

EI-276

GEORGE (GAIDZAG) VETZIGIAN

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RESIDENCES: SHABIN KARHISAR

E. 110 STREET:, NEW YORK; RIDGEWOOD, QUEENS

OFLAZIAN: Don't forget. (she laughs) My signs. Good afternoon. This is Grace Oflazian for the National Park Service. Today is April 2, 1993, at the home of Mr. George Gaidzag Vetzigian in Whitestone, New York. I'm here with Dr. Janet Levine, Ellis Island Oral Historian, and Mr. Kevin Daley, the recording engineer. Mr. Vetzigian is an Armenian, came from Shabin Karhisar, Turkey in 1920 when he was fourteen years old. Why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth, please.

VETZIGIAN: Okay. My name is Gaidzag, George Gaidzag Vetzigian.

I was born in 1906, January 28th, in Shabin

Karhisar, Turkey.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell me your name, please, and the town you were born in? (there is a pause) Mr. Vetzigian is putting in writing in order to...

VETZIGIAN: S-H-A-B-I-N, Shabin. K-A-R-H-I-S-A-R. Shabin Karhisar.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Gaidzag.

VETZIGIAN: G-A-I-D-Z-A-G.

OFLAZIAN: And what does it mean in English?

VETZIGIAN: That means lightning. Lightning.

OFLAZIAN: And why you are called George Gaidzag Vetzigian?

VETZIGIAN: Because when I came to America, I went to Public School Eighty-eight in Queens. And because I, I, I knew nothing about the English language, and my, the, the students next to me asked me my name, and they couldn't pronounce my name. They said we gonna call you George, and my name became George from

there on. So I call myself George Vetzgian.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe me your town that you were born in, Shabin Karhisar?

VETZIGIAN: Well, Shabin Karhisar is a place in Turkey, in Turkey, Asia Minor, near Sivas and Samsun, in a small town, mostly Armenians, separated from the Turkish section. And, and there were a lot of Greek section, too. And my father was at the stores. They used to travel to the store selling material, things to make costume, suits and dresses and things like that. What else would you like to know about it?

OFLAZIAN: What was the major industry of this town?

VETZIGIAN: I, I don't, well, various things. Nothing special. Various things.

OFLAZIAN: Like what?

VETZIGIAN: I was about eight, nine years old at that time, and really don't remember, what they produced. But only one thing I know of, there was a big friction

between the Armenians and Turks. Because the Armenians were in control of the business over there, and the Turkish didn't like the idea of the Armenians being so far advanced. And they did like the Armenians, and they always tried to get even with the Armenians, you know what I mean?

OFLAZIAN: So, which means there was sort of rejections in the...

VETZIGIAN: Rejections because the Armenians were Christian and they were Muslims. And there was the main thing, and they never liked the, they never liked the Christians. And Armenians were devoted Christians, and they had control of the business in there. Most of the Armenians were businessmen, and not so many of the Turk, Turkish people. So they were jealous of the Armenians at that time, and there was a little friction.

OFLAZIAN: How many people you were at home?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, we were three brothers and two sisters. And my grandmother was with us, and I had many, many relatives on my father's side and my mother's side.

We're a very big clan. Armenian clan.

OFLAZIAN: So, were you living all these people in one house?

VETZIGIAN: No. No, no. Separately. Separately.

OFLAZIAN: Can you name them, your brother's and sister's name?

VETZIGIAN: Well, my, my brother's name was Plag.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Plag.

VETZIGIAN: (he pauses) P-L-A-G. Plag.

OFLAZIAN: And what does it mean in Armenian?

VETZIGIAN: Plag means, I think it's brightness. Is it
brightness? Brightness, yeah. Brightness, yeah.
Brightness.

OFLAZIAN: And what is, uh, your, the name of your second
brother?

VETZIGIAN: It was, my second brother and my, there were twins.
One boy and one girl. Twins. Tzolak and Tzlohi.

The boy's name was Tzolak, and the girl's name Tzlohi. They were one year old when the massacre came on.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell me, your, their names?

VETZIGIAN: Tzolak. T-Z-O-L-A-K. Tzolak. That's the, that's the boy. And Tzlohi means T-Z-L-O-H-I, something like that. Tzlohi.

OFLAZIAN: And do you do what does it mean in English, Tzlohi?

VETZIGIAN: I really don't, Tzolak. It means, something, something, does it mean lightning, or, no, something in reference to light. Light, yeah, Tzolak means.

OFLAZIAN: What was your mother's name?

VETZIGIAN: My name, my mother's name was Aisalus [PH].
Aisalus.

OFLAZIAN: And what does it mean in English?

VETZIGIAN: Aisalus means dawn. Dawn. Dawn.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell it?

VETZIGIAN: D-A-O-N, dawn. No, D-A-W-N, dawn. Yeah, dawn.

OFLAZIAN: And what was her maiden name?

VETZIGIAN: Serjenian.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell it?

VETZIGIAN: Yes. S-E-R-J-E-N-I-A-N. Serjenian.

OFLAZIAN: Did she work, or...

VETZIGIAN: No, she was a housewife.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe me the house you lived in?

