

EI-297

EDWARD (PUZANT) VARTIAN

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TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: JOHN MURIELLO, 9/1995

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TURKEY (ARMENIAN), 1922

AGE 11

PASSAGE ON "THE KING ALEXANDER"

PORT OF EMBARKATION: ISTANBUL

RESIDENCES: SHABIN KARAHISAR, ISTANBUL
RIDGEWOOD, NY

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: Mr. Vartian spoke in a way that was difficult to understand throughout the interview. The main of his dialogue has been transcribed to paper. John Muriello, Transcriber, 9/21/1995

OFLAZIAN: Good Afternoon. This is Grace Oflazian for the National Park Service. Today is April 23, 1993. We are here in the Home of the Armenian Aged in Flushing, New York. I'm here with Mr. Puzant Vartian, who is an Armenian, was born in Shabin Karahisar [Ph] in Turkey, came to America in 1922 when he was eleven years old.

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Can you give me the date of your birth, please?

VARTIAN: November 29, 1911.

OFLAZIAN: How many members you were in the family?

VARTIAN: At that time or, or now?

OFLAZIAN: At that time.

VARTIAN: At that time (?), well, there was three brothers, my mother.
That's all.

OFLAZIAN: Can you name their names for me?

VARTIAN: Sure. My mother was, oh my gosh, she just died. Seranoosh.
Seranoosh.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell Seranoosh?

VARTIAN: Seranoosh, yeah. And my older brother, Armenag. He's still
living.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell Armenag for me?

VARTIAN: A-, Armen, A-R-M-E-N-A-G. Armenag. Now, Armenag.

OFLAZIAN: And the next one?

VARTIAN: Next one? Next, oh, the one in the middle. Puzant. P-U-Z-A-N-T. That's my, my Armenian name. My English name is Edward.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Edward?

VARTIAN: E-D-W-A-R-D. Edward.

OFLAZIAN: What about your sisters?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: What...

VARTIAN: I have no sisters. Never had sisters.

OFLAZIAN: What was the name of your mother?

VARTIAN: Oh, the name of my mother?

OFLAZIAN: Yeah.

VARTIAN: Seranoosh.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Seranoosh?

VARTIAN: Seranoosh. S-E-R, Ser, A-N-O, O-O-S-H. Seranoosh. I supposed I, I could write it down, because I never had to write it down. Now.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember your her maiden name?

VARTIAN: My mother maiden name?

OFLAZIAN: Yeah.

VARTIAN: Sergenian. Seranoosh Sergenian.

OFLAZIAN: Can you spell Sergenian?

VARTIAN: C-, S-A, S-E-R-G-E-N-I-A-N. Sergenian. My, my grandfather, my mother's mother, in spite of all the controversy between our minority, Armenians and, and the Turks, he was a judge in a Turkish court.

OFLAZIAN: What...

VARTIAN: Simply amazing. Imagine a Nazi being appointed a judge in the, in the Jewish court. That's just what it, how serious nit was. He was a judge in a Turkish court.

OFLAZIAN: What was his name?

VARTIAN: Nishan.

OFLAZIAN: How do you spell Nishan?

VARTIAN: N-I-S-H-A-N. Nishan.

OFLAZIAN: And what was his family name?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: What was his...

VARTIAN: Sergenian.

OFLAZIAN: Sergenian. And what kind of business your father was running?

VARTIAN: Oh, he was a, he and my grandfather, my father's father, they were in, in the gold business. They collected gold nuggets and things like that. And, and they did that. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember any anecdotes about your family?

VARTIAN: I know that we, we were very wealthy. In that Shabin Karahisar we were the wealthiest family there.

OFLAZIAN: What do you mean by wealth?

VARTIAN: Oh, this, she had a, we had a big house. Four stories high, all one family. And several servants, of course. Something like that. Big building, big rooms. And that's all I can say.

OFLAZIAN: Can you describe more for me your house?

VARTIAN: It's about three or four stories high. You walk in and there's a big hallway, with big rooms. Way in the back there's a big room where we used to dry umbrellas, I remember that. Used to open the umbrellas and lay them there, and, and there's a platform, and that's where we used to go out and play, kids. And, and that's the first floor. The kitchen was on the first floor. Kitchen was the first floor. And old fashioned tuniers [PH]. You know what tunier is?

OFLAZIAN: What is that?

