

EI-1154

HARRY KURKIAN

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INTERVIEWER: JANET LEVINE, PH.D.

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LEVINE: Today is June 28th, the year 2000, and I'm here in Pennsauken, New Jersey, with Mr. Harry Kurkian, who came from Armenia when he had just turned nine years of age, in 1920. At the time of this interview, Mr. Kurkian is eighty-nine years of age, and this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. Mr. Kurkian, could you start by saying the name you were born with, and your birth date?

KURKIAN: Okay, okay. My Armenian name was Hrair, H-R-A-I-R, Kurkjian, K-U-R-K-J-I-A-N.

LEVINE: Okay, and your birth date?

KURKIAN: June 1, 1911.

LEVINE: Okay, and where were you born? What particular town or area?

KURKIAN: It was called Desaria [PH].

LEVINE: Can you spell that one?

KURKIAN: Not very well!

LEVINE: Maybe you could--?

KURKIAN: Let's see.

LEVINE: It may not even ask it on there, but do you know, like, roughly where it was located?

KURKIAN: Well, the Turks took that part over, of Armenia, so we were still there. But that was back in the middle of Armenia, or Turkey, which the Turks took over.

LEVINE: Oh, okay. Okay, so when you were born, you had already two brothers?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And what were their names, and their ages when you were born?

KURKIAN: When I was born, they were—the little one was, he was five years old. And the other one was nine.

LEVINE: And the younger one, what was his name?

KURKIAN: The younger one was Sebu [PH], but we called him Walter. The American language was taking over.

LEVINE: Waller?

KURKIAN: Walter. Walter.

LEVINE: Walter, uh-huh.

KURKIAN: And the other one was Edward, the older one.

LEVINE: Okay, and what was your mother's name?

KURKIAN: Her name was Markery [PH]. Markery, which they made into Margaret, in American.

LEVINE: And how about her maiden name? Do you remember what that was?

KURKIAN: Mostichian, her last name was.

LEVINE: Mostichian. Could you spell that, Mostichian?

KURKIAN: M-O-S-T-I-C-H-I-A-N.

LEVINE: Okay, and how about your father? What was his name?

KURKIAN: Well, his name was Kurkjian! [Laughs]

LEVINE: Oh, I mean his first name.

KURKIAN: Oh, Bahan, B-A-H-A-N.

LEVINE: Okay, and did you live with grandparents?

KURKIAN: Yes, we did, I think, live with our grandparents.

LEVINE: Which would have been your mother's side?

KURKIAN: Yes, my mother's side.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, uh-huh, and that was the grandfather that kind of favored you?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Is that what you said?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Why don't you tell about your grandfather, your memories of him when you were a little boy?

KURKIAN: Well, one time we were sitting in the—it was like a garden. Our house was on a main street, and there was a big gate, and then you'd come in the gate, and then this garden was after that, with big high walls separating different houses. And one time he was sitting on one side of the yard, and I was sitting on the other side. He said, "Hrair, come over and sit with me." So I went over right away. I went right over. And right after I got there, the whole wall on the side I was sitting on fell down. I would have probably been killed if I had stayed there, and not minded my grandfather! Another time he took me to the market, and he bought a chocolate bar. And I'd never eaten any candy at that time. So I broke it in half, and gave him half of it, and he said he was very appreciative of that. And he said to me, "You're certainly a nice boy for sharing this candy with me."

LEVINE: And that was your first taste of chocolate?

KURKIAN: Yes!

LEVINE: Wow! And you liked it?

KURKIAN: Oh, it was wonderful! Yeah, something I'd never had before!

LEVINE: Wow! So do you think your grandfather knew the wall was going to fall down?

KURKIAN: No, he didn't. No!

LEVINE: Or you think it was just coincidence?

KURKIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: He just called you over, and that happened?

KURKIAN: It might have been an earthquake, a little earthquake, or something, and the whole wall come down, right where I was. It was nice in that I listened to him, and I always tell my children [laughs], "You have to listen to your elders, because that could mean a lot, and save your life some time!" I bring that story up all the time to tell them about it.

LEVINE: Most parents don't have such a dramatic example [laughs] of why you should behave!

KURKIAN: Yeah, yes!

LEVINE: Well, and do you remember your grandmother at all?

KURKIAN: Oh, yes, I remember my grandmother. Not too much, though. She was in the background more.

LEVINE: What would she have been doing? Was she sort of a typical Armenian grandmother?

KURKIAN: Yes, very nice, older woman. I don't have much recollection of her too much. She treated us very nice, and of course, we were living in their house at the time.

LEVINE: And how about the house? Now, you said there was a garden? It was kind of desert land, wasn't it?

KURKIAN: No, not where we were.

LEVINE: Not where you were?

KURKIAN: This was a city.

