EI-278
JOHN (SUREN) BABAIAN
BIRTH DATE: MARCH 11, 1910
INTERVIEW DATE: 4/16/1993
RUNNING TIME: 1:27:08
INTERVIEWER: GRACE OFLAZIAN
RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY
INTERVIEW LOCATION: FRANKLIN SQUARE, NY
TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 2/1994
TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 4/1994

SYRIA (Armenian,born U.S.), 1920 RESIDENCE: BITLIS, TURKEY
AGE 10 US RESIDENCE: NYC, E. 25 ST.
PORT OF EMBARKATION: LE HAVRE

Oral Historian's Note: Mr. Babaian is the husband of Emma Babaian, Interview EI-279. A television or radio may be heard faintly in the background of this recording. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of the Oral History Project, 4/14/1994.

OFLAZIAN: Good afternoon. This is Grace Oflazian for the National Park Service. Today is April 16, 1993 at the home of Mr. John Suren Babaian in Franklin Square, New York. I'm here with Mr. Paul Sigrist, Jr. He is the Director of the Oral History Project, and Mr. Kevin Daley, the recording engineer. Mr. Babaian is an Armenian, was born in the United States and in 1912 he went to Tiflis, Turkey. Later, in 1920, Mr. Babaian came from Syria when he was eleven years old.

BABAIAN: I was ten years old. I was ten years old.

OFLAZIAN: Mr. Babaian was ten years old. So why don't you begin by giving me your full name and date of birth, please?

BABAIAN: My name is John Suren Babaian. I was born in New York City, Manhattan, on March 11, 1910, in the hospital, lying in hospital.

OFLAZIAN: And how do you describe your town?

BABAIAN: I beg your pardon?

OFLAZIAN: How do you describe your town?

BABAIAN: My town?

OFLAZIAN: Yes.

BABAIAN: Well, I only remember it after I came back. Because prior to that time I have no recollection, except coincidence when we're leaving here to go to the other side, I was looking through the porthole, and I got a spanking. I had a little shirt and my father came down, he saw me there, he thought I was going to fall out, he spanked my behind, my back. And that's what I remember, because I was crying, see.

OFLAZIAN: Did you go to school in the United States?

BABAIAN: Yes, when I came back. No, not before. How could I? I was only three years old.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. So you said you went to Tiflis, right?

BABAIAN: Not Tiflis, Bitlis.

OFLAZIAN: Bitlis.

BABAIAN: Tiflis is in Russia. Bitlis is Turkey, that's right. But I didn't go to Bitlis first. We went, from New York we went straight to Bulgaria, and the reason for that was because my father, when he came to this country he was fortunate enough to get a job working for the Kasam Brothers Oriental Rug Corporation. They were Asia Minor Greeks. And at the Ellis Island they asked my father, they had an interpreter who spoke Turkish, but he was a Greek. He asked my father in Turkish, "What kind of work did you do?" He says, "I was off in the 1895 massacre, and they put me in the monastery." And he said, "The monks taught me how to weave rugs, repair rugs. And my younger brother became a jeweler, working in jewels, but he also knows how to weave rugs." So he says, "I'll give you an address. You go and see them." Because he also was an Asia Minor Greek and he knew these people, they

needed repair work, and there was very scarce of people that had knowledge of repairing rugs and weaving rugs. He and his brother were very fortunate of getting a job. Then after a few years they found out that he was expert in this thing. They decided to send him with his family to Bulgaria to have the, to open a factory and make rugs and send it back to the United States. After he was there for a couple, two or three years, he decided he was finished with them, enough rugs. He sent his mother back, back home, and he decided to go and see his sister in Bitlis. She was the only one left from his family, the Babaian family, coming to the United States. Three sisters, a brother, an uncle, a granduncle of mine, and a grandmother from my, paternity grandmother, she had come back. There were, they were living in the United States. There was only one sister with five children left in Bitlis. He wanted to go and see his sister before coming back home. By the time we went there, the massacre occurred in 1915.

OFLAZIAN: How many people you were at home?

BABAIAN: At that time?

OFLAZIAN: Before you left the United States?

BABAIAN: How many people? It was my father, mother, my sister, younger sister, and my grandmother. And my uncle. He was there.

OFLAZIAN: All living in one house.

BABAIAN: One big, the same house, when I came back it was the same house. I'll tell you a story about that afterwards.

OFLAZIAN: What was your mother's name?

BABAIAN: Satenik.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell it?

BABAIAN: S-A-T-E-N-I, I-K. Satenik.

OFLAZIAN: And your sister?

BABAIAN: Araxy.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Araxy?

BABAIAN: A-R-A-X-Y, or I-E, depends, some people spell it.

OFLAZIAN: And your brother?

BABAIAN: I have no brother. That's all. I have half-brothers, but that's a different story now.

OFLAZIAN: So you all left to Bitlis?

BABAIAN: No. It was only my parents, my sister and I, and my grandmother, my father's mother. She wanted to see her daughter, that was her daughter.

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

BABAIAN: They used to call her Shaka, but her real name was Shakey, until she died. Shakey was S-H-A-K-E-Y.

OFLAZIAN: Was she Babaian also.

BABAIAN: Of course, she was Babaian.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Babaian?

BABAIAN: B-A-B-A-I-A-N. Some of them spelled it Y-A-N but I spelled it I-A-N, because on my immigration papers when I came I got it over here, they have it spelled Y-A-N.

OFLAZIAN: Can you talk to me about your grandmother?

BABAIAN: I have two grandmothers, I have two grandmothers. You want me to tell you about my grandmothers?

OFLAZIAN: The one Shakey, Shakey Babaian.

BABAIAN: Shakey Babaian, I don't know too much about her and I'll tell you why. When he sent her back here, she lived with a bachelor son, my uncle. And then when my maternal grandparents found out that we were alive, and they wanted us to come back. Of course, when I found out we had a grandfather and a grandmother I wanted to come back myself. They sent the money over to Beirut, to the American college there, and that's how I came. I came over, I came first. And when I came my grandparents took care, my maternal grandparents took care of me. And there was a dispute over me, who was going to take care of me. My grandmother, my father's mother, or was it my grandparents from my mother's side? And the . . .

OFLAZIAN: And what was the family name of your mother's side?

BABAIAN: Krikorian.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell it?

BABAIAN: K-R-I-K-O-R-I-A-N. My grandfather's name was Hovsep, H-O-V-S-E-P. And my grandmother's name was Antaram, A-N-T-A-R-A-M. All right?

OFLAZIAN: So how did you travel to Bitlis?

BABAIAN: How did we travel to Bitlis? From Istanbul, I don't know. We . . .

OFLAZIAN: Excuse me, from United States.

BABAIAN: By boat, by steamship, yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And what was the name? Do you remember?

BABAIAN: No, but I remember a ship coming back. How can I remember? I was two years old. Of course, if I had my parents, or, what was the question you asked me, please?

OFLAZIAN: How did you travel?

BABAIAN: Well, we went by ship. And I know we got to Istanbul by ship. From there on I remember going through Asia Minor on horsebacks, on horses. My grandparents . . .

OFLAZIAN: Wagon and horsebacks?

BABAIAN: No. Horseback by horses, and there was no, there was no railroad passageways. Donkeys and horses, that's how we travelled. We went through a lot of villages, and on the way we stopped at a lot of Armenian

villages. And one incident I remember my father, you know, my father belonged to a revolutionary, a member of the revolutionary. Want me to mention the name too?

OFLAZIAN: If you'd like to.

BABAIAN: Tashnag, he was a Tashnag. I'm not. Of course, that's what caused the disaster, for me, anyway. We used to stop in these small Armenian villages and they used to, you know, greet us. And I remember one incident very well. They were doing target practicing with a gun.

OFLAZIAN: And what was the name of this village?

BABAIAN: Oh, (Armenian). God knows. I don't remember that. And he put me in his lap. Oh, can I go back a little bit? In Bulgaria, my father took me to have my tonsils taken out. And I was only about maybe three years old, maybe three-and-a-half. And to go from Varna to Sofiya, that's the capital, we went with a motorcycle side car. He sat in the side car and he had me in his lap. And we travelled from Varna through Bulgaria and I had my tonsils taken out. You see, I remember very well when I was sick. And I sat

in my father's lap, and the guy, the doctor took it out. That was the old-fashioned way of doing things. I remember things like that. See, the important things. To me it was important. So when we went to this little Armenian village after we, from Istanbul, we went to, supposedly they were practicing target shooting, and my father sat me in his lap. He put the gun in my hand. He put, and he put his finger around the thing, and he shot. And I fainted, because this part of my finger got caught in the trigger. (he gestures) See, I remember things like that. And that's traveling, going over from Bulgaria to Bitlis. We hadn't reached Bitlis. But going to Bitlis we went through Orfa, that's a city. We went through Diyarbakir. Now, you want me to spell them?

OFLAZIAN: If you like to.

BABAIAN: Well, Orfa is U-F-F-E-R.

