

EI-135

**HELEN HARTUNIAN CHAKMAKIAN, ROSE HARTUNIAN ANTRASIAN
AND LYDIA HARTUNIAN MINASSIAN**

**BIRTH DATES: MARCH 27, 1908; JUNE 4, 1910 AND SEPTEMBER 12,
1912**

INTERVIEW DATE: 4/15/1992

RUNNING TIME: 50:00

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1993

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1993

TURKEY (ARMENIAN), 1922

AGES 14, 12 AND 10

PORT: PIRAEUS

RESIDENCES:

- **TURKEY: ZEITON**
- **THE US: BUFFALO, NY; PHILADELPHIA, PA**

**Oral Historian's Note: The interview with Rev. Vartan Hartunian,
brother of the interviewees, is AKRF-166, not AKRF-156 as stated in
the introduction of the interview. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Oral
Historian, 3/3/1993.**

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

Wednesday, April 15, 1992. I am here at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with three sisters: Lydia Minassian, Rose Antrasian and Helen Chakmakian, who came from Turkey, of Armenian lineage, in 1922, were detained at Ellis Island for two weeks, and whose brother, Vartan Hartunian, is our A.K.R.F. interview number 156. Ladies, welcome.

ALL: Thank you.

SIGRIST: I'm going to begin by asking Helen to give me your full name, include your maiden name in that, and your date of birth, please.

HELEN: I am Helen Chakmakian, Helen Hartunian Chakmakian, and my age?

SIGRIST: Your birthday please?

HELEN: March the 27th, and I am, well, it was 1908 I was born. 1908.

SIGRIST: Good. Rose, please?

ROSE: Yes. My name is Rose Antrasian, and my birthday date is June the 4th, 1910.

SIGRIST: And Lydia.

LYDIA: I'm Lydia Hartunian Minassian, born on September 10, 1912.

SIGRIST: Were you all born in the same town?

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

LYDIA: Yes.

SIGRIST: Okay. Why don't I ask Helen to give me the name of the town, please, in Turkey.

HELEN: We were born in a village, really. Our father being a minister, he was the minister there, and we were all born, all three of us, in Zeitoon.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

HELEN: Z-E-I-T-O-O-N. Zeitoon.

LYDIA: Right, yeah.

SIGRIST: Rose, can you describe the town for me? What did it look like?

ROSE: Well, I was just a little child, so I cannot describe the town. But we have a picture which shows my mother, my father, and Helen and I. Of course, Lydia was not born, but mother showed it at that time. (they laugh) And then we moved to Marash, and I do remember Marash.

SIGRIST: Can you spell Marash, please?

ROSE: M-A-R-A-S-H.

SIGRIST: Can you describe that town for me?

ROSE: Well, what I remember is that it was mountainous, a beautiful place, and

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

we, in the summer we had very, very delicious grapes and all kinds of foods, fruits. And of the figs and the nuts were my favorite, the fig trees and the nut trees. And we used to have many, many good times together, all three of us.

SIGRIST: So is that where Lydia was born, then, in Marash.

ROSE: No. She was born in Zeitoun, also, but . . .

SIGRIST: But you left when you were quite young. Let me ask, I'll ask Lydia, what was your father's name?

LYDIA: Abraham Hartunian.

SIGRIST: And his profession was?

LYDIA: He was a minister.

SIGRIST: Can you describe to me what your father looked like when you were a kid?

LYDIA: When I was a kid he looked big, but he wasn't that big. (they laugh) He was a very kindly man, a very loving man. We always used to sit on his lap, all of us at one time, and he always put his arms around us, and showed a great deal of love to us.

SIGRIST: What was his temperament like?

LYDIA: Very calm, very peaceful man, yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. Helen, can you tell me about your mother. What was her name?

HELEN: My mother was Shushan, S-H-U-S-H-A-N. Shushan. What is the meaning?

ALL: Lilly.

HELEN: Lilly. It's an Armenian name. And she was a schoolteacher. She was quite strict with the girls. My father was a loving man and constantly kissed us and loved us, and my mother was a disciplinist. And she loved us, but she also taught me many things, like sewing and crocheting and knitting and all sorts of things like that. She was a wonderful person.

SIGRIST: When you say she was the disciplinarian, how would she discipline you? If you did something wrong, how were you punished?

HELEN: Oh, I think by word more than anything else. I don't remember that she ever beat us or anything like that. She was very loving herself, and I don't remember that at all.

SIGRIST: Rose, are there other children in the family?

ROSE: Oh, well, I have a, we have an older brother, Albert, who passed away, and of course my younger brother Vartan, he's the youngest, and he's the minister. About Mother, there's one thing that I would like to say. She was born in a village and she was very interested in education. So the missionaries came to that place and saw her, and they took her to Marash

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

so that she could study. She was only fourteen. So that was interesting to leave all her family.

