

EI-312/TELLALIAN

EI-312

JACK (HAGOP) ABRAHAM TELLALIAN

BIRTH DATE: MAY 29, 1913

INTERVIEW DATE: 5/15/1993

RUNNING TIME: 59:00

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: KEVIN DALEY

INTERVIEW LOCATION: ELLIS ISLAND RECORDING STUDIO

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED BY: NANCY VEGA, 1/1995

TRANSCRIPT REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 2/1995

TURKEY (ARMENIAN), 1921

BORN: KEYSERIA, TURKEY

AGE AT IMMIGRATION: 7

PORT: PIRAEUS, GREECE

PASSAGE ON: KING ALEXANDER

U.S. RESIDENCE: NYC, EAST 23 ST.

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Saturday, May 15, 1993. I'm at the Ellis Island Recording Studio with Jack Abraham Tellalian. Mr. Tellalian is Armenian. He came from Turkey in 1921, when he was seven years old. Hello, welcome.

TELLALIAN: Thank you, sir.

SIGRIST: Let's begin, Mr. Tellalian, with you giving me your birth date, please.

TELLALIAN: My birthday is May 29, 1913.

SIGRIST: Oh, so you'll be eighty in like a week or so.

TELLALIAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: Great. Where were you born?

TELLALIAN: I was born in Kayseria, Turkey.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

TELLALIAN: It's Ankara, the province of Ankara. Kayseria is the southern part of the mountains, the mountain range there. My people was born, and for many generations they've been there. It's a population of about fifty, my father always said, fifty thousand families. So, according to those, it should be about two hundred thousand people.

SIGRIST: Good sized town.

TELLALIAN: A good size, yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you spell the name of it for me? Do you . . .

TELLALIAN: Kayseria is spelled K-A-Y-S-E-R-I-A.

SIGRIST: Can you describe a little bit what it looked like for me?

TELLALIAN: Well, the city, it's a city, and it consists all around the city, the little towns, the little villages, but that's, the business section is like New York City. It's a central place. And people have different religions. You have the Christians. The Armenians are the Christians. We had three churches. You have the Greeks, and you have a few Jewish people, not many. Mostly was Armenians, and these are minorities. Most of the people were Turks. We all, like here in America, we all speak English, they spoke Turkish. As much as the Armenians didn't care for the Turkish people, but they were born there, like we are born here. We accept America, that's our way, but it was completely a different attitude. They, we're not exploited here. From the day my parents were born, they were persecuted. They were second-rate citizens. If you were not Turkish, Turk, you were a failure, you were undesirable. They called it (Turkish), meaning unfaithful. If you're not a Muslim, you're unfaithful. I mean, under these conditions my people, my parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, they lived it, they accepted that. But when things changed after World War Two

[sic], my uncle was already in America, he says,
"Get out of that country, come."

SIGRIST: Were your parents born in that town also?

TELLALIAN: In Kayseria? Yes. Many generations, my
grandparents were born there.

SIGRIST: I see.

TELLALIAN: So that's, that was the main reason. There was
always dislike there. You being a non-Muslim,
you're undesirable. They kept ghettos. They
created ghettos there. We had our churches, we had
our schools. The government there didn't provide no
public education. The Armenians and the Greeks and
the Jews, they had to supply their own education.

SIGRIST: Did the Armenians have their own merchants, for
instance, also? I mean, was it that closed a
community?

TELLALIAN: Business, they all worked together, whatever
business but the Armenians had control of the
business. Most of the Turkish people in the
villages, countrymen, they came to the city. They
had to deal with Armenians. Armenians were

merchants. They imported things from Smyrna or from, in those days it was Constantinople. Now it's Istanbul. And they made a living. They had, they lived into it.

SIGRIST: What were some of the industries that Armenian people would have gone into in this town?

TELLALIAN: Well, in this, now, in those, in that country at that time, copper was the main item for utensils, pots, pans, dishes. I never had seen any china until I came to the United States. We all ate from copper plates. Copper, sheets of copper were imported from Germany and these coppersmiths, they make pots, they make pans, they make everything you can use. And that was one grandparent's business, shop, work. And the other grandparents was the tin plating. You know, you cannot eat from a copper. Copper is poisonous, so they have to plate it. They call that, in Turkish they say (Turkish), meaning that they plate the copper, tin plating, so you could eat from it, otherwise copper sulfate is poisonous. So my parents, if I was there, if I didn't come to America, I might have been a copper plater. And then you follow a trade. Whatever your

father or grandfather, there's no other. They had imports. They were business people. The Armenians and Greeks, the minority, that's why there was jealousy. Armenians lived well, and the Turkish, it's their country, but they had no education. See, the trouble was Armenians, since they were kept together, they were, they had got help from elsewhere, they educated their children, everybody.

Except in those days, my parents' time, they educated the male. And the female, my mother, was a rug weaver at the age of five or six, they put her with an expert rug weaver. They make Oriental rugs.

So my mother's trade was useful in America, repairing rugs.

SIGRIST: It's interesting that in the Armenian culture that women were sent out for apprenticeships. I mean, this is what your mother, how she learned her trade.

TELLALIAN: That's right. At five years old they, you know how they make these rugs. They have, on the graph paper, one quarter of the rug is put on the graph paper, different colors, different, the design. The design, whoever made that makes it one quarter. The person reads, uh, say, "One red, three blacks," and

the apprentice fills in. You see, what you're doing in this corner, you repeat on the other side. The rug is repeated. See, I understand in Iran or, at that time in the olden days it was Persia, they have mass production, and this is the way they do it. One man with a microscope, uh, like a microphone, he speaks. It's about ten, fifteen people listening to him. And as he calls the colors, each one is putting knots in it. And when they're finished, after six months or three months, depends on the size of the rug, then they have so many rugs completed at the same time.

