

EI-296

ANNA CHOUVALJIAN TOPALIAN

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INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 9/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: CHARLES MITCHELL, 4/2009

TURKEY (ARMENIAN) VIA SYRIA, 1921

AGE 23

POSSIBLE PASSAGE ON "THE MEGALI HELLAS"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: ISTANBUL

RESIDENCES: SIVAS
YONKERS, NY

SIGRIST: Good afternoon. This Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Friday, April 23, 1993. I'm in Flushing, New York at the Armenian Home for the Aged with Anna Topalian.

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Anna is an Armenian who came from Turkey in 1921...

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...when she was twenty-three years old. Mrs. Topalian, can you tell me what your maiden name was.

TOPALIAN: My maiden name was Chouvaljian.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

TOPALIAN: (she laughs). Chouvaljian. I can spell it. Chou-
val-jian.

SIGRIST: C-H...

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...O-U...

TOPALIAN: Uh-huh. Chou-val...

SIGRIST: ...V-A...

TOPALIAN: ...al...

SIGRIST: L...

TOPALIAN: I-A-N.

SIGRIST: J-I-A-N?

TOPALIAN: Hm-hmm.

SIGRIST: And say that again for me?

TOPALIAN: Chou-val-jian.

SIGRIST: Chouvaljian.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I see. What was your date of birth?

TOPALIAN: My date of birth?

SIGRIST: Yes.

TOPALIAN: May 10, '98. 1898.

SIGRIST: You were born in 1898. And where were you born?

TOPALIAN: I was born in Sivas. Sivas. Sepastia [PH].

SIGRIST: And can you describe for me what that area looks like?

TOPALIAN: You know, I, I came from the World War One. I don't see anything about how is the world go round. I was very young. I lost all my family. I was alone like a lost sheep. That's all.

SIGRIST: When you were very, very young, when you were a little girl, do you have any pleasant memories of living in Turkey?

TOPALIAN: I didn't see anything good about the Turkey. Even when I was young, they, my grandma used to say, "Every twenty years they come and they rob you, everything. If you don't give, they shoot you." My two grandpa, they were alive, they died like that, because they don't want to give. They come and take everything every twenty years. By the time you build up, another twenty years.

SIGRIST: Was it, was it only the Armenians that were being persecuted that way?

TOPALIAN: Yeah. All Armenian. All around the Sepastia. There's plenty villages. You know, they're farmers. Farmers. So that's all I know.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

TOPALIAN: My father's name? Ohannes [PH]. Ohannes. Another way that, John, I think.

SIGRIST: John. What did he do for a living?

TOPALIAN: Over there?

SIGRIST: Yes.

TOPALIAN: We had a plantation. My father was a plantation. Wheat. We grow up the wheat. That's all.

SIGRIST: Can you describe what the plantation looked like for me?

TOPALIAN: Plantation looked like? It's a plantation. It's a wheat. My father used to plant it in Ap, in March. So around September, October we used to have, cut it. My father used to cut it. And we used to pick it up. It's very hard work. So, I can't explain.

SIGRIST: Did, did he sell the wheat?

TOPALIAN: Eh?

SIGRIST: Did he sell the wheat that you grew?

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Where did he sell it?

TOPALIAN: Where? (she pauses) When did I start it? When did my father start?

SIGRIST: When did, did your father sell the wheat that you grew?

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And, and where did he sell it? Who bought the wheat?

TOPALIAN: Turkish. After finishing up just the plain wheat, we pile up like this. (she gestures) The government comes, puts a number on it in case of you steal. They give one bucket, they take one bucket to them and two bucket to us.

SIGRIST: Did you have a big family?

TOPALIAN: We were ten women. (a telephone rings in the background) Five, my father had five girls, the, and the sister and the mother, and my mother, almost nine people.

SIGRIST: And everyone lived in one house?

TOPALIAN: Yeah. I mean, yeah, in one house. Yes, yes. They were all living one house, over there no such a thing.
(they laugh)

SIGRIST: Do you remember what the house looked like inside?

TOPALIAN: A house looked like a garage. (she laughs) You want to know? The house looked like a garage. One big garage. That's all. We didn't have a separate room. No. We didn't have a bed. We used to lay down on the floor with the mattress.

SIGRIST: Did, was there a kitchen in the house?

TOPALIAN: Eh?