MRS. BABAIAN: O-U-R-F-A.

BABAIAN: O-U-R-F-A. And Diyarbakir is D-A-B-A-K-E-R. Right, Emma?

MRS. BABAIAN: D-I-A-R.

BABAIAN: She spells it better than I do.

MR. SIGRIST: It's okay. You can speak.

MRS. BABAIAN: D-I-A-R-B-E-K-E-R.

BABAIAN: And then eventually we ended up in Bitlis. Now, in Bitlis I had a great-grandmother, which I saw. I had a great-granduncle, my grandmother's two brothers and her mother, my grandmother's mother.

OFLAZIAN: Do you know their names?

BABAIAN: Yes, just give me a chance to think. My grandmother's name, my great-grandmother's name was Zazana, Z-A-N-A, no, no. Z-A-Z-A-N-A. Zanazan, right. My grandfather, my great-grandfather was killed by the Turks in the 1890s, around that time. So if you want his name, I can give it, too. Merzerdich, M-E-R-Z-E-R-D-I-C-H, Merzerdich. But I never saw him. I met my, as I say, my great-grandmother, my great-granduncle. And I met my father's sister, my aunt. She had five children, and . . .

OFLAZIAN: What was her family name?

BABAIAN: I don't know. That's the only bad, you know, I have a

friend . . .

OFLAZIAN: What was her name?

BABAIAN: Martha, Martha. And I remember her father's, her husband's name. And she had five children, but they're older than I because when we got there it started to snow. You know, Bitlis is in the valley in the mountains, and it's winter about four or five months of the years. And I remember one of the boys, one of the cousins who was older than I, he took me up on the mountainside, a homemade sled. Not the sleds like we have here. It was all made by wood. And coming down there, stuff like that I remember well.

OFLAZIAN: Did you play with the snow?

BABAIAN: Yeah. You know, when the snow drifts over there, you can't go in from the door. You go from the roof to make way. That's how high the snow gets. See, things like that, I remember we used to go up to the roof and then they made steps to go down, to go out. Eventually they opened up a place, but in the beginning they have, they shovel off, all the snow off the roof because it's too heavy, the roof will cave in. So as soon as the snow comes down, they get a

certain amount, they go up there and shovel it off the roof, and that's how it gets high. That's how the sides gets hard, because either it's a drop or it's a slope.

OFLAZIAN: How the houses look like over there?

BABAIAN: The houses, they had flat roof. They had, inside they had wooden beams. You could see the wooden beams. You know, the one thing that affects me the most, you have to excuse me, is the darn bathroom.

OFLAZIAN: What did it look like?

BABAIAN: No, no. Even when I came to France many years later they had, they didn't have good facilities. The only place I saw, the best place was Ellis Island when I got over. That thing made a big impression on me. That's the biggest impression I ever had was the bathroom in Ellis Island. I tell you, I never seen a bowl, toilet bowl, and I never seen water flushing and all that. And I tell you the story. Coming on board ship, boy, that was miserable. It was miserable, on the way down at the bottom of the ship, and the toilet, there was one big, large ship, one big large room. Both men and women used to use it. It was

tough for the women there. You have to excuse me. These things I remember. Most of the women that was on board ship . . .

OFLAZIAN: Excuse me. What do you remember from Bitlis?

BABAIAN: Bitlis? I remember the massacre.

OFLAZIAN: Can you tell us?

BABAIAN: Well, the first, the first time it was on a Wednesday. And at that time they had a woman that worked in the house. Before that, a couple of days before that the soldiers came and took my father's horse. He had a horse. They took the horse away. And then after that it was on a Wednesday. I remember this well. And on Wednesday they did laundry there. And my mother wanted to help the woman that's working there. They put on these blue denim pants there. They call it tumba. She had that on. I remember it very well. And the lady washing the clothes. And that's when I, the first time when all the commotion came up. We looked out of the window, there were soldiers there, and they had brought my father close. And I could see my father from the window. So I hollered at him. I went down. The soldiers let me go and see him. No,

sorry, no. (a doorbell rings) (break in tape)

OFLAZIAN: This is Grace Oflazian. We are resuming now the interview with Mr. Babaian. Can we continue where you were describing the massacre on Wednesday.

BABAIAN: On Wednesday, as I said, they were doing laundry. I saw my father, they bringing the soldiers on two sides. Not only my father. I hollered for my father, and he waved up there. And he told my mother to get in touch with Dr. Tchelebi. He was a Syrian doctor in the Turkish Army. Moslem, he was a Moslem. And he, we were friends, they were friends already. And she says, "Okay." And they took him away. Then the house we lived in had a big gate, a high gate. To get into the house they generally left it open, but because this incident was going on they had the gate closed. Before you know it my mother dressed me like a girl. She took my sister's dress and put it around me. And I don't know why she was doing that. But what happened, the soldiers came, and they weren't able to get in to us. They said to everybody, "Come down." We had men in there, Heghapoghagen, revolutionist in English, revolutionist. They start to shoot at the soldiers. They knew they were going to get killed?

They had no choice. So the commander, whoever's in charge, says, "Let the ladies and the children come downstairs." So we all got out, it was two stories, one, two people lived in, and then ground floor was where we had a, we had a man servant, his name was Kur Galo. Now, I'll explain to you why they called him Kur Galo. Kur means blind in Turkish, or Armenian, too. Galo, his name was Calost.

MRS. BABAIAN: Calost.

BABAIAN: Calost, thanks, huh. Galost, they call him, you know, they give him a nickname. He was a man, at that time he was a pretty old man to me. He might have been sixty-five, seventy, maybe more. I can't tell his age. He used to be our servant, like taking care, and he lived down there. So when this incident happened, when all the ladies and the kids came down, they made, the soldiers were still on the outside of the gate. Some had climbed up there, so they weren't over on this side. They said, "Line up against the wall." We lined up against the wall. And now they said for people to shoo them back. There was about three or four men in there. And Galo, Kur Galo, was hiding in the cellar. They started a fire. The fellows

upstairs never came out, but Galo came out. Now, I'm standing against the wall, one side my sister, one side me and my mother in the middle. I'm on the left side of her, and she was on my right, and she was on her right. And Galo came out of the door, the bottom door, the basement door with his hands up. And we had a big, in this courtyard there was a big rock, an immense, big rock. He came over there and he stood and he had his hands up, the old man, and the soldier just shot him. (he pauses) Here's what he did. This I'll never forget. He says, I don't want to talk about the guy . . . (he is moved)

OFLAZIAN: We are going to pause for a few moments. (break in tape) We resume the tape once more.

BABAIAN: Well, when Galo came out from the basement, or from the cellar, he got out with his hands up, and he came to this rock and the soldier from there shot him. He fell down, he turned around, he come up and he says, "Allah." He said, "God," in Turkish, and he turned around and died. I'll never forget this. I never will. He used to take care of me. My father had brought a tricycle with him from Bulgaria, and he used to watch me go up and down. They didn't have good

streets, so he used to take me. The old man, the shot him, the so-and-so killed him. But anyway, after he was shot we stayed there. The soldiers were able to come down. They opened the gate and they all came in, and they took every little boy. See, my mother was smart. My mother went from this country, so she wasn't naive like the natives over there. She had dressed me like a girl to save me. Let me think. They picked all the little boys, all the little boys, they took away. I wasn't, I was dressed like a girl. I was fortunate.

OFLAZIAN: So you were saved.

BABAIAN: I was saved. Of course, I was saved. My sister's dress saved me. And then there was a wall there. They knocked the wall down and made all these, it was only a house. We lived in, all the houses on that side, they knocked this wall down, made everybody go through this wall, and they took the place, the place, before that my mother said to the commanding officer, "We're Americans." You know, meaning. "Can I go? I want to see Dr. Tchelebi." So they took us to the police station. They separated us from that group and took us to the police station. So, you know, the

phones over there were not accurate like it is today. They tried to get in touch with the doctor, and the doctor, they couldn't get in touch with the doctor. So they took us, the put us where these people were taken in a big, immense, a big place. All the girls and ladies. No boys, no boys. I'm the only boy there. Now, people didn't know that I'm a girl. Five years old, I was. So we stayed there I don't know how many, maybe one or two days, maybe one day. We had no food. They had one soldiers in the front of the door, the guard, so nobody could go out.

OFLAZIAN: So where did you sleep?

