

EI-032

MARY ALJIAN HOVHANESIAN

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SYRIA (ARMENIAN), 1920

AGE 7

RESIDENCE: ALEPPO

RESIDENCE IN US: WEST HOBOKEN, NJ

PORT OF EMBARKATION: LE HAVRE

SIGRIST: Good morning. This is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. It's Wednesday, March 20th, and we're here in Lyndhurst, New Jersey, with Mary Hovhanesian, who came from Syria in 1920 when she was seven years old. Good morning.

HOVHANESIAN: Good morning.

SIGRIST: Could you please give us your full name, when I say that, I mean your maiden name and your date of birth, please?

HOVHANESIAN: My name was Aljian, Mary Aljian. It is now

Hovhanesian.

SIGRIST: Could you spell . . .

HOVHANESIAN: Aljian? A-L-J-I-A-N. And now it's H-O-V-H-A-N-E-S-I-A-N. And my birth date is May 11, 1913.

SIGRIST: I see. And what town were you born in?

HOVHANESIAN: In Aleppo, Syria.

SIGRIST: Aleppo. Could you spell that, please?

HOVHANESIAN: A-L-E-P-P-O.

SIGRIST: Where in Syria is that?

HOVHANESIAN: It's in the northern, the northern part, I guess, northwestern part of Syria. It's near the Euphrates River, I understand.

SIGRIST: Could you describe the town a little bit to us? Was it a big town?

HOVHANESIAN: Well, Aleppo, compared to the other towns in Syria, was like a metropolis. And there was a lot of trading back and forth, you know. The caravans used to go through. In fact, my grandfather used

to do a lot, he was a tailor, he used to do a lot of sewing and designing for the people, you know, when I say caravan I mean like the big shots, you know. They used to go also by camelback, horseback, whatever. And, like I said, it was a big city compared to other cities. It was, I mean, I have to compare it with something. Compared to here it's nothing like here was a very, especially it was seventy years ago, there was a lot of changes even then from, even now from then there's a lot of changes. Excuse me. (she clears her throat) And it was easy living, very easy.

SIGRIST: Were there big buildings in town? When you say it was . . .

HOVHANESIAN: The buildings that I, I don't remember, I remember, are mainly my grandfather's house which you walked in, it was a wall, it was a stone wall on the outside. You opened the door, you walked in. That's the property, which had a big courtyard in the middle. And on one side was our living quarters and on the other side was, like,

when my mother and father got married they took those quarters. And we used to go up on the roof on very hot days and sleep on the roof, you know. You could do it at that time because there wasn't rain any minute, you know, that you could, unexpected rain. Very mild climate, a beautiful climate. That's about all I could remember, really.

SIGRIST: In the courtyard . . .

HOVHANESIAN: The courtyard, I'm saying, is bigger than this, these two rooms here.

SIGRIST: Did you have flowers in the courtyard?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, on the side they had flowers, growing flowers and lines of different types. A little bit, a very small area, very small.

SIGRIST: Did your grandfather own the whole . . .

HOVHANESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And you lived with your grandfather.

HOVHANESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Who else lived there?

HOVHANESIAN: My grandfather, my grandmother, my mother, of course, and my uncles. No, no, the uncles weren't there then. Yes, one uncle and two aunts.

SIGRIST: What side of the family are these grandparents from?

HOVHANESIAN: My father's side.

SIGRIST: I see. Talk a little bit about your grandfather. You said he was a tailor.

SIGRIST: My grandfather was a tailor. I, my memory of him mostly is when I woke up in the morning and he's sitting at his, they called it a desk in Arabic, but actually it's a large table, and he's cutting fabric. And I'd wake up to the sound of the scissors, you know, cutting the fabric. And he was a very austere, severe guy, you know, and he worked hard for his family. I mean, there was nothing else to do there, you know, you just work hard for your family and keep the family together. We had a nice life, you know, it wasn't, we

weren't poor or anything.