VETZIGIAN: (he pauses) Well, all I know was that this was seventy-three year, no, this was many years ago, yeah, seventy-three years ago. (he pauses) There was a large room downstairs, and there was a tunery [PH], you know what tuneries [PH]? You bake, you make bread.

OFLAZIAN: Tonier [PH].

VETZIGIAN: Tonier. Tonier. Tonier. Yeah, but, I remember that. My grandmother used to make bread in that...

OFLAZIAN: What was her name, your grandmother's name?

VETZIGIAN: My grandmother's name was Sivat [PH]. Sivat. Sivat, yeah. Sivat. So there were three rooms, and my father was a businessman. He had a store. They used to sell clothes, and they had another store far away. And once in a while he used to go to the other store and come back to Shabin Karhisar to see everything is right.

OFLAZIAN: Can you tell me any experience that you experienced with your family.

VETZIGIAN: Well, only one thing that I remember. My father bought a sewing machine. At that time there was no sewing machine in, in my town Shabin Karhisar. And it was a, a hand sewing machine. And gave my wife, my, my mother a present, my father. And the, the neighboring ladies used to come over and see the, how does the sewing machine works.

OFLAZIAN: From where he purchase the sewing machine?

VETZIGIAN: I think they, he, he purchase from Sivas. Next town.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember the mark of the sewing machine?

VETZIGIAN: No. I think it was Singer. Singer sewing machine, yeah. It was Singer sewing machine. And everything they used to sew by hand. But since this being a sewing machine, it was new at that time. About eighty-seven years ago, it was, eight-five years ago it was something new.

OFLAZIAN: So, did your mother sew nice clothes for you?

VETZIGIAN: Yes. She was very excellent.

OFLAZIAN: And your grandmother also?

VETZIGIAN: Yes. You should see what my wife does. I'll show it to you when we get done with it.

OFLAZIAN: Tell me how your grandmother baked the bread in

tonier.

VETZIGIAN: (he sighs) Well, tonier is something very, very big. And there's a light on it, charcoal and things like that, you know what I mean. And heat up, and, well, all I know is how to eat it. (he laughs) I don't know what, how she did it. But I used to eat it. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: You liked that, huh?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, yes. It was nice.

OFLAZIAN: So, can you tell me how the religious life looked like in those days?

VETZIGIAN: Very religious over there. The Armenians were Christian, a very religious people. And that's why the Turkish people didn't like the Armenians, because they were very religious.

OFLAZIAN: How far the church was from your home?

VETZIGIAN: I would say, it's about a mile away. Mile away, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So did you walk?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah, I used to love to go to church,
and churchyard...

OFLAZIAN: With whom you used to accompany?

VETZIGIAN: My father used to take us, take the children to the
church almost every Sunday.

OFLAZIAN: So how long the badarak [PH] took place? Badarak is
Armenian word for...

VETZIGIAN: Badarak is the same, same, what it is today, it is
the same at that time. Nothing has been changed.

OFLAZIAN: So how did you celebrated Christmas over there?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, Christmas was a great day for us, and orange and
things like that. Fruits my parents used to bring,
and give it to us, and we used to enjoy it.

OFLAZIAN: What did they do in the church?

VETZIGIAN: In the church?

OFLAZIAN: Yes, in the church. How they celebrate Christmas in the church?

VETZIGIAN: Well, they have Christmas literature, no, Christmas singing, things like that. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: What was that unique Armenian Christmas thing that the church celebrated also, that they...

VETZIGIAN: Christmas, Christmas.

OFLAZIAN: Did they blessed water?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, yes. They bless the water, they bless cross and things like that, yeah. Oh, yeah, they do that, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And what did they do with that water after they bless?

VETZIGIAN: Well, they used to take it home, bless water, and they usually put it with the bread, or put it in a, there was no refrigerator at that time but there

were ice, ice boxes. They used to put it in the ice box to bring, with the bread and with the things that, to eat, you know, and it's sort of a bless, bless, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And do you remember celebrating Easter?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, yes. Very much. And...

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe that for me?

VETZIGIAN: Well, Easter was a very joy, joyous day, especially for the children of my age. And we used to get dressed and dolled up and it was one of the best days for us, you know. And we enjoyed, enjoyed, especially children get together.

OFLAZIAN: You celebrated the Palm Sunday...

VETZIGIAN: Palm Sunday. Very much.

OFLAZIAN: Was there any turn around the blocks, processions?

VETZIGIAN: That's right. In church, church courtyard, it was a procession, all the, the deacons and the priests.

They come out and they, with the cross in their hand, and they process, procession goes on in the churchyard, yeah. It was...

OFLAZIAN: And did you hold any flowers or palm branches in...

VETZIGIAN: On the Palm Sunday, yes.

OFLAZIAN: You did it.

VETZIGIAN: We used to do that on the Palm Sunday, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: I wonder how the, what the school look like in those days.

VETZIGIAN: Well, I went to kindergarten and went to, after kindergarten I went to school. And every time I come home my father used to tell me, "What did you learn today?" You know, "Did you learn any song? Did you, did you learn any recitation?" So he used to ask me to sing or to say, and I used to do it.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember any now?