BABAIAN: We slept standing up or leaning against each other, something like that. There was no place to sleep. It was all, and you know who was in that place? It wasn't only Armenians. They had Assyrians, Christian Assyrians and Greeks, we had Greeks. And Assyrians living in Bitlis. And they had intermarried because they were Christians and the others were Moslems, so they were more closer together. And my mother went over to the guard, told the guard there, the gendarme standing there with a soldier with a gun, she said, "I'm going to leave one of my daughters here, I'll go

see if I can fetch some bread and I'll bring it, I'll give you some, too." And so she tells me, she tells me, "As soon as I go out," because there was a place, it was just this building, and there was all trees around it. She says, "As soon as I go out, you run out of the house, the building, out of the house. He's not going to leave the door unattended and chase you." I was a little girl, supposed to be a little girl. So as soon as she went, there was a tree there. She says, "I'll hide behind the trees." As soon as she went out, maybe it didn't take, I don't know how long. I looked at the guy standing there, and I just shot out and ran, and I looked around and I see he's not chasing me, so I ran and my grand, my mother grabbed us, and she took us to a cousin of her house, a cousin of hers from her mother's, from her mother's side, my grandma. I didn't know who they were. She knocked on the door, you know, still the massacre had just begun, but still they were lax. She knocked on the door and the lady said, "We have no men here." So my mother spoke to her, "I'm Satenik I'm your, you know, so-and-so's daughter, please open the door. I have my two kids with me." So they opened the door and let us in. Oh, they hugged each other. And now

they had three men hiding up in the rafters. So, they were afraid to open the door to anybody knocking on the door. Anyway, I don't know, we stayed there a long time or not. I don't remember sleeping there, or maybe it was the same day. The next thing we heard was a knock on the door. So the lady asked, "We have nobody here. There were only ladies here from inside." He says, "Have you got Mr. Satenik?" In Turkish, "Madam Satenik and her two children?" He says, "Dr. Tchelebi sent me." So we opened the door, there was two soldiers, and he was a sergeant, and one's talking. So we went with him. They took us to a place. There was a lot of ladies living downstairs, and upstairs there's a lot of room. In those houses they have a tremendous amount of rooms, you know, because the family is three generations they're living in these big homes.

OFLAZIAN: Where?

BABAIAN: In Bitlis.

OFLAZIAN: Where your father was at that time?

BABAIAN: At that time I don't know where he was, but later on we find out they had him imprisoned in an armory.

Across where we went to live had windows that faced the armory far away and there's a river going in between. So you could see the men small. So the doctor said, "I'll have you as a nurse. You work, you help to take care of the soldiers." Because a lot of soldiers were coming in wounded, too, because they were fighting the, they were fighting the Russian Army, the Czar's Army at that time. This is 19, 1915, '16. And they were fighting the Russians on the front and they had casualties, they had to bring them. And that's the way they save you, make you a nurse. He saved thirty Armenians, that man. Of course, that's how he got saved, because he saved those thirty Armenians. It's a long story. There's a book I have, an Armenian book, written about him. If you're interested I'll let you . . .

OFLAZIAN: Sure, I would love to.

BABAIAN: He made us stay in this house with all these women, and every day I could look out, we could look out of the window and they'd line up men against the wall and they'd shoot them, BRRRRRRRR, you know, with guns. You'd see them falling down. But before that, this doctor got us a permit to go and see my father. That

was the last time I saw my father. So my mother told that Dr. Tchelebi, he says, "As long as he's under his care, don't worry, he'll save you." But, see, my father met this doctor at the American missionaries. We had American missionaries there trying to convert the Turks. They were never able, so they took a lot of Armenians and converted them from Orthodox to Protestant, see. And they had a big mission house, and before the massacre started, he got acquainted at the mission house with this Dr. Tchelebi. He was Syrian, from Aleppo. And they became friends. He used to come to visit our house. I remember they had davat. You know what davat means? A dinner. Davat, in Turkish, do you understand Turkish? No. Davat, how do you say davat in Armenian? A party. Davat is party. (Ms. Oflazian speaks in Armenian.) I don't know, this high class Armenian. Well, anyway, there was a party, and he was invited, and evidently he saw my mother, and I think that made an impression on him, because he was not married. So let me, I'm skipping myself. So he says, "We will go to this place and see my," Probably my father was killed at the time, but he came in, he so small. And then before you know it six soldiers came and they arrested my mother. They

said, "You people came from the United States. You have a lot of money. You must have buried it someplace here and there." So my mother says, "We didn't have no money. We didn't bury it. Whatever it was we bought a horse with it, and this and that." So they took her to the police station.

OFLAZIAN: And then what happened?

BABAIAN: She went to the police station. She stayed there a couple of days, and then the doctor got her out. She came back home. I mean, she came back to the house. And we stayed there, we left there 1916, we left there to Aleppo.

OFLAZIAN: How did you leave?

BABAIAN: Well, we left because we had a lot of these, over there in Bitlis they cooked bread for a month. They cook it for a month, you know. They make lavash. You know what lavash is?

OFLAZIAN: Did you ever see them how they cook it?

BABAIAN: Yes.

OFLAZIAN: How they cook it?

BABAIAN: They have a big hole. They call it, tunir, tunir. They call it tunir. And it's made out of crockery. When they make the dough and they make it, they have the little lump of dough, they go like this, like that, like this, like that. (he gestures) And it gets to be a pretty big size. Then they take it and they slap it against the crockery side. And the fire is down there. When it was cold we used to sit at the edge and be careful you don't fall it, and we'd heat our feet, and that's what cooked the bread. It was like a little thicker than tissue paper. You know what lavash is, don't you? Well, and then . . .

OFLAZIAN: Lavash is the Armenian bread.

BABAIAN: It's very thin. You can buy it here. It's very thin. And they used to make enough to last a month. Now, they used to make a couple of batches, and they used to stack it up in the room they had, they'd stack it up. And as you'd eat, as it got dry you would throw water on it and you eat it that way. It gets soft.

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

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

OFLAZIAN: This is Grace Oflazian. We are resuming now the interview on Side B with Mr. Babaian.

BABAIAN: Thank you.

OFLAZIAN: Mr. Babaian, you were explaining us how Armenian women bake the bread, which was called lavash, right.

BABAIAN: That's right.

OFLAZIAN: So can you continue your story for us?

BABAIAN: Well, first they kneaded the flour and then they made dough out of it. And then they little balls and they played with it up and down like this. Pardon me. And then they had a tunir. It was a big round, a big hole. Six, seven people could sit around it, kids, I mean, the kids. And they used to, all around it was crockery, and it was pretty deep. If you fell in there you'd get burned, you could die, because there was accidents. Not that I've seen it. But her aunt (referring to Mrs. Babaian) was telling me one time her kid brother fell in there and she was supposed to be taking care of the kid brother and the poor kid fell in there and he died, and they never had any sons

in that family. There were six women and no boys. But anyway, that's another story. That's her story. So they had, they used to get this big, it's made like, it looks like the, well, thinner than pita, a little thinner than pita. You know what pita bread is. A little thinner than that. And they used to slap it against this crockery siding, and it used to, one side used to get a little cold, like, and the other side, it was hot, and it used to get cooked. And they used to stack this up in the room and it would last maybe two, three, four weeks depending on how many people were around. And when it gets dry, it gets dry right away. To make it fresh they used to sprinkle water on there and then they used to eat it. And then they used to make their, they used to call it pourtoush. Pourtoush, right? Am I saying it right? Pourtush is something they roll, they roll any kind of food in there and they roll it up. It's like a rolled sandwich, actually. That's what it is, a rolled sandwich. And they used to eat it that way, or they used to scoop it up. Some of the peasants. I remember the peasants will not use utensils. They would eat with their hands. They used to use, like the Arabs do. You know, don't forget, the Armenians

lived with the Arabs so many years they got a lot of their customs. They used to take a piece of this lavash after it soaked up in water, it's flexible, and they used to put it around like a pilaf or anything that was gravy-like, scoop it up and eat it. All those things I remember. Well, anyway, you said now how they got their food. Well, through the doctor they were able to get flour. They get a lot of things. He brought a lot of things over. And now after, when my mother was able to come out of that jail, wherever she was, they weren't able to find anything. She says, "I'm damned if I know." I'll be glad to tell you." And he used his influence and got her out. So he says to my mother, "Listen. There's only one way I can save you." He says, "See, I've got these girls in the hospital. You served them as a nurse. I could save you one way." He says, "Make believe you're married to me, you're my wife, and I'm going to send you to my mother's house in Aleppo." That's how we got to Aleppo. And now this sergeant that came to find us in the house, remember I told you it was my, this sergeant was a Syrian Jew. And he had made an agreement with the doctor. The doctor says, "I'll give you a discharge, and when you take Madame

and the two kids to my mother's house, and my brother will give you the okay sign. He gave him a letter. You get a discharge, disabled discharge. The sergeant, they used to call them "Turk," youda this and this and the other. Turkish soldiers, they're mean, too. And he was a sergeant, and they mistreated him. So he was glad he was going to get discharged. So he, they made two square boxes like this exactly, (he gestures) two like that, two of them. My sister and I sat in one, and my mother sat in the other one, draped over a horse. And the sergeant, he was in uniform. You know, all the Syrian, actually it was under Turkish rule at that time. He said, "Now you take these people to my mother. And when you show this letter to my brother, my brother will give you a discharge." So that's this sergeant, this lucky sergeant. That's why I'm not anti-Jew, you know. I might get mad driving around, except I might say something but I don't mean it. It's just a figure of speech. I grew up on the east side, and that's what they used anyway. All foul language. And they'd always have to stick somebody's nationality in there. But I don't do it with intention. It's just a figure of speech. So this man took us all the way to the

doctor's house. We went to different cities. Now, we also went from Armenia, from Bitlis in Asia Minor, we went all the way south to Aleppo. Now we're going to start. We came to Diyarbakir and to Urfa again. See? Now, nobody touched us because this was a Turkish soldier, they saw he had his gun and a horse, the Turkish insignia on his horse, and all that. And he says, "I was supposed to take the officer's wife back to his homeland," and it was okay. All along the path we stopped, we stopped. We stopped, here's one thing I remember very well. We stopped in Diyarbakir, the city, in a khan. You know what khan is? An inn. We call it an inn, but actually it's a big, immense place. And they, the people sleep in there. They have open areas where they keep ground bulgur and wheat and the other material.

