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## **"The Barbarians of Hollywood": The Exploitation of Aurora Mardiganian by the American Film Industry**

### **Cover Page Footnote**

"The Barbarians of Hollywood": Term used by historian Anthony Slide in the book, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian*.

## **“THE BARBARIANS OF HOLLYWOOD”: THE EXPLOITATION OF AURORA MARDIGANIAN BY THE AMERICAN FILM INDUSTRY<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

As the first genocide of the 20th century tore through Ottoman Turkey, advances within the film industry opened new doors for humanitarian aid. The story of Aurora Mardiganian, a teenage Armenian survivor, provided Americans with a visual representation of what mass atrocity looked like through the film *Ravished Armenia*. However, the means to which the film and accompanying autobiography were created exemplify a violation of ethics. Anthony Slide’s edited edition of *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian* offers an insightful account of Mardiganian’s plight, and gives evidence to the claim that she was exploited physically, psychologically, and financially in order to yield the maximum profit. Mardiganian’s legacy highlights the need for remembrance over apathy, and active awareness over indifference.

Technological advances in media during the 20th century have impacted and helped shape American culture. Print media has always been an integral part of society, however, the appearance of visual media in the form of moving picture is a fairly recent development. One of film’s first subjects was Aurora Mardiganian, an Armenian Genocide survivor. Her autobiography entitled *Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl, Who Survived the Great Massacres* caught the attention of American filmmakers and inspired the film *Ravished Armenia* (also known as *Auction of Souls*). The film and memoir introduced Americans to an intense visual representation unlike newspaper articles and travel diaries. However, the means by which the film and its accompanying narrative were created show the intersection of ethics and humanitarian aid with its most undesirable outcome.

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<sup>1</sup> “The Barbarians of Hollywood”: Aurora Mardiganian, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 63.

Filmmakers' presentation of Mardiganian's story overshadowed Mardiganian's humanity and sensationalized the suffering of the Armenian victims.

Born in the ancient city of Chmshkadzag in the Ottoman Empire in 1901, Mardiganian grew up with her parents and siblings in a comfortable and wealthy lifestyle until the genocide of 1915. When Mardiganian was 14, Husein Pasha—a prominent Turkish commandant—came to her home and demanded that she join his harem in exchange for her family's safety. Her father refused. A few days later, her father and brother along with 3,000 other men and boys were assembled in the city square and ordered to march into the unknown.<sup>2</sup> Mardiganian never saw her brother or father again. With her father and brother gone, Husein Pasha seized Mardiganian and began her exploitation in the harems of wealthy pashas and her brutal journey through the deserts of the Ottoman Empire.

Mardiganian's autobiography may be the account of one girl's experience, but it is representative of some of the ways in which many Armenians were brutalized. Theft, rape, massacre, and torture were prevalent throughout the memoir. The women were regularly subject to violence from Turkish *zaptiehs*, kidnapping by nomadic groups of Kurds and Chetchens, starvation, and rape. In *The Burning Tigris*, Peter Balakian discussed the treatments of the women who converted to Islam. "The gendarmes robbed them all, stripped the women and raped them in front of their husbands, who were tied up and forced to watch before they were killed."<sup>3</sup> They were offered the chance to renounce their Christian faith and take the Oath of Mohammed. Many refused and were tortured and killed. Some did take the oath, but continued to adhere to their faith in secret. Mardiganian's chances of survival were improved by this strategy, leading the gendarmes to believe she was a converted Muslim girl. She was able to stay alive through the marches and was picked to be taken to different harems. At the last harem, that of Ahmed Bey, she witnessed the murder of her mother and siblings. Shortly after being reunited, she was made to watch as they were whipped and stabbed to death under the orders of Ahmed Bey and his son.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Death marches were used as the primary form of torture and annihilation of the victim groups. In most cases, men were murdered outright while the women and children were marched across the desert without adequate food, clothing, water, and shelter.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003), 253.

<sup>4</sup> Mardiganian, 179.

The murder of her family inspired Mardiganian to risk her life and attempt an escape. She embarked on a journey across the Dersim (a region of deserts, home to the Dersim Kurds) in hopes of reaching the city of Erzeroum near the Russian front. She was met with acts of kindness from the Dersim Kurds, a people “without the lust of killing human beings...” and to this “she owed her life.”<sup>5</sup> After months of wandering, Mardiganian finally reached the city of Erzeroum in 1917. In her memoir, she recalled her arrival and being greeted by a “beautiful sight—the American flag.”<sup>6</sup> By this point, she had walked approximately 1400 miles.<sup>7</sup> Under the protection and funding of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (commonly known as the Near East Relief) she travelled through Tiflis, Petrograd, Sweden, and finally America.<sup>8</sup> Before she left for America, she was visited by General Andranik Ozanian.<sup>9</sup> “When you reach the beloved land,” he said, “tell its people that Armenia is prostrate, torn and bleeding, but that it will rise again—if America will only help us—send food for the starving, and money to take them back to their homes when the war is over.”<sup>10</sup> It is perhaps this message that inspired Mardiganian to tell her story and spread awareness once she reached the United States.