LEVINE: Oh, okay.

KURKIAN: And it was all built, on both sides, houses. And we went—there was a gate in front of the house, and then up above was like a balcony, with rooms in it, above the gate. And my uncle used to be a photographer, and that's where his office was, for taking pictures. And on one side was the oven, when you came in the gate, where you'd bake bread. You know, the real oven. I think you shove the dough in there, and have this fire in there, and they baked a real good bread, you know.

LEVINE: Wow, was it a stone oven?

KURKIAN: Oh, yes! Yes, it was brick or stone.

LEVINE: Now this is now inside the house, or outside?

KURKIAN: It was in the garden portion of the house.

LEVINE: In the garden portion? Wow. So, the garden—it sounds like the garden was kind of incorporated into the house?

KURKIAN: Oh, yes, it was part of the house. And you went into the garden section. It was, I think, brick floors on it, walking in there. Then the house was right in front of you after you left the garden. And the house I remember was a great big living room with a fireplace right in the middle. And the fireplace was sunken into the ground, where they used to do their cooking. And they had a chimney right in the middle. And in the winter time, we had no heat in the house, but we were able to have a charcoal fire in there, and put covers over us, and keep warm when it was cold, slept all around. It was a round fireplace.

LEVINE: Wow, and that would have been your mother, father, your two brothers, you, and your uncle? Was he also living in the house?

KURKIAN: No, he wasn't living with us. He was married, and had his own home.

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, wow. Is there anything else about the living arrangements that you remember, as perhaps being different from what we're used to here? Like, what did you grow in the garden? Do you remember?

KURKIAN: I don't remember much about growing, but I remember they used to have like sheep, and cows, that they slaughtered and prepared, salted it. We had no refrigerators, of course, and they used to smoke that. And we used to be able to keep that quite a long time.

LEVINE: Did you have your own animals?

KURKIAN: No, they purchased it.

LEVINE: They purchased it, uh-huh. And I know you mentioned that they did a lot of salting, and probably smoking and spicing?

KURKIAN: Yes, [laughs] to keep the food from going bad, because there was no refrigeration there at all, and we had very little water, too. We had to buy our water. Most of the drinking water we had to buy.

LEVINE: Oh!

KURKIAN: Because they had cesspools, and the cesspools were right close by, where your water supply would be. You could use that water, but not for drinking.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, do you remember any foods that your mother or grandmother made that you liked as a little boy?

KURKIAN: Oh, sure! We had shish kebab, and baklava, and grape leaves, wrapped grape leaves with meat and rice inside of the grape leaves. I don't remember many other things.

LEVINE: And as a little boy, do you remember playing? Do you remember games, or do you remember what you did for fun? Did you go to school when you were still there?

KURKIAN: I don't remember going to school too much. Of course, when we living there I think I was only around four or five years old.

LEVINE: Oh, mm-hm, right.

KURKIAN: And after that, the Turks took the house over. They shoved us out of the house, and took all our possessions, so we had—what we did was, my mother was very clever. Being a teacher, she knew what to do. We went to a church, and hid there. Of course, the Turks were killing everybody in the town. And we hid there, and we were safe there. They weren't bothering anybody in the church.

LEVINE: And who was hiding there?

KURKIAN: Quite a few Armenians were hiding there.

LEVINE: And in your family, it was your mother and you, and your brothers?

KURKIAN: Yeah, they were all there, and my grandmother and my grandfather, of course. But what happened, when we—we had no money, of course, and we wrote to the United States. We had cousins here, and one of them sent us enough money to come over on the ship, you know. The transportation, he paid for all of that.

LEVINE: What about your father? What happened to him when the--?

KURKIAN: He was doing a lot of traveling to different towns, and we didn't see him too much. But we did see him on holidays, and things like that.

LEVINE: What was his work?

KURKIAN: He was administrator of schools, and he was quite busy, going from one town to another, administrating schools, checking on the schools. And I remember one Christmas he bought me brand new shoes. They had to be made, hand made, because they didn't have stores, and you couldn't go buy shoes. And it was filled with hard candy in there, for a Christmas present. I certainly enjoyed that, because I hadn't had anything sweet, you know.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURKIAN: And I remember that part.

LEVINE: Now when the Turks started their actions against the Armenians, what happened to your father?

KURKIAN: Well, being a man of, you know, good brains, and leadership, they got all these people that could lead the Armenians, you know, in their revolt against the Turks, and when they were doing all this, they seized all those, and put them in prison. Finally, they hung my father. And then my grandfather, he had glaucoma, and his eyes weren't—we had to be all examined before we could get on the boat to come over here, by a doctor. I have a certificate, [unclear]. And he didn't pass, on account of his eyes he didn't pass the test. We had to leave him back there, and I understand the Turks came in that town where we were and killed all the Armenians. Also, I heard that—I didn't know at the time, but a lot of the Armenians, the young people, men, they took in the army, Turkish Army. And when they—when this was happening, what they did was, they knew that the

Armenians had learned how to fight, you know, in the Turkish Army, so they killed all the Armenians that were in the Turkish Army.