SIGRIST: That's fascinating. And this was a major industry in this town.

TELLALIAN: Well, this was, my mother's was at her home.

SIGRIST: Right, a cottage industry.

TELLALIAN: Yeah. But for mass production, that's what the Iranians or the Persians were doing. They, by having one person read the graph paper, there's about ten, fifteen people putting those knots in. And you have, if you're familiar with, for every square inch of Oriental rug you have practically,

oh, a hundred-and-fifty, two hundred knots. The finer, the more square knots there are per square inch, the finer the rug. Like a Chinese rug has, you maybe have eighty knots, because you don't get the same wear. But Persian rugs you might get, for the same one-inch square you might get a hundred and twenty, a hundred and fifty knots per square inch.

SIGRIST: In your own home as a child growing up, did you have these rugs, or was it something that was simply made and sent out, not something that you would have had in the house?

TELLALIAN: Well, people that were in the, people that were doing it from the city, they went, homework. They brought home work. They brought the frame all lined up, and the size of the rug, usually at home the rugs were, oh, six by nine, not very large ones. And the women, they supplied the graph paper, the design, and they supplied the wool and everything. And then, as you go along, every couple of weeks he'll come back with a tape measure and measure how many inches you've done, and then he'll pay you for it and bring you more supplies.

SIGRIST: I see, wow.

TELLALIAN: The Oriental rug business.

SIGRIST: Can you describe for me the house that you lived in in this town?

TELLALIAN: Yeah. That's a, the house, we were in the court there, in the street, with both sides, a mixture of Turks and Armenians. They all had a courtyard. And I remember distinctly we had an opening that in the wintertime they used to shovel snow down the, like a cellar or you would call an icebox. The snow would melt, and they used the water for washing the house, because drinking water was not available. They used to buy it. A man would come and, say, come a couple of times a month and supply so many gallons. I don't know how they measured it, but they'd supply fresh water. For washing, they used to use that.

SIGRIST: So there would be some kind of a cistern in the house for the fresh . . .

TELLALIAN: Just like the courtyard, yeah. The relatives, they all owned one. Within that courtyard is the relatives. Another distinctive thing I remember

over there, they, in the summer time they used to sleep on the roofs. The roofs were flat, and they used to, they're so heavily, they used to have dirt.

They used to grow flowers, like daisies, and there was no fear of, like we have here. Everybody could go up there on the roof, we had no air conditioning, nothing, they slept on the roof.

SIGRIST: Like having your own little lawn up there.

TELLALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Can you walk through the house and just describe for me how the rooms were laid out?

TELLALIAN: In my grandmother's house was one big room, one large room. It had a little kitchen, and they had a bedroom and, you know, there was no beds like we have here. They put them on the floor. And then they sewed their own quilts. They put one sheet on the bottom, and on top of that they put wool, and then they put another sheet on top of that, and then they sewed it and made quilts, and they slept good that way.

SIGRIST: Did you live with your grandparents? Did you live

with your grandparents?

TELLALIAN: Yeah. Well, it's customary in those days, when a young man marries a girl he brings his bride to his parents' home. That's the way. In that country, I guess a lot of Asian countries, too, women are the chattel. You know, a man that has so many daughters is a handicap because girls can't work, and then you have to pay dowry. I know several Armenian families that had five or six daughters. They came to America because they didn't have the money to marry them off.

SIGRIST: What kind of a dowry would be presented to an Armenian man who is getting married?

TELLALIAN: Well, they dictated, the groom dictated how much he wants in order to marry this particular young lady. It's a terrible thing, but . . .

SIGRIST: Do you know what your father got for your mother?

TELLALIAN: I really don't know. (he laughs) Well, these were, I don't know if there was dowry, but they didn't have much, working people. But the, those that have it are requested to give dowry.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

TELLALIAN: Well, they were neighbors. They grew up together. My father lived on one block, and my mother's family lived on the next block. They know when my mother was born, they went to the church together, they know one another.

SIGRIST: Well, and it's a tight community. Everyone knows each other.

TELLALIAN: That's it, you know. When you're exploited, when you're penalized for everything you do, you keep with your ghetto. You create a ghetto.

SIGRIST: What was your dad's name?

TELLALIAN: Abraham, Abraham.

SIGRIST: And he went into this copper manufacturing business?

TELLALIAN: Well, his business, he did the plating.

SIGRIST: He was the tin plating.

TELLALIAN: Tin plater, yeah. But after the war, my father was doing exceptionally well. As a matter of fact, I used to go with him after the war was over. You

know, all these villages hadn't had their dishes or their plates or pots plated, so my father got us utensils, and we went from town to town, the barter system. They welcomed us. They gave us the best of food. You know, farmers have always more to eat than city people. Well, we got, we came home with cheese and milk and yogurt and animal skin. And my father used to come to the city every three or four days, and then we'd sell it. We had two jackasses, mules. I used to ride one and he carried his other stuff with it, and it's good. I built up after the war. The war ended in 1918, and it was two years more before we came to America.

SIGRIST: Now, what was your dad's personality like? What was his personality like?