At the time of Mardiganian’s travel to the United States, she was entering a country where there was some degree of public knowledge of the atrocities. For over two years, the world had learned of the horror experienced by Armenians through firsthand accounts and visual evidence.<sup>11</sup> In December of

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<sup>5</sup> Mardiganian, 185.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 188.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 88.

<sup>8</sup> Near East Relief was an organization formed in direct response to the massacres, and which worked to aid in humanitarian relief.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 189. General Ozarian (1865-1927), throughout his life, remained a symbol of nationalism and strength among the Armenian people.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 190. In 1916, shortly before Ozarian made this remark to Mardiganian, the persecuted Armenians were in a particularly delicate position, as Ottoman authorities were attempting to halt any and all aid to them.

<sup>11</sup> Visual evidence was provided in 1915 most famously by Armin T. Wegner, a German nurse and second lieutenant who witnessed the state of survivors in numerous refugee camps. He defied orders and took hundreds of photographs that today are invaluable in our study of the Armenian Genocide. A few of these photos may be seen in Balakian’s *The Burning Tigris*.

1917, there was even talk of engaging in war with the Ottoman Empire. Balakian notes, “With more than two decades of American anger against Turks for their treatment of the Armenians, public opinion favored war with the Ottoman Empire.”<sup>12</sup> An intense debate ensued, but in the end, America would not go to war with the Ottoman Empire.

When Mardiganian landed at Ellis Island in 1917, she was sixteen, an orphan, ignorant of American culture, and desperate to locate one of her brothers who was rumored to have survived the genocide and sought refuge in the United States. An Armenian couple took her in and helped her post newspaper advertisements to find her brother. These advertisements led to public interviews and soon caught the attention of Harvey Gates, a famed screenwriter with a special interest in Mardiganian’s plight.

Although Gates and his wife Eleanor claimed to want to take care of Mardiganian, they ultimately steered her down a path of exploitation.<sup>13</sup> Mardiganian shared her story (through a translator) with Gates who published it in 1918 under the title *Ravished Armenia: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian, the Christian Girl, Who Survived the Great Massacres*. The writing of this autobiography deserves closer scrutiny. At the time, Mardiganian knew very little English and Gates could have altered her story without her knowledge. General Andranik’s message mentioned above may have been altered by Gates to foster a reaction from the public and spur higher book sales.

Gates’ urging Mardiganian to recreate her plight suggests that Harvey and Eleanor Gates (then her legal guardians) did not have her best interests at heart. She was told if she signed a set of papers, she would be able to travel to Los Angeles to have her “picture taken.” However, she believed this meant taking a still photograph, not filming a movie in which she would play the leading role.<sup>14</sup> Some argue that the Gates’ simply wanted Mardiganian to have a solid income and that they were unaware she had misunderstood the terms. At the time, however, she was a traumatized and vulnerable adolescent who knew little to no English. It is difficult to imagine that an orphaned genocide survivor would have willingly signed up to reenact her repeated rape, exploitation, and the murder of her family. However Mardiganian came to sign the legal papers, it was decided that she would make \$15 a week

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 305.

<sup>13</sup> Slide, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 12

to star in the film *Ravished Armenia*. Colonel William N. Selig acquired the film rights and Near East Relief (NER) co-produced the film.<sup>15</sup>

Mardiganian made her way to Los Angeles, unknowing of what she had agreed to. She faced numerous psychological and physical challenges during filming, many of which could have been avoided. “The first time I came out of my dressing room,” she recalled, “I saw all the people with the red fezzes and tassels. I got a shock. I thought, they fooled me. I thought they were going to give me to these Turks to finish my life. So I cry very bitterly. And Mrs. Gates say, ‘Honey they are not the Turks. They are taking the part of those barbarics. They are Americans.’”<sup>16</sup> While shooting a scene that required her to jump from roof to roof, she fell and broke her ankle. She was not allowed to rest and heal her injury and was made to continue shooting with bandages in full view. Film historian Anthony Slide remarks: “Audiences were presumably expected to believe the bandages covered wounds inflicted by the Turks rather than the barbarians of Hollywood.”<sup>17</sup>

These instances of neglect represent a process of retraumatization, where Mardiganian had to relive the horrifying experiences of the genocide. She was not offered psychiatric care to help her heal. To put this concept in perspective, draw a hypothetical example from the Holocaust. It is highly unlikely to think of a Holocaust survivor acting in their own semi-biographical film a year after they arrived in the United States. The process of healing for a genocide survivor is intense and arduous; having to act out the scenes that haunt one’s memories would complicate it further.