LEVINE: Oh.

KURKIAN: Another time, in the house, they came after my older brother. He was, well he must have been fourteen or sixteen years. They were going to put him in this army, you know? Then we had heard about it, and the soldiers came to get him, and he hid in this oven. We had stored a lot of wheat, with the straw and all, in this oven, and he hid in there, and they didn't find him. So that's how he saved himself from being put in the army, the Turkish Army.

LEVINE: Wow! So, was there any lead-up? Well, I guess you were young; you were about five when it started?

KURKIAN: When it really started, yeah.

LEVINE: So you really don't remember? Do you remember? Do you have any other memories of it, of the genocide, or the massacre of the Armenians? Is there anything else that, experiences, that you had?

KURKIAN: Well, I knew that they were putting all the Armenians out in the desert, to die. If they didn't make this, kept on marching, they would shoot them, kill them. I had knowledge of that.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. So your mother must have been just frantic while you were hiding in the church?

KURKIAN: Yes, we were. We were pretty safe there, I think, and we were waiting for our money.

LEVINE: And did you know that your father had been hung, at that time?

KURKIAN: Well, yes I knew about it, because just before he was hung, my mother took me to this prison, Turkish prison. And she wasn't allowed to go in there, but I was—they would let a child go in there to see his father. And that was the day before they were going to hang him. And mother put a note in my shoe, hid it in the shoe, and I took it in there. And I told him about it, and he read the note. I don't know what was in the note, but they had given him a cup of tea, and that was his meal, I think. And he gave the tea to me; I remember that.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. So did you, as a child, do you remember having encounters with the Turkish people? I mean, were you living amongst them, up until then?

KURKIAN: Oh, yeah, they took over a lot of the houses where the Armenians were, and they shoved all the Armenians out of there. And they moved in, you know. And by the time they got to us, we were living right, you know, next to them, or across the street from them.

LEVINE: Were relations strained before that? But you were so young!

KURKIAN: No! No, there wasn't. There was a political party that got in there, and they wanted to get all the Armenians out of there, like Hitler did with the Jewish people, get them out of the country. So they took over the country, and then they tried to kill every one of us, so they could take over the whole country.

LEVINE: So, do you have any remembrances of the time that you were in the church, hiding?

KURKIAN: Yes. I remember that quite well. We weren't doing much of anything at that time. We were waiting for our money. I think we—in between that, I remember my mother taking me, when things got bad there, took myself and my mother, and I don't remember my brothers being with us. We went to this desert. There was a little nomad, little settlement there. And we had no place to stay, so there was this empty house, and we went to sleep in there. Of course, it was really hot in the desert, and we had nothing to eat. So one day one of these nomads with a chicken came, and it went down in the cellar and laid an egg! [Laughs] And my mother took that, I remember, took that and put some water with it, so we had a meal out of that one egg! We ate that. And then after that, I remember going to an orphanage. We were trying to get away from the Turks, you know, when they were seizing all the Armenians, and my mother seemed to know when they were coming, and everything else, and trying to keep us safe, you know. We went to this orphanage, and they accepted us in there, and she was a teacher, and she was able to teach the children. They were all Armenian kids. And the first meal we had there, it was wonderful! It was a piece of bread, and a handful of raisins. It tasted wonderful.

LEVINE: So, were you traveling any distance, when you were trying to keep away from--?

KURKIAN: Oh, yes! Yes, yes, we were. I remember one time I was put on a camel, and it had no saddle on it or anything. And we rode through a desert.

LEVINE: Was your mother with you?

KURKIAN: Yeah, my mother was with me, and in the middle of the desert, we were going in a group, like a—

LEVINE: Caravan?

KURKIAN: --caravan, you know. And one of the donkeys that was carrying some of the goods that they were going on, that donkey wouldn't move. So they had to take all the stuff off of it, the donkey [laughs], and leave the donkey there! Because the people were afraid the Turks would catch up with us, and kill us all.

LEVINE: Now, were people—I mean, I guess whatever you took with you was whatever you were able to save?

KURKIAN: Yes, yes, whatever we could carry, that's all we were able to take.

LEVINE: And what did your mother take? Do you remember?

KURKIAN: I remember her taking some oriental rugs. And in it, she wrapped like bedding and stuff like that, that were needed the most, and things like that. That's about all.

LEVINE: Well now, were you using, like, the bedding, while you were--?

KURKIAN: Oh yes, yes!

LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh, wow! And how about you personally—oh, you were so young. I was thinking: did you take any favorite thing that you had?

KURKIAN: No, I didn't have any things [unclear], at that time. But I do remember this new shoe that I got. And my mother and I would go into another town to visit somebody, and the shoes hurt my feet so bad, because I wasn't used to it.

LEVINE: Had you gone barefoot a lot, or no?

KURKIAN: Yeah, barefoot, yeah! So, I asked my mother if we could rest for a little while, and there was like a—I guess it was stones, or sand, piled up pretty high, like that. We got our back to this stones, and we took a little nap. And I had to take my shoes off. And when I woke up, somebody had sneaked in the back of this wall, and stole my shoes! [Laughs] The only shoes I ever had! I remember that.

LEVINE: When you were walking—well, you were on a camel. I was going to say it must have been hot on the feet, walking in the desert?

KURKIAN: Oh, sure it is! But they had me on the camel, with no saddle. And boy, that was hard, too.

LEVINE: Now, was your mother on a camel, and your brothers? Were you all--?

KURKIAN: They must have been on donkeys, I think. Yeah, they weren't on the camels. I remember myself being the only one on the camel.

LEVINE: On the camel?

KURKIAN: These people that were going with all this stuff that they had with them on the donkeys and camel, you know? They put me up there. I was so small that they were able to place me on a camel.

LEVINE: Now, as a little child, do you remember how you felt? Were you aware of everything?

KURKIAN: Oh, yes! I was so—after I heard that my father was killed by the Turks, I was very mad. I was trying to get a couple of my friends, "Let's go and kill some of those Turkish kids, you know, and get some revenge!" I was so mad about it, but we never did anything. We couldn't do anything like that.

LEVINE: So was your—you say you had some examination, and your grandfather was rejected because of his eyes?

KURKIAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: At what point did that occur?

KURKIAN: That was towards the end, when we were getting ready to come over.

LEVINE: So in other words, your grandfather and grandmother had also been with you, while you were traveling and trying to keep ahead of the Turks?

KURKIAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow. So what—did you go to a port city, then, for that examination?

KURKIAN: Yes, we did. What happened, we went to this port city, I know.

LEVINE: Was it Marseilles, is that where you said you'd left from?

KURKIAN: No, we didn't get to Marseilles yet. We were—

LEVINE: Oh, Smyrna?

KURKIAN: Smyrna, yeah.

LEVINE: Right.

KURKIAN: I think that's in Turkey.

LEVINE: I think so, yeah.

KURKIAN: Then, we were waiting for the ship, and this ship was just to go part way, to Marseilles. It wasn't to go to the United States. So we got on this—to get on this ship, it had—the ship was tied way out in the ocean. We had to go out there with a rowboat, and my mother hired a rowboat to take us out there with what possessions we had. And they agreed on a price to take us out there. But a storm came up, and it got so wicked that the waves were like ten foot high! And when we got near the ship that was anchored out there, if we had gotten anywheres near it, and hit it, it would break the rowboat to pieces. And I know it's pouring, and we have no cover or anything, but they finally got it close enough so we could get on the ship. But in the mean time, whoever was taking us—I don't know whether it was Turks or Armenians—they wanted double the money that we had paid them. And they got it! They got us on the ship, and we got on the ship. And I remember the first thing they did to me, cut all my hair, and doused me with kerosene! Because I might have had lice, you know, and no bathing, or anything, no water, you know, all that time? And I remember them doing that to me.

LEVINE: Wow! And how about your brothers?

KURKIAN: Well, I don't remember too much about it, but my middle brother, he got—somebody over here, one of my cousins—sent enough money for him to come over, and he came over a year ahead of us.

LEVINE: Oh!

KURKIAN: So he was over here, at Port Jervis, New York, and he was having a good time. These people were—they had a nice tailoring business, you know, and he went to school there, while we were still back there, [laughs] in the old country!

LEVINE: So he had come over before the worst of this started?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Before your father was arrested?

KURKIAN: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Oh, my goodness! Uh-huh, now was there any correspondence for the period before you were forced out of your home? With your brother, that you remember? I mean, did he write anything?

KURKIAN: No, I don't think there was any correspondence.

LEVINE: Yeah, wow.

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

LEVINE: You got on the ship from Smyrna to Marseilles--?

KURKIAN: Marseilles, yes.

LEVINE: And that's where you had the kerosene put in your hair?

KURKIAN: Yeah, on that first ship we got the kerosene put on my hair [laughs].

LEVINE: Now, was the ship full of Armenians fleeing?

KURKIAN: Yes, yes, it was.

LEVINE: Do you remember anything about that voyage, what people were like?

KURKIAN: Well, the only thing, that we came to Marseilles, and they put us in this great big room. And everybody was in the same room, beds, you know.