SIGRIST: What did your grandfather look like?

HOVHANESIAN: My grandfather, he looked just like my father. He was about seven, eight, seven, eight or nine, had a moustache. And I mean a moustache, a big moustache. And quite handsome.

SIGRIST: Dark hair?

HOVHANESIAN: Well, when I remember he had gray hair, it was graying. I guess it was dark to begin with.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk about your parents. Let's talk about your father first of all. What was his name?

HOVHANESIAN: His name was Salim, S-A-L-I-M. And he had an opportunity to come to the States, but he couldn't afford to bring my mother and myself, so he figured he'd come here first, save enough money, and then send for me and my mother. Well, that was in 1913, right after, about a month or so after I was born. When he came, by the time he got himself together, got a job, got some money

gathered together, the war broke out, World War I. Of course, you know that the travel had stopped. There was no boats going back and forth, and they were separated, my mother and father. They were separated from that time until 1920, that we came. In the meantime, my mother stayed with her in-laws. Her parents lived nearby, but we always lived in my father's, in my grandfather's house.

SIGRIST: What did your father do before he went to America?

HOVHANESIAN: Tailor with his father, yeah.

SIGRIST: Was he one of many children?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. There were eight children in the family.

SIGRIST: I see. And what was your mother's name?

HOVHANESIAN: My name was, her name was Susan.

SIGRIST: And you said that her family lived nearby.

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Talk about her side of the family a little

bit.

HOVHANESIAN: Her side of the family, it was a very joyful family. They were musicians. My grandfather used to play the violin. My mother had a pretty nice voice, and an uncle of mine used to play the, what they would call the O-U-D. It's a Middle Eastern instrument. And every Friday night or Saturday night we'd have a party in the house. The neighbors would come in. Everybody would bring something in, you know, they, I don't know if they drank but, you know, just had fun, you know, playing music and dancing, and made their own entertainment.

SIGRIST: Would you say that her side of the family was much more light-hearted than your father's side of the family?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: How did the two families get along?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, they got along great.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of opportunities for the two

families to . . .

HOVHANESIAN: I don't remember. That much I don't remember.

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about religious life.
What were you?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't remember what kind of a religious life I, all I know is that they used to send me to the Armenian school, which was quite a distance from our house. So then they decided to send me to a Catholic school because it was closer. But all in all my faith was Armenian. It still is Armenian. Armenian Apostolic, that's what they call it. I was too young to remember anything religious there.

SIGRIST: Do you remember holiday celebrations at all?

HOVHANESIAN: No.

SIGRIST: You talked about parties, but these, you don't remember any specific celebrations?

HOVHANESIAN: No. It was mainly the, you know, weekends.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk a little bit about school

life. How old were you when you started school?

HOVHANESIAN: Here?

SIGRIST: No.

HOVHANESIAN: Over there? Five.

SIGRIST: And do you have any recollections . . .

HOVHANESIAN: Uh, the recollection I have is that we were taught French. We had to learn French there because it was French mandate. Syria was a French mandate at that time. And I know I, when I came here I knew a little French, and I must have learned Arabic to read and write. I don't remember. I must have.

SIGRIST: Did your mother speak French also?

HOVHANESIAN: No. She spoke Arabic until she got married, and then she, although she and her father, I mean, they were of Armenian descent, but having been in Syria for such a long time, they lost the Armenian language and they just spoke Arabic. So that when my mother and father got married, she didn't know Arabic. And when they talked, when they spoke Armenian she thought that they were talking about

him, about her, rather. So, and then by living with them she learned the language.

SIGRIST: I see. Why did her side of the family leave Armenia and go to Syria?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know. I would imagine for any other reason just to get away from the Turks.

SIGRIST: I see. Let's talk about, who did the cooking in the house?

