

RedCell ScreenProductions presents:



a documentary by Shahane Bekarian

Director/Producer: Shahane Bekarian
Editor: Danielle Akayan
DoP: Matthew Syres

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Logline: Are descendants of the Armenian Genocide slowly losing grip of their rich culture as they integrate into multicultural Australia 101 years on?

Short Synopsis: Filmmaker Shahane Bekarian searches for cultural identity as he struggles with the notion of assimilation in multi-cultural Australia. As a second generation Australian-Armenian, he feels the weight behind the term “white genocide”, coined by the few survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 to describe the bloodless loss of culture; assimilation. This construct of the white genocide is burdened with sacrifice, cultural pride, and faith with which their people endured.

From 50 archival interviews the ancestral story of survival is revealed as their forced dispersion ultimately brings them to Australian shores. Shahane, himself a grandchild of a survivor, examines today's challenges of eight families, as descendants from those in the survivor tapes. The after-effects of war crimes are still evident 101 years later as the struggle continues to preserve their ancient culture in the multi-cultural "lucky country" of Australia.

Shahane's semi-assimilated upbringing allows the unique perspective to raise important questions for both the diaspora and multiculturalism in Australia.

Long Synopsis: About 500 survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 eventually landed on Australian shores. Now their descendants need to maintain their centuries-old culture in a modern struggle of assimilation, known as "the white genocide" as they integrate into multicultural Australia.

In the 1980's 50 of these survivors were interviewed as elders of the community for documentation purposes. The filmmaker Shahane Bekarian, learns of these tapes and discovers his own grandfather's story amongst them. On the VHS recording he saw his grandfather cry for the first time, but couldn't comfort the poor man who had passed years earlier. This lack of closure led him to make this film.

Shahane is somewhat disassociated from his Armenian peers, so he reaches out to compare stories. From the tapes he interviews eight direct descendant families; Are they suffering at all from this intergenerational trauma? Are they keeping the nationalistic flame burning which the genocide ignited all those years ago? They survived the cutlass, but will they survive the "lucky country" of Australia?

A montage introduction shows us a multitude of families, specifically survivor Khosrov Tachjian, his daughter Carolyn and granddaughter Natasha. Khosrov is a distinguished and endearing man of 75, and 12 year old Natasha honours her grandfather by learning Armenian dance, she has a large concert approaching at the end of the year. The filmmaker's mother teaches him how to make an Armenian dish as they disclose how they came to be in Sydney.

Khosrov and the other survivors begin their stories. In 1915, during World War I as the ANZACs landed on the shores of Gallipoli, Ottoman Turkey was facing collapse. They feared the suppressed indigenous minority of the Christian Armenians would rise-up and join the Russian Army who was preparing to attack from the North-East. Turkey began a systematic top-down approach to destroy the Armenian race, beginning with Armenian leaders and intellectuals. Turkish soldiers then rounded up civilian men and removed them from the picture. In chaotic circumstances, the helpless women, children and elderly were forced from their homes under the pretence of soon returning.

The descendants' interviews provide a contemporary perspective as the young children read their great-grandparents' memoirs and play out the scenes through stylised dream-like re-enactments. This is sewn together with archives to set the period. At gunpoint and with cracking whips, they are forced out of their homes onto death marches, walking hundreds of kilometres under extreme conditions scarce of food, water, shelter and hygiene. Starvation, disease, and rape was only the beginning. Some mothers sell their children to villagers for their own protection. Survivor Movses Kardashian recalls his mother refusing to sell him, this in turn gave him strength to one day become a man and save his mother when the roles would turn. Some mothers were forced to slay their own children to end their suffering. Turks would kill Armenians at any opportunity and unborn babies were often cut from pregnant mothers' stomachs on a whim. There were piles of bodies strewn on the streets with no-one to bury them. Meanwhile parallels are drawn between the Ottoman Turks and the barbarity of (so-called) ISIS, "It's as though they're reading from the textbook" one interviewee suggests.

"Where was God, where was that God?" one elder asks. Faith is tested and eventually humanitarian efforts from Australia and around the world set up orphanages to rescue a race nearing extinction. They protected the children who were taught their culture, language, and a trade. After armistice in 1918 they were sent to neighbouring countries; Syria, Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon to begin a life. Later, during the 1950's unrest in the area forced them out into Christian countries like France, Germany, the UK, USA, and Australia.

They settled down in these welcoming lands finally able to enjoy their lives. However, as they grew old they faced a new threat to their culture; the white-genocide, otherwise known as assimilation. The families reflect on current day issues amongst the Armenian diaspora in Sydney, where in this day and age experiencing culture has become a duty. Every family keeps the fire burning in their own way, and their individual struggles unite them into a joint identity. Each tender child is doing their small part to contribute to their community. In a musical finale, we see Natasha Tachjian dressed in traditional Armenian garb leading a dance recital of 40 youngsters as they circle into formation with synchronised elegance as they throw their hands in the air on the final beat of an age-old Armenian song “ta-da-da!” to a standing ovation!