VARTIAN: Tunier. It's a hole in the ground with the, with the (he pauses), with the tile. Tile lined up. They set a fire in there, and then the, with the stove pipes and all that. After it's, all the coal is all burned out, they remove all that and they use it to bake.

OFLAZIAN: To bake what?

VARTIAN: Bake bread. They stuck it against the side.

OFLAZIAN: And did you like that?

VARTIAN: Yeah. It was good. Delicious.

OFLAZIAN: What other things they use to bake in the tunier?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: What other things they use to bake in the tunier?

VARTIAN: Well, now you're asking me too many questions that I don't know. I suppose, only two, three years old.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember playing with your brothers?

VARTIAN: Not much. Not much. My younger brother was too young. He was about a year, year and a half old. Older brother, he was about two years older than I am. And that's about all.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember going to church?

VARTIAN: I remember the churches. Yeah. Yeah, yeah. There's one big Armenian church over there. It's old looking in a big Turkish town right down below, below the, the walls down below where the Turkish town is.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember the name of the church?

VARTIAN: No. I know it was a very big church.

OFLAZIAN: How far the church was from your house?

VARTIAN: Oh, I don't know. How am I going to know that? I was just about a kid. We walked, or we rode, or we rode in a, in a cart, in, in the carriages, or what, I, I don't remember.

OFLAZIAN: Who went with you to church?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Who went with you to church?

VARTIAN: The whole family.

OFLAZIAN: You remember celebrating Christmas over there?

VARTIAN: No.

OFLAZIAN: Or Easter?

VARTIAN: No. I don't remember. I know the holidays. Holidays. But I, I don't remember what, they were Christmas, Easter, or what, I don't know. I can distinguish him today, but I didn't know anything, any difference at that time.

OFLAZIAN: You remember going to school?

VARTIAN: Over there? No, I was too young. I, oh, wait a minute. Wait a minute. I, I think they sent me to kindergarten. They used to go, start you very young, just kindergarten. Just kindergarten, that's all.

OFLAZIAN: You remember what the kindergarten looked like...

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: ...in those days? Can you describe me?

VARTIAN: What?

OFLAZIAN: Can, do you remember the, your days...

VARTIAN: Kindergarten, no. I know there were a bunch a kids in there.
They just, I don't know if they taught us any reading or
writing, I don't know that. I have forgotten it. It was,
remember I was only two or three years old.

OFLAZIAN: You said that your father was in a business...

VARTIAN: He, he, he and my grandfather were together in the, in the
gold mining business.

OFLAZIAN: From where they used to mine the gold?

VARTIAN: Oh, I don't if they mined it. I think they bought from other
people. Other merchants.

OFLAZIAN: Who were these people?

VARTIAN: Oh, I don't know. No. That I don't know.

OFLAZIAN: And how did you see his business growing?

VARTIAN: Oh, I wouldn't know.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever went to his business place?

VARTIAN: Yeah. I went there once or twice way down in the market place. In a dark place. He had just a small office like over here, that's all he had. Small office and a safe. I think there was a safe way in the corner. Out, outside of that I don't know anything about it.

OFLAZIAN: Was it safe, his business place?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Was it safe, his business place?

VARTIAN: Yeah. It was, it was in the Turkish closed market. Closed market.

OFLAZIAN: Why you say closed market?

VARTIAN: Well, it's, it's covered over, roof, roof on it. Yeah.
That's all, all I remember. You remember, you must remember I
was only two, three years old. You shouldn't expect me to
remember all of that.

OFLAZIAN: I understand that.

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: What, what makes you to come to America?

VARTIAN: Oh, well, we didn't come to America directly. We went to
Sivas, in Turkish, and a few other places, and finally ended
up in Istanbul, Turkey.

OFLAZIAN: Why did, why did you go to Sivas?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Why, why...

VARTIAN: Oh, I don't know. My mother found a job in, in a Turkish
hospital. In a Turkish hospital. And then we just traveled.

OFLAZIAN: So you were in the military hospital working along?

VARTIAN: No, my mother was. Not me. Not me. I was just a kid.

OFLAZIAN: Where was your father that time?

VARTIAN: He was dead. He was shot. He was killed by the Turks.

OFLAZIAN: So he was shot and killed by the Turks before you went to the military place to work...

VARTIAN: My, my mother work in the hospital there.

OFLAZIAN: And then what happened.

