government were so intent on destroying Armenian presence they not only forcibly deported and murdered Armenians but they sought to destroy any evidence of their residence there. Building stones with Armenian markings were defaced or destroyed, and all the towns and villages with Armenian names were re-named with Turkish names. Even today, the many remaining Armenian churches are left to decay with a small handful converted into secular museums.

To find out more about the atrocities in Armenia, we recommend watching *The Betrayed*, by Fergal Keane, available on YouTube. 24/04/1915 marks the date of the deportation of Armenian intellectuals from Istanbul. You can find out information on the events of 1915-17, and read more about the Armenian massacre at <http://hmd.org.uk/content/24041915-deportation-armenian-intellectuals-istanbul> or at <https://www.ushmm.org/search/results/?q=The+Armenian+Genocide#>



The annual marking of Holocaust Memorial Day in the Phoenix programme has been long-standing. Our prime objective is always to bring members good quality, internationally-flavoured films. Thus, unless a film related to the topic is good enough, we just don't show it. Through the years there has always been something that meets the mark for HMD.

Our Chair, Graham Cole, has been an educator for the Holocaust Educational Trust (HET) for many years. It is partly for this reason that he isn't at some of our screenings as he's away hosting groups of mainly college-age students visiting the Auschwitz and Birkenau death camps in Poland, or at pre- and post-visit briefings around the UK.

Most of us are very familiar with the events of the Jewish Holocaust in Europe during WW2. For me, documentary film wasn't quite enough. I still needed to stand on the ground where it happened. Would the nature of the Nazi Final Solution campaign finally sink in? A few weeks ago I joined Graham and the HET groups at the town of Oświęcim (in German, Auschwitz), near Krakow, on a cold Autumn day.

Before seeing the camps, a visit to the town square reinforces the extent of the integration of the local Jewish population prior to the Nazi invasion of Poland on September 1st 1939. Before WW2 there was a fine synagogue just a block away, now wasteland. The ex-Polish barracks of the first Auschwitz concentration camp has its familiar 'Arbeit Macht Frei' over-gate sign. It was not built for the Nazis' purposes, but carefully and quickly adapted, notably the conversion of the arsenal into the first gas chamber and crematorium - less than 100m away from the Kommandant's mansion.



Nothing prepares you for the site of Auschwitz-Birkenau to the west of the town. Once the site of a small village, it became a vast prison encampment sliced through by a railway siding, built to service the camp with those mainly Jewish victims from all over Europe, most notably from Hungary in 1944. The camp still has its perimeter fencing, lookout posts and ditches. The site was razed by the Nazis retreating from the oncoming Red Army and most of the men's barrack huts only have their brick stove chimneys left. However, some have been reconstructed from what was left so you can actually stand in the spaces that the prisoners had to endure.

Away in the trees at the end of the railway track are the dynamited remains of the purpose-designed and constructed gas chambers and

crematoria. At their peak even these could not cope with the huge number of Jews that were dealt the 'final solution' by the Nazi guards. The film **Son of Saul**, that the Phoenix showed in January 2017, recreated what it was like from the point of view of a Sonderkommando working in that area of Birkenau.

I watched **Son of Saul** again on my return. The Phoenix audience had mixed feelings about it (85%): perhaps the lead character had a bit more freedom to act than would have been true? Nevertheless, it was an effective recreation of how Auschwitz-Birkenau functioned. I've seen the films and, now, walked the sites: I still can't reconcile that people can do such callous things to others - those that they would otherwise regard as neighbours. Adrian Pickering

The Southampton Holocaust Memorial Day event will take place at The Spark building at Solent University on Thursday January 25th at 6 p.m. It is open to the public and there is no entry charge. Details are available at <http://www.hmd.org.uk/events/2016/southampton-holocaust-memorial-day/fri-01122017-1515>