HOVHANESIAN: My grandmother, my mother, my aunts.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did they cook?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know, I can't, I remember my grandmother sitting in the kitchen making bread. It was like a round iron opened, you know, round metal. And she would slap the dough right on top of the, you know, the heated iron there. And it would come up baked, beautiful baked bread. And I remember her maybe chopping parsley for one thing. I remember particularly the day before we were going to leave to come to America, she was standing there cooking things to take with us. They thought that we

weren't going to have anything to eat on the boat, you know. And crying, and cooking, and crying and cooking. That I remember very well.

SIGRIST: You talked a little bit about your grandfather. Talk a little bit about your grandmother. What did she look like?

HOVHANESIAN: She was very work-worn. After eight kids you could imagine, you know. And she was a very tired looking woman. That's all I can say about her.

SIGRIST: Was she thin? Was she heavy?

HOVHANESIAN: She was thin, she was thin, yeah. Poor grandma.

SIGRIST: What, let's talk a little bit about the decision to come to America. You said your father was already here. What job did he get when he got here?

HOVHANESIAN: He got mainly operator in women's clothes, you know, either what they used to call petticoats at that time, you know. Or skirts, or whatever he could get.

SIGRIST: Was this factory work?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: And did he remain in New York?

HOVHANESIAN: It was, he, oh, he travelled all over. Wherever his uncle used to go, he would travel with them, you know.

SIGRIST: Exactly, explain to me how your father actually came here. You said he had the opportunity. Was there somebody already here?

HOVHANESIAN: The opportunity was this: that his cousin had bought this ticket in his own name. And for one, I don't know what the reason was, he couldn't make it, so he sold the ticket for my father. Actually, my father came under a different name, you know. But they straightened out afterwards when he got his citizenship papers. That was all straightened out. The opportunity was that. Otherwise, the ticket was going to go for nothing, you know.

SIGRIST: So there was no one here then that . . .

HOVHANESIAN: No, none aside from his uncle. He had an uncle

here, and his family, his uncle's family.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about that uncle.
What was the uncle doing here?

HOVHANESIAN: The uncle, over here he was, you know, jobwise,
you mean?

SIGRIST: Yeah.

HOVHANESIAN: He had a grocery store, and he was a butcher also
in Union City most of his, most of the days that I
remember.

SIGRIST: And so it was, so when your father came over
here in 1913 he hooked up with this uncle.

HOVHANESIAN: He stayed with him for a while until he got a job,
and then he got a room, a furnished room
someplace.

SIGRIST: The, you said the uncle moved around with him.

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, they went, they lived in Virginia, I know,
for a while, and then they went someplace else. I
don't know. I know they moved around for a while,
and then they ended up in Union City. West New

York. Not West New York, West Hoboken.

SIGRIST: Was there communication between your father and your mother while he was gone?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Much communication.

SIGRIST: He was writing to her.

HOVHANESIAN: Well, he would write to her in Armenian, but of course she didn't know how to read Armenian, so she had it read by someone else to her, that uncle that I'm telling you about. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: I see. Were there other brothers and sisters? I'm sorry, I don't remember if I asked you that.

HOVHANESIAN: Yes. Well there were, there was a brother who lived in Beirut at that time. There was another brother who had left home and gone to Egypt.

SIGRIST: These were much older than yourself?

HOVHANESIAN: Uh, oh, yeah. Oh, yes. And in the house lived my Uncle Leon, the one that I'm telling you about, the story about getting into Ellis Island, and two aunts.

SIGRIST: I see. Okay. So the father, your father was communicating with your mother back and forth. Tell me a little bit about when you finally decided to come, or when it was finally, you were finally able to come.

HOVHANESIAN: I couldn't say. I don't know.

SIGRIST: He sent, did your father send money to you?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: So you were saving up the money . . .

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk a little bit about leaving and coming here. You said you remembered your grandmother cooking and crying. Do you remember packing, or do you remember what you took?

HOVHANESIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Other than the food that your grandmother made?

HOVHANESIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Uh, who came?

HOVHANESIAN: My mother, myself and my uncle.

SIGRIST: This was Uncle Leon.

HOVHANESIAN: Uncle Leon, my father's brother.

SIGRIST: I see. And what port did you leave from?

HOVHANESIAN: From what city? From Aleppo.

SIGRIST: But where did you pick up the boat?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, no. We went by train from Aleppo I think to Beirut. Then in Beirut I think we took a boat. I'm not sure, to Egypt.

SIGRIST: Do you remember that train ride at all?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What was that like?

HOVHANESIAN: Very exciting for me because I had never been on a train before, you know. It was very, very exciting.

SIGRIST: Was that a long train ride?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't remember. It can't be too long because, I mean, hours. It wasn't days, you know. We must have taken a boat from Beirut to Egypt because there is water there. I mean, the Suez Canal there, you have to cross it. I'm sure they didn't have trains over that canal overpass, whatever it is.

SIGRIST: I see. And where did the boat leave from?
I'm sorry, I forgot.

HOVHANESIAN: (she sighs) If I'm not mistaken, it left from, after we got to Egypt, it left from Egypt, we went on to Italy. We, in Italy we just, we just, we didn't disembark from the boat. We stayed on the boat overnight. And I could see Mount Vesuvius there someplace. And after that we went to Milan and we stayed there for a few weeks. The reason for waiting here and waiting there was to wait for passage. And then from Milan we went to France. We went to Paris, France. And from Paris we came straight over here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, you said you were in Milan for a length of time. Do you remember any of that?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. The only thing that I remember, they had, of all things a beautiful cemetery there that the most, the cheaper of the monuments there, there would be like a showpiece over here. One monument was like a little, tiny miniature cathedral. When I'm saying miniature, it must have been about two stories high. It looked gorgeous, all white and beautiful. That's what I remember.

SIGRIST: So you said you stayed there about three weeks.

HOVHANESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Where did you stay?

HOVHANESIAN: In hotels, in hotels, yeah.

SIGRIST: In different hotels, or in the same hotel?

HOVHANESIAN: Each city in a whole different, I mean, we didn't go from hotel to hotel in any one minute, in any one city. But it, in Egypt, in Beirut we stayed

at my uncle's. First one uncle, then the other
uncle.

SIGRIST: I see. Were there any other people from that
town travelling with you?

HOVHANESIAN: Not that I remember. I don't think so.

SIGRIST: So you were in Milan for a while, and then you
went to France. And then it was from France that
you . . .

HOVHANESIAN: To here.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where in France you left from?

HOVHANESIAN: Paris. We took the boat, La Havre, from Paris.

SIGRIST: How long was the boat ride?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know. It looked, it felt like very long
at that time.

SIGRIST: Sure. Do you remember anything about the boat
ride?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. I had a, I had pets, guinea pigs, three of
them.

SIGRIST: That you brought with you.

HOVHANESIAN: That I brought with me. I don't know how we got away with it, but I had them. And I remember my mother and my uncle, they were getting tired of this ship food, you know, the food that they served on boat. So she gets up one day, she decided to cook something of her own. I guess she had stuff, you know. And then either the captain or somebody, they came, they said, "You can't have a fire." It was like a little Sterno fire, you know. That I remember. And I remember the other people like making a fuss over me, a seven-year-old kid, of course, you make a fuss over, you know. That's about all I remember from the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you traveled in the boat? What were your accommodations?

HOVHANESIAN: Uh, it wasn't first class. I don't know. I don't know what the . . .

SIGRIST: Were there a lot of people?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yeah. There were a lot of people.

SIGRIST: Did you get sick?

HOVHANESIAN: No. My mother did.

SIGRIST: Was it a smooth voyage or a rough voyage?

HOVHANESIAN: I couldn't really, I don't remember that. I couldn't say.

