

LAYERED LIVES: Iranian Armenian Contemporary Arts

ORAL HISTORY WORKSHOPS

Each of the 4 workshops in the Oral History series provided wonderful opportunities to build skills and work towards a larger, long-term project of creating an archive of local and ethnic oral histories. The best attendance (30 people, from ages 18 to 75) was the first which focussed on the experiences of Iranian Armenians in Britain. This is probably because participants knew that the three people being interviewed would be the focus and they would not have to participate unless they wished to. We got the impression that while many people agree that there should be a continuing oral history project, they do not yet want to be active participants in the gathering of the histories. However, the workshops were well received and those attending felt much more confident about the process afterwards. They said that they were encouraged to begin (or continue) the work and inspired by the new techniques and ideas. Many more people wished to be interviewed than to do the interviewing themselves – something that we hope to change in the future.

Sunday May 7: Introduction to Oral History Workshops: Our Community, Our Lives

Dr. Susan Pattie (social anthropologist).



Dr Gagik Stepan-Sarkissian speaks about Tehran.

This first session provided an opportunity to explore the experiences of British Iranian Armenians while learning some of the basic techniques of collecting and organising oral histories from individuals and communities. Iranian Armenians, now resident in Britain, were interviewed by Susan Pattie who asked them to speak about their early years in Iran, the decisions that led to settle in the U.K., and the special influences and attitudes that endure across the

years and long distances. Gagik Stepan-Sarkissian (from Tehran), Anahit Kazarians (Tabriz), and Adom Saboonchian (Tehran) described their experiences and memories. The audience took part with a lively discussion and many questions.

Saturday May 13: The Video Camera as An Extension of the Body

Veronica Castro (visual anthropologist), Helena S. Inverno (video artist and camerawoman).



Veronica Castro (left).

The session began with a talk by Veronica Castro on the ways in which video can be incorporated into the collecting of life histories. Helena S. Inverno demonstrated with different samples from her own fieldwork and the participants brought ideas from their previous experiences. One member of the group had already begun video documentation of a youth group in Acton and was pleased to receive feedback and suggestions on her work.

Saturday June 10: Household Objects

Dr. Susan Pattie (social anthropologist).

A lively group met to hear about ways to initiate conversations about the past through a focus on ordinary items in the household. Each person brought an object from their home and was encouraged to tell the story of that object. Through this shared experience, it became clear that such items provide an entrée into more complex stories in thinking about the process of acquiring the object, what it symbolises for the owner, how it is used (or not), how long it has been in the family, its relationship to other objects in the house, etc. One participant brought an ornamental metal napkin ring that had been given to her as a child in India. Through this she was able to remember and speak about the familiar animals depicted on the ring, to talk about her family (her parents had given her the ring and a similar one to her sibling), and about the customs surrounding meal-time in the family home as well as other related narratives. Others had brought equally interesting items and enjoyed the exchange of stories, as well as becoming convinced that the technique does indeed promote the flow of memories.



Sunday July 2: Narratives of Food and Feasting

Dr Polly Russell (oral historian, British Library Sound Archives).



Dr Polly Russell.

A wide variety of participants were led to speak about early food memories by interviewing each other. These lively stories led to others and Polly Russell succeeded in encouraging people to see how stories focusing on food customs in families and communities could inspire people to think about relationships between men and women, children and parents, members of the wider group – and ways



in which new migrants both accommodate change and try to persist with old traditions. The evolution of recipes and styles of producing and eating food were discussed and the participants enjoyed learning about the foodways of others.

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