SIGRIST: Was that how she met your Dad?

ROSE: Yes.

SIGRIST: This leads me to the question of other family. Lydia, tell me, were there other family members in this town?

LYDIA: We didn't have any other family members. We didn't know any grandparents, aunts, uncles. There was just one cousin who lived with us. She was the only relative that we knew.

SIGRIST: Why was she living with you?

LYDIA: She had no family. Her family had been massacred, and my father had taken her under his wing.

SIGRIST: I see. Helen, tell me what it was like being a little girl in this town. What did you do for fun?

HELEN: You mean in Turkey?

SIGRIST: Yes.

HELEN: I don't really remember, because we've been through so many different conflicts when we were there. When we were happy were the times that

were very peaceful. We played jacks, and of course everything was not given to us as jacks that you would be, the stones were the jacks. We used to play with stones. And our dolls were the dolls that we made ourselves, because we were not able to get anything that was manufactured. And one time one of my friends had a doll sent to her from America, and I certainly was so jealous of her when I saw that doll. It was a beautiful doll. And otherwise, in that town of Marash, we were there through the massacres, the first World War. Afterwards, a conflict between the Turks and the Armenians, I guess, at that time, and so that there were many people killed. We ran. There were fires and massacres. Friends of ours, their our whole family was massacred while they were in their home. At the church, many people gathered there, and it was a miracle that some of us came out alive.

SIGRIST: So this is a very threatening atmosphere.

HELEN: It was. It was very threatening. Practically all our lives we've been from one thing to the other.

SIGRIST: Rose, what do you remember of the Turkish massacres?

ROSE: Well, as a child, I think I was a very trusting and depending on whatever my father and mother said, so that I don't think I ever felt scared of things. But I know that while we were in our father's church there, the Turks were shooting at the church and shooting at us, and Father took us around and said, "My dears, don't worry, we're all going to go to heaven together." Of course, thank goodness we were able to get out of that situation. And, of course, the Turks did a lot of cruel things, setting churches on fire, and, uh, well, we survived. It seems as though somehow we were able to get out of

all that, and we survived.

SIGRIST: In this town that you lived in, were these all Armenians in this town?

ROSE: No, no, no, no. It really, I don't think the Armenians were the majority. I think it was that, um, but Armenians tried to educate their children as much as possible, and they tried to instill basic things that were good for us. That's what I remember.

SIGRIST: Rose, I'm sorry, Lydia, let me ask you, because you're the youngest of all, when you were in this environment, did you understand what was going on, or was this just kind of exciting, or did you feel threatened, as a little girl?

LYDIA: Well, I've told my sisters that whenever mother and father were with us, I was never afraid, because they were always with us through these times. Now, after Rose mentioned the incident in the church, after that we escaped and went into a Catholic church, which was full of Armenians. There was hardly any room to move around. And the Turks had surrounded the church, and they were starting to pour kerosene all over the church to set it on fire. But fortunately just at that time an American missionary came by, and I don't know exactly what happened, but we were allowed to, they didn't burn the fire. Although when we were there another fire, another church was set on fire. You could hear the screams from that church.

SIGRIST: Did these raids almost become kind of commonplace, like it's almost routine?

HELEN: Almost, almost.

LYDIA: Well, this massacre lasted about twenty-one days, three weeks. After that we had a time of so-called "peace", in quotes. (she laughs) And we had a few months of peace before we left that city to go to Smyrna, because my brother was there, the oldest brother, in college. Albert, yes. So we went there to be with him and then in a few months we had another massacre over there.

SIGRIST: So you were just used to going from place to place. Helen, tell me kind of a typical fleeing. What did you do when you had to leave? What did you take?

HELEN: All right. In, from Aleppo, we were on our way to America. We had our passports. And we went to Smyrna, because my brother is in college, and he had another month to finish, so we thought we would get him so that we could all go. We were in Smyrna about two months, I think, and we had gotten our passage. The ship was at the shore. And we were, we had packed everything, ready to go, and on, we were to get into the ship on a Monday. On Saturday all of a sudden hell broke out. The Turks and the Greeks, this time, were fighting. They put practically the whole city on fire. And everybody who could get away would be saved. Everybody was going towards shore. Now my parents, my father had us down in the basement, and, again, he was saying, "Don't worry. We are going to heaven." And, you know, he prayed. And my mother said, "Oh, no. Let's go upstairs, take your shoes off, and we will run for the American Girls College." And that's exactly what we did. And we got there, and after a while the Americans had sent sailors to take the missionaries to the shore, and we followed them through fire and bullets and we got to the shore, being my father was a

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

minister, and the missionaries knew him. So they decided they would take us on a battleship. What was the name of the battleship? (discussion amongst the sisters) I forget the name of the battleship, but they took us on the battleship, and later on transferred us to the Greek freighter. And for three days, hungry, we arrived in Greece, and we were there for a short period of time when we started coming, took our passage to, we left everything. We had nothing but the clothes on our backs.