SIGRIST: A kitchen. Where did you do your cooking?

TOPALIAN: We had a space. We had a space just for cooking.

SIGRIST: What kinds of food did you eat in Turkey when you were a young girl?

TOPALIAN: The same fruit as we have over here. Same fruit. Fruit is almost the same.

SIGRIST: Did you eat meat?

TOPALIAN: Not too much meat. More vegetable.

SIGRIST: Did you grow your own vegetables?

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What kinds of vegetables did you grow?

TOPALIAN: We grow up string beans, and the potatoes, carrots, peas, that's all. Things like that.

SIGRIST: Did you have a chore around the house that was yours specifically?

TOPALIAN: What?

SIGRIST: Did you have a chore around the house that you had to do when you were a little girl?

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What?

TOPALIAN: (she pauses) Now you think I remember now? (she laughs)

SIGRIST: It was a long time ago.

TOPALIAN: First of all, I think I didn't understand.

SIGRIST: Was there a task that you had to do as a girl to help with the housework or something like that?

TOPALIAN: Housework?

SIGRIST: When you were a little girl?

TOPALIAN: I didn't do too much.

SIGRIST: No?

TOPALIAN: No. My father and my older sister, they used to go to the farm. They pick it up. That's it. I was too young for that.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

TOPALIAN: My mother's name is Rosie.

SIGRIST: Do you remember her maiden name?

TOPALIAN: Yes. Mouradian [PH].

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please? Try?

TOPALIAN: I cannot spell. I can't.

SIGRIST: Mouradian.

TOPALIAN: Mouradian. Mouradian.

SIGRIST: Mouradian.

TOPALIAN: Mouradian.

SIGRIST: And, can you tell me a little bit about what your mother looked like?

TOPALIAN: As a woman. (she laughs) How can a say how does he look like? I only know he suffered and he die in the street. That's all I know.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Can you tell me a little bit about going to church when you were a little girl.

TOPALIAN: Oh, yeah. We have a church next door to us. If Easter come we were fasting for seven weeks. We don't eat meat, we don't eat butter, we don't eat egg, we don't eat nothing, except a plain vegetable, fish, olive. That's all. No cheese, no nothing.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember the name of the church?

TOPALIAN: Church is a church.

SIGRIST: Church is a church.

TOPALIAN: Church is, the church has no name. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I see.

TOPALIAN: Church, I don't know. There is no, I don't know the name, really. They did, we don't call the church. It's church, that's all.

SIGRIST: So, so you lived, you lived kind of a hard life.

TOPALIAN: Very hard life. Awful hard life. Especially all the people, all, my father and my, my sister, my aunt. They worked very hard in a forest, that bring that wheat in. You don't know how much hard. I don't know. Sometime when I think of it I go crazy. How hard they work? Understand that wheat, to separate from the hay. To much work to do.

SIGRIST: Did you also keep animals of any sort?

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What kind?

TOPALIAN: We had a lot of sheeps. One or two cow, and two hock [sic], ox, ox, you know the ox?

SIGRIST: Ox? Sure.

TOPALIAN: Yeah. So, those has to take the wagon. The ox takes, carry the wagon. Of course, one cow, plenty sheep.

SIGRIST: Who took care of the sheep?

TOPALIAN: Well, we have somebody come and take it to the mountain to feed them. And every, every single day they bring it back. Then my mother used to mil, milk them, you know?

SIGRIST: Milk the sheep?

TOPALIAN: Milk the sheep. And they make the cheese, they make everything, anyway. From the milk they make everything, you know. They make cheese, all kind of stuff.

SIGRIST: Did your mother also do anything with the wool from the sheep?

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what she did?

TOPALIAN: First of all we wash. We wash the wool. Then we open it up. You know if you wash it it gets. (she gestures) Then we used to work, like make it loose. Then we used to, (she pauses) yarn. We used to make yarn. We had a wheel, a spinning wheel. So you had the spinning wheel. Little bit, little bit, it grow up like that. (she gestures) Then that's it.

SIGRIST: Then what would your mother do with the yarn?

TOPALIAN: Yarn?

SIGRIST: What would she do with the yarn after you made the yarn?

TOPALIAN: We, we make the stockings, and we make, some of them they make a heavy jacket. Winter jacket.

SIGRIST: Was it cold in this part of Turkey?