The plot of the film *Ravished Armenia* did not accurately represent Mardiganian’s experience. Indeed, many aspects were altered or fabricated for Hollywood. Anthony Slide, editor of Mardiganian’s autobiography, *Ravished Armenia and the Story of Aurora Mardiganian*, provided a forward, introduction, narrative, and full script of the film highlighting the discrepancies between her story and the version created for Hollywood. Scenes of naked Armenian women crucified in the Ottoman desert look like a western Christian’s visualization of the traditional upright cross. Only years later would Mardiganian admit that this was a false depiction. “The Turks did not make their crosses like that,” she explained, “The Turks made little pointed crosses. They took the clothes off the girls, they made them bend down. And after rap-

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 15.

ing them, they made them sit on the pointed wood, through the vagina. That's the way they killed—the Turks. Americans have made it a more civilized way. They can't show such terrible things."<sup>18</sup> The filmmakers also inserted the character Andranik to create a love interest for Mardiganian. In reality, Andranik was romantically involved with her sister Lusanne until his death in 1915. Miss Graham, a Christian schoolteacher from England, was given an expanded role in the film, heroically following the Armenian girls on death marches and into harems. In Mardiganian's autobiography, Miss Graham disappears early on, but the audience is led to believe that she was taken away and killed by Turkish *zaptiehs*. These inauthentic characters and situations add an inappropriate Hollywood flare. The average contemporary viewer would not have noticed such historical alterations. In the end, the film is a shadow of reality—a truth that Mardiganian exhausted herself trying to communicate to Americans.

While Mardiganian's exploitation was hidden behind closed doors, sensationalist studio promotions for *Ravished Armenia* were in full swing. By the time the film was released in 1919, Selig Studios and NER had created and distributed numerous film posters. These posters indicate that the filmmakers attempted to create shock value to improve monetary outcomes. One poster, for example, depicted a brutish man—a Turk—wielding a bloody sword in one arm and carrying away a terrified Armenian victim looking delicate and helpless. The poster depicted the Turks as savages and a danger to Christian girls, racking up a death toll around 4 million. The filmmakers had no way of acquiring such a number. In a promotional review published in 1919, key words and phrases include “tragic,” “tender romance,” and “the drama of Armenia,” intended to spark emotional responses from viewers or readers. For the film, they add an inappropriate theatrical component to a hellish narrative of survival. Other advertisements sexualize Mardiganian in a way that showed “Hollywood's concept of a pin-up.”<sup>19</sup> In the case of *Ravished Armenia*, the NER's advertisements masked the woman behind the story.

Although the film industry's advertising methods for *Ravished Armenia* were distasteful, they were effective. This is particularly significant because the NER claimed that all proceeds would go to support relief efforts for Armenians. The amount of money that actually made it to Armenians is unknown. *Ravished Armenia* was a commercial success. Ticket prices were \$10

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 10.

<sup>19</sup> Mardiganian, 41.



—more than ten times the average ticket price.<sup>20</sup> Film screenings were almost always accompanied by distinguished speakers, luncheons, and other special events.<sup>21</sup> Box office records were broken in a number of cities, including Detroit, and Dayton, Ohio.<sup>22</sup> Outside of its notable financial success, the film received many positive reviews. Hanford C. Judson of *Moving Picture World* wrote, “This picture is too big and too affecting for words to tell much of the impression it makes on the spectator. It is so reverently done and so wonderfully true to humanity in all that it shows... Nothing could be more affecting than this vivid picture of the greatest tragedy of the world.”<sup>23</sup> The list of positive reviews for the book and the film ranged from sources such as the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, *Motion Picture News*, and the *Exhibitor’s Trade Review*.<sup>24</sup>

Publicists emphasized that the film was made to support NER’s effort in raising \$30 million to aid the victims of the atrocities. Before Mardiganian and her survival story, America was in a state of heightened awareness of the Armenian genocide. This was largely due to Ambassador Henry Morgenthau, whose pleas for action brought the atrocities in the Ottoman Empire to light. Compared to other instances of powerful hidden agendas behind calls for humanitarian aid (whether political or military), American calls for relief were fairly honest. As a neutral party, the United States formed numerous relief organizations including the NER (formerly the American Committee on Armenian Atrocities).<sup>25</sup> This particular organization was highly successful in making fundraising for relief a priority for Americans even before they began to use film in fundraising campaigns.<sup>26</sup> When the organization ended its operations in 1929, it had raised more than \$116 million.<sup>27</sup> In today’s terms,

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<sup>20</sup> Leshu Torchin, *Creating the Witness: Documenting Genocide on Film, Video, and the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38.