VARTIAN: We came to the United States. First, we had two, three other aunts. One of them was also working in the military hospital. But it was in some other portion, portion of Sivas.

OFLAZIAN: And after Sivas, where did you go?

VARTIAN: After Sivas, (he pauses) I think we, we went to, let me see if I can't think of the other name. A big house that belonged to my mother aunt. White house. It was Samsan Samsan We, we stayed there just a very short time, and then we moved on. You were asking me too many details in which you shouldn't

expect a two, three year old kid to remember.

OFLAZIAN: And then, therefore how did you manage to come to America?

VARTIAN: Oh, we, we stayed in Istanbul for, for two, oh, wait a minute.

No, no, no. I was about, I was about eleven, eleven and a half. My mother worked in the U.S. Military. Not military. Naval hospital in Istanbul. And she managed to get the, the hospital doctors to, all them to write letters to, as far as I can remember, write letters to the, the consulate, you know, making it easier for us to come to United States. Of course, at that time, my, my youngest aunt was married to an American citizen in Providence, Rhode Island. He was the one that made, wrote, or got all the papers ready for us to move over.

And the money, I, my mother inherited some, some three or four thousand dollars from my father's insurance with the New York Life. New York Life, American company. In the old, in old, in old Shabin Karahisar.

OFLAZIAN: You mean that New York Life was that insurance company?

VARTIAN: Yeah, yeah. It, you must not, because my mother hadn't any insurance.

OFLAZIAN: And then, how, how did you leave Istanbul?

VARTIAN: Just by boat. We've got the passport and everything ready, the papers, and then they just "shoo," got into the boat, and then we came.

OFLAZIAN: From where you took the boat?

VARTIAN: From Istanbul. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Where did you go?

VARTIAN: Istanbul, we went directly to New York, New York Harbor.

OFLAZIAN: Did...

VARTIAN: It was a Greek, it was a Greek ship. King Alexander.

OFLAZIAN: From where you take the King Alexander?

VARTIAN: Istanbul.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. When the ship arrive to New York port, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty?

VARTIAN: Ah, that I don't remember. See, there so many things, newer,

newer things, you don't remember all of them. We got off the boat, we came to, to New York City. There they already had an apartment for us.

OFLAZIAN: Excuse me. The ship Alexander arrive to New York.

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Right. And then, how did you get to Ellis Island?

VARTIAN: How did we get the Alexander?

OFLAZIAN: To Ellis Island.

VARTIAN: Oh, oh. All right. The ship stop at New York City, and then they, oh. The next day they let us off. But the next they must have had some error or some mistakes in the shuffling of the paper, so they thought they made a mistake. They threw us, they took us back to Ellis Island. For one night. And we stayed there one night, and then they corrected everything. And the next they turned us loose, we came back to New York and, and, that's all.

OFLAZIAN: Was the ship crowded?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Was the ship crowded?

VARTIAN: Oh, I guess so. You, there you ask me details again. For a little boy anything more that ten people is crowded.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember going through medical examination in Ellis Island?

VARTIAN: I don't know. I, I knew they took us to room to room. I don't know.

OFLAZIAN: So, you said you stood in Ellis Island for one night.

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Where did you sleep?

VARTIAN: Oh, I don't, they had a, dormitories, or someplaces over there we slept.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember what did you eat?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember what did you eat?

VARTIAN: Oh, eat, I don't know. American food, I guess, or, or is Armenian food. I don't know. I don't remember.

OFLAZIAN: Who came to Ellis Island to meet you?

VARTIAN: Oh, my, my uncle. My, my youngest aunt's husband. He was the one who made the affidavits and all that paper ready for us to come. See, he used to live in Providence, Rhode Island. He was a tailor. He was a customs tailor. Good. Good standing. And he was the one made all the papers ready. He brought us to the United States. And, as I said, there was some sort of mix up in the papers, and they thought they made a mistake, so they took us back to Ellis Island. And then we stayed there one night, and then we, we came back, we came, they said, turned us loose, we came back to New York City again. In Ridgewood. Ridgewood.

OFLAZIAN: How did you get to Ridgewood?

VARTIAN: I don't know. By, by car, taxi or something, I don't know.

OFLAZIAN: What was your expectations from America?

VARTIAN: From a two year, three year old boy, I, no. You ask me...

OFLAZIAN: You were eleven years old by then, right?

VARTIAN: Oh, oh, yeah. When we came from the United States. Yeah. You're right. You're right. Oh, I don't know. I suppose we all expected a lot. Especially on, on board the ship, saw a lot of luxuries and things like that. Expected more of them.

OFLAZIAN: What did you see in New York City that you were never seen before?

VARTIAN: Big tall buildings, like that. Lot of automobiles, and all that.

OFLAZIAN: So, after Ellis Island you went with your...

VARTIAN: I went, Ridgewood, New York, Ridgewood. There, there we lived there for, for, for, oh, until, until just recently.

OFLAZIAN: Was is an apartment building?

VARTIAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Apartment. Apartment. A six family apartment.

OFLAZIAN: How many rooms was there?

VARTIAN: In all there were five, because we were a bit crowded. We were used to crowds, you know. Over there.

OFLAZIAN: By living with those, with these people, weren't you disturbed?

VARTIAN: No. No, no. We were used to, to, in Istanbul, were six, seven of us that lived in one room. You can imagine.

OFLAZIAN: How did you learn English?

VARTIAN: Oh, little by little.

OFLAZIAN: Like what? What you mean little by little?

VARTIAN: Going to school. I went, I went, I went the day or two days after I, we landed in, in New York. They took us to the nearby school. P.S. Eighty-eight in Ridgewood. There I stayed and, and went from the various grades until I graduated in 1927. I graduated eight, eight year course in five years.

OFLAZIAN: Good.

VARTIAN: Yeah. I was very good.

OFLAZIAN: Did you experience any difficulties in the English language?

VARTIAN: Yeah. That the only difficulty I had. I had the education. Arithmetic, geography and all of that. But it was not, it was not in English. It was in Armenian. So in order to translate that into English, I had difficulty with the language.

OFLAZIAN: Where did you learn the Armenian? Where did you study Armenian in arithmetic, in geometry.

VARTIAN: Oh, in, in Turkey. In Istanbul. Istanbul. I went to Armenian schools there. My brother, my brother, the school where he, he went, they gave him the French and English languages. I only took French. I was still too young yet.

OFLAZIAN: You still speak French?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: You understand, you speak French?

VARTIAN: Oh, yeah. Well, I took up French again, more, in, in high school. In college.

OFLAZIAN: You said you were going to school. Then who supported the family?

VARTIAN: My mother worked in a dress shop downtown in, in the area where they make dresses. Downtown New York.

OFLAZIAN: Did she learn English also? How did she learn English?

VARTIAN: Yeah, yeah. She, she learned a little bit, little bit...

OFLAZIAN: Did she go to school?

VARTIAN: ...hard, difficulty, but she learned the hard way. She didn't go to school. No. No, no.

OFLAZIAN: So, did you graduate at your school?

VARTIAN: Oh, I did. P.S. Eighty-eight.

OFLAZIAN: Was that in high school?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Was it in high school?

VARTIAN: No, no, no. That was a grammar school. Elementary school. Then I graduated in 1927, went to high school. Where the street car at that time, street car, you drop a nickel in the coin box, and so it was. The fare was just a nickel. Like the car, like a subway fare. Went to high, went to high school. Newtown High School in Elmhurst, Long Island. I graduated there. Four years later I graduated in 1931.

OFLAZIAN: After you graduated high school...

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: After you graduated high school...

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: ...four years later...

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: ...you also graduated, right?

VARTIAN: Yeah, I graduated, and then went, went to Brooklyn Coll,
Brooklyn College.

OFLAZIAN: You, do you remember which year was that?

VARTIAN: Oh, 1931. I never stayed o...

OFLAZIAN: What was your major?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: What was your major?

VARTIAN: Oh, English language, physics, mathematics, whatever.
Whatever they teach you in high school, I don't know.

OFLAZIAN: So, you did go to Brooklyn College.

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: What did you study over there?

VARTIAN: That's what I said, the general, general schooling. Then,
after I graduated, I went back there again, and this time I
took, I, I took the physics and math. I finished those

courses, and then graduated, and then I went into the mil, the service. That was during the World War Two. And after World War Two I came back, and I went back to, back to Brooklyn College again. But this time I took civil engineering. It was not Brooklyn College then, it was promoted to Brook, Brooklyn Polytech. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So which service did you go?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: You said you went to service.

VARTIAN: Oh, yeah. Airforce. Airforce. I, I went to mechanics school, and spent my all, my fours years as a airplane mechanic.

OFLAZIAN: So, you were majoring civil engineering, and you were for mechanical engineering?

VARTIAN: Yeah. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Did you specialize in mechanical engineering?

VARTIAN: In school?

OFLAZIAN: Yes.

VARTIAN: No. No, no, no. No. No.

OFLAZIAN: And how did you learn these techniques then?

VARTIAN: Well, I went to school.

OFLAZIAN: That what I said.

VARTIAN: Yeah. Technical school.

OFLAZIAN: Technical school.

VARTIAN: Technical school.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever tried to construct buildings, or to...

VARTIAN: Not, not during that time, no. Later on, when I was an engineer, I didn't construct. I supervised a construction. I was an engin, I graduated engineer diploma. If you want to see my diploma, it's upstairs. Huh?

OFLAZIAN: I might see it later. Not now.

VARTIAN: Oh, okay. You remind me quickly, because I, I haven't got much time. I have a headache. I want to lay down.

OFLAZIAN: Okay, sure.

VARTIAN: You let me know. As soon as you finish you can go over there, room 207.

OFLAZIAN: Okay. How did you find the life in America?

VARTIAN: Oh, very nice. Very nice. Yeah. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: And the religious life?

VARTIAN: Huh?

OFLAZIAN: Religious life in America?

VARTIAN: Oh, religious life was all right, because it, we went to Armenian churches in downtown, Twenty-seventh Street, New York. An Armenian church over there.

OFLAZIAN: Do you remember celebrating Christmas?

VARTIAN: Yeah, yeah. Oh, that's the, after, we'd be, celebrate Christmas. Christmas, Easter, all. Armenian religion.

OFLAZIAN: And how do you describe celebrating the Armenians Christmas?

VARTIAN: Well, just the way we usually celebrate Armenian. I can't, I can't distinguish from the English. Of course, we all celeb, all the, all the religious we did were in Armenian. According to Armenian calendar.

OFLAZIAN: And what about the Easter?

VARTIAN: Well, celebrate Easter. Armenian Easter.

OFLAZIAN: Do you have any special hobby?

VARTIAN: Photography. Photography, and for a while, many years I used to do the carving in wood. Wood carving.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever done such pieces...

VARTIAN: Oh, I passed them around. Not, not, nothing to brag about, no.

OFLAZIAN: And did you get married?

VARTIAN: No, I never got married.

OFLAZIAN: Not at all?

VARTIAN: No, not at all.

OFLAZIAN: So, do you think that you are happy in America?

VARTIAN: Yeah. Yeah, I was happy. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever thought going back to Shabin Karahisar, and living...

VARTIAN: No, I never went to Shabin Karhisar, but I did, I did go back to Istanbul several times. Walked around, all the streets where I used to play with the kids. Greek, Greek kids and Turkish kids. All around there, but, but I never actually wanted to go back, stay there.

OFLAZIAN: At what, what was your age when you went to, to Istanbul?

VARTIAN: Oh. Oh, that was, I mean, that was in, in the early thirties, or thereabouts. Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: So you were grown up then?

VARTIAN: Almost, yeah. Young man. Young man.

OFLAZIAN: Have you ever seen any changes?

VARTIAN: Where?

OFLAZIAN: In Istanbul since the time you left?

VARTIAN: No. I was too young to notice the difference. No.

OFLAZIAN: So, on an overall basis you are happy that you are in America.

VARTIAN: Oh, of course. Yeah. Definitely. Definitely.

OFLAZIAN: Do you have any words to say to America?

VARTIAN: Any work?

OFLAZIAN: Any words. Any nice words to say to America?

VARTIAN: Oh, everything is nice. Everything is nice. It's a nice, happy place. You, you, if you work hard enough, you can be happy and accumulate whatever the property you want to have.

OFLAZIAN: Exactly.

VARTIAN: Nobody stops you. There's no religious, or any kind of a, a
interference with your work.

OFLAZIAN: Okay, I thank you very much Mr. Vartian...

VARTIAN: Yeah. You're welcome.

OFLAZIAN: ...about your story you provided us...

VARTIAN: Yeah.

OFLAZIAN: ...and we have to sign off now. This is Grace Oflazian for
the National Park Service signing off with Mr. Puzant
Vartian...

VARTIAN: Oh, you mentioned the National Park Services is in charge of
this, this establishment, isn't it? Yeah.