Children of a Genocide is a snapshot of the Australian-Armenian community of 2016. The biggest challenge for Shahane was the extensive study of the 50 heartbreaking interviews which rang so close to home. He couldn't help be affected by the wise leather skinned frail elders when they broke down into tears as they revealed their stories. To load all that sentiment into an hour long package, to live up to the diaspora's expectations, to bring justice to his grandfather and all those who have passed and all the families in the film and the community at large, became a huge burden. A burden and promise which he delivers on.

Director's Statement

As an Armenian born to Armenian parents on Australian soil, the dangers of cultural assimilation has played on my conscience for years. **Children of a Genocide** awakens the conscience of Armenians young and old, urging them to re-visit their inherited values and re-think their personal imprint on our Armenian trajectory.

The film forms a snapshot of the Australian-Armenian community, displaced after their ancestors narrowly survived a genocide as children in 1915. They act as a paradigm for peoples forced to find a new home in the aftermath of war-crimes. Now, a century after escaping the racial hatred, a contemporary version of the problem arises; Australia may not be the safe-haven for cultural preservation it was thought to be. The descendants' culture is split and we're born chasing our nationalistic identity in a race against our dissolving culture in the mixing pot of Australia. As a result of 1915, we ourselves are also children of a genocide.

The personal accounts of genocide survivors deliver a dramatic telling of the worst kind of human treatment, known to be both barbaric in comparison to the Jewish Holocaust, and a blueprint for it. Their struggle demonstrates the limits of human endurance and faith when all hope seems lost. Issues raised are the importance of culture, religion, and identity as they are forced into death marches into the Syrian desert, where similar crimes are repeating today. History is folded into the present as today's Armenians carry the burden of cultural preservation for which our ancestors died and suffered, as we face the invisible genocide of assimilation into multi-cultural Australia.

Questions are raised regarding age appropriateness of exposing children to the horrific ancestral stories for the benefit of building a nationalistic identity; is intergenerational trauma necessary to build our identity? This question raises another, whether we're losing ourselves by perpetuating a "genocide culture"; have we become a culture that loses itself in the fight for genocide recognition by the Australian government instead of growing our rich ancient culture, today and into the future?

The film became a journey of rediscovering the Armenian community and heritage. My roots grew stronger while meeting the community. However, I began to see fractures amongst different groups who held differing opinions on how to best preserve the culture. Then, seeing the youth going about their lives invigorated my views on Armenian prospects. All along the way, I saw myself as a semi-assimilated Armenian who provides a unique perspective, I have a close understanding of the community, while not being lost amongst it.

Shahane Bekarian - Director / Producer



About the Filmmaker

Shahane Bekarian works as a screen artist under an umbrella of talents; editor, compositor, motion graphics artist, and film-maker. Inspired by the history and progression of film as a culture, his work balances forbidding subject matter with gritty textural aesthetics creeping with magic-realism, bringing celluloid nostalgia into contemporary perspectives.

Unsatisfied with the rewards of his Bachelor of Commerce in Management Science with a marketing major in 1997, his inner-artist pecked at his soul until eventually finding work at the Computer Graphics College where he also achieved a Diploma in Screen in 2002. During his time there his music video **Slowly Surfacing** for **Inga Liljeström** won film festival awards. He began his editing work with two shorts, **Dead Tired** and **Tommy The Kid**, the latter winning numerous awards and screening at the prestigious **Berlinale** in 2007.

He left the college to freelance in 2006 starting with small corporate gigs in graphics, compositing and editing, moving up to regular work with **Zealot Productions**, **BWM**, and **carbon5**. End clients for TVCs include **Granola**, **Headspace**, **Weight Watchers**, **Horizon Credit Union**, and TV programs include **Double The Fist** (ABC) and **The Unbelievable Truth** (Ch7/Giant Dwarf). He

produced and co-animated 104 x 15-second animations for the **Kid Detectives** series (**Ch7/Beyond**). He was a compositor on Aussie film **The Reef** by **Andrew Traucki**, and worked closely with editor **Nick Meyers** on *Sleeping Beauty* in 2011. That same year he also laid his plaque in rock 'n' roll history with 3 x 4-second stings for retro month for **ABC's rage**. Currently, he works as the assistant editor on **ABC's Compass** program and as fx artist on **ABC's Good Game** series where he created the title sequences and graphics.