<sup>21</sup> Torchin, 38.

<sup>22</sup> Mardiganian, 24.

<sup>23</sup> Mardiganian, 21.

<sup>24</sup> Mardiganian, 19-21.

<sup>25</sup> Balakian, 280.

<sup>26</sup> Torchin, 31.

<sup>27</sup> Balakian, 280.

this sum would be in the billions.<sup>28</sup> Americans appeared to rally around NER's cause. Some claimed that "the special appeal of the Near East Relief transcended anything in the way of a nationalizing movement of charity and brotherhood that we have ever known."<sup>29</sup> With the addition of film to the fundraising effort, the NER became pioneers in spreading awareness of genocide through the cinematic medium.

The tactic to use film to raise public awareness had never been utilized and yielded noteworthy results. However, one must always ask: at what cost? In this case, Mardiganian suffered during and after the filming of *Ravished Armenia*. After her injury exploitation on set, she was thrown into the unfamiliar chaos of Hollywood. Burdened by countless special appearances, she was forced to complete a national promotional tour and held to unreasonable expectations of behavior. Mardiganian was expected to behave as "a normal American girl," despite her background. In the March 1919 issue of *New York American*, a journalist reported: "Miss Aurora seemed to be annoyed; she avoided answering the questions put to her... When the meal was finished and she had retired to her apartments with her guardian, Miss Aurora was gently chided."<sup>30</sup> Mardiganian viewed talking during a meal as something that interfered with her need to pray to God for her "poor starving Armenia."<sup>31</sup> Following this incident and the tour, Mardiganian's condition declined even further. After making an appearance at a film screening in Buffalo, New York in May of 1920, she suffered a complete mental breakdown in public.<sup>32</sup> Eleanor Gates sent her to a convent, while Harvey Gates hired seven look-alikes to handle publicity and screenings in her place. However, the damage was done and Mardiganian threatened suicide. After this, she left New York to stay with Mrs. Oliver Harriman, whom she had met shortly after her arrival in America.

The exploitation of Mardiganian extended to her compensation—or lack thereof—for the film. According to Anthony Slide, she earned \$15 a week (about \$213 today). Upon completion of the film, she received \$7,000 (about \$86,967 today), but the Gates deducted a total of \$6,805 for "personal ser-

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<sup>28</sup> Balakian, 280.

<sup>29</sup> Balakian, 280.

<sup>30</sup> Mardiganian, 25.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 25.

vices,” a chauffeur, a nurse, and the seven look-alikes. This left her with \$195 (about \$2,422 today). After a later payment and effort to help a surviving family member, Mardiganian ultimately made \$4,745 (about \$58,976 today).

Ultimately, the fame and popularity of *Ravished Armenia* was short-lived. By the late 1920s, it began to slip from the public radar and eventually disappeared altogether. Today, all that is left is twenty minutes of film. The political climate of the time, particularly the rise of Nazi Germany and the alliance between Germany and Turkey, may have caused screenings to be cancelled.<sup>33</sup> For years, Turkey, Germany, and the United States were bound by appeasement. In 1934, the film rights to Franz Werfel’s *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh* were sold to MGM. The film was adapted from Werfel’s best-selling novel and depicted the true story of the Armenians of Musa Dagh during the genocide. The Turkish Ambassador informed the United States that they would view the project as a hostile act unless it was dropped by MGM immediately.<sup>34</sup> Under the leadership of the Kemalists, denial of the genocide was integrated into the post-war narrative in Turkey: “In their efforts to create a monolithic, homogenous Turkish state after the war the Kemalists created a totalistic nationalism that was built on several foundation myths.”<sup>35</sup> The formation of a new Turkey required more divisions between groups. At the same time, the United States pursued an open door policy for oil in Mesopotamia.<sup>36</sup> These factors contributed to the Armenian genocide’s “disappearance into the black hole of historical amnesia in the United States.”<sup>37</sup>

Mardiganian continued to live in America even as the country forgot about her and her story.<sup>38</sup> She settled in California, married a fellow sur-

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<sup>33</sup> Within Mardiganian’s narrative, there is an incident of rape committed by German soldiers.

<sup>34</sup> Balakian, 377.