TOPALIAN: Yeah. Very cold.

SIGRIST: Did you get snow?

TOPALIAN: Oh, a lot of snow. We get a lot of snow over there.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the kinds of clothes that you wore when you lived in Turkey?

TOPALIAN: What?

SIGRIST: The kinds of clothes that you wore?

TOPALIAN: Oh. We were making at home, you know, any kind of clothes. But not too much. Only heavy stockings, stuff like, stuff like that.

SIGRIST: What kind of shoes did you wear?

TOPALIAN: (she sighs) Wooden shoes. (she laughs) You remember old fashioned wooden shoes? That's what we wear. We haven't got a shoes like this.

SIGRIST: Who, do you know, do you know where you got the wooden shoes from? Did your father make them or...

TOPALIAN: No. They, they, they buy from the, from the city. From the city they buy the shoes.

SIGRIST: I see. Tell me a little bit about going to school.
Was there a school in this town?

TOPALIAN: We were going to school by just learn a, b, c, d,
because there is no teaching for the girl. Only the
men supposed to go to school. Girls, they don't go.
Then finally there were a woman came, and they said,
"We have to pay for this woman. Let them teach to the
girls." I only went couple of months to learn a, b,
c, d. Then the war starts. That's all.

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about the war?

TOPALIAN: At the war?

SIGRIST: About World War One. What do you remember about that?

TOPALIAN: Miserable life. Miserable life. That's all there is.

SIGRIST: How was your life changed because of the war?

TOPALIAN: How, how is gonna be changed? All that problem, how
much is gonna change. We don't know if we were coming
or going. In that days you think you remember too
much. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Before we talk a little bit about that, you mentioned you had a grandmother. Did your grandparents live in this town with you?

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what you remember about your grandparents?

TOPALIAN: I don't remember. Only one. I had about (she pauses), grandpa, there were four brothers. They used to come, they were sheep, you know? Like a sheep, they used to take the sheep out in the mountain. So time to time they used to come and take the, they want to take the sheep. If you don't want to give, they shoot you. My two grandpa die like that.

SIGRIST: You're talking about the Turks wanting to take the sheep?

TOPALIAN: They don't want to give, if you don't want to give, they shoot you. And they take you anyway.

SIGRIST: I see. Kevin, could we just pause for a moment,

please? We're now...(voice off-mike)...Okay. We're now going to resume the interview with Anna Topalian.

Mrs. Topalian, you started to tell me your grandfather, two of your grandfathers' brothers had been shot by the Turks. They had been sheep herders and they had been shot. What other kinds of things did the Turks do? How did they make your life difficult?

TOPALIAN: Well, us, they're going to make it difficult. If they take everything every twenty years. If you don't give they shoot you. By time you raise something, they come and they take you again. What else they want? They take everything. They think they a king. Nobody says why you do that? Why you kill them? Nobody said it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any Turks in Sepastia [PH] that were kind to you, that were nice to your family?

TOPALIAN: I don't remember that. I don't remember. I don't there's somebody take care of us, that it shouldn't happen. It's happen just the same. They don't listen to anybody. Long as they take it away. My father, he was going to the army, no? All right, there's a, if

you give a beddel [sic], you know what I mean, beddel?

Forty piece of gold. So, after we pay a forty piece of gold, they come and they take my father to the jail. After his forty piece of gold. And they take out of house, that's all.

SIGRIST: Where did they take you to?

TOPALIAN: All the ways to the Syria.

SIGRIST: You went to Syria.

TOPALIAN: Yeah. In that area. Haleb, Syria, Hama, Homs, all over.

SIGRIST: Did you see your father again? (she indicates) No. Did, how old were you when that happened, do you remember?

TOPALIAN: I don't remember, maybe nine years old. I don't know.

SIGRIST: So you were a young girl when that happened. (she sighs) How did your mother react to the...

TOPALIAN: We went to the Syria. My mother, my mother got sick.

We were out in the street, my mother die.

SIGRIST: She died in Syria?

TOPALIAN: Then one of them Arab lady come. We were four sisters. We were four sisters. We were sitting next to my mother. Then all of a sudden one of them policemen came. "Come on. Out. You're going to go to the desert." They called desert.

SIGRIST: The desert.