SIGRIST: You said your mother got sick. Do you remember any of that?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes. She stayed in her room for quite a while. She just couldn't come out.

SIGRIST: You said that they didn't like the food very much. What kind of stuff did they feed you on the boat?

HOVHANESIAN: Well, whatever it was, it was very alien to them, you know. They hadn't eaten anything but Middle Eastern food all their life. And just to be thrown at different food, you know, it was too much for them.

SIGRIST: You said that there was a lot of people on the boat. Were they all Syrian, or were they . . .

HOVHANESIAN: They were a mixture. Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty at all?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

SIGRIST: Describe that a little bit to me.

HOVHANESIAN: That, well, it didn't mean much to me, but seeing the other people getting excited, it meant a lot to me.

SIGRIST: Did they bring you up on deck or . . .

HOVHANESIAN: On the deck of what?

SIGRIST: The boat.

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah, yeah. I think we must have seen that one, I must have seen that when they brought us over the ferry from Staten Island to West Hoboken. I'm not sure. Not on boat, not on board boat.

SIGRIST: But they did bring you to Ellis Island.

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yes. Oh, yeah. We spent the night there.

SIGRIST: You did.

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: Well, let's talk a little bit about Ellis
Island. Tell me what you remember about Ellis
Island.

HOVHANESIAN: Well, when I saw it, when I went there visiting
several months ago, I remembered the largeness of
the place. But what I remember from then was
stacks of the bed. Maybe there were just two
stacks, but they seemed like three and four
stacks, you know. And very plain, very, (she
pauses) Very plain, there was nothing, just
stacks of iron bed on top of each other. That's
all I remember.

SIGRIST: Why did you have to stay overnight?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know. Maybe my father couldn't come and
pick us up that one day when we came, so we had to
stay over. I'm not sure why.

SIGRIST: As a little girl of seven, how did you feel
about all this? Were you frightened?

HOVHANESIAN: Very excited. My whole thing was that I'm going to come and see my father. I don't think anything else mattered to me.

SIGRIST: You'd never seen your father.

HOVHANESIAN: No, only with pictures.

SIGRIST: Did you have photographs when you were in Syria?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. He sent pictures once in a while, yeah. That's why I was able to recognize him when I saw him in the hall there.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about your mother, how she felt at Ellis Island.

HOVHANESIAN: Well, she felt wonderful about coming here, but then again she left her father, her sisters, her brothers, her mother-in-law, who she grew to love. My mother-in-law, my grandmother loved my mother as much as she did her own children. She had mixed feelings about everything.

SIGRIST: I see. They asked your mother if she could read at Ellis Island?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Could you tell us that story, please?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. So, being that she didn't know English, she was asked, and my uncle interpreted for her, whether or not she spoke, she read and wrote Arabic. And he said to her, "Say yes." And she said, in Arabic, "But I don't know." He said, "You just say, 'yes.'" So she said, "Yes." They handed her a book in Arabic. She said to my uncle, "Now what do I do?" He says, in Arabic, of course, he said, "Open a page and recite the Lord's Prayer in Arabic." So she did. As soon as she did that, they passed her. (they laugh)

SIGRIST: When you stayed overnight, did you sleep with your mother.

HOVHANESIAN: I think so.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when you stayed overnight if there were lots of other people who were staying overnight with you?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, there were.

SIGRIST: Was that a scary experience?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know. Not that I remember.

SIGRIST: Were there lots of people at Ellis Island?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yes. There were many, many people. It was just like they showed in the pictures at Ellis Island, that movie that they showed. Just throngs of people.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any of the examinations? Did they examine you medically?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Okay. So you stayed overnight. Did your father come the next day?

HOVHANESIAN: The next day, yes, he came.

SIGRIST: And do you remember seeing him?

HOVHANESIAN: I remember seeing him from ten, fifteen feet. I pointed, "There's my father." And, of course, I ran over to him, he picked me up and hugged me. Yeah.

