

Stories Among Us: Personal Accounts of Genocide

1 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 One

INTRODUCTION

written by *Ilana Cone Kennedy, Director of Education, Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center*

Stories are all around us. They are everywhere — behind every building, on every corner and within each one of us. Whether it is something that happened recently or in the distant past, these stories become part of who we are. We carry them wherever we go. They are as much a part of us as our skin.

When most of us talk about genocide it seems like something far away — something occurring on a different continent with different people. But in fact, the stories of genocide are right here, among us. The survivors are not distant unknown people; they live in our community and they too carry their stories with them as they walk down the street, go to school or shop in the local store.

Over the next 10 weeks, we will have the opportunity to hear just a few of the stories from those in our own community who have been affected by genocide. We will hear from a woman who survived the Armenian genocide, a Roma (Gypsy) woman whose family perished in the Holocaust, and from three Holocaust survivors — each with very different experiences.

We will also hear stories from a woman who worked with children in Rwanda who were made orphans from the genocide there, and a Bosnian woman who survived the genocide in the Balkans. Finally, we will hear from a Sudanese woman who fled persecution in Sudan and has become an outspoken advocate for action against the atrocities currently taking place in the Darfur region of Sudan.

“Genocide” is a relatively new word. In 1944, Raphael Lemkin, a Polish-Jewish lawyer, introduced this word to the English language. In his 1944 book, “Axis Rule in Occupied Europe” (published originally by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), Lemkin explains:

“This new word, coined by the author to denote an old practice in its modern development, is made from the ancient Greek word “genos” (race, tribe) and the Latin “cide” (killing)”



PHOTO: *Thomas Blatt's bowl.*

“Each of us was given our own eating pot. Each day at five I picked up my pot from under the pillow of my bunk and joined the others in line for supper. When my turn came, the cook poured out about 16 ounces of black liquid that tasted like sweetened warm water. I received dark bread with a warning that it should last me until the next evening.”

— *Thomas Blatt, survivor of the Nazi death camp Sobibor. He is a member of the Washington State Holocaust Education Resource Center's Speakers Bureau.*

Born in 1900 on a small farm in Poland, Raphael Lemkin was deeply affected by the persecution and mass murder of the Armenians. He later experienced anti-Semitic pogroms (riots) in his own country. He strongly believed in legal protection for groups and fought tirelessly throughout his life for this cause.

As early as 1933, he argued for the need for legal protections for ethnic, religious and social groups; his efforts to create such protections were not successful.

When the German army invaded Poland in 1939, Lemkin escaped and came to the United States. He later learned that 49 members of his own family were murdered in the Holocaust.

Every day, he spoke to government officials, national and international leaders, and anyone who might listen on the importance of recognizing genocide as a crime.

On December 9, 1948, the United Nations approved the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Lemkin continued to devote his life to the cause. He died in 1959.

Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide (often referred to as the Genocide Convention) defines genocide as:

... any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such:

- (a) Killing members of the group;
- (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

The Genocide Convention became an internationally recognized law in 1951. Many of the world's most powerful countries, including the United States, delayed support for the ratification of the Genocide Convention for various reasons. The United States ratified the Genocide Convention in 1988.

The effects of genocide do not end when the killing stops. Nor do they end when the perpetrators have been accused and prosecuted. Genocide has a ripple effect: it starts in one place and then begins to spread, over miles, continents, years and decades.

Genocide affects all of us.

For more information on this article or others in this series, please contact the Holocaust Center at www.wsherc.org or info@wsherc.org.

LEARN MORE

- ◆ What are the stories among us? What stories have been passed down through your family? What stories will you pass down as you grow older?
- ◆ Discuss Article II of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide. Review each definition. Why do you think the United States waited 37 years to fully support this?
- ◆ Have certain groups in the United States ever faced something similar to genocide?