VETZIGIAN: No, no, no.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember the name of the school?

VETZIGIAN: Not, well, offhand I don't know, yeah. Off hand I don't know.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe the school for me?

VETZIGIAN: Well, the school, our teachers mainly were men, men, men teachers. You know, not so much women, but men. And they were very strict. Very strict. And I learned a lot. I learned plenty. And every time I read, every day when I went back to home my father used to say, "What did you learn today?"

OFLAZIAN: You said your teachers were strict.

VETZIGIAN: They were strict.

OFLAZIAN: Do you mean they were tough? Tough?

VETZIGIAN: Tough, yeah. You've got...

OFLAZIAN: How tough there were?

VETZIGIAN: Well, you, you got, when they give you a, a,
something to do, if you don't do it, then they...

OFLAZIAN: They punish you?

VETZIGIAN: They punish you, yeah. They...

OFLAZIAN: Did they ever hit you?

VETZIGIAN: Not, not, not, not to hurt, no. No, no.

OFLAZIAN: Did they use any stick?

VETZIGIAN: Well, he had a stick in his hand, but he wouldn't
hit us, no. Just a gesture. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did they reward good students?

VETZIGIAN: Sure they do, yeah. Oh, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did you graduated from that school?

VETZIGIAN: I know I graduated, I don't remember. I don't
remember. At that time I was nine years old.
Evidently I must have graduated junior school.

Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Which level is that?

VETZIGIAN: That's, that's (he pauses), something like a public school. Public school, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Do you categorize like an eighth grade or ninth grade that...

VETZIGIAN: They have grades, but I don't remember. I don't remember. This was many years ago.

OFLAZIAN: As a...

VETZIGIAN: Eighty-seven years ago. (he laughs)

OFLAZIAN: As a little boy, what wa, what were your hobbies?

VETZIGIAN: We used to play stick.

OFLAZIAN: What was...

VETZIGIAN: It's something, something similar to baseball. On top of the stick we used to put something, and used

to hit it with the, with the other stick, you know?

It's like a, it's like a baseball. Baseball.

OFLAZIAN: Any other?

VETZIGIAN: Well, there were many things. Tag. We used to play tag, and grounds you were supposed to go and touch. Some things like that.

OFLAZIAN: Were you playing with other boys or girls also?

VETZIGIAN: No. With the boys. With the boys.

OFLAZIAN: No girls.

VETZIGIAN: No. No.

OFLAZIAN: Why not?

VETZIGIAN: Girls were with the girls, and boys play with the boys, yeah. (she laughs) No.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. Now, you said you went through the massacre, which means the...

VETZIGIAN: Massacre.

OFLAZIAN: ...which means the, the Turkish attacked your place.

VETZIGIAN: Right.

OFLAZIAN: So, can you describe me the Turkish attack, please.

VETZIGIAN: Well, my...

LEVINE: Take this, because it's for the microphone.

VETZIGIAN: I'm sorry. I remember that my grandfather was working for the Turkish government. He was a notary public, and he was a lawyer. He was working for the Turkish government. And one day the gendarmes came and told my grandfather that, that the, the governor of Sivas wants to see my grandfather with couple of other Armenians, you know? And...

OFLAZIAN: What was your grandfather's name?

VETZIGIAN: Neshan. Neshan. Neshan Serjenian.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell his name?

VETZIGIAN: N-E-S-H-A-N. Neshan. And, these gendarmes came and told my grandfather that he has to go to Sivas to see the governor. So my grandfather thought that he's going to be promoted. There's going to be a promotion for him when he goes to see the governor. And they went with couple of Armenians, and those were elderly people. And next day one of our neighbors came. He says, "You know," he says, "We saw, we saw Neshan Effendi [PH]." My grandfather and the others were killed.

OFLAZIAN: What, what is the word Effendi means?

VETZIGIAN: Effendi is a Turkish word means, (he pauses) Effendi, it's means Mister. Not Mister, but it's, it's respectable name. It's a respectable name. Effendi. It's, it's a Turkish word. It means Mister, or, or grownup, they call their grownup people Effendi. So, then we knew that they killed my grandfather and few others. And Shabin Karhisar is between two mountains. And...

OFLAZIAN: And what, what, which mountains are these?

VETZIGIAN: I don't know the names of it. I don't know the names of it. But (he pauses), so Turkish, Turkish gendarmes used to come to our house. Now, my father was a young man. You see what I mean? He was supposed to the army at that time. There was the war on. And in order for him not to go because he got a family, he's got children, he used to pay beddel [PH]. Bed, beddel means that instead, instead of going to, to army, you pay money to the government. And he paid money to the government. And every, every once in a while they used to come and ask for more money. More money. More money. And, and the gendarmes, gendarmes came and they want to see where my father's inside of the house. They want to take him, put him in the army. And my father said, "Don't take me. I paid many, many beddels." You know what I mean. "I'm covered up." Understand? So they used to come and start bothering the female. The gendarmes, you know? So this went on, and, and the army, people didn't like the idea of the Turkish gendarmes come to our house. So we went to the mountains. And we fought against the Turks for twenty-nine days. My country and the Shabin Karhisar did that. You understand? We fought them for twenty-nine days, and we carried