TELLALIAN: Well, he's the kind of man that didn't express his love. I know he loved me, he loved my sister, but he's not the emotional type to kiss you and hug you or nothing. But he had, he was a good man.

SIGRIST: What was your mom's name?

TELLALIAN: Gulu. Translated to English, it's Rose. Gulu in Turkish means flower.

SIGRIST: How do you spell that?

TELLALIAN: G-U-L-U.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

TELLALIAN: Oh, her, Jebikdelian.

SIGRIST: Oh, dear. Can you spell that, please?

TELLALIAN: J-E-B-I-K-D-E-L-I-A-N, Jebikdelian.

SIGRIST: And let me ask you the same kind of question, what was your mom's personality like?

TELLALIAN: Oh, mom was good. Mom was intelligent. She couldn't do enough for the children. She had a good heart. And it's because of my mother that I'm alive. You see, during the Genocide, after April 24th, there were, the Turks were trying to eliminate the male as part of the Genocide. The older people they sent down to Iraq and Iran and all that, get them out of the way, instead of going towards Russia. They sent them south. But my father was conscripted into the Turkish Army. Even though they didn't give them no guns, they used them from construction battalion. My father was making roads.

And finally they found out that he was a tin plater, and they take him into the camp nearby. And he used to take me with him every morning, carry me on his back. In the camp we lived very well. All the officers would bring their own plates. My father was doing all the non-government jobs, until the war was over. Then, when he was free, you see, he was trying to escape to Russia.

SIGRIST: To get out of the army.

TELLALIAN: He's a deserter. That's a bad word for the American boys, but he deserted the Turkish Army. He went to the Black Sea Trabzon, and he wanted to get to Russia. He knew that Armenia was being formed, and Russia was our big brother at that time. Russia, in those days, protected all Christians. But he didn't make it, the war ended, and it took him two months to come back home. And in the meantime my mother kept house. She did her rug work. The government gave them, not like Uncle Sam, what they gave her for an officer, for a military man's family, what they gave us was just enough to buy one day's food, so you had to work. Mom made rugs. My grandmother made rugs. Everybody got one of these looms, they

put them against the wall in the summer time, and they worked outside.

SIGRIST: You started telling me the story of how your mother saved you somehow during the Genocide?

TELLALIAN: Well, you see, part of the Genocide was to get rid of the male. So once a month or so a man with a cart, an oxen-driven cart, whatever, open cart, picked up all boys and put them there. He says, "We're going to send them to school," on that pretext. When the neighbors saw, even the Turkish people, they would come and tell my mother, "The man is coming around to collect boys again." So Mama used to, that well that we had, dry well, that we didn't shovel any snow in, she, I used to go down the steps, and it's covered overhead. Mama used to say to me, "The man is coming to take you away. Keep quiet, don't say anything, just hide down there." I put the cover on, I was down there maybe for an hour. The guy come around, look into the house, and he said, "You got any boys?" "No, no, we have no boys." They wouldn't take girls. So then the next time, the neighbors were good, even the Turkish neighbors. I mean, neighbors, sometimes it

has no religion. You could have nice neighbors regardless of their religion.

SIGRIST: So there were some good Turkish people.

TELLALIAN: Oh, definitely, yes. But as a whole, we were second-rate citizens. We weren't accepted. We couldn't vote. We couldn't do this. We couldn't do that.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit, I want to get back to your mother a little bit. Talk about, for instance, the food that you ate when you were a child in Turkey. What kind of things?

TELLALIAN: Well, there were days we had no food. The war, we got a loaf of bread with a little piece of garlic on it or cheese or something, or olives, olive was very common. But food was not, I don't think I remember drinking milk until the end of the war when my father started doing his work, and we finally bought a goat. I didn't know what milk was. I mean, food, we had, that's why I was so impressed when I came to Ellis Island and I saw this spread half a block long with cheese and olives and jam and eggs and rolls. We had never seen anything like that. You don't

know, you don't understand what hunger is unless you've been hungry yourself.

SIGRIST: Tell me about what your religious life was like in this kind of environment in Turkey.

TELLALIAN: In Turkey, prior, after, during the war there was no religion. They took our church and made a factory out of it. They took our school classrooms and they made a sewing factory for the ladies to sew military clothes. As a matter of fact, I remember, you see, women do not mingle in Turkey when they are Christians. Even their faces are open, but they don't go anywhere there's men. So I was about four or five years old. They used to give me a bag and go to the church and get a bag of cotton. So these Turkish men used to beat up the cotton. In fact, they didn't have a cotton gin, so they had some way of separating the cover from, getting the cotton out and beating it. And then he'd give it to me, and I used to bring it back to the ladies so they can sew blankets or quilts or whatever, or mili-, army uniforms. And this was during the war years. And at home they always had these rugs. They got any spare time, they'd always put in a couple of lines

of a rug. That was their life. Food? Forget it. Sometimes it was unbearable, the hunger. We got something, we shared a loaf of bread. Sometimes that's all we had for one day.

SIGRIST: Tell me some more things about what you remember about World War One in this town. You seem to have some very good recollections of the war years. What other things come to your mind when you think about the war in . . .

TELLALIAN: Well, I said, I went with my father to the camp, military camp. And he used to work in the shop with the tin plating, and I walked around. Some of the Turkish officers were good. You know, seven-year-old, six-year-old kid, they treated, they'd give me an apple or something, and at night I'd come home. And then, as far as before that I don't remember, because I was born in 1913 and the war started in 1914. Then it was about, I recollect about, when I was about four, five and on I know very well.