Shahane also creates visuals for large scale screens including **Ch7's X-Factor** in 2010 and **Kylie Minogue's** F1 Malaysia Grand Prix performance in 2012. His latest piece for the NSW Transport Authority will be unveiled in February 2017 as part of *Wynscreen*, a 27metre wide screen in the pedestrian links of the new *Wynyard* train station. When the sun goes down, Shahane also works with live improvised projections under the alias "redcelldisorder" for local eccentric bands **Toydeath**, **Forenzics**, **Axis**, **Defektro** and **Louis Burdett**.

In his "spare time", Shahane works on his own productions. Notably the sexy surreal music clip **Vulnerable Heart** (DoP **Tania Lambert**) by **She Plays** about the inner consequences of love lost (2009). In more recent years he made a series of four short self-financed documentaries based around the Armenian Genocide, a topic which burdens and feeds his creative endeavours. His first short fiction; **The Blind Passenger** (DoP **Jesse Frazer**, Stunt Supervisor **Grant Page**, Stuntman / Grip **Leroy Page**), took out the people's choice award at the Sydney Underground Film Festival 2013. An avant-garde piece using experimental techniques and stop-motion elements to capture a blind man's struggle for independence lost in the persistence of his memories. Finally comes his first low budget commissioned feature documentary **Children of a Genocide**. It looks at the reverberating intergenerational after effects of genocide on both the survivors and their descendants, as they slowly assimilate into multicultural Australia.

Editor's Statement

Editing **Children of a Genocide** has been a very sobering and moving experience. I feel honoured that I got a chance to acknowledge my Armenian family's journey from genocide through to survival here in Australia. It made me think about my great grandparents and grandparents and the pain they carried with them so well and so hidden, always so gentle, funny and caring. It made me also think about how disconnected I've become from my heritage but that through the process of hearing these stories over and over I've realised I am proud to be Armenian.

Danielle Akayan

Editor

About the Editor - Danielle Akayan

Danielle Akayan has been working in post-production in the Film and Television industry for 20 years and has demonstrated experience as an independent filmmaker. Her work as editor/filmmaker has spanned features, TV series, long form documentaries, music videos and interactive documentaries.

Awards include **1st Prize for Life** (a short film directed by Danielle) in the Launch Film Festival 2002, **2nd Prize for Life** in the Groovin' Short Film Festival 2002, and **Most popular Short Film for Life** in 2002 at Ausfest. Also as editor, she was the "Freakshow to Bigtop" Winner of the John Newfong Media Prize. While working within ABC TV's Indigenous Programs Unit, they were awarded **Outstanding Achievement in TV** at the Deadly Awards 2009.

Danielle has worked collaboratively with some of Australia's very talented directors including **Platypus** (David Parer, 2002), **Message Stick** (Alan Collins, Adrian Mills, Richard Frankland, 2004-6), **The Magic Pudding** (Karl Zwicky, 1999-2000), and more recently producer **Olivia Rousset** on **The Yazidi - People of the Peacock Angel**, a documentary about the Yazidi people and their fight for survival against ISIS. Her involvement as editor on **Children of a Genocide** honours her heritage and serves as a great resource for future generations.

About the DoP - Matthew Syres

With decades of stills photography and imaging experience behind him, Matthew Syres has now embraced the moving image, drawing on his extensive lighting and compositional skills to create effective and beautiful footage for commercial, art and personal projects.

Since undertaking his first freelance commercial shoot for the **Life Education Centre** back in 1995, Matthew went on to shoot editorial and advertising work for **Carter's Publishing** in 1996 which saw him travel to New Zealand, Perth, Adelaide, Canberra and regional NSW. This was followed by a stint at photographic studio, **Leicamat**, in 2001, where he was introduced to digital photography and printing, graphic design, retouching and pre-press processes. 2006 saw a move to full-time creative retouching at **Dimension Studios** where he worked on high end print campaigns, billboards and installations for **ING, Bundaberg, SBS, Colgate** and **Samsung**, with agencies **Jack Watts Curry, The Marketing Store, Leo Burnett** and **Razor**. In 2011 he moved to running his own business full time, concentrating on photography, retouching and film/video work.

Concurrently, Matthew has shown fine art photography in over 25 solo and curated group exhibitions ranging from the first, a solo show entitled **Tree City**, Cafe Niki, Glebe in 1993, to the latest, group show **20/20 Vision**, Gauge Gallery, Glebe in 2015. Highlights include **Shoot the Chef** at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 2004, a massive group exhibition featuring works by artist/musicians, entitled **Art Groupie** in 2008, and the highly successful black and white landscape exhibition **Extended Mileage**, at Gallery Red, Glebe, included in 2012's **Head On Photo Festival**.