everything up to the mountain. It was a ford. It was a mountain and a ford on top of it. After we fought about twenty-nine days and there was no, nothing to eat, nothing to fight with. Ammunition was depleted. So the Turks came and they took us, they killed all the men. All the men. Since I was nine years old, they put us around, made a circle of all those boys, not the girls, not the girls. Girls were able to go. They're free. But not the boys. And they were throwing carcass into burners. And there was a Turkish religious man. He says, "You can't kill these boys." He says, "God told me that you cannot kill them." So that's how I became survived. Otherwise at my age, being a nine years old, eight, nine years old, they, they, Turks killed it. Now they, nobody came alive from my father's side. I had cousins that all was killed.

OFLAZIAN: So, what happened to your brothers and other sisters, mother...

VETZIGIAN: Well, they were banished. They were, they were banished. I don't know what happened to them. I found them about two years later. I, they put me in a, in a Turkish orphanage. They made a Turk out of

me. You understand what I mean? And about two, three years later my mother came and found me. They found me. And, and one night she came, and she looked for me and she found me, and...

OFLAZIAN: Where was your mother that time?

VETZIGIAN: I don't know where she was. She was, she was banished to other places. Understand what I mean? So, my, my, my, my, my, my brother, my two br, my two my brother died from the starvation.

OFLAZIAN: How old was he that time?

VETZIGIAN: He was about seven years old. Seven, seven years old my brother was. And my sister died from the, from typhoid, typhoid. Typhoid sickness. And I had another twins. One girl, one boy, they were about one year old at that time. And one of them, one of them, fell down from my, my mother's, was holding two of them, you know what I mean? One of them fell down and died, and the other one died from starvation.

OFLAZIAN: Where was your father?

VETZIGIAN: My father was killed in front of my eyes. The, when the Turks came, when the Turks came, you see, I'm not saying this in rotation. That's why it's all, it's all, they killed my father. My father came to tell us that the Turkish soldiers are coming. This is up in the mountains. The Turkish soldiers are coming. And at that time the, the Turkish soldiers shot my father. And my father fell down, and my mother ran to lift him up. They wouldn't let her do it. Understand what I mean? All the men was killed. None of the men from my town came out alive. They were killed. The only one that was saved was women and the girls and the boys that were about a little less than nine years old.

OFLAZIAN: Do you have any idea where they went, these women and childrens?

VETZIGIAN: When the Turk came to the mountains they took all of us, all the Armenians. They put them down in the church courtyard. And in the church, church courtyard, most of the women taking poisons, because they didn't want to be, Turks to get control of them, and they do a lot of things to the females,

and so forth. So they were taking poisons. But my mother didn't take poison. So they, they, aksor [PH]. You know what aksor means? What was the Turkish (unintelligible).

OFLAZIAN: Did they take her to their zone?

VETZIGIAN: No. No.

OFLAZIAN: Aksor?

VETZIGIAN: Aksor. Aksor means...

OFLAZIAN: Like in, in prison, prisonment. Isolation?

VETZIGIAN: Isolation. They isolate, they send you to different places. I, I, my mother, my mother came and found me in a Turkish orphanage. They, they took me because I was a little boy at that time. They figure out that they can put me in a Turkish orphanage and they, they made read the Koran. I knew the Koran Turkish Bible from beginning to end. I was very good at it.

OFLAZIAN: How did you learn that?

VETZIGIAN: They teach you over there. That, the, so my...

OFLAZIAN: And you knew how to say in Turkish way?

VETZIGIAN: I was excellent in, in, in, in, in Turkish. I was able to write...

OFLAZIAN: And where was...

VETZIGIAN: ...able to write, and able to read anything that you want to, I used to write letters in Turkish. But when I came to America I didn't use it and now I forgot. I don't know one word of the Turkish word. Yeah. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So, where was located that orphanage?

VETZIGIAN: Orphanage was in Sivas. It's one of the, one of the villages of the Turkey. Sivas is a big town, big place.

OFLAZIAN: So in the orphanage how they treated you, these Turkish people?

VETZIGIAN: They were very strict. You gotta learn the Bible, Turkish Bible. You know what I mean? And I was very good at it. I knew it from the beginning to the end. And, in fact, I knew Turkish very, very well. I used to write letters to the people who want to, Armenians. Armenian woman who lost a, a daugh, lost their husbands and children. And they used to come to me, and write a letter to the insurance company saying that my, my husband was insured, my, my, my husband was insured, to collect the insurance.

OFLAZIAN: Did you wrote these, did you write these letters in Armenian alphabet?

VETZIGIAN: No, no, no. Turkish.

OFLAZIAN: Turkish.

VETZIGIAN: The old Turkish. Not the new Turkish.

OFLAZIAN: What kind of alphabet is that? Turkish alphabet?

VETZIGIAN: Turkish, Turkish, Turkish, now they, they, they use the regular, regular lettering and that, you know.

But at that time it was a Muslim, Turkish lettering.

OFLAZIAN: Like an Arabic, Arabic...