TOPALIAN: If you go over there, of course they're going to kill. You know. I, we were, my other sisters, they were much younger than me. And I had my older sister a little bit smarter, I suppose. He moved, he turned around in the street, he come back. But we three sisters, we were going. "Where we gonna go? They gonna take us to the desert." Desert. Then all of a sudden, my aunt, she was coming behind me. She says, "Make believe you sick. You lay down, sleep." Before we go to the group that were going to take us to the desert, the policeman leave us, and we came back again. We came back, my mother was laying down over there. She was very sick. Anyway, all of a sudden,

Turkish woman come, Arab. Arab. They want to take us. So, I don't know how my mother make him understand. He says, "You have any children?" She says, "I'm gonna die. If I die, you could come and take it." So, after my mother die, sure enough they come. They took us, the Arab ladies, two, two sisters, a different house, and I went a different house. So it didn't take too long. I don't know how long it takes. One day after the war, it wasn't a war. It wasn't a war. Wartime was ended 1898, 1908, '18.

SIGRIST: 1918.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Right.

TOPALIAN: So, we were over there. All the soldiers, they come. They were gonna pick up all the refugees. So they took us, put it in the trunk and close it. And one of them lady, I suppose, open the window and says, "There is no Armenian girl over here." Soon as they said that all the soldiers, they know there was something over there. They come in. Of course we are in the

trunk, we are (unintelligible). They open the trunk, three us, three sisters, they pick it up and they bring from the refugees to the silisia [PH]. You know what is the silisia? Yeah. silisia, they call. Girighia [PH]. Girighia. And that's it. From there I went to the American school over there.

SIGRIST: Can we, before we get you, before that happens...

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...I want to ask a couple more questions about the time you were in Syria. You said your mother died.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What did she die of?

TOPALIAN: How did she die? You're telling me how, how did she die? I'm eight years, how I know? Do I know?

SIGRIST: But you were in Syria for a long time?

TOPALIAN: Not too much. About three years.

SIGRIST: Three years you were in Syria.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what it was like living with the, the woman who took you.

TOPALIAN: They were living, they were nice, really. We were young. We used to clean, you know what I mean. And that's it.

SIGRIST: But they were kind to you.

TOPALIAN: They were nice, yeah. Whoever take us, it was nice to us.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about some of the things that you saw while you were in Syria? What, what kinds of things did you see happening around you?

TOPALIAN: I don't remember, really. I don't remember. I only know, we were making yarn from the government. From the government we were making yarn. We would have to making it about eighth ounce of yarn so they should give me piece of bread.

SIGRIST: It's a very bad situation, isn't it? What were your sister's names?

TOPALIAN: One was Mary, the other one was Rosie, and the other one was Mishkinas.

SIGRIST: The two sisters that are with you in Syria, are they older than you or younger than you.

TOPALIAN: They were younger than me.

TOPALIAN: They were younger than you.

TOPALIAN: Yeah. They were younger than me.

SIGRIST: So, did you kind of have to take care of them?

TOPALIAN: Wartime my mother used to say, "You take these two sister and follow me." My older sister, she was about fourteen, I suppose. Before, before we leave the home, I know they were going to move us. My father boiled the hay. With that hay washed my sister's hair, and cut the hair like a crazy. So my mother used to take care, as she was sick. And I was taking

those two sisters and carrying with them. That's, we went like that all to this, Haleb. Syria, then Hama.

SIGRIST: How did they take you to Haleb. How...

TOPALIAN: Walk.

SIGRIST: ...how did they get you...

TOPALIAN: Walk. Walk.

SIGRIST: What did you remember about walking to Syria?

TOPALIAN: What am I, there is nothing to remember. Only I remember they kill the people. Understand? Then that's it. And my, my mother nephew, he was in the army. So they said he was wounded with the hand. He came. So, he says, "You know, Ann." He says, "I think they're going to kill me someday. But you do me a big favor. Either bury me, or either throw me in the water." Because the body has nothing but oil. If you did some, you blow up, stink like hell. So it's happened to be, we were sitting in one day, there is a robber going around. I remember that very well. And they come and ask, "Who's got the money?" So, he

says, "Who's got the money? How should I know. You've been taking all these years, months, robbing, robbing, robbing. And so I don't know anybody, they got the money." They put the school, and that's the way he die. He was telling my mother and his wife, "Just bury me or throw me in the water." After everybody went out, my mother and his wife, they were going to throw it in the water. They didn't let them. They didn't let them bury that body, throw it in the water. Let him suffer like that. I remember very well. I don't remember the good things. I remember the bad things.