OFLAZIAN: Bulgur is the chopped wheat.

BABAIAN: Yeah. And you could see like rodents running up and down. It was filthy, but what are you going to do? And then from there we slept one night in that khan, and then gradually traveled. We slept a couple of other places, but I don't remember the names. They were villages, we slept. And when we got to the

doctor's mother's house she was, you know, it's funny. The Orientals, the Arab Muslims, a woman has no right except a matriarch, like a woman whose husband was, his father married three times. He was from the first marriage, the doctor was the first one. And the mother, the father had died many years ago, and she became the matriarch of that house. Now, she had one, two, three, four children, four children. They were the eldest of the family. The doctor was the oldest, see? No, the doctor was, he had a sister that was one older, but the male had the, the woman don't mean nothing. The male is in charge. The doctor was in charge. She had four of her own children. Then the other two wives had died. They were younger than her, but they had died. The youngest one out of the lot never had children, but the other one had one, two, three, four, five children. One of them was an officer in the Turkish Army. The Arabs had to go to be in the Turkish Army, because they didn't, the Arabs had to be in the Turkish Army because Turkey had conquered all those countries. So when he got to, when he brought us to the house and he knocked on the door. Now this, Tchelebi residence, they were well-known at that time, practically half the city was

Tchelebi. It was a big clan.

MRS. BABAIAN: Five hundred in the clan.

BABAIAN: Yeah. So she says, the servant came to open the door. They had one, two, three doors. You go in the first door they keep the horses. They have a horse place. They keep right there, horses. And then you go to another one, there's a horse, the male housekeeper, he stays there. Of course, the female is inside. And then the third door opens, it's a big gate. The houses are shaped, you've probably seen news, movies. I've seen this in Spanish, in Spanish pictures, where they, you go into a courthouse and it's all closed. Well, that's all Moorish and Arabic stuff that they're explaining as established now. Well, they had a big fountain in the courtyard, big enough. And they had rooms all over. They had rooms for guests and so forth. No sleeping here, it's all for guests. And they had rooms for the ladies, separate ladies, because they used to have people come in there, and they had a lot of relatives. And when we went in the sergeant, the sergeant said, "This is Dr. Tchelebi's wife and two kids." And she was astonished. And he gave her the letter. Of course, she couldn't read.

Then the brother, the brother was a, became a teacher. He was not a teacher, he was a civilian. In order not to go into the Turkish Army he became a mullah. You know what a mullah is? He wrapped something on his head. You don't know what mullah is? You lived in Syria, you come from, born in Syria? A mullah is a Turkish, is a Moslem priest. Mullah.

OFLAZIAN: Oh, you mean the sheik.

BABAIAN: Sheik, sheik. But a mullah is the guy that gets up on the minaret and says, "Allah (he recites in Turkish)." You don't know those things? I'm surprised. You come from an Arab country. And I came . . .

OFLAZIAN: Now I remember, now I remember. (she laughs)

BABAIAN: And he was that. And naturally when she showed me the letter, how come my brother remarried and had two kids. Now, I was six years old, my sister was four now, see. She never knew he was married. So his mother said to him, "If your brother says that's his wife and kids, she's his wife and kids. I accept it." So she says, "What is your name?" The doctor had given us names. My name was Ali Tchelebi, and my

sister's name was Chadija, Chadija Tchelebi. I said, "Ali." "Okay." So she accepted, she accepted.

OFLAZIAN: So these are Arabic names.

BABAIAN: Arabic names. So now we're speaking Turkish, not Arabic. I know Turkish, see, because that's what, we weren't allowed to speak Armenian. My mother spoke Turkish to me. (Turkish) You don't know how to speak it. So they, she accepted us. But she knew that we weren't his children, but she accepted, because he said so. They hadn't heard anything from him for a couple of years, because in the Turkish Army. And, you know, mail over there doesn't travel like in the United States. I send letters to Mexico and it gets lost. So she accepted it. But she knew darn well we weren't his children. And then her children from, her husband's children that were from the second wife lived in there. They weren't married. The girls were married. The girls were married, and one of the girls' husband was killed in the army. And the other one, I don't know what he was, like a big shot. He dressed like a European. She had two. And one son was an officer in the Turkish Army, but he was stationed in Aleppo. And one son was the sheik, no,

no, not the sheik, no. Let me think. The middle son, one son was an officer. Oh, okay then. And one son, you know, Moslems, they don't drink. But this boy used to drink. I'll tell you a story about him. And then the youngest son was about eighteen years old, nineteen years old. He was the . . .

OFLAZIAN: Were you scared of them?

BABAIAN: No. I wasn't scared at all. I'll tell you the truth. I wasn't scared, I wasn't afraid at all. But you know where I got scared? I'll tell you. In Aleppo I got scared. I'll tell you the story when I come to it. I wasn't scared because I was under the doctor's roof, and I had a sergeant with me. How could I be scared? Every place he went he showed his credentials and he passed us through. I wasn't afraid. I was afraid, but not afraid. I was, I didn't know any better. To tell you the honest truth at that time. Where the heck was I? Oh. Now she, you know, the Arabs that go "Lu, lu, lu, lu, lu, lu." She gave it, you know, she was glad that the doctor's wife and son came in, so all the other buildings, they're all Tchelebis. They all come around. They wanted to know what the good news is. They think the doctor is back.

So she tells them, "This is my son's son, my son's wife and two children." Now, these people are all curious to know. So she said, so they have to accept it. So they accepted us. But the third day, about the third day we dressed, we dressed, you know, we dressed (?), not like an Arab.

OFLAZIAN: Casual way.

BABAIAN: Doctor's first cousin, very close to the doctor. Same age, they grew up together. They went to the Turkish school together. They were Arabic and Turkish school. And the doctor, from there he went, he went to France and he became a doctor. He became a doctor in France. And he spoke, the doctor spoke French fluently. So he tells the doctor's mother, we used to call her Nana, Nanny, something like that, Grandma. He says, "I'd like to take the kids out and have them some sweets." You know, the Arabs have a lot of sweet stuff. And ice cream, stuff like that. So he took us to a cafe and he told the guy there, he took coffee and he took a nargile, smoking, and he's talking to us and he's smoking. He ordered soda, gazos, gazos, they call it, and the good stuff we're eating. He says, "What is your name?" I said, "Ali Tchelebi." To my

sister, she's Chadija Tchelebi. And I give some of the sweet stuff he's giving. This is shrewed, him giving. We were kids, though. So about maybe fifteen, twenty minutes he says, "What is your name again?" I says, "Suren Babaian." What the heck could I say? I tried to stick up my, that's all. He said, "Oh, come on, get up." (he laughs) He took us, he took us to his mother, to the doctor's mother. He says, "These people are not even Moslems." So the doctor's mother says, "So what are they? My son said that's his children, that's his children. He says that's his wife, it's his wife, and that's what they are." So we stayed there 1916 until 1920, and lot of things happened there. In between, I tell you, when I was five, now, the doctor, the doctor's family, they were city-bred and also peasantry. No, not peasantry. They lived on the mountains. They had beautiful, big homes. But they didn't dress in Western-style clothes. They used to dress in Arab-style. But the doctor's relatives, brothers, the half-brothers and his own brother, they had Western clothes. Only the sheik had Western clothes, but he had a turban on his head. So we went, we used to go over there once in a while with the family. We used to go there

occasionally, visiting them. And you had to walk, you had to walk. You have to go out of the city and walk up the hills to the mountains. And they used to have phaeton. You know what phaeton is?

MRS. BABAIAN: Horse and wagons.

BABAIAN: Cabs. We used to go as far as the city line, and walk up the hill. So one time what happened was that I, my mother wasn't with me, and I was with somebody, and I said, "I want to go. I want to go to home." And I speak Arabic now. I learned how to speak Arabic. Kids pick it up fast. I was able to speak Arabic. So, "You go home. You know how to go home." So I walked down this mountainside and there's no house, nothing, all along. And that's where I got scared, frightened. Down the hill. And then the clouds used to come up. It used to get dark over the sun, cover the sun. I was, and they had a lot of wild dogs, you know, dogs. You've got to be careful. They're going to bite you. That's where I got frightened. I really got frightened there.