SIGRIST: Very, very dramatic circumstances. (They all agree.) Rose, tell me a good memory of being a child in Turkey.

ROSE: A good memory. (They laugh.)

SIGRIST: Yeah. Something that sticks out in your mind as a time when you really had a good time, or . . .

ROSE: Yes. As a child, I would like to tell stories to my friends. (they laugh) And maybe stories would be to get them frightened. So we had a fig tree that there were lots of snakes that crawled around it. And, of course, I was scared of them, but still I would get close enough with my friends, tell them to come. And as they came closer, I would scream, "The snakes are coming." And then we would all run away. And, of course, as a child, I'd love to swing. We had a big, big tree, and, you know, the ropes were very long. And that was my fun time that I had, scaring my friends and swinging and swinging. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Lydia, let me ask you the same question. When you think back to Turkey, what fond memory do you have of this?

LYDIA: Fond memory? (everyone laughs heartily) This is a fond memory. They don't have outhouses there, they have holes in the ground, okay. So we had to go from where we were down to this hole in the ground. But the missionaries had an enclosed place where you could actually sit. And, oh, we just wanted so much to go and try that out. (they laugh)

HELEN: That's a nice thing to say.

LYDIA: So one day Rose and I decided we would try it out. So she waited outside, I went in. I came out, she went in. Not until we came to this country did I find out that it was only an outhouse. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Helen, let me ask you, what did your house look like? Did you live in one house for a long time in this one town?

HELEN: In Marash a house was, it was part of the church complex. The school was there for the children, and the church. And then on the side was the house where we lived, because my father was a minister. And the house was, I think the houses was very similar, in a way. Not so beautiful as the ones that are here, but, you know, they have porches and flat roof. During the summer you would sleep on the roof because it was so much cooler up there. But it was very similar to the houses that we would have.

SIGRIST: What was it made out of?

HELEN: Mostly lumber. Mostly lumber. I don't think that we had brick, or anything like that. Oh, they used to use brick for something else. They make the

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

bricks, they would make the brick themselves with straw or dirt or whatever they used. They had some brick, but I think the buildings were mostly lumber.

SIGRIST: Rose, what did you all eat in Turkey?

ROSE: What did we all eat in Turkey?

SIGRIST: What kind of foods did you eat? Did Mother make something that you remember that was your favorite?

ROSE: Mother made all the Armenian dishes, but maybe one thing that I could explain to you is you take the very, very fine wheat and mix it with some lamb or beef, and knead the two of them together. And then you take a little bit in your hand, and put a little space there, and then you have a filling that you put in there, and it's like balls, and meat inside. And of course that's one of the favorites of most of the Armenians.

SIGRIST: Was that cooked?

ROSE: Yes. And then later on you cook it in some broth of some kind.

HELEN: Shish-kebab. They always had shish-kebab.

SIGRIST: Speared. Was Ma a good cook?

LYDIA: She was a great cook.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

HELEN: She was a wonderful cook. And the pastries are different. That filo dough, you call it, they made a lot of pastries with that.

SIGRIST: Filo dough.

HELEN: Yeah, filo dough.

SIGRIST: Lydia, let me ask you, what kind of clothes did you wear in Turkey?

HELEN: Not pants.

LYDIA: I don't remember really. I don't remember.

HELEN: Mostly dresses, that's all. Mostly we just had dresses.

ROSE: Yeah, mostly what Mother would have made with the machine.

HELEN: Mother made our dresses.

SIGRIST: She had a sewing machine.

ROSE: Yeah, she had a sewing machine just, you know, straight clothes.

SIGRIST: What about shoes? Did you wear sandals?

ROSE: Tell that story about the shoes. (they laugh)

HELEN: That story about the shoes. (they laugh) The shoes were made by hand.