SIGRIST: Did your father have to wear a uniform, that you remember?

TELLALIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Nothing like that.

TELLALIAN: They were, they didn't have it for their own people, let alone give it to the minority. They were construction battalion. They just built roads just to keep them out of trouble. You see, prior to that Armenians were forming organizations. Like we have Democratic club here? We have the Republican club? There we have (Armenian) and Tashnagen and (Armenian), different organizations. Supposed to be friendly over there, but it was political also. So they tried to keep, that's the first thing the Turks did was when the war started they got all the records of those people that were involved. Fortunately my father, I don't know, he wasn't a very educated man. When he registered as an (?), he gave a wrong name. He gave a fictitious name. And they came looking for him. They were, they know that these organizations were not friendly organizations, social clubs. They were political, more or less. So they got these people, and they slaughtered them. So my father, I don't know, I guess his father told him, my grandfather must have told him, "If you're going to join up, give a

fictitious name." I don't recall what name he had used, but they did come looking for that particular name. So then they took him into the army, and he spent in the battalion construction.

SIGRIST: Which, in a funny way, was a good thing, you know.

TELLALIAN: Because of him being in construction, they, according to their Turkish rule, laws, you have to, his family had to be protected by another female, so my grandmother, my father's mother was overseer of the family while my father was in the army. My grandfather, they saw he was sixty-five, they said, "You're going to a, we're going to take you to a warm place, a warm climate." They took him to the deserts of Iraq, and the poor man perished over there.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about what you remember about the Armenian Genocide and how it affected your family? Obviously, your grandfather was sort of a victim of that.

TELLALIAN: Well, this was death march. My grandfather, oh, they asked him, we all had to be converted. We had to become Turks. My name was Hagop, in Armenian,

they made it Yahop, that's the Turkish pronunciation. My father was Abraham in Armenian. They called him Ibrahim, the Turkish name. My grandfather said, "Sixty-five years old, I'm not changing my religion. I'm a born Christian. I'm going to die a Christian." So he refused. If he had accepted the Turkish religion as his own, I think we would have all been better off, because he could have stayed in his own shop and run his tin plating business, and we would all be comfortable because there was nobody doing it. "No," he said, "I want no part of Turkish." He thought he was going to a vacation. He went to the deserts of Iraq and he perished there.

SIGRIST: What about your grandmother? How did she, did she convert over, or was she . . .

TELLALIAN: Oh, we all converted.

SIGRIST: It was the smart thing to do.

TELLALIAN: Otherwise, either you go on to the death march or you become a Turk. That's one way of them getting you to stay. And then my father was conscripted, as a Turk, into the Turkish Army. But if he persisted

and said, "No, I don't want to change," then he would have been put on the death march.

SIGRIST: So he really saved your whole family, in a way.

TELLALIAN: Yeah. See, my grandmother always said, "My husband was stupid." (he laughs) "If he had accepted the Muslim religion, we would have all been comfortable, because all the copper platers, tin platers, were gone to the service or they were slaughtered. All the well-known people, wealthy Armenians, were the first ones to slaughter. They hung them, they shot them, they put them on these death marches.

SIGRIST: And this was something you were witness to?

TELLALIAN: Well, I don't, actually, I saw one hanging, I remember that. But I, you know, my parents repeated these things over. You know, it was something that that bothered them for the rest of their life, long after. My, her soul rest in peace, every time she dreamt about the old country she used to be glad that it was a dream. They had no pleasant memories of their, my mother was thrilled. She came to America, she saw running water in the house, hot water. We didn't have earlier, but later on she had

hot water, and cooking utensils and food. You can work, you may earn money, and we had difficult days here, too, coming from a foreign country, and you couldn't, they were earning money but they couldn't shop. I was going, because I remember distinctly my father wanted to buy T-shirts, undershirt. He said to me, "How do you say undershirt?" I said, "I don't know." I'm going to school. I'm there for six months. I'm having difficulty, too. The teacher doesn't say, "This is shirt." Every American kid knows that a shirt is a shirt. So we went shopping, my father opened his shirt, he says, (he laughs), pointed out the T-shirt and we got it, gradually.

SIGRIST: But the old country was something your parents just wanted to forget about.

TELLALIAN: They were glad to be out of there.

SIGRIST: They just didn't even want to talk about it that much.

TELLALIAN: Yeah. Well, I think the story that I'm telling you is probably repetitious to you because all Armenians have, that have gone through that era, have seen

this.

SIGRIST: Similar experiences, certainly. Well, did you have family in America already?

TELLALIAN: No. My uncle was here, my father's brother.

SIGRIST: What was he doing?

TELLALIAN: He was in the rug, Oriental rug, business. His story, running, getting out of that country, you see, he was being, learned how to become a tailor. And with everything, you have to serve internship, apprenticeship. So he became a qualified tailor. He made himself a nice jacket. He wanted to go to church Easter, he's walking the street, four, five Turkish hoodlums confronted him. They said, "(Turkish)." That means faithless. "That jacket doesn't look good on you." They took it off his back and they beat him, and he went home crying. He said to his mother, "I'm going to get out of this country." He was about eight, seventeen, eighteen years old. Then he came to, he went to Greece, and from there he went to, he came to, he couldn't come to the United States, he went to Argentina. From Argentina, then he came to the United States. And

he got established here. Somebody taught him the rug business, the repairing end of it. Here it doesn't pay to make new rugs here, because labor over there is much cheaper. Here people have rugs that have damage. In those days in America we used to have these storage batteries. They used to run off some battery juice, and the rugs had to be repaired. So he got into the rug business. He saved some money. So he sent us enough money, I think it was a thousand dollars, my father said. Seven people came from, from Greece, from Athens, Piraeus, from here, and we took three weeks.

SIGRIST: Okay. We need to pause right now so Kevin can flip the tape over, and then we'll get you to America.

TELLALIAN: Okay. I'll take a sip of this.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay. We're now continuing the interview with Jack Tellalian. Mr. Tellalian, you said your uncle sent you the money to come. Can you tell me a little bit about the process of getting ready to go to America? Do you remember . . .

TELLALIAN: Fine, I know that distinctly. We had to leave Kayseria, that's in the central part of Turkey. We had to go to the seashore. We had to get to Adana or Mersin, or one of the Black Sea [sic] seaports. So, through an oxcart, we loaded, it's about three days' trip from inland. We had to prepare dry foods, rolls and, you know, what we call (Armenian), dried food, and (Armenian). Oh, yeah, before, I forgot to tell you. One of the major Armenian industries in Kayseria was making (Armenian). It's a dried beef. It's covered with spices. See, because they have no refrigeration they use a lot of dried, preserved stuff for the winter, or get some lamb and semi-cook it, semi-fry it, and then keep it for the winter. Because the butcher cuts up a lamb, he's got to sell it that day or take some of it home. Otherwise, there's no refrigeration. So it took us, on the way this cart, this ox-driven cart, the wagon took us up. We stopped in two or three inns on the way, and this man, my mother and I used to be scared. The man, the animal knew the path, and the man used to be sleeping. (he laughs) We used to be scared we'd go off the cliff. Then we

got to the seashore. We got to Mersin, in the Armenia, we got into an Armenian camp that was supplied by the Armenian Benevolent Union, established there for refugees. So we, I went there about a month, to the Armenian school there. And then, in the meantime, my uncle was sending papers through American Express, money, and we bought the pass-, tickets. Then we went to, we had to go to Istanbul. At that time it was called Constantinople. And we, in order to get a passport you've got to have proof of your age. We had no proof. The only record was my birth date, because they put it in back of the Bible when I was born, May 29, 1913. But my parents, all the records were missing, there's no records, so they had to go to the Armenian diocese, and he'd look at them and say, "Oh, you look like thirty-five," and looked at my mother and said, "You look like twenty-five." He had to sign it and to, in order to get a passport. You see, another thing, in those countries, my father says they didn't register male newborns because if they registered they'd be liable for tax and they'd be liable for military service. So when they had a male child, only the church knew about

it, the christening. But the government, the Board of Health, had no record.

SIGRIST: They were smart. I didn't ask you, what did you take with you? What did you pack with you when you first left your city?

TELLALIAN: We didn't have much to pack. Enough food for three or four days, and in the meantime our money was coming from, through American Express, to Istanbul, and my father got a check. Then we got the money to buy the tickets to come to America.

SIGRIST: Now, it's you, your mom, your dad, and are there any other children?

TELLALIAN: No. My mother, my father, my grandmother . . .

SIGRIST: Oh, your grandmother went, too.

TELLALIAN: Yes. An uncle, my uncle wanted a bride, and there was no, he was a farm boy and he wanted somebody from the old country. So what happened, we had to go around, and he says, he wanted somebody virgin, because of the war. So my grandmother and my mother had to go around and look and say, "We're going to America. We want to have somebody that's virgin."

And some young people that their parents didn't want them, or it was too late, their virginity's all gone, so finally we got one for our uncle, and she said, "My mother has enough money. She can come, too." She had an orphan nephew, my aunt-to-be, the new brides-to-be had a nephew whose parents were slaughtered, so he was an orphan, so there was three people on the bride's side, and there was four on our side. Seven of us came. And we came to Ellis Island . . .

SIGRIST: That's a big responsibility for your mother and your grandmother to go around the countryside looking for a bride.

TELLALIAN: There were, they were turned away, a lot of people. I mean, you know, when you have a war, you know, it's Genocide, then raping is very common.

SIGRIST: Now, from Constantinople you went to . . .

TELLALIAN: Greece.

SIGRIST: To Piraeus, did you say?

TELLALIAN: Piraeus, yes. That's the seaport.

SIGRIST: So how long, how long is this whole journey taking?
It must take quite some time.

TELLALIAN: Three weeks from Piraeus to New York.

SIGRIST: And how long did it take for you to get from your
town in Turkey to Piraeus?

TELLALIAN: Well, I said it was about another two months.

SIGRIST: I see.

TELLALIAN: Because we had to wait for papers to come, letters,
they're communicating, and every time Uncle sent a
letter, he said, "Make sure the girl is virgin."

SIGRIST: That was very important to him.

TELLALIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: But, as a little bit, is this an exciting adventure,
or this a scary time? How did you feel, as a boy,
through this whole travel process?

TELLALIAN: I had no choice. (he laughs) But I liked it, I
enjoyed it. I was with my family. When we were in
Turkey I was having a ball, because we had the goat,
I used to play around with the goat, and then we had

a little kid, we had a little baby, the goat had a baby, we had a kid, I used to play with the kid. And the shepherd is, one thing he always amazed me was these shepherds. These animals have a tendency to know where they live. The shepherd would come in the morning to the end of the block. You let them, you take them over there, he takes control. In the evenings, say, four, five o'clock in the evening when he returns he's got about forty, fifty animals. Every block the animals find their way home.

SIGRIST: I see. And a lot of people kept animals, I would imagine.

TELLALIAN: Yes, overnight they kept them, they milked them. (he laughs) Some of the shepherds stole some of the milk.

SIGRIST: I wanted to ask you, how old was the girl that your mother and grandmother finally found?

TELLALIAN: She was, she was with her mother, she had a mother, but she was about sixteen, seventeen.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what her name was?

TELLALIAN: Yes, her name was Haygonish. In Armenian, it's

Haygonish. In Armenian it was Helen.

SIGRIST: Haygonish. How do you spell that?

TELLALIAN: H-A-Y-G-O-N-I-S-H. Haygonish.

SIGRIST: I think that's a very interesting story, that whole, getting a bride for your uncle.

TELLALIAN: And they established a family here, and through him I think there's about, at least forty people, forty, fifty people been saved through, well, my uncle. My aunt came here, she got established, she worked, her mother worked. They brought all their relatives . . .

SIGRIST: They just kept bringing people over.

TELLALIAN: So through Uncle Charlie we had almost forty, fifty people that came. So when I go to the cemetery, I say a prayer for him.

SIGRIST: Yeah. He really was instrumental in your family.

TELLALIAN: They all did. Every one, these men had come to this country to make their fortune and go back. That was the theory. But I don't think he had any love for that country.

SIGRIST: With good reason. How long were you in Piraeus before you got on the boat?

TELLALIAN: Oh, about a month.

SIGRIST: And what was the name of the boat?

TELLALIAN: King Alexander. My father, excuse me for interrupting you, my father went to his brother's, my Uncle Charlie was the twin. He died in Greece. He was working in Greece. And he went, I went with him to Athens. The cemetery, we found this brother's, my father's brother's grave. And Piraeus was a terrible place. The hotels, I mean, over there there was nothing modern, there was no, candlelight there. My father said, "Throw that out. Throw that candlelight. Give me a lamp." They didn't want to use electricity. They didn't want anybody to use kerosene lamp. We were just anxious, a hard trip, from Piraeus to here wasn't that great either. You know, with that kind of money, a thousand dollars was equivalent to bringing four people. Well, he was paying for his bride-to-be, so it was five people. And then we all came in through third grade, third class. In those days they didn't

have tourists. They had first class, second class and third class. A lot of these Greek people, a lot of, most of them were Greek people because we took the ship from Greece. They, the people were dancing, and they all, they were coming to a great country, these older people. I was too young to know what we're headed to. So when we came here, naturally my father owed his brother X number of dollars. So they made a contract with several witnesses, that I owe my brother, I think about six hundred and fifty dollars that was for our passage.

My father paid it. I still have the contract. He said to me one day, "I want you to keep this." I said, "Why?" He says, "I don't want my son, uh, my brother's son to tell you some day in the past that you came here with my father's money."

(they laugh) That never happened. We were good friends.

SIGRIST: So the boat trip takes three weeks. Does anything stick out in your mind about that boat trip? Is there a memory that you have?

TELLALIAN: Well, a lot of people were seasick. The ship was packed. We were in the third class. They separated

the ladies, you know. In the dorms, in third class, men's dormitory separate, women's dormitory separate. And one day, I was seven years old, so one day I stayed with my father, another day with my mother, you know, back and forth. It just happened one day after we landed here, the Board of Health inspectors came, they found lice in the ladies section. It happened to be I happened to be there, so I was quarantined, too. So every day they used to take us through Staten Island, the Board of Government Health was stationed there. I think the government was running some kind of a hospital there, and they used to give us baths, sulphur baths, they'd put over your head, and then you'd take a shower, whether you had it or not, because everyone in that section had to have, was quarantined. They had the doors locked. Nobody could go in, nobody could get out. I was crying. But finally everything was okay.

TELLALIAN: Now, were you staying overnight at Ellis Island and they were bringing you back and forth to Staten Island?

SIGRIST: Yes.

TELLALIAN: Tell me, after the boat docked, how did you get to Ellis Island?

SIGRIST: I think they, the ship has, the ship didn't dock in the Hudson. They were out on the bay, and they used to have the ship, I don't know how we got there, but we got to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, let's talk about Ellis Island. You were here for quite some time. So tell me what you remember about Ellis Island.

TELLALIAN: Well, as I said before, that most impressive thing was the food. Uncle Sam, the Department of Agriculture must have supplied all the food. It was a block long. I never ate so well in the last four or five years. So that was my first impression. And, you know, every day there was something. Ellis Island was an impression. Every nationality had an interpreter, different, these cubicles were all divided, those people that were leaving, going to be permitted to go into the United States, they had to present some money, Uncle had an affidavit that we will not be a public charge. So then they have these interpreters. They had Armenian, they had, in

our case the worker was Turkish speaking. You see, my parents didn't speak Armenian because they were born into a language that, all these countries spoke Turkish, but they went to Armenian school. They learned how to read and write. My father used to write in the Turkish language using the Armenian alphabet. In other words, you spell out the words in Armenian. When I was in the service, so they could read that, I would write in the Turkish language in Armenian characters. I went to the Armenian school here, too. So my father could read. They didn't even understand Armenian. They went to church. They knew all the rituals, chants and everything. But when it came to communicating, they had no, they never had it.

SIGRIST: Well, they grew up in a Turkish environment, so it makes sense that they would speak Turkish.

TELLALIAN: And then, if you were caught speaking, you were called (Turkish), and they would beat you up and, you know.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, can you describe for me where you slept at Ellis Island? You were here for three

weeks, correct?

TELLALIAN: Yeah. That I can't recollect. I know that from Ellis Island we're going back and forth to Staten Island. I don't know, is there dormitories here then? I don't recall . . .

SIGRIST: There were dormitories here, sure.

TELLALIAN: Then we must have slept here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how your mother or your father felt about being kept here?

TELLALIAN: Look, it was getting away from hell, excuse the expression, and anything was, they heard about America. Oh, this you might like very much. When we were coming to America, this is, people were, really meant it. One old lady came to, my grandmother said her name was Gohar. She says, "Gohar, Hannem," that's Mrs. Gohar. "I understand in America they shovel gold off the sidewalks. Will you please send me a shovelful?" (he laughs) So when we came to America it wasn't nothing like, we didn't find no shovel of gold on the sidewalk. They had to work.

SIGRIST: Really a surprise.

TELLALIAN: Well . . .

SIGRIST: So you were at Ellis Island three weeks. Your lice goes away. They take care of the lice problem, correct? Now, does you uncle come and take you off?

TELLALIAN: Oh, yeah. He couldn't take his bride out.

SIGRIST: Oh, well, tell me about that.

TELLALIAN: Uh, Uncle sent affidavit for his bride-to-be, but the people in Ellis Island said, "We cannot let a single girl go out to you. You have no affidavit. We can't, she's got to have somebody from her relatives to vouch for her." So they were detained another four or five days. She had, my aunt had an uncle, her mother's brother was in Philadelphia. They wired him, they got him here, and he said, "This is my wife, uh, my sister, and this is my niece, and this is my grand-nephew." That was the orphan there. And he vouched for them, some fellow. George Cleams Young. That was their name, and he vouched for them. And then we took Anthony over to our house. We lived, our first address in the

United States was 242 East 23rd Street in Manhattan.

SIGRIST: Did your uncle like the girl your mother and grandfather, uh, grandmother had found for him?

TELLALIAN: Oh, they had been submitting photographs back and forth. My uncle was a big man, six, uh, almost five eleven. And unfortunately we couldn't get anybody that height. So this girl was about five one, five, he didn't like that too much because she was short, but they made a good marriage. They made a go of it. But they had photographs while we were in Piraeus and Istanbul, negotiating. In the meantime, after we got her okayed, we sent her photograph and they approved. There were a lot of marriages like that in those days.

SIGRIST: Yeah. We just don't hear about them that often. Tell me, can you describe your first apartment for me in America? What did it look like on the inside?

TELLALIAN: 42nd Street, excuse me, 23rd Street our apartment was a walkup, naturally, and we had about five or six rooms upstairs. But there's only one bathroom for the three floors. There was a first floor, second floor, third floor. The bathroom was on the

second floor, so we had to come downstairs to go to the bathroom. That didn't last too long, and they got, my parents got another apartment, as soon as they were earning money, you know, repairing. My father had to learn how to repair rugs.

SIGRIST: They went into business with your uncle?

TELLALIAN: Here he couldn't get into electro-typing or anything like that. The kind of work that he was doing, they're all unionized here and he could nowhere get it. So his brother taught him repairing Oriental rugs.

SIGRIST: Did your father feel sort of resentful of that? Did he feel he was doing women's work?

TELLALIAN: Well, it's not considered women's work.

SIGRIST: It's not, okay.

TELLALIAN: This is repairing. Making the new one, as a matter of fact, when they mass production, these Chinese or Persians, men work at it. Like I told you earlier, where they have people speaking through a microphone and about ten, fifteen people in a factory making knots according to, it's a man's job.

SIGRIST: I see, okay. Did your father, did it take him a long time to learn how to do this?

TELLALIAN: It was a little difficult, yes. He (?). But in those days there was no nine-to-five job. They get up in the morning and have breakfast and go work, at lunch time have lunch and go back, have dinner and go back. It's all in the same house. It was sometime ten, twelve hours in that deal.

SIGRIST: It's like it's his entire life.

TELLALIAN: And then he was, he had, his uncle was, used to bring the outside work. He brought the work and took it out. And then whatever we ate, what groceries and everything, was coming out of his kitchen. They were partners. They had formal partners. My mother and my father, one, and uncle was the other. In other words, everything was, my father's shares included my mother, too. The two had to work with one of his. But they did this for a while, and then my father got a job privately, someone else. Then we moved out, and he got started earning. Then my mother went out and worked, found a job doing rugs, so we were fine. Then they had me

in school.

SIGRIST: I was going to say, tell me about, tell me about some of your first impressions of New York City. Now, you've already been to some major cities on your way to America. What did you see in New York that you had never seen before?

TELLALIAN: Well, tall buildings. That's, the fact is, the Statue of Liberty everybody went on the side of the ship to look. You know, I was too young. I had no knowledge of history or nothing, so it didn't impress me too much. But the buildings, tall buildings, I had never seen big buildings there. Everything was one, two stories, even in those countries. My first impression of a trolley, in Smyrna, that Izmir, that's alongside the pier, the trolley line, horse-driven trolley. So we were going to Constantinople. Passengers weren't permitted to go. My mother had a brother there. He came on board to see it, and he said, they asked the skipper of the ship if he could take my nephew out and take a walk. "Yeah," he said, "go ahead. The ship's not going to leave for a while." So I walked, and then he put me on the trolley, the

horse-driven trolley on one track. Then they bought me baklava and a lot of food and things like that.