LEVINE: Like a dormitory room?

KURKIAN: Yeah, like a dormitory room.

LEVINE: Bunk beds, or--?

KURKIAN: Yeah, bunk beds.

LEVINE: Uh-huh.

KURKIAN: And we stayed there a couple days, waiting for our ship to go to the United States. And from there, we did go to the United States. And I remember that the ship we were on, of course, we were down in the bottom of the ship, which was—

LEVINE: Steerage.

KURKIAN: --very hot, and very dingy. And it had bunk beds you had to climb, I remember that. And then what we did, we sat out up on the deck all day long, you know, because it was so terrible down below.

LEVINE: The name of that ship? Was that what you think is the Patrios?

KURKIAN: Yeah, Patrios, P-T-I-A-S.

LEVINE: And by any chance do you remember the name of the ship that brought you to Marseilles from Turkey?

KURKIAN: No, I don't. That doesn't seem to sink in at all, and I have no records of it.

LEVINE: Right, right. Is there anything you can—I mean, with hindsight, and in retrospect, is there anything you could say about human nature that you observed as a small boy with the people fleeing their life in such a sort of massive situation, onslaught? I mean, how were people—how were they taking it? I suppose there were lots of different reactions by different people, but is there anything that you could say that maybe characterizes that--?

??: Are you cold?

LEVINE: No, no, I'm not.

KURKIAN: I don't recall anything that I can remember about that. As a child, I wasn't thinking too much about what was really going on, really. And I noticed just those things that I remember well.

LEVINE: Well, is there anything now that when you think about that time, how do you think about it now?

KURKIAN: Well, I'm very sad that we had to go through all that terrible part of our life. It was very sad. And we were very lucky to get over here, wonderful country.

LEVINE: Where were people going, besides the United States? Were there other destinations that the Armenians were heading for?

KURKIAN: No, not on that, not since we got on to Marseilles. That ship to the United States, that came to the United States. We did—when we got to the United States, we of course saw the Statue of Liberty, and that was—

LEVINE: Oh, yeah, well tell me first about the Patrios. You said, you were in steerage; you stayed in the day time up on deck.

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Just to get some air, I suppose. And how about, were you fed on the ship?

KURKIAN: I believe so, yes. We must have been fed.

LEVINE: You must have been pretty malnourished by that point? I mean, because you hadn't been really eating—or maybe in the orphanage? Well, you said raisins and—

KURKIAN: Yeah, yeah, we were kept alive in the orphanage, and of course, on the ship they fed us, I'm pretty sure, pretty good. And I remember my mother giving me a nickel, and I learned how to say gingersnaps—an American word, you know. I didn't know a word of English, and every time I got a nickel I'd go—I didn't know how to say anything else! I used to get gingersnaps on that ship. And I got so tired of gingersnaps, I won't [laughs] even eat it now!

LEVINE: And so when the ship came into the New York Harbor, did you realize you were approaching land?

KURKIAN: Oh, yes, we saw the Statue of Liberty, and it was a wonderful sight to see!

LEVINE: Did you know what that was? Did—I guess maybe your mother told you?

KURKIAN: Yeah, oh yeah, she told us. And the big high buildings there—it was amazing! I had never seen anything like that before, such a wonderful sight!

LEVINE: And what did you think? Did you think that the Statue had meaning to you, coming here?

KURKIAN: I thought so, yes. I thought, "Boy, this is freedom now. It looks like we're going to be free."

LEVINE: And safe, I suppose, too?

KURKIAN: Safe, yeah, sure. Safe.

- LEVINE: Yeah, uh-huh. Wow! So, did you go then directly to Ellis Island?
- KURKIAN: Yes, first we went to Ellis Island, from the ship. And then from there—
- LEVINE: Well, just to back up a second, you mentioned that there were a lot of ships in the harbor when you came in.
- KURKIAN: Yes, yes, that's right. We had to stay out in the harbor about two days, I think, before we could get into the Ellis Island, because they had such a crowd at that time there.
- LEVINE: And you were coming in in 1920, in June?
- KURKIAN: Yes.
- LEVINE: That was when you were coming in, when it was so crowded that way?
- KURKIAN: Yes, that's right, yeah.
- LEVINE: Uh-huh, so when you did get to Ellis Island—did you, was your mother fearful, or do you remember? Was Ellis Island a place that was faced with some trepidation?
- KURKIAN: Oh, yes! We were very scared that they might ship us back, you know. In fact, I thought I was going to be going back. What happened: we had to go upstairs on an elevator, and be examined by the doctors up there. And when the elevator got filled—my mother's in there—they closed the door! And I'm outside, and I got left behind! And I didn't get with my mother; I'd lost her. They took me and put me in a cage to send me back to where I came from! And I was sitting there crying, I remember that! A very sad time for me.
- LEVINE: Did it take long for you to get reunited with your mother?
- KURKIAN: No. In a little while I saw my mother way up on the second floor there, looking down for me, and I waved to her, and she came and got me. I was so glad to see her!
- LEVINE: Wow! So you were examined, and everybody was examined?
- KURKIAN: Yeah, we were all examined; we all passed good. No problem, no disease, or anything.
- LEVINE: Do you remember anything about the examinations? Any particulars about--?