The shoemaker made the shoes out of leather. And they were not very beautiful. You know, they were simple, simply made shoes. And one day someone had sent a pair of Mary Janes in black patent leather to, somebody gave it to my mother. It had come from this country. And being the oldest girl, I thought, oh, she's going to let me have those. And I tried it on, and it didn't fit me. And Rose got it, and I was so jealous of her. (they laugh) But mostly everything was made at home, you know, whatever it was. People made them. I don't think you could go and buy shoes or anything like that. And then I was, when I was 11 years old, I guess, my father was exiled during the deportations, and we didn't know where he was, and Mother was trying to make a living. So my mother taught me how to knit, and I used to knit socks, and then we learned how to spin cotton on the spinning wheel. We would get the cotton, take the seeds out of it by putting it through, what is it that they call those things, when you do laundry through. I don't know what you call them. And it was just like you prepared the cotton from, the cotton was picked up with the seeds. You got rid of it, you beat it up, you rolled it, and then made thread out of it. And my brother Albert used to weave this into cloth. So we learned a lot when my father was exiled, and for over a year he was gone, and we didn't know he was alive or not.

SIGRIST: And you really had to fend for yourselves. (they all agree)

HELEN: And my mother being a teacher, she really didn't know anything else to do except these little things we did to keep ourselves going.

SIGRIST: Would you say, as all girls growing up in this kind of society, was it expected of you to learn the domestic arts?

ROSE AND HELEN: Oh, yes, oh, yes.

LYDIA: Except for the little one.

SIGRIST: How was it different for you?

HELEN: She was too young.

LYDIA: Well, they always claimed I ran away from work, but I was the smallest, so what could I do. (she laughs)

HELEN: Mother used to say, "Helen!" Then Lydia was disappear, and Rose would come and help.

ROSE: What she would say with that, the three girls, we were put into the orphanage, the German orphanage, at the time father was deported, and Mother and Vartan, being a baby, was put in the hospital, so that we would not be deported also. So that was . . .

HELEN: Actually, they hid us so that we would not be following our father because they knew we would be killed. So I don't know how long we were in the orphanage, but we, it turned out, you know, it was a German orphanage, and they insisted during the war, remember, everybody, they thought Germany was it, and we had to learn how, in German, you had to learn how to talk German. So what they did was when, in the morning, they would have a ring and a ribbon around it, put it around your neck, and if I heard you talk anything but German, I'd pass this on to you. The person that was

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

left with this got a punishment at the end of the day, and they were very strict about it. So we did learn some German, but I have forgotten it. But every morning we sang, "Deutschland, Deutschland." (they laugh)
Whatever.

SIGRIST: You've already started telling me this story, but why did you want to come to America?

HELEN: To get away from all this.

LYDIA: Father would always say, "One day we're going to America." In our childish minds, we had equated America with heaven. So we just thought we were coming to heaven. After what we'd been through over there, America was heaven. So we all looked forward to coming.

SIGRIST: It's interesting that your father, in this terrible atmosphere, this dramatic atmosphere, is always thinking in sort of death metaphors, "We're all going to heaven," and you're thinking America is heaven. (they all agree)

HELEN: He was a very Christian man, very.

SIGRIST: As if that death was the only release. (they all agree) It's interesting. Well, how did you get there? How did this process start?

ROSE: Coming to this country? After the fights that, the burning of Smyrna, there was no other choice. We had everything ready before anyway.

SIGRIST: So you were all ready.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

ROSE: We were running away now, we were running away . . .

HELEN: We were running away from what we had seen.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of Armenians that were doing this also? (they all agree)

LYDIA: We had no passage money, but a missionary friend of my father sent us the money. That's how we were able to come, on steerage, with the money he sent us.

SIGRIST: The missionaries in Turkey seem very important to your life story. (they all agree)

LYDIA: They were very important.

HELEN: And we came, when we arrived, all we had was the clothes on our backs, and probably anybody wouldn't believe it, but that's all there was.

SIGRIST: So you, um, I think, you ended up on the Greek freighter?

LYDIA: Well, the name was King Alexander, and I think it must have been Greek, but they served us spaghetti and macaroni the whole trip.

HELEN: It was a Greek ship.

SIGRIST: So that was . . .

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

HELEN: Third class, because there was no room in any of the other classes. I think they had sent us enough money to go second class, but we couldn't get on it, and my father was so anxious to get us here that we took the third.

SIGRIST: You said they sent you money. Who sent you money?

ALL: The missionaries.

SIGRIST: So they were responsible.

LYDIA: A certain missionary. I don't remember his name.

HELEN: I forget his name.

ROSE: Good, something? (discussion)

SIGRIST: What port did you actually leave from, the journey to America?

ALL: Pireaus.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the boat for me?

HELEN: No, I don't think so, because it was very . . .

ROSE: Those were such trying days.

HELEN: I think it was very stormy.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

ROSE: We had a very bad storm.

HELEN: And we were not able to go on top, you know, to the top. And we were way down in the bottom, and it was horrible.

SIGRIST: Why? Why was it horrible?

HELEN: Because it was . . .