SIGRIST: And your mother, was she happy to see him,
 too?

HOVHANESIAN: Very, very, happy, yeah. Very happy.

SIGRIST: What did you do after he picked you up? Where
 did you go?

HOVHANESIAN: We went again to my uncle's house, his uncle's
 house. We stayed there a few days and then they
 rented one of the floors in the same building.
 And the uncle's wife took to my mother very
 quickly, you know, and they became like mother and
 daughter, almost.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the apartment that you
 rented?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. It was railroad rooms. Two bedrooms,
 living room. I don't think there was a dining
 room. No, no dining room. Bathroom and a
 kitchen.

SIGRIST: And this was in West Hoboken.

HOVHANESIAN: West Hoboken, yes.

SIGRIST: And what floor was it on?

HOVHANESIAN: Second floor. We were directly above my father's
 uncle's family.

SIGRIST: I see. And by this time did your father have
 his own business?

HOVHANESIAN: He was still working for a man who had a dry
 cleaning shop in Journal Square at that time. So
 after he had, after we had been here for a while,
 he said to my father, he said, "Sam, we have to
 get you a store." He said, "I can't afford it,
 you know, I just brought them over. I can't
 afford to buy a store." He said, "Never mind.
 We'll go look for a store. I'll help you out."
 So they found a store on Grant Avenue in Jersey
 City, an existing dry cleaning store. They bought
 it for the sum of three hundred dollars. And my
 father was worried, "How am I going to pay for
 this thing?" You know, he said, "Don't worry
 about it." He said, "We'll buy you the store.
 When you can pay me back, okay. If you can't,
 forget it. You don't have to worry about it." So

he opened up the store. I mean, he bought over the store and within several months he paid him back. Then business started like you wouldn't believe. It was bringing in five, six, seven hundred dollars a week. But in the meantime my father's brothers, sisters rather, one by one, the one came here. The sister got sick over there, she died. One uncle got sick, he died. Another uncle got sick, he died. Then my grandmother got sick. In the meantime, my father's sending money over there. Two, three, four hundred dollars a week was nothing.

SIGRIST: His intention was to bring them over here?

HOVHANESIAN: No, to help them during their sickness. Doctors and medicine and everything.

SIGRIST: What was everyone sick with?

HOVHANESIAN: They say T.B., but I don't believe it. I don't believe it was T.B.

SIGRIST: What could it have been?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know. I don't know. And then my uncle,

my grandfather lived the longest. He was eighty-five years old. He fell and he had a fracture someplace. And then after that he had a stroke, and after eighty-five years old he died from the stroke. I guess it was some months later, I don't know.

SIGRIST: But the one sister who was still alive did come.

HOVHANESIAN: One sister came here, yes.

SIGRIST: When did she come?

HOVHANESIAN: She came (she pauses) at the same time we came, that's right. Because we had met her in Paris, she was traveling with my cousin, with a cousin of mine. And we had left the hotel, my mother, my uncle and myself, we had left the hotel one day, and we came back and they said, "Mr. Aljian, there was someone here to see you, a cousin of your's." He says, "I have no cousins here in Paris." He says, "Yeah, they're going to be back later tonight." And it was them. They knew that we were there. How they knew we were in that

particular hotel, I don't know. And it was a very nice reunion. So we came almost the same time.

SIGRIST: I see. So when you came to America it was actually all of you on the same boat?

HOVHANESIAN: I don't know whether they came on the same boat or not.

SIGRIST: But soon thereafter.

HOVHANESIAN: Soon thereafter. They might have come before us, I don't know.

SIGRIST: What was the sister's name?

HOVHANESIAN: Kleeia. That's Arabic for, it means like "wedding."

SIGRIST: K-L-Y?

HOVHANESIAN: K-L-E-E-I-A we spelled it, Kleeia.

SIGRIST: Did she live with, did she live with you?