KURKIAN: Not really.

LEVINE: Were people nice to you, in general?

KURKIAN: Oh, yeah! The doctors were very nice to us. Yeah, they were nice people.

LEVINE: Were there a lot of other ethnic groups going through the processing at Ellis Island when you were doing through there? Do you recall that?

KURKIAN: I don't recall.

LEVINE: Do you remember other languages? I assume it was very crowded, if you had to wait two days on the ship.

KURKIAN: Yes, that's right, but I don't remember any other people. I know there was quite a few Armenians there at that time.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. Now, were your family speaking Armenian? Were they speaking anything else?

KURKIAN: Nothing else.

LEVINE: Any other language that they knew?

KURKIAN: No, nothing else.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And do you remember if the inspectors could speak Armenian?

KURKIAN: Yeah, they had people that knew what we were saying.

LEVINE: Mm-hm, okay, so then, I guess at some point, everybody realized you'd passed through?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And then what?

KURKIAN: Oh, before that, my uncle that we were going to live with, he had sponsored us. He hadn't sent any money, because my other cousin had sent the money. But he came on one of these tugboats, brought a great big basket of fruit. And we got—we pulled it up on the rope, and we were able to have that basket of fruit. And I had never eaten an orange, or a banana, and I tried to eat the banana with the skin and all—I remember

that! [Laughs] It tasted good, anyway. I was eating bananas that way!
[Laughs]

LEVINE: Was this when the ship was moored in the harbor, before you could get into Ellis Island?

KURKIAN: Yes, it was before.

LEVINE: He came out on a small boat?

KURKIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: Oh, wow!

KURKIAN: I remember that. Then of course, after we got out of Ellis Island, we came to Philadelphia where my uncle lived.

LEVINE: So you must—did you go by car, or train? Do you remember how you got to Philadelphia?

KURKIAN: No, I don't really. I think it was on the train, yes.

LEVINE: Well now, did someone meet you at Ellis Island?

KURKIAN: Yes, my uncle.

LEVINE: Your uncle came to Ellis Island, and you went back with him?

KURKIAN: Yeah, we went back with him. And what happened there was my uncle and my aunt had only a little apartment they were living in. They rented a house, a big house, to accommodate us, but that was only for a month or two months we could stay there. And of course, when that time was up, we had to go. So happened: friends of ours got in touch with us and told us, "There's a factory here, a ribbon factory, that if you come over here, I think you can get a job there." My mother and my older brother. "And we'll let you live in the attic, and you can use the kitchen down in the cellar." So we took them up on it; we didn't want to stay with the uncle any longer, because they wanted to go back to their apartment. So that's what we did. We went, Cottage Point, New York, it was called. Do you know any place like that now?

LEVINE: No. In other words, you left Philadelphia?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: And you traveled some distance, to take this--?

KURKIAN: Yes, in New York, at Cottage Point. Yeah, we moved there. And so we lived in the attic, and I remember I hit my head on the rafters [laughs].

LEVINE: On the eaves?

KURKIAN: Yeah, when I got up in the mornings. Then we went down the cellar, and had our breakfast, and cooking down there. And my mother and my older brother got a job in the ribbon factory.

LEVINE: Do you remember the name of the factory, by any chance?

KURKIAN: Not really, but it was a pretty big company that made ribbons. And my mother could get extra work. She could bring it home, and it was in a great big roll like this, ribbons. And they had a string at the edges of it, and you had to cut that string, and take it out of that ribbon, and then they could sell the ribbons, you know. So that was my job when I got home from school. I'd cut those strings, and get it ready, so they could take it back. We used to get a dollar, I think, every time they did the roll. And my mother gave me a nickel a week for doing that. [Laughs] And I saved ten dollars doing that!

LEVINE: Wow! So do you remember what your mother was doing in the ribbon factory?

KURKIAN: No, I don't, but they probably were making ribbons.

LEVINE: Yeah, on a machine, or something.

KURKIAN: Machine, yeah, yeah.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, wow. Now, was this anywhere near where your other brother was, in Port Jervis?

KURKIAN: No, no. This was [unclear]. But it was in New York State, though.