LYDIA: Too crowded.

HELEN: We didn't have anything. It was crowded and, you know, we had gone through so much, it was just very difficult.

LYDIA: But every evening all the Armenians would gather in one little area, and we'd entertain ourselves. We'd sing. Somebody would recite a poem, and things like that. You know, we'd do that every evening to get together.

SIGRIST: You mentioned a storm, Rose. Do you remember this storm at all?

ROSE: Sort of vaguely.

HELEN: A lot of people were sick.

ROSE: He got sick, too.

SIGRIST: What do you think is going through your father's mind? By the time you finally got on the King Alexander, what do you think your father's finally

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

thinking, at this point.

LYDIA: Well, I think, I would imagine . . .

ROSE: Excuse me, I would imagine that he was very, very happy. Very, very happy to be a part of the group that was coming. And, of course . . .

LYDIA: And he was thanking God, I'm sure.

ROSE: And praying.

SIGRIST: You're going to heaven.

HELEN: And we did arrive, and they wouldn't let my mother go through. He suffered a great deal.

SIGRIST: When you were still on the boat, do you remember, you said it was very crowded, do you remember what you ate? Was the dining room on the boat that you remember at all?

HELEN: It was very, I don't really remember a whole big dining room. But I know that the food was always the same. Just something in the pastas, you know, whatever it was.

SIGRIST: Did you have a cabin, or were you all in one big room?

ROSE: No, everybody was in the same.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

HELEN: One big room.

SIGRIST: Did you see anything on the boat that you had never seen before?

LYDIA: I think we saw our first movie, a Charlie Chaplin movie, silent, of course. I think that was on the ship. I'd never seen it before.

SIGRIST: How long was the journey?

HELEN: Two weeks, I think. Two weeks.

SIGRIST: Did you ever get to go up on deck at all?

HELEN: No. It was too stormy for that.

ROSE: When we saw the picture today, you know, there was really a storm on that, it was exactly like that. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I want to ask you a question about your relationships with, just your younger brother, at this point, right, because your older brother was not there with you. Were you guys a handful for your parents, or were you guys basically well-behaved?

LYDIA: We were a very well-behaved family.

HELEN: We loved, we had a very loving relationship.

LYDIA: The boys, excuse me, the boys misbehaved once in a while, but the

girls . . . (they laugh)

SIGRIST: I wonder if that didn't come from, you know, being in an environment that you grew up in where you had to listen to your parents.

ROSE: That's right. That really helped a lot.

HELEN: My father and mother were very strict about telling the truth and obeying, no matter what it was, because it was wrong. So when we came to this country, the first time I went to work, I went, my boss, I was answering the phone, and the boss, somebody wanted him, and he says, "Tell them I'm not here." I said, "I can't do that." And he was so surprised. Really, you know, because Father and Mother were very good-living people.

SIGRIST: So you had these virtues ingrained in you. Interesting. We're going to pause right now so that Kevin can flip the tape.

ROSE: Okay.

HELEN: Okay, dear. (they all laugh)

END OF SIDE A

BEGIN SIDE B

SIGRIST: All right. So you were on the boat for two weeks. Helen, do you remember

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

seeing the Statue of Liberty?

HELEN: Yes. And my father said it was the symbol of freedom. And I really, I thought it was beautiful.

SIGRIST: How about you, Rose?

ROSE: I didn't know what it was there for, but I thought it was great to see it.

SIGRIST: And Lydia, what impressed you the most?

LYDIA: Well, more than the Statue of Liberty, I was awed by those buildings of New York City. I had never seen such tall buildings and such density of buildings as I saw there.

SIGRIST: Tell me, I'll ask Rose, actually, what happened after you got into New York Harbor. How come you ended up at Ellis Island?

ROSE: How come we ended up in Ellis Island? Because I think the ship left us there, right? The ship left us there. So we had to get off and go to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Why were you detained for two weeks?

HELEN: We were detained for two weeks because my mother and father had problems with their eyes, and they took them into the hospital, and we were left to do, to take care of ourselves. Except, I had my older brother to help out, but at night he had to go with the men, so I took care of the three, my

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

little brother and the two sisters. But it was very lonely without our parents for two weeks.

SIGRIST: Did you not see them at all?

HELEN: We didn't see them at all.

SIGRIST: Were you at least told of what was going on?

HELEN: Well, we knew that they were taking care of them, and that's about all. We didn't see them.

SIGRIST: Hmm. Lydia, what do you remember of Ellis Island, being a ten-year-old girl on Ellis Island?