VETZIGIAN: Arabic. Arabic. Right, right. That's it. Arabic, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. After you went through all this horrible...

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: ...you know, difficult times in your life, have you ever wondered what your future will be?

VETZIGIAN: Well, did I wonder? I didn't know, I didn't know what was going to be my, if I stayed, if I stayed in, in Turkey, naturally it would have been bad. But my mother found me and couple of years later she brought me to Constantinople, you know. And from Constantinople my, my aunts adopted me, and brought me to America in 1920.

OFLAZIAN: Was that relate to, to your father's side, or to your mother's side?

VETZIGIAN: My mother's side?

OFLAZIAN: And what was her name?

VETZIGIAN: Hagoohi, Hagoohi. Hagoohi Isengenian [PH].

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell me Hagoohi?

VETZIGIAN: (he laughs) (he pauses) Hagoohi. H-A-G-O-O-H-I.
Hagoohi. Was first name, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Now we are going to pause for a few minutes while
Mr. Kevin, the recording engineer, flips the tape.

VETZIGIAN: Uh-huh. All right.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

OFLAZIAN: This is Grace Oflazian. We are resuming now the
interview of Side B with Mr. George Gaidzag
Vetzigian. Okay Mr. Vetzigian, during that time,

have you ever heard people talking about America?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: What did they say?

VETZIGIAN: Well, everybody likes to come to America. They think that America is the best, best place in the world to be because there is no, there is no religious persecution, and nothing, and, you are free, and when you are in America, so, the whole world wants to come to America. Everybody wants to come to America.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever dreamed about, dream...

VETZIGIAN: I never dreamed. But when my, my aunt was coming, my mother said to my aunt, "Won't you take my, my son, Gaidzag with you?" And I changed my name to my, my aunt's. My aunt's name was Hagoohi Isengenian [PH]. So I changed my name to George Isengenian. I came to America in 1920, and after a while my mother came two years later, and I went back to George Vetzgian. In other words, when I came here my name was Gaidzag Isengenian. My aunt's

name, because she adopted me. Yeah. And so my mother came and I went back to my original name.

OFLAZIAN: You said that you did come to America in 1920.

VETZIGIAN: Right.

OFLAZIAN: Who decided that?

VETZIGIAN: Well, I just told you that my aunt was coming, and my, my mother asked my aunt, why don't you take my son George, Gaidzag with you. And that's how we came, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So you came with your aunt.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah. She adopted me. She adopted me. Because I wasn't able to come with my name. But she adopted me, she brought me America.

OFLAZIAN: Did you learn English over there?

VETZIGIAN: No.

OFLAZIAN: Not at all.

VETZIGIAN: No.

OFLAZIAN: Did you want to come to America?

VETZIGIAN: Actually, the whole world wants to come to America?
Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did anyone come to say good-bye to you?

VETZIGIAN: Over there? Oh, yes. Many Armenians. Many
Armenians. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe me your separation from them?

VETZIGIAN: Well, they were happy. They wished they were the
ones coming to America, and they wished me lots of
luck, and I think I was very fortunate that there
was luck with me, what they wished.

OFLAZIAN: What did you take with you?

VETZIGIAN: I brought nothing. Just myself. (he laughs)

OFLAZIAN: So what did you leave behind?

VETZIGIAN: Friends. A lot of friends, yeah. I left my, my, my, my mother, but my mother came back two years later.

OFLAZIAN: So you accompanied with your aunt.

VETZIGIAN: My aunt, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Your aunt.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Hagoohi?

VETZIGIAN: Hagoohi Isengenanian, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So, from which port you departed?

VETZIGIAN: I think it was from France, Le Havre. Le Havre. We came to France, and from France we took the boat Lafayette to America.

OFLAZIAN: How did you get Le Havre?

VETZIGIAN: Well, from, from Constantinople we came to we came to France, Le Havre, and from there on we came to America.

OFLAZIAN: By which transportation means you arrived to Le Havre. From Constantinople to Le Havre. How did you travel.

VETZIGIAN: Well, I think we, (he pauses) we came, we took a boat, and then we took the railroad in France, and came to Le Havre.

OFLAZIAN: So, you were in Lafayette, right? The ship?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Was the ship crowded?

VETZIGIAN: It was crowded, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Was there diversified people...

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: ...or only Armenians?

VETZIGIAN: No, no. Every kind of people were in there. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So, where did you sit in, in the ship?

VETZIGIAN: It's a good question. (he laughs) Well, wherever there was the place for me, I don't know exactly, I don't know.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe me the accommodation of the ship?

VETZIGIAN: It was nice. Clean. It was very nice. We were happy that we were coming to America. We're coming to here. Free country.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember which class you travelled?

VETZIGIAN: I really don't know. It could have been the third class. Third class, yeah, because we weren't wealthy. Third class.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember what did you eat in the ship? What they served, the food?

VETZIGIAN: Whatever they served we ate.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember what was there?

VETZIGIAN: Not exactly, no. Anything they gave we, we ate.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe me the ship on an overall basis?