SIGRIST: How did you learn English in America?

TELLALIAN: Well, it was a little difficult. Young people learn very rapidly. I had a little rough time. I didn't understand the teacher. We arrived in March 1st, March 31st we got out, at twenty days, from Ellis Island. Then Easter was there, Easter vacation. So by the first time I went to school was about May, and naturally I flunked the first term, and I had difficulty, and the teachers weren't very cooperative. My name they couldn't, they, my uncle had registered me as Hagop. The teachers made a mess of my name, Hagop, Jacob, Hockup. All kinds of, and the kids used to laugh. So they, so a friend of my said, "Jack, Hagop is Jacob. Let's call him Jack." So we went to the Board of Education and changed my name to Jack.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember any specific difficulties you had learning English, maybe difficulties with certain words or . . .

TELLALIAN: No. As a matter of fact, since I flunked the first

term, I was here two months, when I became, the second September came, that same September, when I went in first grade, well, I was an A student because I had already learned so much, and some teachers were very cooperative. I learned, that's no problem. As a matter of fact, they even tried to, I was eight years old and among seven-year-olds. They wanted to know if I knew any mathematics. If I knew some mathematics, math is international. But I hadn't learned anything on the other side. So I had to stay, well, I made pretty good. I made a rapid advance, RA's. Then I made up that year. I made three years in two. Then I went to high school in commerce. I studied bookkeeping. I did very well. I did in 1932, I don't have to tell you that, Depression. I couldn't go to college. My father wasn't making much. So they told me, you know, they believe in, Europeans believe in having a golden bracelet, a golden, you know what the golden bracelet is? It's a trade, go and learn a trade. So we had some friends in the graphic arts. They, I got, it was rough there, too. Apprentice that they took, and you work for nothing, three dollars a week after two months, you know. But things got better,

thank God, through, after Franklin D. Roosevelt, they organized us and became union, and then I became a member of the graphic arts and we did very well.

SIGRIST: Did your parents learn English, or did they not learn English?

TELLALIAN: Very little. See, my father stayed in the rug business. All the people they dealt with were rug dealers. Oriental rugs, or resale, importers, so predominantly the language was Armenian, or Turkish. Mom was better, she learned English better than my father, because she did some shopping, she, you know, it didn't bother her. She mis-pronounced the name or said something. Women have a tendency to learn. My father was a little backward in learning the language, but he managed.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about the religious life here in America.

TELLALIAN: You know, when you come from a ghetto, you happen to create another ghetto in the new country. When we came here, we wanted to be with our people, Armenians. So our church was at 27th Street, and we

have Armenian schools there. So they wanted to keep our culture. See, this country doesn't condemn you for being, not following this country's religion. It's a free country. You can pray as you wish. So they had the tendency to create a ghetto. All the Armenians were between 23rd Street through 33rd Street on the East Side. All the restaurants, all the social clubs. And gradually, as the next generation came about, then we spread out. Now I'm in the Bronx and my son is in Nassau County, you know, that's how it is.

SIGRIST: But at that time, in the '20s, everyone was sort of . . .

TELLALIAN: We were all together, yes. And we had the church picnics, we all go together, Van Cortlandt Park, with our groceries and shish kabob and watermelon, on the subway. Imagine carrying a whole melon.

SIGRIST: Did you ever experience any kind of prejudice in New York because you were from a foreign country, or anything like that?

TELLALIAN: You see, when you're being condemned by a, you're used to being persecuted, there wasn't anything like

what we were accustomed to, so this was a blessing, because nobody bothered us.

SIGRIST: So your parents, of course, never wanted to go back to Turkey?

TELLALIAN: Oh, definitely, definitely. This was God's country.

SIGRIST: In our last couple of minutes, can you tell me about the person that you married, and when that happened, and your children.

TELLALIAN: Well, I married another Armenian girl, and she, her parents were born on the other side, and she was the first generation American. My wife was born in Newark, New Jersey.

SIGRIST: What is her name?

TELLALIAN: Her name is Margaret Elizabeth Suzmejian, was her name.

SIGRIST: Can you spell her last . . .

TELLALIAN: S-U-Z-M-E-J-I-A-N.

SIGRIST: And when did you marry?

TELLALIAN: When I did I marry?

SIGRIST: When?

TELLALIAN: Uh, we got married on February 16, 1941.

SIGRIST: I see. And children?

TELLALIAN: We have two children. One is with me here, that's Raymond, the first born. He was born in April, April 3, 1942, a year later. And then we had another daughter in '46. That was, and then there was a war in between. After Raymond was born, I went into the service in 1945, '44 and '45 I was stationed in Key West, so Raymond was with me down there, but when we came after the war was over, we decided to have another child, and this was Diane. And she's married now. She has three children. Raymond has two children. We made a successful visit to America. (Mr. Sigrist laughs) I always say, "This is God's country."

SIGRIST: Well, Mr. Tellalian, this is probably a good place for us to end. I want to thank you very much for coming out here on this very lovely Saturday and letting us ask you some questions about . . .

TELLALIAN: If there's anything else you want to know, that's

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all I can know. Well, it's, that's all I can say.

SIGRIST: Well, that's a lot to say. Anyway . . .

TELLALIAN: How long have we been here?

SIGRIST: An hour, we've been at this. This is Paul Sigrist signing off at Ellis Island with Jack Tellalian on Saturday, May 15, 1993.