HOVHANESIAN: She lived with my father and my mother and me, and then she got married pretty soon after that.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother go to work when she came to America?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, she did.

SIGRIST: What did she do?

HOVHANESIAN: She did, uh, operating work, you know, on clothes, children's clothes, infants clothes.

SIGRIST: In a factory.

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did, let's talk about you going to school. How did you learn English?

HOVHANESIAN: That is an amazing thing, as far as I'm concerned. I have no remembrance of difficulty. It seemed like one morning I got up and I knew English.

SIGRIST: Did they enroll you in school right away?

HOVHANESIAN: Yeah. I went and my cousin, younger cousin, no, not younger than me, younger than the other cousins. He was about fourteen, fifteen years old, and he was going to the same school. And

he'd help out like, you know, if I didn't know anything in English, they would call him over and see what she said, you know, they would help him out. But it seemed like overnight I learned English. I had no problems at all, no difficulty.

SIGRIST: What about your mother and father? How did they learn English?

HOVHANESIAN: Well, my father had learned a little bit by when he was here, these seven years, you know. And my mother, well, she was, after we came here she died nine years later. She had an automobile accident in Brooklyn. She spoke broken English. She made herself understood.

SIGRIST: Did, had your mother been working all that time, those nine years before she died?

HOVHANESIAN: She was working for a while, and then three years later my brother was born, and three years later my sister was born. So after she had my brother and sister she didn't work any more. She helped my father in the store. I don't know if you'd call that working.

SIGRIST: Did you ever help your father in the store?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, oh, yeah.

SIGRIST: What sorts of things did you have to do?

HOVHANESIAN: Uh, first of all, I used to wait on customers, take the clothes in, mark them, and put them where the cleaning is going to go out. And then when they came back I would have, I would press the dresses, you know, the silks, and do tailoring. I learned how to sew, also. General, you know, general manager, you might say, in the store.

SIGRIST: Did your father pay you for that?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: So this was really sort of your first job.

HOVHANESIAN: That's right.

SIGRIST: What about, of course, your brother, the brother and sister that were born here would be so much younger, but did they eventually help out, too? Or . . .

HOVHANESIAN: Yes. Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: So you all were pressed into service.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Let's talk a little bit about your mother again. Was she still doing the cooking in the house?

HOVHANESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And did she cook in a Middle Eastern sort of way, or did she try to Americanize?

HOVHANESIAN: No. Well, a little bit, yeah. She used to make some, uh, bakery, you know, baked goods American style. But mainly she was Middle Eastern cook. She was a terrific cook.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Did she teach you how to cook?

HOVHANESIAN: I learned. She didn't teach me, but I learned.

SIGRIST: Did she make something that was your favorite? Was there one thing that she made that you really,

really liked?

HOVHANESIAN: I can't say. I liked everything that she cooked.

SIGRIST: Did your parents, um, have a religious life here in America?

HOVHANESIAN: Uh-huh, yes.

SIGRIST: Talk a little bit about that.

HOVHANESIAN: The religious life, well, we had the Armenian church close by, maybe two or three blocks from our house. Sundays they were in church, baptism was in that church and the marriages, whoever married, you know, I got married in that church, too.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the church?

HOVHANESIAN: The Holy Cross Armenian Church on 27th Street in Union City. It was at that time, at that time it was West Hoboken.

SIGRIST: Did, do you remember, did you have to, were you confirmed in that church?

HOVHANESIAN: No.

SIGRIST: You didn't do anything like that. All right.
Let me just ask you one more question. Are you
glad that you came to America?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yes. Very glad.

SIGRIST: Were your parents happy, too?

HOVHANESIAN: Oh, yes. They were.

SIGRIST: Good. Well, I want to thank you very much for
having us in your house . . .

HOVHANESIAN: Thank you for coming.

SIGRIST: And for letting me ask you your deepest and
darkest memories of your childhood. (she
laughs) This is Paul Sigrist signing off for the
National Park Service.