Film/Video credits include 2 x 1 minute video art pieces **Red & Green** created for the **Illuminart** - a roving projected exhibition in 2006, promotional stills on the award winning short **Tommy The Kid** in 2006, camera on the music video **Outside (Morning Song)** by **Other People's Music** in 2011, DoP for Shahane Bekarian's **Children of a Genocide** documentary in 2015, DoP for a **Wynscreen**, a large scale public video work to be unveiled in February 2017.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How did you come across the archival interviews?

In 2008 the Armenian National Committee of Australia handed me the genocide testimonials in a cardboard box held together with packing tape with the purpose of creating some kind of film together. They were full of old random VHS tapes with handwritten labels peeling from ageing adhesive. It was a decaying treasure.

Q: What was the inspiration behind this film?

To my surprise my grandfather's name appeared on one of the VHS cassettes: "MR. BOGHOS TAVRAYAN - RECORDED 26-5-86 - BORN 1913 ZYLÉ, SEPASDIA". I immediately played the tape and for the first time I heard him speak about the Armenian Genocide committed by the Ottoman Turks during WW1, a matter which he never spoke about in front of us grandchildren. He broke down into tears on the tape, the 80 year old scars still afflicting him. Years after he passed away I finally understood who he was. The film acted as some kind of personal closure while raising awareness on the topic.

Q: What do you want people to take away from the film?

To understand the plight of the Armenians from over the last 100+ years - what makes us tick as a diaspora separated from our lands. I'd like people to start conversations about it or at-least be curious to learn more and find out why this is such an important and controversial issue. Our government must never be kowtowed to turn a blind eye from war-crimes or any other humanitarian issue. Impunity allows history to repeat itself, with the Yazidi people today by the hands of "ISIS", and with Adolf Hitler saying to his Wehrmacht commanders before the invasion of Poland in August 22, 1939, "Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?".

Q: Why isn't this taught in schools?

Turkey has positioned itself as an important ally to the west in these volatile times. The U.S. Incirlik airbase on Turkish soil near the Syrian border is crucial in its operations in the middle-east. This relationship facilitates Turkey's hard-lined policy of genocide denial which they spend millions of dollars annually globally lobbying. Australia, the U.K., and U.S.A. succumb to this pressure and do not formally recognise these events as genocide, and prefer to call them mass tragedies of war (against historians' advice). Contrary to this pressure, Germany recently recognised the events as genocide, which is poignant considering they were an ally to Ottoman Turkey at the time. Further to this pressure, modern day Turkey has clearly stated that if Australia officially recognises the genocide, they will suspend ANZAC Day ceremonies in Gallipoli. The Armenian Genocide can only be included in the public school curriculum if our government recognises the history. Although, it is readily taught in genocide studies in universities worldwide.

Q: Are century old Armenian values relevant in today's society?

If we don't know our past, then we can't know our future. Even if we don't practice old ideals, they still act as good measure. Our ancestors' blood runs through our veins and there's an unheard calling to connect with them through the culture. The idea of marrying within the race may be overly nationalistic, but Armenians are an idyllic bunch who pride themselves on their culture, it helps unite the diaspora.

Q: Do Armenians contribute to Australia? Do they integrate?

Armenian population in Australia is about 50,000, primarily in Sydney. Although not a large number, everyone seems to know at-least one Armenian and they always speak highly of them. They are recognised for their success in politics, finance, law, jewellery, trade and the arts. They hold an annual cultural festival in the Sydney CBD which attracts over 25,000 people, and is the second largest festival behind the Greek festival.

Q: How do I personally feel about the diaspora?

The diaspora never fail to surprise me. Past tragedy has forged a resistant pride in their character, making them tirelessly dedicated to their ancient culture. In the face of adversity, their commitment to genocide recognition echoes through their blood and their fight will never end until they achieve restitution. However, this possibly makes them a very insular group, perhaps a means of self-preservation.

Q: Is it possible to be an atheist Armenian? Does Christianity define a good Armenian?

Christianity is hardcoded into the Armenian identity. It's difficult to separate the two, but it's futile to argue that religion is a qualifier to being a good Armenian. Who's the judge anyway?

Q: Why do you think you were one of the assimilated ones?

Circumstance, proximity, peers, and different interests. My parents moved into a new area of Sydney in the early 1970s. The communities formed in other areas such as Chatswood, Belrose, or Fairfield. As it turned out our school had very few Armenians and as young'uns we stuck with our peers. Hanging out with Armenians our age felt forced, they were into sports and scouts while my twin brother and I were into music, art, and films.

Q: Now that Armenia is a relatively safe area, is there any reason you don't go back?

I've formed a life here with a partner, family, friends, colleagues, and networks. It's difficult to leave it all, my identity is split; my heritage is Armenian but my home is Australia.