LEVINE: Mm-hm, yeah. Wow, so what was it like when you—is this place—what did you say, Cottage Point?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: Is Cottage Point where you started school? Or had you been in school in Philadelphia at all?

KURKIAN: No, I hadn't been in Philadelphia, because we were only there a month, or a little over a month. I didn't go to school there at all.

LEVINE: Remember your first day in school?

KURKIAN: No, I don't. It wasn't—I don't think we were there too long. Then what happened: we have an aunt and uncle that lived in Camden after that. They asked us to come visit them. And that time came, and it was wonderful! It was good people in there, you know, and they asked, they said, "Why don't you move to Camden?" you know? And we all liked it, you know. We liked what we saw. And so one of our friends, he said, "Open a tailor shop," for my older brother. They didn't know anything about tailoring, but they got this cheap house in Camden—had rats in it, and everything, outside toilet, you know? So we rented that, and they went in their tailoring business, Mother and my older brother. And we made a living out of that. And I remember lots of times we didn't have enough money to buy coal. I used to go to the dump, and I had a wagon I'd fill up with wood. And one winter I filled the whole cellar with wood, enough to heat us for the whole winter! And then another time, I used to make snowballs, and sell them out on the sidewalk. I'd make a dollar a day profit, doing that!

LEVINE: Did people buy them to throw at other people? Is that why they bought a snowball?

KURKIAN: They what?

LEVINE: Why did people buy them?

KURKIAN: Eat it. It was flavored. You know, you had—

LEVINE: Oh, flavored! [Laughs] I was thinking it was out of snow. Oh, I see, uh-huh.

KURKIAN: I used to have to scrape the ice, and make it, you know, put it in the paper dish, and put any flavor they wanted. I used to go and get the flavor on Federal Street in Camden, on the trolley, and bring it back, and sell that. And they were doing pretty good in the tailoring. It was a Polish section there, that we got started there.

LEVINE: Well now, your mother knew how to, I assume, knew how to sew?

KURKIAN: Oh, yeah, she was good.

LEVINE: She was good at it?

KURKIAN: Good at it, yeah. She could make anything!

LEVINE: Oh, uh-huh, uh-huh.

KURKIAN: So they did well there. After a while, this place where we were, they made enough money to buy a good place up the corner, next block—all brick house, you know. We moved there, and my older brother had that business there for quite a while. Then my other brother, from Port Jervis, he came, and of course, he was living with us then. And he went in with my brother, and they started a shoe business, shoe repair business, in that store. Then after a while, he wanted to open a cleaning business, tailoring business. So he moved out to Merchantville, and opened a store, rented the store, and opened this cleaning business. And he did well. He bought the whole building—it was a big apartment house—after a while. He did good work. And of course, that was the middle brother, this one here.

LEVINE: Edward, did you say?

KURKIAN: No, that's—

LEVINE: Walter? No?

KURKIAN: That's Walter, yes. And he did very good, and was very popular. They liked him there in Merchantville. And then after that, he had this tailoring business—he gave that up. And he was elected to be president of three banks! He was president of three banks. And in the mean time, I didn't like the cleaning business, so I—when I met my wife, we were put in the same class together in Merchantville. I was—I had started in Camden, and this friend of mine came one day, and he says, "Look this girl up when you go to Merchantville." And here, they had a picture of my wife, all in a costume. She was the lead opera singer in the play that they were having at Merchantville High School. So, I went in the same room, and I met her. [Laughs] That's how we got married!

LEVINE: Wow! Did you like her immediately?

KURKIAN: Not right away no. But in a little while. I met her, and we got a long very well. And now we're married sixty-five years!

LEVINE: Oh, that's wonderful! That's wonderful. So, what do you think about all the kinds of things, how the family pitched in and worked, and tried different things? Do you think, like, had you stayed in Armenia, do you think your family would have done the same kind of thing? Well, your mother would have been a teacher. I mean, she wouldn't have gone into—

KURKIAN: We would have had a hard time there, if we had stayed there. We wouldn't have gotten ahead, like we did here, of course.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah.

KURKIAN: We wouldn't have the—we wouldn't have what they call it, the—

LEVINE: Opportunity, I guess?

KURKIAN: Opportunity.

LEVINE: Yeah, yeah. Could you say, is there—well, you were very young, but I'm just wondering, like, how life compared before the Turks started in against the Armenians? How life compared in your town, before you left, or before the trouble started, and how it was here?

KURKIAN: Oh, uh-huh. Well, we had a nice life over there, before the Turks gave us trouble. But not like we have here. We had a wonderful life here. You could do anything. If you worked hard, you could get ahead.

LEVINE: Yeah, and how about you? You stayed in—did you go through high school, then?

KURKIAN: I finished high school.

LEVINE: You finished high school?

KURKIAN: That's all, though.

LEVINE: And then what?