<sup>35</sup> Taner Akcam qtd. in *The Burning Tigris*, pg. 375.

<sup>36</sup> As Balakian describes, oil would play a considerable role in genocide recognition in the U.S. Oil was, and still is, a highly valued resource—one that Turkey had and the U.S. needed.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 377.

<sup>38</sup> It was not until the vocal and turbulent culture of the 1960s in the U.S. that a conversation about the genocide started to emerge. In Turkey, denial was an integral part of the national narrative when it came to the Armenian Genocide. Such hateful sentiment may point to why Mardiganian and other survivors would have remained quiet about their experiences.

vivor, and had children. In 1994, she was moved to a residential care facility where her experience in the Ottoman Empire was recorded by the Zoryan Institute of Canada.<sup>39</sup> She passed away on February 6, 1994 at age 92, estranged from her only living son.<sup>40</sup> Like *Ravished Armenia*, Mardiganian was forgotten for the majority of the 20th century.

Even as *Ravished Armenia* was nearly forgotten, it may have achieved Mardiganian's initial goal. She wanted to raise awareness of the ongoing violence in the Ottoman Empire to elicit aid for Armenian victims. Because of her account, Americans had (and have) a visual of mass atrocities in the Ottoman Empire. Although some aspects of the film were fabricated or altered, there were a number of accurate elements. In one scene, a woman holds her daughter, who was brutally raped. She then dies in her mother's arms. Mardiganian and other survivors' preserve the memory of the countless women who were raped and murdered during this period. Mrs. Oliver Harri-man of the National Motion Picture Committee commented on the purpose of the film beyond its commercial value. "The whole purpose of the picture," she explained, "is to acquaint America with ravished Armenia... to visualize conditions so that there will be no misunderstanding in the mind of any one about the terrible things that have transpired."<sup>41</sup>

From the early days of her arrival in the United States, Mardiganian was taken advantage of in nearly every way. She was misled, misinformed, underpaid, neglected in her unique and sensitive psychological needs, and pushed beyond her mental and physical limits. American modes of advertisement sensationalized her horrific story for financial gain and created inaccurate images of the genocide. Despite these morally questionable methods, the money raised for the NER was considerable. In *Creating the Witness*, Leschu Torchin remarks: "the work of NER yields considerable insight into the strategies and processes necessary in using media to produce witness publics who can understand and act upon the information presented."<sup>42</sup> One cannot overlook the groundbreaking strategies they employed, including using a moving picture to visualize genocide.

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<sup>39</sup> Mardiganian, 27.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 27.

<sup>41</sup> Torchin, 38.

<sup>42</sup> Torchin, 60.

In recent years, Mardigian's account and sacrifices have received attention as the Armenian genocide is remembered and acknowledged. The Armenian diaspora has honored Mardigian's memory with the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity.<sup>43</sup> Backed by 100 Lives (an initiative aimed at keeping the spirit of Armenian remembrance alive), the prize is given annually to a recipient whose effort helps preserve human life. It consists of a \$100,000 award and a million dollar grant.<sup>44</sup> Director of the Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute in Yerevan, Dr. Hayk Demoyan, is publishing a book with new information about Mardigian and creating a traveling exhibit of her story.<sup>45</sup> It is because of these efforts that her story has been reawakened and used to better understand and commemorate the Armenian Genocide. Some may question the relevancy of this historical event, but to this day, the Turkish government has not recognized the massacre of 1.5 million Armenians as genocide. The Armenian Genocide occurred one hundred years ago and Mardigian passed away 21 years ago. However, the events of the past are crucial to our understanding of the world today. Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel said that "without memory, hope would be empty of meaning, and above all, empty of gratitude."<sup>46</sup> We remember Aurora Mardigian with gratitude for her courage in telling her story.

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<sup>43</sup> Rick Gladstone, "Armenian Leaders Establish Rights Award to Commemorate Centenary of Genocide," *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 2015. <http://nyti.ms/1BlnAuH>

<sup>44</sup> For more information on the Aurora Prize for Awakening Humanity, or the 100 Lives initiative, visit <https://100lives.com/en/>.

<sup>45</sup> Alin K. Gregorian, "Scholar Captures Tragedy, Miracle of Aurora Mardigian's Life Story," *Armenian Mirror-Spectator* (Watertown, MA), Mar. 24, 2014. <http://www.mirrorspectator.com/2014/03/24/scholar-captures-tragedy-miracle-of-aurora-mardigians-life-story/>

<sup>46</sup> Elie Wiesel, "Elie Wiesel: Days of Remembrance Excerpts," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum Holocaust Encyclopedia*, last modified June 20, 2014, <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007199>.

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