SIGRIST: That's what sticks in your mind.

TOPALIAN: I dream all that night. I'm over here about seventy-five years. I don't forget that. Good thing you forget, but bad thing you don't forget.

SIGRIST: Let me ask you, your mother died when you were in Syria, you were taken into this house with an Arab woman?

TOPALIAN: I don't know how old. About forty-five years old. That's what.

SIGRIST: You told me you started going to an American school.

TOPALIAN: Oh, that happened in silisia [PH]. After soldiers some, they grab all the refugees, they bring to Syria. And they say, they were going to give a blanket. My aunt, my sisters, it wasn't with me that time. So they were in a French orphanage home when I was in silisia. They said, my aunt says, "They gonna give a blanket. Go get us a blanket. Register." I went there. They said, "Who you got?" I said, "I only have an aunt." So you want to, they say, "You want to come to the school?" I say, "Yes. But I want to ask my aunt, then I come." So next morning they come and they take me to the silisia. They put me in the school. I think, I don't know how long I stay there. Not too long. And one day we were drawing the water from the well, well. And we see (she knocks on the table), they were opening up from the ground to come from that well to kill us. So American lady says, "They don't do nothing for us. They gonna kill you people. And I'm gonna break up this." Then they went, I don't know when they went. Anyway, I come to my aunt's again. And that's it. From there all the silisia, they think they were give it to Armenian.

They didn't give. They said they have to move from here. From there all the refugees, they come to Istanbul. They take you to Istanbul. From there everybody on their own. One of them Armenian women or man came. He says, you want, he was looking for the service. So my aunt says, "You want to go?" I says, "All right, I go." I have no choice. I didn't have anybody. Only my aunt. My (she pauses), I went to the service there.

SIGRIST: You're saying to the service, to the army? Is that what you're saying?

TOPALIAN: I went to somebody's house.

SIGRIST: Somebody's house.

TOPALIAN: As a housekeeper.

SIGRIST: Oh, I see, I see. Like doing domestic work in the house.

TOPALIAN: Yeah. Yeah. From there I used to push the carriage, you know, they were taking a walk. So, it's happened to me, the man was, had a cigarette store over there

that he knows my father very well. And I know his son, I know his daughter. Both of them I know. So all of a sudden they say, "Oh, Anna (unintelligible), Anna." So that's how I know. I, and my mistress used to tell me, "Every Saturday you go over there." From there my husband's cousin, he went to the French army to find his wife and the children. It just happened to be that in that village where my husband is, my husband had two brothers, two sisters, they all had babies. Nobody's. From that village nobody got safe. Maybe about three hundred people in that village. Nobody. Only one woman throw herself in a well. There was so many dead over there, she didn't die. And one of them old Kurthe [PH], we call Kurthe, I don't know what they call, you know Kurthe?

SIGRIST: Kurds, yes.

TOPALIAN: So, Kurd. So, "Look at her," he says, "Oh, there is a woman over there. We better take it out." So that old man goes in that well, takes that woman out.

SIGRIST: We need to pause just for one second while Kevin flips the tape over.

TOPALIAN: All right.

SIGRIST: So hang on. Hang on to that thought.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. We're beginning side two. You were saying that the old man went over to the well.

TOPALIAN: Yeah. And took that woman out. He was an old man. So all of the sudden, all the refugees, the policemen, they were hitting, they were killing, everything. They say, "Go, child, go. That's your people." So, you could go to them, you know? Whoever make this war, God punish them. That's all. And only one woman got safe.

SIGRIST: I have a question to ask you. Were you married while you were still in Turkey?

TOPALIAN: No.

SIGRIST: No. That happened later?

TOPALIAN: No, no, no, no.

SIGRIST: Okay. You said you're husband's cousin, and I just didn't know if you had been married while you were still over in Turkey.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: I just wanted to clear that up. So you're in Istanbul.

TOPALIAN: And I, I was in Istanbul. When I see that friend. I told you. And my husband's cousin, he was going to come back to America. And my husband writes. He says, bring me a girl. So, that, my friend that I saw that had the cigarette store, said, "All right. Make the arrangement." So then I came to America.

SIGRIST: Did, what did you know about America?