VETZIGIAN: Well, for me it was a nice place, to come to America, get away from Turkey where they did a lot of damage to Armenians. They, they killed all the Armenians. They, you know, there was, we had Turkish Armenia, Persian Armenia and Russian Armenia. And Persian Armenia was lost many centuries ago, and Turkish Armenia, they, they did it recently in 1916. Now we got the Russian Armenia. Now the Russian Armenia is the only one that exists. And now it's a free country. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: How do you describe your voyage through the Atlantic?

VETZIGIAN: It was good. It was, I was very happy. As a little boy, fourteen years old, thirteen, fourteen years I was very, very happy that I was coming to America.

OFLAZIAN: Did you built any friends in the ship?

VETZIGIAN: I think so. I think so. Yeah. I have, there was an, a few other people, little boys like my age, we were together.

OFLAZIAN: Did you played with them in the ship?

VETZIGIAN: Played, yes.

OFLAZIAN: What did you play?

VETZIGIAN: Well, we played domino and things like that, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Are you still contact with them?

VETZIGIAN: No. No, no. (there is a pause)

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

VETZIGIAN: Sure I do.

OFLAZIAN: And what was your impression?

VETZIGIAN: Lovely. It was, it's just remind that you're in a

free country now, that no, no Turks going to do any damage to you or to your family, and freedom is there for you to enjoy, and it was great sight to see Statue of Liberty.

OFLAZIAN: And how did you see Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: I was frightful of, of Ellis Island, because I figure out with me was my uncle. My uncle was a sick person. And I figure out, if they find him very, very sick and they send him back, we all have to go back with him.

OFLAZIAN: What was the reason of his sickness?

VETZIGIAN: He had some problems with his lungs, and things like that, you know. And, and it was, I was very much scared. In fact, my, my aunt was scared that they wouldn't take him in to America, and if they send him back we all have to go back, and I, we were scared. But luck, luckily they let him go.

OFLAZIAN: Did you go through medical examination?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. They examined, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did they examine your eyes?

VETZIGIAN: They did, sure. Everything. Eyes and ears and nose and everything.

OFLAZIAN: How long did you stay in Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: I think it was overnight. Something like that. Overnight. Yeah. Overnight.

OFLAZIAN: Where did you sleep in Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: I don't remember. They had places for us.

OFLAZIAN: Did they give you blanket?

VETZIGIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Did they give you blanket?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, yes. I think so. I think so.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember the color...

VETZIGIAN: Nn...

OFLAZIAN: ...of the blanket?

VETZIGIAN: This was seventy-three years ago. I, I really don't call. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: You remember what did you eat over there?

VETZIGIAN: Well, I was a young boy and I ate anything they gave me.

OFLAZIAN: What they gave you?

VETZIGIAN: Must have, must, I don't know, must have been good.

OFLAZIAN: Was it delicious...

VETZIGIAN: I know, I know I didn't get sick by eating it.

OFLAZIAN: So, do you know, did you know any person here in America before you arrived?

VETZIGIAN: I knew nothing. My aunt, my aunt, my aunt had friends, relatives and this, she came to them and

she brought me with her, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So who came to meet you in Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: My aunt had friends, relatives through her husbands', her husband was killed. The Turks killed her husband. But her husbands' friends were...

OFLAZIAN: In Constantinople or, did they kill her husband in Constantinople?

VETZIGIAN: No, no, in Shabin Karhisar. Yeah. She's from Shabin Karhisar. They killed, no, no men came alive. They were all killed, all massacred.

OFLAZIAN: Was Ellis Island crowded?

VETZIGIAN: It was crowded. Yeah, it was kind of crowded. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: It was too much crowded.

VETZIGIAN: Especially when you go through, you have to go through the medical examination. They were very, very strict. And if they put any kind of thing in

your back that choke or anything like, then. (he laughs)

OFLAZIAN: So, you said you stood overnight in Ellis Island, and you went through medical examination, you slept, you ate over there. But you didn't tell me, how did you get to Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: How did we get to Ellis Island?

OFLAZIAN: Yeah?

VETZIGIAN: We were in Ellis Island. We were in Ellis Island.

OFLAZIAN: How? Which means that the Lafayette ship, Lafayette came directly to Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: Evidently. Evidently. I remember that. Yeah, evidently.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. What did you expect from America?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, geez [sic]. All I want is freedom and get established, and bring my mother. We were, I was very joyous to, to come to America. It was, it was

very nice.

OFLAZIAN: What did you see in New York you had never seen before?

VETZIGIAN: The subway. Trolley cars, the subway. The subway was the...

OFLAZIAN: How the subway look like in those days?

VETZIGIAN: Well, they were good at that time. (she laughs) At that time they were good, yeah. They were something new.

OFLAZIAN: So where did you go after you left Ellis Island?

VETZIGIAN: We, we went to a hundred and tenth street and Third Avenue, or Lexington Avenue, in that neighborhood.

OFLAZIAN: So, you went by train then?

VETZIGIAN: By, by train, yeah. Subway, subway, subway took it over there.

OFLAZIAN: Was it an apartment building?

VETZIGIAN: It was an apartment, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: How many rooms there was?

VETZIGIAN: I don't remember. I think there was about three, four rooms, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So, you were living then with your aunt?