LYDIA: Well, I really don't remember too much from Ellis Island. I might remember stories that were told later of what happened there. One story I remember is that Mother was almost sent back because she was born in Syria, and the Syrian quota had been full. And Mother, of course, there was a great dread of the situation, and mother said, "You stay here with the children. I'll go back," she said. And Father said, "No. If you go back, we'll all go back with you." But fortunately she was permitted to stay here when they found out that she had been a teacher in the old country, and she entered the country as a professional. So we were all relieved, greatly relieved.

SIGRIST: Rose, what do you remember of Ellis Island when you were here?

ROSE: Well, I remember that they used to give us a lot of nice rolls. (they laugh)

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

And we used to put a lot of butter on it, and enjoy it immensely. That's one thing I enjoyed. And, of course, I know that Helen went and got blankets and pillows and things like that for us for the night, to sleep on.

SIGRIST: Where did you sleep?

ROSE: On very crazy looking cots that, you know, we saw pictures of today. And it was not very comfortable, but we were all together. At least that was one great thing.

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people here?

ROSE: Oh, yes, yes. A lot of people.

SIGRIST: Helen, how did you feel about this responsibility?

HELEN: Well, I think I was used to it. Being the oldest girl my mother always made sure that I did what was necessary and at night, when we were ready to retire, you would go to the door. They gave you a cake of soap, a towel, a blanket, a pillow, and I remember those cots that were one on top of each other. Today I saw pictures of the individual beds, but we never saw those at that time.

SIGRIST: These were like bunk beds?

HELEN: Bunk beds. And they had it in one of the rooms today, and we saw them, because I insisted that they were bunk beds. And that's how we, you know, I tried to take care of them as much as I could.

SIGRIST: What was there to do during the day?

HELEN: I was only, well, we just, you know . . .

ROSE: Not much.

HELEN: There was no much to do. It was quite, uh, difficult. You know, we talked and we laughed. We were very good with each other, so I guess we passed the time that way.

SIGRIST: Did you have to undergo physical examinations of some sort yourself?

HELEN: I don't remember that. I don't remember that at all.

ROSE: I'm sure we must have had, because . . .

HELEN: I don't remember if the doctors listened to our hearts, and so on and so forth. I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating at Ellis Island at all?

HELEN: Oh, yes.

LYDIA: I remember the dining room table. Like Rose said, the rolls and the butter.

ROSE: The long tables.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

LYDIA: Besides the rolls and the butter, I don't remember what other food we ate.

ROSE: We were talking about that. We had forgotten.

SIGRIST: Nothing made an impression.

LYDIA: No, no.

HELEN: That was another thing too, because we were children, and that there were so many people, and the minute that they opened the dining room door for everybody to go, they would grab at things. And if you weren't quick enough, you know, children were left out. So my brother used to try to get something so that we could have it.

PAUL: Was it scary?

HELEN: It was scary. I would say that it was scary, because we were used to being with our parents. It was scary. But we survived.

SIGRIST: Did they offer any kind of entertainment for you?

HELEN: I don't remember that at all.

ROSE: I don't remember that either.

HELEN: I don't remember being entertained at all.

SIGRIST: Were you allowed to go outside?

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

LYDIA: I don't remember that either.

ROSE: We were talking about that today. And we just could not remember that we were allowed to go out. But I'm sure, as children, we would have gone out.

LYDIA: But one thing I remember, at night, we'd be, the bunch of us would be in a certain room and the doctor would come in and say, "Anybody sick?" And we'd all say, "Everybody's sick." (they laugh)

HELEN: She remembers that.

SIGRIST: So you were at Ellis Island about two weeks. When did you finally have communication with your mother and father?

HELEN: Well, finally they brought them, and it was after that that they thought, even though their eyes were all right, but Mother probably couldn't go. This business came up. And then finally when that was settled, I, we were allowed to go. And we went to Buffalo.

ROSE: No, before we went to Buffalo, we, before we went to Buffalo we went to some friend's house.

LYDIA: No, no. We went directly to Buffalo first. Yes, directly to Buffalo.

HELEN: Directly to Buffalo.

SIGRIST: Did anyone, while you guys were separated from your parents, did anyone

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

come and visit you? Did you have . . .

ALL THREE: No. No one at all.

SIGRIST: All right. Well, let's get you off of Ellis Island. (They all agree.) So you're in Buffalo. Okay, where did you go in Buffalo? Did you have a relative there?

HELEN: We had an uncle there. We had never met our relatives. He was the first relative that we met. He was my mother's oldest brother. He had been in this country for a long time, and he's the one who sent some money for us to get there. And as soon as we got there, he took all our clothes and burned them, and bought us some new clothes. And he was very good to us. I don't know how long did we stay in Buffalo?

LYDIA: About two months? One month?

HELEN: Maybe about a month.