OFLAZIAN: Did you make any friends during this period?

BABAIAN: Well, let me explain to you. I'm going to come to it.

OFLAZIAN: Okay.

BABAIAN: Well, I made friends, yes, after a while. Now, I went to four schools there. I went to German school, German. It was occupied by Germans within, Aleppo at the time, with the Turkish Army. I went to German school. That's where they sent me first, because I was European. They didn't want me to go to the Oriental school. When they, when the Germans got pushed out, when the English, when the English came and pushed the Turks out and the Turks and the Germans out of there they were having wars, you know. They were having battles. That's where I saw these small planes shooting at each other, and you can see the bombs, you know, whatever they shoot there, exploding. But never, I never saw anyone get hit. I guess they went too close. So the English came through, they came through to that area and they came with the Hindus. At that time they had Hindu soldiers. They were Moslem soldiers. They came right into Aleppo. And then the Germans gone, so they put me in Arab Muslim school, and it was an awful school. You kneeled down on a concrete floor. And the sheik, he spits all over you, especially when you falala. You

know what falala is? I used to get beaten up that way.

OFLAZIAN: It's the Arabic word for a stick.

BABAIAN: Yeah. You know, falala is they put, they have a piece of rope around, they put it on your ankle and they roll it up to hold your feet up and he smacks you. They're mean. Those people, they're mean. They're mean, they're mean. I got a couple of times like that. It's awful filthy. When I used to go home I told my mother, "Look. They're all dirty, filthy, this and that." So my mother tells him, the mother-in-law, the mother, she was very nice to me. She tells her son, "I don't want, I don't want Ali to go to the school." Just then an Italian school opened up. It was a combination Italian-French. It was monks, so they put me there under the name of Suren Babaian. That was another reason why I wanted to get out of that area. So all the Tchelebi kids were all going to that school. Hey, here comes Ali, and the teacher when I went to, whatever, don't ask me what name, they hop up, "Ali Tchelebi," they said. They let me speak. Now they got me as a Moslem, right? They put me in the classroom named Monsieur Philippe.

I remember that guy, too. Now, I'm embarrassed because they used to go to church. All the Christians, they used to go to church every morning. So I couldn't go to the church. I'm a Moslem, so I stayed with the Moslem kids. We used to play, this and that, until we come out of church half an hour. This went on for a while, you know, for a long while. They come looking for Suren Babaian, there's no Suren Babaian. I'm ashamed and afraid to say it, because these fellows have accepted me as Ali Tchelebi. The one, and they're very clannish, the Tchelebis. All the Arabs are like that. Arab relatives, they're very clannish. And the slightest thing, they fight, they even could kill each other. It doesn't mean anything. After a while they make up and it's all forgotten. But, of course, you've got civilian laws that takes, they're not up to par with civilians, they're a little bit going back to the ancient time, the ruling suit. They were like clannish. And then the few years I stayed there, every year the big clan, the big shot of the Tchelebi, an old man, he used to come around at a, they had a special cemetery, and everybody, all the Tchelebi kids, maybe two, three blocks like this, long blocks. And all the Tchelebi kids used to stay in

line way over. And they used to go and kiss the man's hand, he used to give you candy in a cone, like, you know, an ice cream cone made out of paper and there's candies in there. You used to kiss his hand, he used to give it to you. And he, they never knew the hell that I was not an Arab. They never knew I was, because some of those kids didn't look like Arabs either. They were Syrians. God knows they were mixed, you know. So I was accepted. So what happened one day, I like to go to school, Mr. Phillipe's class, I was in there. And he was mean, I tell you, I was a little rowdy. I wasn't afraid. I was never afraid. Sometimes the subways, gee, I worked thirty-five years at night and I never was afraid. But now you read in the paper, I was reading this morning's paper, I said, "Holy Christmas. This is bad. People can't go in the streets, in the subway." Thirty-five years I worked nights, and for thirty-five years I never had, it's only once to happen, not to me. After the war, this was. An officer was sitting across the way in the subway with me, because we lived in the Bronx at that time, coming home, and two guys came. The train was empty. It was around three thirty, four o'clock in the morning. And this officer came and sat in front

of me, you know. And I generally used to take a snooze. I looked, there he was. Then I saw a guy sitting next to me. The place was empty. It didn't mean nothing to me. A black man came and sat next to him. I'm still asleep, I wake up. This guy gets up. He says, "You see the guys?" I said, "What guy?" I said, "I saw two men sitting." He says, "They swiped my," he had his money, they swiped his money. We chased them back and forth. That was the only incident I saw in my life working all that years in the subway. And I used to walk, I hope you haven't got it on, have you? (referring to tape recorder)

SIGRIST: It's on, yes.

BABAIAN: And I used to walk from shop, I worked on, I lived on 25th Street all my life that I lived in the United States, I mean, before I was married. And I happened to work in an engraving shop. That was on 25th Street between Lexington and Third Avenue. I, the Armory, the 69th Armory is right there.

OFLAZIAN: So, can you tell us, Mr. Babaian . . .

BABAIAN: I'm going off, huh? I'm going off.

OFLAZIAN: Never mind. It's a very beautiful story. But can you tell us how . . .

BABAIAN: Go back, go back . . .

OFLAZIAN: How did you manage to go out from Aleppo, Syria?

BABAIAN: Let me explain to you. This Mr. Philippe, he used to give me a hard time. He was, I was a Moslem. He didn't like me. He was a Christian. So one day when I went to school, see, my mother says, "Come to the khan. There's an Armenian lady there. I'm going to pay her a, I'm going to visit her, and you come over there, we come home together." I said, "Okay." So when I got out of school, I played a little bit outside. And then we went there, and then I went to the khan, I went upstairs, I knocked on the door. The lady answered it. A woman. "Oh," she says. This and that. She brought me in, and Mr. Philippe was there, the teacher. And he says to me, "What are you doing here?" In Arabic, you know. And he said bad words. My mother got mad. She says, "How dare you speak to my son like that?" "Your son? Isn't that Tchelebi?" "Yeah, but that's my son. His name is Suren Babaian." He says, "Is he called Ali Tchelebi?" So

now I didn't want to go to school no more.

OFLAZIAN: So he got confused.

BABAIAN: He got, and then my mother, she said, "You know I'm supposed to be the wife of the doctor." She probably never put the two together. Anyway, to make a long story short, I'm going, now I'm going to Christian church, I'm going to the Catholic church. Now, the Arabs got mad at me. Now I'm between the Devil and the deep blue sea. Just then we heard that my grandparents are alive. My mother didn't know that they were alive. She thought she was, that they're dead, and they're looking for us. Word came that my grandparents, they're alive. And they want us to go, come back, because we never thought we would be back. So now I told her, I'm having a fight with my mother. Oh, pardon me. Before that the doctor, they took the doctor to, I got to go back, I'm sorry. I'm skipping myself.

OFLAZIAN: Never mind, Mr. Babaian. You may continue.

BABAIAN: When I left Halab, I don't know how long after that the Russian Army, under the czar, this is 1916. '17 was when they had their civil war, whatever it was.

Under the brother-in-law of the Czar, the Czar's wife's brother was in charge of that campaign, the Armenian legion was in there, Antoinique, General Antoinique's group, the Armenian legion, was fighting the Turks with them. They happened, the Armenian legion got into the city of Bitlis. And they captured whatever Turks there were there, soldiers. The soldiers started to move, but they captured them. And these soldiers were sent to Siberia. Now, the doctor was in the missionary with these thirty, near thirty Armenian girls' nurses. By the way, I didn't say this to you, but I'll tell you. I, at the time I saw, I saw soldiers raping the girls, I saw killings of the girls, but I didn't know what the hell they were doing. I didn't know what the hell it was. I don't know. And then, pardon me. I saw things that medical doctor haven't seen. I saw old ladies in the place where we were staying, I saw, watching across the window, young girls, they were being aborted. And I didn't know what they were doing. I was dressed like a girl, so I was able to pass through. I didn't know what they were doing. But when I got older and older I realized what the, what they were doing because I was innocent. A five-year-old boy, five- or six-year-

old wouldn't have known. It's not like today. Listen, I'm going back seventy-eight years. Yeah, it's going to be seventy-eight this month, seventy-eight years. I didn't know what the heck they were doing. But later on, but anyway, they captured, the doctor was in the missionary, in the mission, the mission house, with these thirty, the mission house was made into the hospital, with these thirty nurses who are Armenian girls, young girls. When the soldiers got in, the Armenian volunteers got in, they saw the Turkish uniforms, they grabbed them. They were sent to Siberia. They're going to kill them. They wanted to kill them, the thirty. They didn't know what the story was. One of the girls, that's how my grandfather learned. One of the girls grabbed the man, one of the soldiers, he says, "You can't do that." She says, "This man saved us. He was a doctor, he saved us." So that's how they sent him to Siberia. He went to Siberia. So now, when we were in Arab, we didn't know if the doctor was dead or alive, and the mother didn't know if the doctor was dead or alive.

OFLAZIAN: So . . .

BABAIAN: This lady that saved his life married one of the volunteers. And they came here in 1919. He volunteered, from the United States he went and he served on Antoinique. And the war was over, he came back to the United States. And there were, they only had one Armenian church at that time in New York, and at the church, my grandparents used to go and visit there, and I saw this lady, and this lady, she was (?), and she says, "Your daughter and the two children are safe. They're in Halab. They're in Aleppo." That's how my grandparents found out that we were alive in Aleppo. And now the news came that my grandparents are alive. Now I want to come to the United, I want to come back home. I give my mother a lot of trouble. Every day I, I was a naughty boy. I would climb the big things. I used to go here and there.

OFLAZIAN: So how did you manage to get out from Syria?

BABAIAN: I'm coming to it. My mother got tired. She didn't want to be apart with us.

OFLAZIAN: Because you grew up together . . .

BABAIAN: No, in the meantime, before I was saying, before this

incident happened that my grandfather was alive, the doctor came in and he gave my mother two choices. He says, he says, "You can marry me, or you don't have to marry me. You're not obligated to me." So there was a lot of Armenian ladies from Bitlis over there. They said, one lady says, "If you ask for my daughter's hand, I'll give it you." She says, "You are in America." You know how life was in those days, back in the early 1900s. The United States wasn't, the United States, it was freedom and all that. But people used to work hard. There were immigrants in New York. Downtown on the East Side it was all immigrants. So she convinced my mother to marry him, so she married him. And then now I don't want another man to be near my wife. I was, by this time I was smart. By this time I was smart.

OFLAZIAN: So you . . .

BABAIAN: I don't want my mother to sleep next to another man. I don't like the idea. And I found out my parents, I want to go to America. I want to go to the United States. I say, "If you won't give it to me I run away." So we had a lady, a young girl working. In the meantime the doctor came back. He established a

clinic and all this. We had a girl, a young Armenian girl who was often working as a maid in the house. And she came one day and told my mother, she said, she spoke Armenian to her, she said, "(Armenian.) Mrs. Satenik I'm engaged to an Armenian-American soldier by pictures, you know. And I'm going to go to America in a couple of months." So that's an opportunity my mother found out that she could put me with this lady to come to the United States. This lady was engaged through this family's son related to them. And that's how I . . . (tape ends)

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

OFLAZIAN: We are going, this is Grace Oflazian. We are resuming now the interview with Mr. Babaian. Mr. Babaian, you just told us that you come to America from Aleppo, Syria. How did you come?

BABAIAN: Did I say about the servant working with my mother?

OFLAZIAN: Can you tell us how did you manage to go to the harbor, to the port?

BABAIAN: Oh. Well, this young lady, I came with this young

lady, and she was coming with this family, because this family, through letters and photographs, had made an, engaged the girl to a doughboy, an American soldier, they called them "doughboys" in those days. He was a, he was a very nice young fellow. We were coming together. Now, this lady, not the young girl that I was with, but the family, she had two children with her, a boy and a girl. The boy was sixteen, the girl must have been about twenty, and herself. And . . .

OFLAZIAN: How old you were at that time?

BABAIAN: Exactly ten years old, exactly ten years old. In the meantime my mother had a boy in this time, a boy . . .

OFLAZIAN: From her new marriage?

BABAIAN: From the new marriage. That boy today is in an old age home here in New York, old age home. He's old. He's feeble. And when he was born, he was a couple of months old, and I left. I wanted to get out of there. And I came with these folks, just as I mentioned, the young girl, and the lady with the two children, to Beirut.

OFLAZIAN: How did you go to Beirut?

BABAIAN: By railroad, railroad. Now Beirut, at that time, was Syria, it was part of Syria. Oh, in the meantime, pardon me. The English had to leave Aleppo and the French came there. The English took Jerusalem after that, what they call Israel today. They were giving, they separated those countries. And then the French created Lebanon, the country of Lebanon. But it was Syria at that time, when I was there it was Syria. So by railroad I don't know how many hours it took us to come to Beirut. And in Beirut we went to live in an area where they had tents. We still had refugees, Armenian refugees. And we went there, and they were building an Armenian church on that same ground, and everybody had tents and they slept in tents. Now, they gave us a large tent, and three, four, five of us slept in one tent. I used to sleep on, we slept on the ground. I used to sleep, I used to be afraid, they had rats there, big rats in the field. I used to be afraid of the rats. There was a lot of cats. So I slept in between Paris. This lady, a young girl, her name was Paris, I don't know, a French name, a French capital. I slept between Paris and the other girl. I

slept in between them. And my mother slept next to her, and the boy slept here. The boy used to give me a lot of trouble.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember the area that the tents were in?

BABAIAN: Yes, yes. They were, I don't know the name of the street. They were building an Armenian church on the ground.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember the name of the church?

BABAIAN: No. But right across the street was an armory, and the first time I saw Japanese soldiers in my life. And they were still part of, the war had ended, but there were, they were taking, they were guarding some area, and they used to come in, they used to be marching and then come back and go to the army. And that's how I used to watch. I said, "Gee, they're little men, but they're men." They were little short people. And that's the, now, if you know an Armenian church in front of an armory, that's the church. I asked some people, they know which church it is. They even mentioned the name.

OFLAZIAN: Did you go to church?

BABAIAN: No, they were building it. How could I go to church? I only went to the Armenian church once in Halab, on the QT I went. And my mother, actually I'll tell you a story about, I was going to Germany. I used to go to Germany.

OFLAZIAN: So what happened after then, when you were in the tent? You slept over there.

BABAIAN: Well, there were, we had to wait to get visas for this family. The girl had the visa, and I had the visa. I don't think I had a passport, because I said I was an American. The passport was, got lost. I had the same kind of papers. I only had one thing left, I remember. That's all I had.

OFLAZIAN: So how long did you stay over there?

BABAIAN: We stayed there approximately about four months. And what happened, this guy, this boy that was with the family, he used to annoy me. Pardon me, the bathroom, you know why I say the bathroom, they had no bathrooms there. You had to go in the fields and do whatever you had to do. And you used to sometimes be careful stepping, and the women, that's why that impression on Ellis Island made a very good impression on me. And I

had to stay with these people for approximately four months until they got a visa from there to come to the United States.

OFLAZIAN: So after they got their visa.

BABAIAN: All right. I'm telling you now. After they got the visa we took a boat from Beirut and went to Marseille. (Mr. Babaian pronounces an "s" at the end of "Marseille") We stayed in Marseille about, hmm, about a week. From Marseille then we were ready to come to the United States. We went to Le Havre. From Le Havre we took a ship, the S.S. Niagara. I even know the ship's name, because I have a record of it. And it was on December 11th we left, we left Le Havre. And I don't know, it took, my wife says a month. I said, "It didn't take us that long." Because I spent Christmas in Ellis Island. So we came, we came to Brooklyn.

OFLAZIAN: Excuse me.

SIGRIST: Could we pause for a moment, just pause.

BABAIAN: I can't hear. I'm deaf in one ear now. (break in tape) We were in Le Havre, we took a ship, the

S.S. Niagara, as I said. And we came. I don't know how long it took. We came before Christmas. We landed in Brooklyn on a dock.

OFLAZIAN: Excuse me, excuse me. Can you describe me the ship for me? You have a good memory.

BABAIAN: The ship had one stack, and we were way down on the bottom. You had to go up three flights to go up to the upper deck. There were people living above us. Two people living, two floors living above us. And then the upper deck, and then you had the captain's area. And I used to sneak in, they won't let you go up there. I used to sneak in there. I tell you what happened there. Coming over, we're nearing the United States, and the crew that came down, and they gave us, pardon me, they gave us beer. I never drank beer, because they had to either throw it in the water, throw the beer, because they had the Prohibition. Prohibition was in effect. They had to either throw it in the ocean or give it to the poor people downstairs, so it . . .

OFLAZIAN: Was it crowded, the ship?

BABAIAN: Oh, downstairs we were crowded. Oh, we were crowded.

OFLAZIAN: What did you eat in the boat?

BABAIAN: We ate, they didn't give us much food. Whatever they gave us we ate. Most of them have food there. Most of these people that came, they had brought food themselves. But we didn't have no food. Whatever they gave us we ate.

OFLAZIAN: So where did you sleep in the boat?

BABAIAN: Oh, sleeping in a rotten place. I'll tell you, you went to the bathroom, I hated to go to the bathroom because you walk in the dirt. And the women, pardon me. The women, they wanted to urinate. These women, I don't know what country they were from, they used to hold their dress apart and urinate standing up like a man. I mean, you know, all those things I see. You know, you get disgusted. Well, anyway . . .

OFLAZIAN: Did you see any friends in the boat?

BABAIAN: How could I make a friend? I make enemies. (he laughs) No, I don't make no friends, because we used to run around and play games and all that, but we don't have no friends.

OFLAZIAN: How long did the voyage took?

BABAIAN: I don't know. I'll tell you, I left the eleventh of March, I left the eleventh of December 1920, and it arrived before Christmas of 1920. So it took us, I told them, I told Emma, "About eight days." She says, "Oh, it took two weeks." I said, "You came after me on a better ship than I did."

OFLAZIAN: So when the ship arrived . . .

BABAIAN: When the ship arrived here, we docked in Brooklyn. And in Brooklyn, this man that was going to marry this girl, he knew more about boats and everything like that, he got in touch with my grandfather, and they rented a motor boat to come to pay us a, to see us. And we were hanging over the guard rail. And the lady next to me, now, I never spoke Armenian, I never spoke Armenian to anyone. I only spoke Arabic. The lady that brought me, that came with, she asked my grandfather, she says, "Baron Hovsep." Mr. Hovsep. Hovsep means Joseph. Hovsep in Armenian means Joseph in English or any other. "Baron Hovsep. Your grandson can't speak one word of Armenian." I knew what she was saying, but I go, I wave at him. He

says, "Throw something down." So we had some kind of a rope. He put a lot of apples. Now, I haven't eaten an apple in God knows when.

OFLAZIAN: So how did you get to Ellis Island?

BABAIAN: Well, just wait. You have to tell the story.

OFLAZIAN: Okay.

BABAIAN: We stayed, we stayed on board ship two days, one or two days. Then the small boat came, put us on there and they took us to Ellis Island.

OFLAZIAN: Did you see the Statue of Liberty?

BABAIAN: Yeah, but I didn't know what it was. Nobody told me. Ah, I saw everybody going crazy, "Artzan, artzan." What the hell's artzan? It doesn't mean nothing.

OFLAZIAN: Artzan is the Armenian word for statue.

BABAIAN: What does that mean? It doesn't mean nothing. Nobody told me, mentioned about the freedom. I didn't know what the heck freedom was anyway, to tell you the truth. I didn't know what freedom was. I didn't know nothing about the good points. I was brought up kind of more rough like anything else. I come to Ellis

Island and the first thing that strikes me is that they put us in a place first to examine you, if they want to find your eyes, find anything. One doctor, somebody asked you where you were born, you know. An interpreter, an Armenian interpreter, he says to me in Armenian, but I never spoke, I spoke Arabic. He says, "Where's the address?" I said, "New York." They say, "You crazy." The guy said I'm crazy. I said, "I'm born in New York." And then in Arabic, they brought an Arabic interpreter, I says, "My father took me back and he got killed." And then he said, "Here's the story." So he says, "Yeah, he's born in New York. That's the story he tells." So the doctor said, "Oh, go ahead." He didn't even examine me. He just took, he says, "Go ahead." So now we stayed there. If it took eight days for us to come it would be the 19th. Christmas on the 25th, because they celebrated Christmas there.

OFLAZIAN: So did you celebrate Christmas in there?

BABAIAN: Yeah, but I still didn't know what Christmas is. A Christmas tree, I didn't know what a Christmas tree was. I didn't know what. How was I going to know. When I was up to five years old I remember vaguely

that we, in Bulgaria, they had a Christmas tree.

OFLAZIAN: You were ten years old when you came to Ellis Island.

BABAIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. So don't you remember a little bit how they celebrated Christmas there?

BABAIAN: Where, in Aleppo?

OFLAZIAN: No, in Ellis Island.

BABAIAN: Oh, in Ellis Island. Oh, they had a Christmas tree and, all right, they gave the boys, the children, they gave candy and all that.

OFLAZIAN: Was it crowded?

BABAIAN: Yes, a lot of people there. They had a gathering. They sang Christmas songs.

OFLAZIAN: What food you ate during Christmas time?

BABAIAN: They had good food there. I mean, I never ate such, I don't remember what I ate. To tell you the truth, let me see what I ate. I never used to eat. I was a very skinny boy, you know. When I come there I was very thin. I was thin. Anything I ate I always had to, I

used to eat, go, take food, eat and walk out.

OFLAZIAN: Where did you sleep in Ellis Island?

BABAIAN: We slept in, we slept in what do you call it, dormitories. We slept in a dormitory.

OFLAZIAN: And how long did you stay there?

BABAIAN: I don't know. I tell you. I celebrated New Year's with my parents, grandparents.

OFLAZIAN: After Christmas in Ellis Island.

BABAIAN: In Ellis Island. So I think, I think one or two days before New Year's Eve we came home. Now, another thing. When my grand, when the inspector was asking questions he asked, when I was in front of them, "What's your name?" The guy, the interpreter's asking. I tell him, "Suren Babaian." "Where were you born?" "New York City." "What?" "New York City." Well, so I told the guy, "This is the story." And I showed him my immigration thing, you know. It doesn't say where you're born. So I told him, "I was born here." So he says, "Go ahead out." He chased me out, like that. (he gestures) And my grandfather is standing over there. When he saw me he wrapped his

arms around me. Do you know what happened? You'd think somebody put a key in my mouth like this and turned it. I started speaking Armenian. I forgot Arabic, honest to God.

OFLAZIAN: Right away. (she laughs)

BABAIAN: I forgot Arabic. I only know the dirty words in Arabic left. It's funny, I spoke Armenian.

OFLAZIAN: What kind of dirty words do you remember?

BABAIAN: Oh, I don't want to say. It's too dirty. (Ms. Oflazian laughs) As I said, I used to, I used to, in the, in Beirut I never used to stay over there in the tent because this guy, this son over there used to bother me. So I started wearing an entary. You know what an entary is?

OFLAZIAN: A casual dress?

BABAIAN: Like a, just a plain robe, just like an Arab kid, and I used to roll them up. And my Arabic was Aleppo, Aleppo's dialect. And I used to go out, I used to go to rich areas. Sometimes they used to give me food to eat. Some guy was a rich man there. He used to throw money at me. He used to, like a silver dollar. He

used to spend it around there. The guy was a wealthy man. He didn't want me to come too close. He had it all fenced up. He didn't want me to come too close because I had like a, so he used to throw that, and then I used to get it and walk away. Not every day, though. I stayed there four months. I said, "Give me a piece," once or twice a month.

OFLAZIAN: So after your grandfather saw you in Ellis Island?

BABAIAN: Oh, he hugged me, he hugged me.

OFLAZIAN: And you . . .

BABAIAN: And then we took the ferryboat from there to South Ferry. South Ferry we walked about a block, then we walked up the elevated. I don't know, I never seen an elevated. Gee, I was surprised. We sat in the elevated. Of course, you put in, no nickels then. You had to buy tickets in those days. And another five cents. I think I got a ticket in my, I saved a ticket in my scrapbook.

OFLAZIAN: For a souvenir. (she laughs)

BABAIAN: I don't know where it is. And we came to 23rd Street. We got off at 23rd Street. We walked two blocks to

25th Street and Third Avenue. Then we went to the block. This is night now. It's getting dark, it's night time, and you see all these five stories, three, four, five story buildings. And we came to the house where the apartment, he lived in there. And I found a lady that my parents used to live in. Before my grandparents came from Bitlis, and when they would go to the other side they let them have the apartment. And I thought the whole building was my grandfather's. And we had to walk, walk up one flight, two flights, three flights. And the fifth, the top floor, eh lived on. So it was night time. My grandmother grabbed me and kissed me. "I've got to take and wash you."

OFLAZIAN: Were you happy?

BABAIAN: Of course I was happy. Because I could see, you know, the different treatment I'm getting. The first thing she did, she put me, we had no showers, but she put me in the tub. And she had, she had heated, a big, what do you call those things, people that wash clothes? (voice off mike) No, in English, what do they call it?

MRS. BABAIAN: A basin.

BABAIAN: Not a basin, but it's a big thing, it holds five. In those days, you know, they used to wash the laundry by hand. And she had that, she had that on the fire, you know. We had no heat.

OFLAZIAN: Legen, I think.

BABAIAN: No, it's not a legen. A legen is different. I'll, you hold laundry with it. She had it on a, we had, we had a large stove in the kitchen. And she had it on there, heating the water. She knows my grandfather's going to bring me. She put me in the tub there, and I was like ashamed, like. She says to me, "Get out of there. You're my grandson." She took all the clothes off me. She gave me a good bath, rubdown. You know, then I had, when I went to the bathroom later on, worms came out of me. Worms, when you defecate, worms came out. Because I was, God knows what the hell I was eating or what kind of germ I had. But anyway, and I thought the whole building, the place was all my grandfather's. I didn't think this apartment, only a four-room apartment, was the only place that they lived in. And naturally we started to speak Armenian, and I never cared to speak Arabic no more. But Turkish I did because there's a lot of Armenians spoke

Turkish. I used to see them, they used to come. Some of them couldn't speak Armenian or English. They spoke Turkish to each other.