VETZIGIAN: My aunt, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And she took care of you. Did she send you to school?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah. At that time, all the, all the children at that age supposed to go to school. If they, if they find you walking and not going to school, the cops will ask you, why don't you go to school. They were very strict at that time. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: They were good.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah. So I went to Queens, in Queens, P.S. Eighty-eight. I graduated there in P.S. Eighty-eight in

1925. In '24 or '25, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Was it hard for you to adopt the English language...

VETZIGIAN: It was very hard.

OFLAZIAN: ...as a new language?

VETZIGIAN: Very hard, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did your friends picked on you?

VETZIGIAN: In the school? Oh, yes they did, yeah. They can't say the word Gaidzag, so they, they name me George, and I became George.

OFLAZIAN: How was your teacher?

VETZIGIAN: They were very nice. They were...

OFLAZIAN: What was your favorite subject?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, I think it was arithmetic. Yeah. It was arithmetic. Not English, though. English was, I wasn't too good.

OFLAZIAN: So, did you continue your education after your, your graduation?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah. I went to high school, evening to the high school about a year, and then I quit and I went to work.

OFLAZIAN: What kind of work?

VETZIGIAN: I was in the printing line. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So, what was your religious life in America?

VETZIGIAN: Well, I went to church. Armenian church over here. It was downtown New York. It was on twenty, Twenty-sixth or Twenty-seventh Street between Second and Third Avenue. Saint Gregory Illuminator's Church at that time, yeah. Yeah, I went there. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And what kind of participation you brought to the church?

VETZIGIAN: Just became, I don't think I was in the choir, no, I

didn't par, I used to go, I used to attend church.
Sundays. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever served the church?

VETZIGIAN: In what...

OFLAZIAN: Altar, or in the parish council, or...

VETZIGIAN: Parish council? Yeah, later I became a parish council Saint Gregory. I became, 1946 I was parish council of the Saint Gregory Illuminator's Church. At that time the church was on the, on the second floor of Edon's [PH] Memorial Chapel. At that time I was parish council, and I remember the time Torcolme [PH] Hahisoo [PH], was the bishop came to America. And he gave his first sermon at our church. I remember distinctly.

OFLAZIAN: As the parish council what was your position?

VETZIGIAN: Just regular member. Parish member. Parish council member, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And how did you celebrate Christmas here in America?

VETZIGIAN: Well, it was a big day. We celebrate together with the families, and my aunts, my mother, and we were all together, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did they again bless the water here on the cross?

VETZIGIAN: Oh, sure they do. Yeah, the same thing.

OFLAZIAN: The same thing as they celebrated in your town?

VETZIGIAN: What, whatever they did centuries ago, they do the same thing.

OFLAZIAN: What about Easter?

VETZIGIAN: Easter?

OFLAZIAN: Yeah. Easter.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: How do they, they celebrate here in America?

VETZIGIAN: Same. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: The same way? Hm-hmm. So, you lived in, you said you lived in, on the twenty-third after you left Ellis Island, right?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. And then, where did you go after that?

VETZIGIAN: When, we lived in New York, New York right, right around a hundred, Hundred and Sixteenth Street, and then we moved to Queens. We came and lived in Queens, in Ridgewood, right around Fresh Pond Road. Fresh Pond and in that neighborhood, yeah. We did, lived there for many, many years.

OFLAZIAN: Did you got married?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah, I got married. Yes. I was in Ridgewood when I got married, yes.

OFLAZIAN: And how many childrens do you have?

VETZIGIAN: I have two daughters.

OFLAZIAN: What are their names?

VETZIGIAN: The oldest one is Ann, Annaid [PH], and the other one, the youngest one is Adrienne. Adrienne.

OFLAZIAN: Did you give them education?

VETZIGIAN: Sure. They went, they all went to college. They all graduated from college, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Do you know what are their majors?

VETZIGIAN: One became a teacher, and it was teaching in public school before she got married, and the other one was a nurse. It was, the little was a nurse, yeah. They all went to school.

OFLAZIAN: Have your ever helped your wife in cooking?

VETZIGIAN: No, I'm not a good cook at all. I was the only male in my family. My wife, my two daughters, my, my mother-in-law, and my mother. I was the only male. And it was no way I was able to cook. Yeah. Yeah. Even today I can't cook, but I can take care of myself. My wife passed away about twenty-one years

ago. Yeah. So, it was...

OFLAZIAN: God bless her soul.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah. I was very happy, very happy with her.

OFLAZIAN: What about gardening, like that?

VETZIGIAN: That's my hobby. Gardening is my hobby, yeah. Last year I planted twelve different vegetables.

OFLAZIAN: What kind of vegetables you planted?

VETZIGIAN: Well, I planted tomatoes, eggplant, peppers, squash, corn, beets, beets, parsley, and cauliflower and broccoli.

OFLAZIAN: So you provided all you summer vegetables from your own garden then.

VETZIGIAN: My own garden, when my wife was alive. But now I give it away. I'm all by myself now. I live all by myself. My daughters, one of them lives in, live, lives in Little Neck, and the other one lives in Jersey, New Jersey.

OFLAZIAN: Do they come to visit you?