TOPALIAN: Oh, I didn't know nothing about the America. (she laughs) I only hear name of the America. But I don't

know nothing about it.

SIGRIST: How did you feel about leaving Istanbul at that time?

TOPALIAN: I was poor. I don't know anybody. So only those people. If I wouldn't have meet them, I don't what was going to happen to me. But the God was good to me. I meet them. So somehow they make the arrangement and I came to America. And I got married end of July. August six we got married.

SIGRIST: You arrived in America at the end of July.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And then you married your husband on August sixth. Now, did you know your husband bef...

TOPALIAN: No, I didn't know. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: You didn't. Oh, good. Well, we'll get to that in a second then.

TOPALIAN: I didn't know. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Where did your boat leave from?

TOPALIAN: Istanbul.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you took with you? Did you have any luggage, or...

TOPALIAN: Only two piece of clothes, that's all. One of them, that guy, cigarette store, when we got engaged, she make two piece of underwear. That's all.

SIGRIST: So that's all you had with you when you left?

TOPALIAN: That's all I had. No luggage, no nothing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the name of the boat that you took?

TOPALIAN: I tell you, it was a Greek line. But I don't know the name. I think it was Megali Hellas. Something like that...

SIGRIST: Something like...

TOPALIAN: ...but I'm not sure.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me what the boat was like? What was it like to travel on the boat?

TOPALIAN: (she laughs) It was the first time I was on a boat. You think I'm in heaven?

SIGRIST: Did you get sick on the boat?

TOPALIAN: No. My aunt was sick.

SIGRIST: She, you aunt was coming with you?

TOPALIAN: Yeah. She got sick, but I didn't get sick.

SIGRIST: Can you, can you describe for me what it looked like where you stayed on the boat?

TOPALIAN: I don't know, really, I don't. We only laid down on the floor and that's all I know.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long it took?

TOPALIAN: I think one month. End of July. No. Beginning of June. End of, no, July, August. Beginning of the July. And we end over here end of the July, and I got

married in August six.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty or any, when you came into New York Harbor?

TOPALIAN: We saw it, but I didn't know what was it. (she laughs)

I see one of them a statue, but I don't know the Statue of Liberty, how, how it look likes, and what was the meaning of it. I didn't know. After I got married, my husband take me. We were walking around.

That came from the French as a re, no, present, whatever it was. That's all I know.

SIGRIST: What, what happened, when you got to New York, what happened? Did you go to Ellis Island?

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about Ellis Island?

TOPALIAN: Ellis Island, I think I stay one night because chief justice wasn't there. They have to marry us.

SIGRIST: Oh. Did you get married at Ellis Island?

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Oh.

TOPALIAN: I got married over there. Then I came to the New York. My husband's cousin, he was living in Twenty-third Street. We stayed there a week, and there is a Armenian church over there, Hundred and Twenty-Seventh Street. So we got married over there. My husband used to work in Yonkers. We went to Yonkers. That's all.

SIGRIST: What, what did you think when you saw your husband for the first time?

TOPALIAN: I didn't know. My, when Ellis Island chief justice want to marry us, my husband start to kissing me and push him out. (they laugh) I don't know what the marriage, marriage mean.

SIGRIST: Well, you didn't know this man.

TOPALIAN: Of course I didn't know.

SIGRIST: What was your husband's name?

TOPALIAN: Walter. Vartan.

SIGRIST: Vartan Topalian.

TOPALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: And when, when did he come to America?

TOPALIAN: Who, my husband?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

TOPALIAN: I think 1912. 1912 he came to the Istanbul. From the Istanbul he came to America. 1912. And he lost his family also.

SIGRIST: Same kind of situation that your family was in.

TOPALIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember any details about staying over night at Ellis Island? Do you remember anything about that, where you stayed, or...

TOPALIAN: I tell the truth, I don't know.

SIGRIST: Don't...

TOPALIAN: I, I don't remember.

SIGRIST: So, your, your husband and you, and your husband's
cousin go to New York from Ellis Island. Did your
aunt go with you?

TOPALIAN: Who?

SIGRIST: Your aunt. Your aunt. Did she go with to, to...

TOPALIAN: No, they, they went out.

SIGRIST: They went somewhere else.

TOPALIAN: They went, they went out the other way. Soon as the
boat was waiting they went out. Only because I came
as a, engage, they didn't let...

SIGRIST: As a bride.

TOPALIAN: They didn't let me go out. I stayed there Ellis

Island, and until next morning chief justice marry us, and then we went out.

SIGRIST: Tell me what some of your impressions were of New York city when you first were there for the first time.

TOPALIAN: Please don't ask me. I don't know. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: No?

TOPALIAN: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what you did the first night that you were staying at your cous, at your husband's house, what...

TOPALIAN: Yes. We stood there. Of course, they feed us. They were preparing that I should get married. And it was August six that we got married, and that's it.

SIGRIST: And what job did your husband get in Yonkers?

TOPALIAN: He was working on a ship, really. Sugar house, they call it. Brown sugar comes, and he used to break it in a bag, empty it. Brown sugar turn to the white

sugar, whatever it was. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: It's kind of hard work, isn't it?

TOPALIAN: Very hard work. Very hard work. My husband used to say, "I put glass of water. By time I have a chance to drink it turn to ice." Because it was at a ocean.
(unintelligible)

SIGRIST: Did you get a job when you moved to Yonkers?

TOPALIAN: Who, me?

SIGRIST: Yes. Did you work?

TOPALIAN: No. I had three kids. I have a baby boy yet after that. How I'm gonna go to work?

SIGRIST: Now did you learn English?

TOPALIAN: Well, my boys, they were growing up. They were going to school. And they say, they were talking English to me. They understand Armenian, too, but they talking to English to me. And that's it. I had three boys. I'm sorry to say my youngest one die about twelve years

ago.

SIGRIST: What are their names?

TOPALIAN: George.

SIGRIST: And your other sons?

TOPALIAN: Harry, my oldest one, Harry. My second one was Peter, and third one was George. And I had ten grandchildren.

SIGRIST: Wow.

TOPALIAN: And I had ten great grandchildren.

SIGRIST: That's wonderful.

TOPALIAN: Every, everybody all over there. But my son's gonna come at the picnic. And Peter, he takes, he takes care of me, really. Only that son takes care of me. My oldest son by himself. He just, "Say, you call, Ma." I say, "Why don't you call me?" He says, "You call. Collect call." I say, "You call me." Once in a while he call on Mother's Day or Easter. But the

Peter comes at the picnic, and that's it.

SIGRIST: Let, can I ask you another question about America when you got to America. Was there something about America you didn't like? Something that you couldn't get adjusted to.

TOPALIAN: I have no idea to say I didn't like it. I like it very much. After my children was grow up, I went to the work. We had three, my husband had three thousand dollar. This was 192', when did it got the rush, '27. We lost that three thousand dollar, my husband got sick, he never got better. He said, "I had three thousand dollar to take those kids through school, or something." That he never got well. After my kids was grow up somehow I had a job. I work about twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: What, what job did you get?

TOPALIAN: Finishing. International Ladies Garment worker. I work about twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: What did you do? What kind of job was it?

TOPALIAN: Finisher they call.

SIGRIST: Is that...

TOPALIAN: Handwork.

SIGRIST: Handwork.

TOPALIAN: Handwork. Inside. You know, jacket, you take inside, buttonhole you make by hand, you put the shoulder pad. So. I work twenty-five years.

SIGRIST: Did you, did you speak enough English by that time to, to...

TOPALIAN: Not too much, but I make it up. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: Did any of your family come over? Your other sisters, did they ever make it to America?

TOPALIAN: They had a brother over here. They come twice. And one of my sister die, husband die, all, my other sister's husband die, she's alone. She lives in Paris. And my other sister was living in Marseilles. They both die.

SIGRIST: Oh. I see. Did, did you, when you first got to America did you miss your family, being separated from them? I guess you just had your sisters living, right?

TOPALIAN: Is that, is that a question to ask? (she laughs)
Tell me, is that a question to ask? That's not a question. Anyways, so.

SIGRIST: Well. Well, Mrs. Topalian, I want to thank you very much for, for letting me ask you some questions about, about your history, about what you were like as a little girl, and coming to this country. You had...

TOPALIAN: This...

SIGRIST: ...a hard time.

TOPALIAN: Oh. We were working but is not like now. We work very cheap, really. But still we make a living. That's all.

SIGRIST: Well, this is Paul Sigrist signing off with Anna Topalian on April 23, 1993.