OFLAZIAN: So did you go to school here?

BABAIAN: Yes. Then in January, well, sure. In January a girl, a girl I say, a woman. She was just married and had a baby. Her husband was a GI, you know, a doughboy, they called them "doughboys" in those days. She took me to the P.S. 14. And P.S. 14 was a school where my mother used to go pregnant with me, they threw her out of school before I was born. My mother was not even fifteen years old when I was born. So when she was pregnant with me . . .

OFLAZIAN: She was too young.

BABAIAN: Yeah. My mother was only fifteen years old. My grandmother was only twenty-nine-and-a-half years older than I. My grandmother died in 1930, 1962. She was a member of our church, Holy Martyrs. Well, anyway, to make a long story short, I grew my, I (?). Then I went downstairs and I met, they had a lot of Armenians. There was an Armenian section. They had a lot of Armenians live in that area, and I met Armenian

boys and I got to talking to them. And they, some of them spoke Armenian, some of them didn't know how to speak Armenian because if they go away they speaking in English. And I picked up . . .

OFLAZIAN: Did you graduate from the high school?

BABAIAN: No, I never went to high school. I quit, I quit school at sixteen. I went to school four years and I quit school. You know, by . . .

OFLAZIAN: So what did you do for a living then?

BABAIAN: Oh, I went to run errands in the photo engraving shop. I was, I mean, I retired photo engraver. I went to run errands first. I was an errand boy. I was a sweeper in the shop. Then I was a glass washer. Then I became an apprentice. Then after an apprentice I became a journeyman. That's when I got married. So that's the story. Then I retired. I'm retired.

OFLAZIAN: How many children do you have?

BABAIAN: We have four children.

OFLAZIAN: Are they . . .

BABAIAN: The oldest is fifty-three and the youngest is forty.

OFLAZIAN: Are they boys and girls?

BABAIAN: Three boys, the oldest. The girl was the youngest. She's the youngest, she's forty years old, and the oldest is fifty-three.

OFLAZIAN: Did they go to school?

BABAIAN: Yeah, they went to college. One son went to college six times. He joined the Marines, the two of them joined the Marines. One joined the Marines after he graduated college. One joined the Marines, one joined the, one was going to college and joined the Marines. Then he came back, went to college, he quit. Then he came, he went back. (Ms. Oflazian laughs) Six times. In the end, in the end he was far better off than the guys that went to college, financially, even today. Today he owns six, seven buildings. He opened, he worked. When he went to, when he went to, when he quit the high school he went to work for a fellow at a bicycle store. And the guy used to utilize him for practically nothing. He liked bicycles.

OFLAZIAN: Do you have grandchildren?

BABAIAN: I have ten grandchildren.

OFLAZIAN: God bless you.

BABAIAN: We have ten grandchildren. He was going back to, he was going to Queens college. He says, "Ah, I'm not going to work no more. He's using me and not paying me much." So he quit. He goes to school since September.

OFLAZIAN: Did they speak Armenian?

BABAIAN: My grandmother lived in, when she was living with us they had to speak, she wouldn't speak English to them, she spoke Armenian. So it's in their heads. When they speak Armenian, they understand what you're saying. But my oldest son and my daughter, they speak, my daughter speaks the best.

OFLAZIAN: What are their names?

BABAIAN: My oldest son's name is Robert, his middle name is Suren. My middle boy's name is Gerard, his middle name is Gabriel, that's Emma's father's name. My youngest son's name is Michael. That's the guy that we had a lot of trouble with. Michael, his middle name if Hovsep, my grandfather's name. And my

daughter's name is Beatrice Susan. She's married to a fellow named Saleem Isa. He's an Assuri. My sister, my daughter got fooled. They went to a dance and this guy was speaking Armenian. He comes from Egypt. So she thought he was an Armenian, so a couple of times they went together and she still doesn't know what he is. So one day he tells her he's Assyrian. So she comes home, she says, "Dad, what is an Assyrian?" I said, "Why?" I said, "Are you sure it's Assyrian?" "Yeah," she says, "not Syrian, but Assyrian. He says that belongs to an ancient race." I said, "Assyrian in Armenian means Assuri." I said, "Where my people come from, Bitlis, there are a lot of Assuris, Syrian, and they inter-marry, too. Especially my grandmother says we had an Assyrian church next door and I used to go there and she started to imitate them." I said, "So that . . ."

OFLAZIAN: Does he speak Armenian?

BABAIAN: Yeah. That's all they speak. He and his brothers, when they get together, they speak Armenian. But he speaks English, Armenian, Turkish, Italian and French.

OFLAZIAN: Wonderful.

BABAIAN: He comes from the other side. They go to school there. You know, they learn how to do that.

OFLAZIAN: You have a great story, marvelous.

BABAIAN: But my oldest son married an Italian girl. He had a daughter. She works now, she graduated, she graduated. Who said they were going to Adelphi here? (to Kevin Daley) You went to Adelphi? My daughter, my granddaughter graduated now two years ago. She's got a nice job, you know. For a girl, you know, to me, thirty thousand dollars a year is a lot of money.

OFLAZIAN: So much money. (she laughs)

BABAIAN: Yeah, because seventeen years ago I was only making three hundred and seventy-five dollars. And I worked all my . . .

OFLAZIAN: When did you move here?

BABAIAN: Seventeen years ago we sold the house. We bought this house before selling that house. Well, anyway, my youngest son Michael, I had a lot of trouble with that boy. In 1964 . . .

OFLAZIAN: So he looked like his father?

BABAIAN: No, he's better. He's nice looking. He's tall. We have pictures someplace. In 1964 he and his friends, well, he was, as I said, after school he used to work, while he was going to high school he was working in this bicycle store, so he was a little mechanically inclined. So he took my lawn mower from the other house, took it apart (he laughs) and made a motorcycle out of it. And at that time, 1964, there was, the cops were bosses. It's not like this. The cops were boss in the neighborhood. We lived in Queens. The cop grabbed a hold of him, he says, "You're getting four tickets. Unlicensed, unregistered, uninsured and a minor."

OFLAZIAN: Did they put them in jail?

BABAIAN: No, no. He got a summons. He knew where he lived. He says, "I live here." He knew that. So I had to go to court. You know how we got him out of it? Fortunately he was going to Sunday school every Sunday. The priest gave us a letter saying that Michael so-and-so comes to Sunday school every Sunday. And he used to go to Armenian school. We used to

have Saturday Armenian school, Saturday school. So it took me a couple of months. It cost me two hundred dollars for a lawyer. So we got him free that way. And then he graduated, or he graduated high school, sixteen years old he graduated high school. He was smart, he was a fine, intelligent boy, but he didn't like it. He just didn't like to go to school. He just didn't like college. He kept going back and forth. So the last time, then, you know, three times he had to go join the Marines when he became eighteen. His older brother was in the Marines already. But at that point he already graduated college and he joined the Marines. Now he wanted, and then the Vietnam war was on, and I didn't like them to join the Marines, but fortunately neither one of them went to, I was glad. He joined the Marines. He come out, he started working for this guy. Again, the guy. So one day he hears the salesman for Schwinn Bicycle people. He tells the boss, his boss, that the storekeeper in Valley Stream, he's an old man, he wants to sell. He says, "Do you know anybody who wants to buy the store?" Michael, my son, hears this. I worked nights. When I came home, Emma's up. I came home about one o'clock and my wife is up, and she says,

"Michael wants to buy a store." She said, "Will you back him?" But before that he wanted to open up a gas station. When he was in the Marines he was in a car pool. He became a mechanic handling the tanks, the jeeps and the cars and all that. He became pretty good. He is a good, but now he says, "I can't understand these new motors. I can't understand them," he says. "They've got computerized. I can't. I don't." But this boy, so when my wife said he wanted to go into gasoline I said, "I don't want him to go in that. He's going back and forth. Let him go back to school." She says, "He doesn't want to go to school." Now he's in his twenties. We're coming to the end?

SIGRIST: Grace, we need to end the interview. We have just about two minutes left.

OFLAZIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: (to Mr. Babaian) Grace will end the interview for you.

BABAIAN: So my wife says, "Michael says this and this about this store." "I'll back him," I says. "I'll back him."

OFLAZIAN: So he bought it.

BABAIAN: The guy wouldn't sell it to him.

OFLAZIAN: That's great.

BABAIAN: He went over to him, he says, "You haven't got the money to buy this." He says, "My father's going to back me." He says, "Bring your father over."

OFLAZIAN: So you backed him up.

BABAIAN: Of course I backed him. I'm glad I did. It was the best thing I ever did in my life, I'll tell you honestly, with that boy.

OFLAZIAN: Okay.

BABAIAN: Not for me, but for him.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. I thank you very much, Mr. Babaian, for giving us your precious time today.

BABAIAN: Okay.

OFLAZIAN: And this is Grace Oflazian signing off with Mr. Babaian for the National Park Service.