KURKIAN: We didn't have any money to go to college or anything.

LEVINE: Right.

KURKIAN: Then when I met my wife, I was going to tell you, her father was a distributor for roofing materials. And he says, "Why don't you go in the roofing business?" he said, you know? I said, "Yeah, I'll try it." And so he told me what to do, and I rented an office, and I hired some roofers, myself, and learned the trade. And—

LEVINE: Who did you learn from?

KURKIAN: Well, my father-in-law--

LEVINE: Oh, he taught you how--?

KURKIAN: --taught me what to do, and how to do it, you know? And it was great help. But then I did very good, I think. Of course, now my son has the business; he's doing great.

LEVINE: Oh! Wow!

KURKIAN: Yeah.

LEVINE: So you started the business, and you retired from it?

KURKIAN: Nineteen thirty-five, I started the business. And it's still going now.

LEVINE: What's its name? Does it have a name?

KURKIAN: Kurk Roofing and Siding Company.

LEVINE: Oh, wow! So, let's see. Well, how do you think coming here, under the circumstances you did, and starting a new life—how do you think that affected you, and your character, and who you are, and how you behaved? How do you think—what impact do you think all of that has had on you?

KURKIAN: Well, it had a very good effect on me, because, you know, I didn't hardly know anything. And I got, I think, going to high school, that was wonderful, because that made me think better, you know, and everything. And I could—and I was able to manage a business that held up, and I was able to make it through life, [unclear] started other people in business, same as myself. But I was his best customer. I bought more material from him than anybody else in the whole New Jersey.

LEVINE: So you were actually responsible for doing people's roofs?

KURKIAN: Yes.

LEVINE: He was the distributor for the materials?

KURKIAN: Right.

LEVINE: I see.

KURKIAN: He'd get a commission on everything I bought off of him.

LEVINE: Uh-huh, and were you and your family part of an Armenian community in this country? After--?

KURKIAN: Well yeah, we were friendly with a lot of Armenians here, yes. There were some—quite a few—around this area.

LEVINE: And how do you think about that? Your Armenian aspect, and your American aspect? How do you think about those two parts of yourself?

KURKIAN: Well, [pause], well I love both very much. I mean, I certainly appreciate what this country did for me. My brothers did, too. We was very active in [unclear].

LEVINE: And how about you? Besides your work, and your family, are there any other activities that you have been particularly involved in?

KURKIAN: Well, I've been a member of the Lion's Club, which helps the blind, and different kinds of sicknesses; we raise money for that.

LEVINE: What's the name of the club?

KURKIAN: Lion's Club.

LEVINE: Lion's Club?

KURKIAN: Lion's Club, yes. It's one of the biggest clubs, organizations, in the world. They have clubs all over the world.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. And how about your greatest satisfactions, that you feel have been satisfying to you over your lifetime?

KURKIAN: Well, I feel that I've been very lucky, to be able to do as much as I did, with just a high school education.

LEVINE: Mm-hm. And you've been retired some years now?

KURKIAN: Twenty-six years now, I've been retired.

LEVINE: Wow! And you've found enough to do?

KURKIAN: Oh yes, I keep busy. I have this property that has three apartments. I own that. And I have my shop, which is once—I'll show you where the shop is.

LEVINE: Well, don't show me now, because you're hooked up with the mike. But after we finish, you can.

KURKIAN: Okay. Am I still hooked up?

EI-1154/KURKIAN

- LEVINE: Yes, yes, you're fine. It's on the back of your sleeve.
- KURKIAN: Oh, I see.
- LEVINE: Why don't you mention your wife's name, and your children's names?
- KURKIAN: Okay. My wife's name is Ann Casper—her maiden name is, C-A-S-P-E-R.
- LEVINE: Was she Armenian?
- KURKIAN: No, she wasn't. She was Dutch and German extraction. My son is Richard Kurkian, and Melinda Gaffney. She's married to an Irish gentleman. He's a proofreader. He was a proofreader for the newspaper in Philadelphia, but they went out of business! So he works for five lawyers now, and reads all their things before they use the, you know, whatever they have to do, the briefs and all.
- LEVINE: Wow! Well, we just have a little time left. Is there anything you'd like to say in closing about coming here, starting a life here, living your life here?
- KURKIAN: Well, I love my life. It's been wonderful, and I appreciate everything that I got from life. But I think anybody that will work hard in this country will get ahead, if they want to work. I can't understand why so many people are on welfare, and stuff like that. I started with nothing, and I'm able to retire, and take life easy now.
- LEVINE: Well, thank you so much, Mr. Kurkian, for a wonderful interview! Okay, this is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. I've been speaking with Harry Kurkian, who came in 1920 as a nine year old from Armenia. And I'm signing off.

END OF INTERVIEW