SIGRIST: And where did you go after you left Buffalo?

LYDIA: May I say something about Buffalo? For the first time there we saw comic papers, comic strips. And every Sunday morning Brother used to read the comics to us in English and, of course, translate it into Armenian. We'd laugh our heads off. The Katzen Jammer Kids, Winnie Winkle, Have Wrath Harry. (they laugh) And a bunch of others.

ROSE: She knows them all.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

SIGRIST: When you were in Buffalo through this two-month period, what struck you about the difference between America and Turkey? In fact, let me ask Rose this question.

ROSE: I think the cars struck me. (they laugh) Literally. One day we decided to go for a walk, and I think we were going to go to a movie. Were we not? Yes. And, of course, I have never crossed a street with cars coming back and forth, so I stepped out in the street freely, and a car came and hit me. But thank goodness not to the extent where I needed, really, help. But that was my first experience. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Were there other things in that first couple of months that were really different than anything you had seen?

HELEN: Well, we had never seen an airplane, never a telephone, never, uh, many things.

ROSE: A can opener.

HELEN: Many, many things that were very new to us. It was like coming into heaven. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Your father was right.

LYDIA: Yes, he was right!

HELEN: Because we had never seen, like a typewriter. There were so many things, when you think of it. Because where we lived it was just like, uh, just a

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

country, you know, a small country town. Very primitive.

SIGRIST: Yes, Rose?

ROSE: But one thing we did feel is that we were able to communicate. You know, my parents were able, our parents were able to communicate, because they spoke English on the other side.

SIGRIST: They spoke English in Turkey?

ROSE: Yes, in Turkey. And we had sort of picked a lot of things, words and sayings.

LYDIA: Not much.

ROSE: Not much, but anyway, I know I, when I was in school I had learned to say, "I feel so seeek." (they laugh)

SIGRIST: I feel so seek?

ROSE: Seek, instead of "sick." (they laugh)

HELEN: Well, we did, I must say that in our schools, as children, we had to study Turkish because we were in Turkey. It was compulsory, because they came and examined the schools. We studied Armenian, our own language, and we also studied English because it was an English missionary school that we were going to. So between the three languages, we spoke Turkish, we spoke Armenian, and English we learned enough that it didn't take us

long to be able to understand when we came here. It didn't take us long to catch on to the English language.

LYDIA: Not knowing the language was very difficult. When I started school here they put me in the third grade. And the children all stand up, and they go like this, (she gestures) and they say something. They look at the flag and say something. So I go like this, and somebody fixes it for me. And then they sing The Star Spangled Banner. Well, I would listen to the words, and some of the words would sound to me like some words I knew in Turkish. So I would sing along with them, but sing my own words. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: You know, and it's interesting, because you're the youngest, your brothers are younger than you, but you're the youngest of the sisters, I would think that you would have the easiest time, actually, to adjusting. What, when you went to school in America, what was the hardest thing for you in the learning process?

LYDIA: Well, just the language, really, because I was a good speller. I remember in the fourth grade I was the best speller. I didn't know English, but I could spell the words. And I was good in math, very good in math.

HELEN: We were all good in math.

LYDIA: But by the time we were really able to pick up the language and speak, well, maybe I was in the sixth, seventh grade.

SIGRIST: So it took a while.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

LYDIA: It took a while. Yes, it took time.

SIGRIST: What about, did you want to be an American? Did you want to look like Americans, and . . .

LYDIA: Well, because we couldn't speak the language, the children wouldn't communicate with us too much. So at recess time my sister and I would each find three stones in the yard somewhere, and we knew how to juggle, so we'd stand there and juggle like this, and soon the whole class, at recess, was watching us juggle. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: A nice ice breaker. (they all agree) Rose, let me ask you, talk to me about difficulties you might have had being in this very different culture than where you would come from.

ROSE: Well, let me think. When we lived on Yewdell Street, as such, in Philadelphia.

SIGRIST: This is after, you went from Buffalo to Philadelphia. Yewdell Street? Could you spell that for us?

ROSE: Y-E-D . . .

LYDIA: Y-E-W-D

ROSE: D-E-L-L. Yewdell. And Lydia and I decided to, do you remember the time when we were going to walk home from school. And, you know, it was just a short distance, but because of the train tracks and not knowing where we

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

were going, we had quite a time. Finally we were able to find our way.

LYDIA: We were holding hands and crying and crying and walking and crying. Finally a lady who had seen us, knew about us in the neighborhood, she took us to our home, so we were very grateful.

SIGRIST: Helen, talk to me about your father in America and the problems he may or may not have had adjusting to this culture.

