

Mini Lesson: The Great Fire of Smyrna

Elise Taft



Subject Area: History/Social Studies, Media Studies

Grade Level: 7 – 9

Duration: 30 minutes

Standard Addressed: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.8.2

Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

Learning Aim: As a result of this lesson, students will identify evidence in audiovisual testimony, discuss the Great Fire of Smyrna of 1922, and recognize the factors that can influence information they receive in any form, including audiovisual form.

Testimony:

Elise Taft
Armenian Survivor



(3:30)

CONSIDER

- Tell students that they will learn about the Great Fire of Smyrna of 1922 from the testimony of an Armenian Genocide survivor. State that they will critically analyze audiovisual testimony. Tell them they will be focusing on the qualities of testimony and how these are presented audiovisually. They will be watching an unedited clip of testimony.
- Assess students' prior knowledge by asking them if they have watched documentaries. How are documentaries different from film or other audiovisual forms?
- As a whole group, discuss how an audiovisual interview, like testimony, can influence a viewer's interpretation based on what and how it is presented. The interviewee, her/his voice/tone, body language, and the background all matter.
- Ask students: What are some qualities of an effective interview? What factors during an interview or the way an interview is recorded and presented affect the information intended to be delivered to the viewer by the interviewee?
- Tell students that they will watch a selection of testimony from Elise Taft who shares her experience during the Fire of Smyrna. Elise's testimony is part of the largest collection of filmed interviews of survivors and witnesses of the Armenian Genocide, the first genocide of the twentieth century. The interviews were conducted by the late Hagopian, who recorded them on 16 mm film between 1975 and 2005 for a series of documentaries.
- Be sure to provide background on Elise's life by sharing Elise's biography either by distributing the handout, projecting it on the board, or reading aloud to the whole class.
- You can also provide additional context about the Armenian Genocide: see the "What is the Armenian Genocide?" video on your IWitness Dashboard. [Click here for more background info on the Great Fire of Smyrna.](#)

COLLECT

- Explain that you are using testimony in this lesson as a way to both learn about a significant historical event, the Great Fire of Smyrna in 1922, and about the challenges and opportunities audiovisual interviews provide for understanding and humanizing history.
- Tell students that they will watch a clip of testimony and that will be the "text" that they are reading. Explain that in this clip, Elise discusses her experience during the Great Fire of Smyrna.
- Students will view the testimony clip twice:
 - ◊ Viewing 1: Play Elise's clip and ask students to identify information Elise provides about the Great Fire of Smyrna.
 - ◊ Viewing 2: Play the clip a second time and direct students to focus on the approach of the filmmaker who conducted and recorded this interview as part of a series of documentaries. Ask them to identify specific examples that show the filmmaker's approach to filming and questioning.
- Then, as a whole group, discuss the following questions using students' information as a guide.
 - ◊ Is Elise an appropriate person to ask about the Great Fire of Smyrna? Why or why not?
 - ◊ Why does the interviewer interject in the testimony? Do the interviewee's interjections affect what you think of Elise's story?
 - ◊ What other aspects of the interview affect your understanding?
- When this interview took place, over sixty years had passed since the Great Fire of Smyrna. What are the challenges in collecting the testimony many years later after the event took place? Alternatively, what is the value in collecting their testimonies?

CONSTRUCT

- Remind students that Elise and other genocide survivors voluntarily shared their stories so as to ensure that the world would not be able to forget or deny important historical events and their impact on individuals.
- Now, ask students to pair with a classmate. Together, using their student handouts, tell students to discuss the opportunities and challenges of audio visual interviews provide us in learning about history, such as the Fire of Smyrna.
- Ask students to reflect on what they learned about the role of the filmmaker or person collecting an interview can have on the quality and form of the interview itself and the interviewee's intended message for the viewer.

COMMUNICATE

- Return to whole group and discuss the questions students discussed. The key to this discussion is to help students recognize the factors that can influence information they receive in any form, including audiovisual form.
- Also ensure students recognize the value of testimony in humanizing history.

Student Handout

Elise Taft Biography

Elise Taft, survivor of the Armenian Genocide, was born in 1906 to two Armenian parents. She was among those targeted by the Ottoman government and forcibly displaced from Ottoman-controlled territories. For Elise, this meant exile from her home in Bandirma, Turkey alongside her parents and siblings. In her testimony she describes the hardships both she and her family endured while in transit -- the death of her four-year-old sister, the inhospitable conditions that pervaded the death march, and the endless abuse those around her suffered at the hands of government soldiers.

Years later, Elise was able to relocate to Greece with help from American rescuers. She would then go on to author a memoir titled *Rebirth: the Story of an Armenian girl who survived the Genocide and found Rebirth in America*. As a mother to sons, she was determined to preserve and share her experiences with future generations.

This interview took place on April 23, 1984 in the United States.