VETZIGIAN: Sometimes. Very seldom they come. I go to them.

OFLAZIAN: Are they married?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah. They have children. They have children, yeah. My oldest daughter lives in Little Neck over here, and every, every Sunday I go to their house, and I eat with them. And the youngest one lives in Jersey.

OFLAZIAN: What is the family name that she's married to?

VETZIGIAN: She's married, my oldest daughter, her name is married to Newbar Martesian [PH].

OFLAZIAN: Newbar?

VETZIGIAN: Newbar Martesian, yeah. And the youngest one is married to Berj Mouvsesian [PH]. Mouvsesian.

OFLAZIAN: How many childrens they do have you said?

VETZIGIAN: The oldest daughter has two boys and one girl, and the youngest daughter has one boy and one girl, and the girl was killed two years ago at the age of twenty, at the age of twenty-one, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And what was the reason of...

VETZIGIAN: It was drunk driving. Drunk driver. Accident, yeah. Tragic. Very tragic. She was very smart girl. She graduate Villa Nova a year before.

OFLAZIAN: Are you happy that you are in America?

VETZIGIAN: Naturally. Naturally.

OFLAZIAN: Do you think that you do have a better life than your country of origin?

VETZIGIAN: I don't think so. This is the country that you have to appreciate. It's best country there is in the world.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever went to...

VETZIGIAN: No. I never did. Never went back and I don't want

to go back. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So, how do you see your life overall in America?

VETZIGIAN: I'm satisfied. I'm satisfied. I go to the senior center almost every day. My hobby is dancing. I love to dance.

OFLAZIAN: What kind of dance?

VETZIGIAN: Ballroom dancing, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Ballroom dancing.

VETZIGIAN: I, I, I belong to senior center over here. Monday we have exercise. We exercise Monday.

OFLAZIAN: You mean physical exercise?

VETZIGIAN: Yes. Yes. For about...

OFLAZIAN: Do you used gym instruments?

VETZIGIAN: No, but (he pauses), ex, you exercise, you know. And on Tuesday I go to the Armenian church. We have

senior center. We play cards. Wednesday I go again to senior center over here, the American, and we have exercise, and we sing along. Sing along. And on Thursday over here at the center we do line dance. I'm the only male doing line dance. All the others are female.

OFLAZIAN: What kind of dance is that?

VETZIGIAN: Well, line dance is, is single. You do it single. Not with a partner. You do it single. And twice a, twice a month we have ballroom dancing.

OFLAZIAN: And you dance with other girls?

VETZIGIAN: With other girls. Yes, yes.

OFLAZIAN: And you wear nice clothes?

VETZIGIAN: Yes. Yes. Yes, yes. So I...

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe me how you dance with girls?

VETZIGIAN: Well...

OFLAZIAN: With other womans?

VETZIGIAN: Well, you do either waltz, foxtrot or cha-cha.
(they laugh) Things like that. And at, at my age,
at my age I do a lot of dancing. Yeah. And, in
fact, in the line dance I'm the only male. All the
other are female.

OFLAZIAN: Do they love watching you?

VETZIGIAN: Yeah, it's, sure they do. Yeah. Yeah. When I go
Florida, every year I go to Florida for three
months, I ride around, one o'clock I go into the
pool. They have a pool there. The temp, water
temperature is eighty-eight degrees. It's lovely.
And then I come out of the pool, I stay in the pool
about an hour or so, maybe more, and then in the
afternoon I go ballroom dancing. They have dancing
outside in the park.

OFLAZIAN: To whom...

VETZIGIAN: And I dance. (he laughs)

OFLAZIAN: To whom you meet in Florida. Who's there in

Florida?

VETZIGIAN: My daughters, they have a, apar, they have a condomini, condominium, and I go there. I go there. I helped them to buy the condominium. It's on the fifteenth floor. Beautiful, lovely place. Lovely place. So I do a lot of the, I do a lot of swimming in the pool, and I do a lot of dancing. After that I go dancing.

OFLAZIAN: That's great.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Wonderful.

VETZIGIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So you are an active person.

VETZIGIAN: That's why I'm eighty-sev...

OFLAZIAN: Physically and mentally.

VETZIGIAN: That's why I'm eighty-seven years old.

OFLAZIAN: That's why you stay healthy.

VETZIGIAN: That's right.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. Thank you...

VETZIGIAN: Is that all?

OFLAZIAN: That's it. Yeah.

VETZIGIAN: Oh. Oh, my.

OFLAZIAN: I thank you very much...

VETZIGIAN: I'm sorry...

OFLAZIAN: ...for your precious time.

VETZIGIAN: I'm sorry...

OFLAZIAN: You gave it to us today.

VETZIGIAN: It was my pleasure.

OFLAZIAN: It was very interesting.

VETZIGIAN: My pleasure. I hope come out all right. I don't know. My answers weren't too good. I wasn't able to answer you right.

OFLAZIAN: It was perfectly clear and acceptable.

VETZIGIAN: Okay. All right.

OFLAZIAN: So this Grace Oflazian signing off with Mr. George Gaidzag Vetzigian for the National Park Service.

END OF INTERVIEW