HELEN: Well, my father, as soon as we came to Philadelphia area, he was given, the church had divided into two. Somehow they had some disagreement, and one section of the church, they decided to call him as their minister. And he was very happy about that. But it was very difficult, because the pay was very low. In the beginning, when we went into our house, for quite a while we lived by things that were given to us, you know, just clothing, shoes, whatever it was, because we had, we really didn't have anything. And there was a day when we didn't have enough to eat, and the money was all gone, and, of course, Dad prayed. And we went out to, for some reason he was going somewhere, he went out in a trolley and there was some kind of an accident, and he had hurt his hand. And they gave him two hundred dollars or something, and he thought that was an answer to his prayers. (they laugh) And it was very difficult, because he started to all, and especially a church that had divided, which was bad, because there were people who probably didn't like him because he was taking charge of the other half of the church. And so it all turned out fine. He was very happy with what he did. And but he didn't, and, well . . .

LYDIA: I was going to say that this change was very difficult for Father, because in

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

Marash where he was pastor, he was a very respected man.

HELEN: A very big church.

LYDIA: And ministers there generally are very respected, but he found things quite different in this country, regarding his position.

SIGRIST: How he was treated.

LYDIA: Yes, in how he was treated.

SIGRIST: What were some of the differences, do you think?

HELEN: Well, criticisms.

LYDIA: Yes, criticisms, divisions.

ROSE: Not enough money, not enough people.

LYDIA: Not enough pay. That sort of thing.

SIGRIST: How did your mother fare in all of this? Rose, let me ask you, did your mother like being here?

ROSE: Well, I think she liked being here, but it was very difficult for her because there wasn't too much money coming in, so she sent us to work. Both of us worked for a while, and she herself brought some work at home, and that way it was okay. But I think she was happy to be in America because it was

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

freer. She had no worries as far as where our father was, where the children were. So she was happy.

LYDIA: Earlier you asked why we came to America. The main reason was for freedom. We didn't say that earlier, but that's why we came to America, to be free.

HELEN: We were a very close family. Every evening after dinner we sat around in the living room and we would, first we would have Bible reading and prayer, and then it was fun time. And my father was just wonderful about giving us riddles and things to solve, and we had so much, and educational besides. It was very nice.

SIGRIST: Did you move into an Armenian neighborhood?

HELEN: Not necessarily, no. It was not an Armenian neighborhood.

SIGRIST: Did any of you or your mother and father experience any kind of prejudice because, in America, because of the background that you were from?

ROSE: Go ahead.

LYDIA: I did, from a black girl. (they laugh) Coming home from school one day, she started to walk beside me. She went like this to me, (she gestures) and I didn't know much English, so I said, "I hate you." And she said, "Where would you be if it wasn't for this country." Blah, blah, blah, blah, she gave me a lecture about that.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

SIGRIST: Rose, did you have an experience?

ROSE: I personally didn't, but I have friends that go back and say, my, we really suffered a lot because we were Armenians and they looked down on us. But I personally didn't have any problem.

SIGRIST: Helen, any kind of thing, or your parents?

HELEN: No, I don't think so. I made friends very easily, and when I went to school I had friends, yeah. And I got, I think that I had studied English a little bit more, being as little as Lydia was, and it didn't take me long to get along in school.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Part of the adjustment was already done. (they all agree)

HELEN: I would say I was very happy. We were all very happy.

SIGRIST: Ultimately, do you think your parents were happy that they made this decision?

HELEN: Very much, very much.

LYDIA: They were happy for us, I think, more than for themselves, because their life was difficult here.

HELEN: It was really very wonderful being in a country like this, and that's all my dad and mom wanted anyway.

SIGRIST: Interesting.

HELEN: So it was really great.

SIGRIST: Can any of you tell me how your life would have been different had you stayed in Turkey?

HELEN: God knows.

ROSE: We might have been killed.

HELEN: We might have been dead.

LYDIA: We might not have been alive.

ROSE: We may not have come to America at all.

HELEN: We went through not one but one, two, three, four conflicts. We went through four conflicts.

SIGRIST: And major conflicts.

HELEN: Major conflicts. And through all that, and many times I think to myself, when I pray, I say, "God, we were no different than anybody else. But with all that, we could come to this country as a whole family. We didn't lose one member of our family. All the five children, with parents, we got here, and it was a miracle. And I feel it's, you know, very good about that.

EI-135/CHAKMAKIAN

SIGRIST: America is heaven. (they laugh) Well, ladies, I want to thank you very much for taking time out from your visit for this very special interview, and I'm just thrilled that we got a chance to do it.

HELEN: Thank you.

ROSE: Thank you.

LYDIA: We're happy to have met you.

HELEN: Yes, thank you very much.

SIGRIST: This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW