**EI-344**
**JAMES MELCON**
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**TURKEY (ARMENIAN), 1924**
**AGE 12**
**PASSAGE ON "THE PARIS"**

**PORT OF EMBARKATION: LE HAVRE**
**RESIDENCES: TURKEY: KARPOOT**
**US: WEST NEW YORK, NJ**

LEVINE: This is Janet Levine for the National Park Service. It's July 6, 1993, and I'm here at Ellis Island in the Oral History Studio with James Melcon. Mr. Melcon was born Yacob Lulagian. He was born an Armenian in Turkey in 1912. He left Turkey in 1922 with his family for Syria. There they lived for two years, and then came to Ellis Island. They were detained at Ellis Island for ten months, which we will talk about. Then they went to Mexico for about another ten months, left for Cuba for about a month, and then came

by ship into the New York Harbor in 1926. I want to welcome you, Mr. Melcon. I look forward to a most interesting historical and personal story.

MELCON: Thank you.

LEVINE: Let's start with your birth date.

MELCON: First let me correct the spelling of, the sound of the name. It's not Yacob, it's Hargob.

LEVINE: Hargob.

MELCON: Yeah. Which is Yacob, you know, in a different language. But in the Armenian sound it's Hargob.

LEVINE: Hargob Lulagian.

MELCON: Yeah. And also Hargob means James. Now, there are, biblically there is Jacob, the son of Abraham, and there is also James, not Jacob, James, one of the apostles of Jesus. So in our language Hargob could also mean one or the other. So today I am James.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, tell me your birth date and the name of the town you were born in, and if you would spell it, please.

MELCON: Yeah. According to records, I was born January 6, 1912. Now, my mother used to make a big deal about it, because that's the Armenian Christmas, January 6.

LEVINE: And what town were you born in?

MELCON: Oh, it's, now, it has different sounds and different spellings. It's, in English it would be Harpoot, H-A-R-P-O-O-T, Harpoot. In Turkish it was Karpoot, K-A-R, Karpoot. And the reason the name is Karpoot means there was a stone, a very huge stone citadel, and that's how it was named, Harpoot or Karpoot.

LEVINE: And did you live in Harpoot the entire time before you left for Syria?

MELCON: Yes, from 1912 to 1922. Now I'm, I heard you mention that we came to this country, I mean, that we came to Syria. It was my mother, my brother and I. My father is not with us. I'll give you a story about that if you're interested.

LEVINE: Okay. Well, tell me first about Harpoot. What size city, what do you remember from your child recollections of that place?

MELCON: Very beautiful trees. It was not cold. It wasn't

hot. It was one of those cities on top of a hill where we knew everybody and the doors were never locked, and . . .

LEVINE: Was it strictly an Armenian town?

MELCON: No, Harpoot was divided. It was, see, twenty thousand people. Armenians were about eight thousand, the rest were Turks and Kurds. But we had different areas. The Armenians lived in one area, the Turks and Kurds lived somewhere else.

LEVINE: Was there something that defined the area that they lived in? In other words, what did people do? Was there a farming area, or . . .

MELCON: No. No, the city, oh, incidentally Harpoot was the capital of a vilayet, that was, the vilayet was equal to a state. There were six or seven vilayets in Turkey. Harpoot was the capital of one of those vilayets. And it had a very fertilec plain area where they used to grow all kinds of vegetables, cotton, wheat and so on, but the city itself was more or less a residential and manufacturing city. Our section, where we were, there was an American college. It was called the Euphrates College, and we were right near

them. So our, we were almost like a campus. And . . .

LEVINE: Euphrates? Is that what you said?

MELCON: Euphrates, Euphrates, the river.

LEVINE: Like the river, uh-huh.

MELCON: And we did, well, we spoke Armenian. We went to Armenian school. And there were Armenian apostolic churches, the original church, and the Americans brought their Protestant churches too, a few. But at home, as I said, we spoke Armenian. In school our instructions were in Armenian. But when we had to go to do some shopping, we had to deal with the Turks. So, as a result, we picked up a few words.

LEVINE: Were most of the stores that you would, or the marketplaces, would they be Turkish-run?

MELCON: Well, no. There the complication comes in. Before 1915 most of the butchers and food vendors were Turks. And all the others were Armenians or Syrians. That is, the, when you bought some clothing or so on, they were the Armenians. And in my day, after the 1915 massacres or genocide, whatever you call it, there was

no Armenians left. All the stores were run by the Turks. I went back in 1972, that's sixty years later after my birth, expecting to see a city. Well, it was on a hill, as I said, the city was on a hill. And we got up there, I looked around, there was nothing left, absolutely nothing left. All the buildings, everything, was torn down, sort of used the wood for firewood. If I proved to you or somebody else that people lived here fifty years ago, you wouldn't believe me. That's how destroyed the whole place was.

LEVINE: Now, you were only three years old in 1915 when the genocide occurred. But what, maybe you can tell me what you heard, because . . .

MELCON: No, I remember the thing.

LEVINE: You remember something, uh-huh.

MELCON: My father was a pharmacist. He had a, the only pharmacy in town.

LEVINE: What was your father's name, by the way?

MELCON: Melcon.

LEVINE: His first name?

MELCON: That's it. I used his first name as my last name now, Melcon. M-E-L-K-O-N. It doesn't matter how you pronounce it, you spell it, as long as you pronounce "Melkon." He was the pharmacist in town. Because he was the only pharmacist, he was spared. He wasn't supposed to go on any of these marches or deportations. But one morning on the way to his store a strange gendarme, or policeman, if you call, saw him, didn't recognize him, took him to the, into the municipal building where all the Armenians were detained. When they saw, they realized that he had seen what was happening, they wouldn't let him go. Now, the next day we saw eight hundred people were taken out into the valley and completely shot in cold blood. My father's nephew's body fell on him. So two people out of eight hundred came out alive. My father was one of them. He went back, he came back to the city at night in the darkness, and after a couple of days the Kurds, they were like the, you know, underground railroad workers here during the Civil War. For money they used to take you and transport you to the Russian side, which is only two hundred miles. And that's all I remember of him then, but I do remember the drugstore. I remember the Wrigley's

candy, chewing gum, Nestles candy, I remember that. I remember in the back counter of the pharmacy, there was that caduceus, the snake wound around the bar. That was the sign of the doctors, pharmacists.

LEVINE: What was the building like itself? Do you remember it?

MELCON: Of his?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MELCON: Yes, I remember, but it's not, I can't describe it, except that last year when we went to, we went to India, and when I saw people living under the conditions that I thought was today horrible, that's the way we lived, and we didn't see it that way. You see? I don't know, it was a small building next to a han. A han is an area, enclosed area, where different people are, say, shoemakers belong grown here, and people in the textile business belong here, and quite near that we my father's drugstore. So when I went back I saw the walls of these buildings. I asked someone if there was a drugstore here, "Do you remember?" This man said to me, "I'm sixty years old. I don't remember." And somebody else was going to

say something, an older person, they cut him off. "Don't say anything. Say nothing." They said nothing. Now, there were three churches, Armenian churches. And there was one Protestant Church. There were five mosques.

LEVINE: You, what kind of church did the Armenians attend before the genocide?

MELCON: I'm glad you asked that. We are, this is the only thing our family has that we're proud of. We were the first Christian church, established church. Look, they were Christians in Rome, all over the place. There was eighteen, in the year 280 or '83, was the first time the Armenians came, proclaimed Christianity as a distinct religion. So we were, they say Orthodox. Well, let me explain that, too. We call ourselves Apostolic, because the apostles came. Now, in English when you say Orthodox with a capital "O" it means Greek Orthodox, or Russian Orthodox. But the word orthodox means "true to the faith," regular. And also now Catholic, with a C, a capital "C", it means Roman Catholic. With a small c it means universal. So we claim ourselves to be the Catholic Orthodox Apostolic Church. So we're not Catholic, we're not

Orthodox. We're Apostolic. It means we belong to the universal church, and orthodox means "true to the faith." We have the true faith, and we're apostolic. That's how . . .

LEVINE: Wow, that's a wonderful description. Thank you. Okay. What were these, what was the house you lived in, and the pharmacy your father had, what were they made of? Were they stone structures?

MELCON: Uh, well, mud brick, some stone, yes. Some stone, and hardly any wood, because there was no wood around. They used to make bricks, made straw and mud and dried it in the sun. You've seen the pictures of that.

LEVINE: Sure. And what kind of floors? Do you remember what they had on floors?

MELCON: Some floors were wood, but mostly they were, again, cement or some sort of a concrete, I imagine. And they had carpeting. If you notice, the so-called oriental carpets are well-made because they used it on the floor. An oriental carpet would last at least two hundred years. When you see a carpet, an oriental carpet, where the nap is worn slightly, that means it's a hundred years old. That's, we lived, my

father's people, grandfather and so on, my grandfather was a schoolteacher. One of the brothers was a professor at the local college.

LEVINE: What was their last name?

MELCON: Bulagian.

LEVINE: Bulagian.

MELCON: Yeah, yeah. And in 1910 my father had finished pharmacy school in Beirut, Syria. Today it's Lebanon, but it was an American college. I have the diploma at home. He come had back and married my mother about 1911 or so, and I was born in 1912. Oh, there was another child born before me, but he died in infancy.

LEVINE: I see. Now, what was your mother's name and her maiden name?

MELCON: Araxes, Araxes. That's the river, Araxes River.

LEVINE: How do you spell it?

MELCON: Well, in the geography books it's A-R-A-X-E-S, Araxes River. This is a tributary to the Euphrates River. The Euphrates River and the Tigris River come together and run into the, what is it, the . . .

LEVINE: Which way do they run?

MELCON: Into the Persian Gulf, and in between is Mesopotamia, the land between the two rivers. And, oh, my mother's maiden name is Hampartsunian. Hampartsunian is, see, some names had biblical names, some names indicated the occupation you were in. Hampartsunian was met when Jesus went into heaven. He ascended into heaven, Hampartsunian. See, it was a biblical name. And, of course, as I indicated, they were Armenians.

LEVINE: How could, how did you spell that?

MELCON: Hampar, H-A-M-P-A-R, T, which is "sir", U-N-I-A-N. Hampartsunian.

LEVINE: And so you were the oldest child of your mother and father that lived?

MELCON: Well, at the time, because as I said, the one before me died, and there was only two of us left. I mean, I was born in 1912, my brother was born in 1913. In 1915 this whole thing started. My father was separated from us. And we lived from 1915 to 1922, they weren't many in our city, one or two. Maybe there was a Protestant minister, and later on a priest

came in from Istanbul, Turkey, and there was one carpenter that we knew. That was a man. All the young men were under eighteen. The moment the beard began to grow on their face, somehow they managed to get them out of the country. We were not molested because we kept to ourselves and they kept to themselves, that is the Turks, but there was times when I did see some brutality. I don't know what happens in young man, why they grabbed a hold of him and they were beating him, this man, this policeman, with his belt buckle, on the head. Blood all over the place, and the poor man collapsed, the boy. They grabbed him and they took him to the jail. What happened to him, I don't know. But, uh . . .

LEVINE: What were the Kurds doing during the time when, after the genocide and the . . .

MELCON: Well, you know, the Kurds are very interesting people. Racially, ethnically they're closer to us and the Persians, than the Turks. They're not Turks. See, the Turks came from central Asia, while the Kurds, they claimed their history is as old as ours, but there's one slight difference, or big difference. They never settled down in the communities. They were

nomads. They have a language, but no literature, no written language. The average Kurd was a nice person. As I said, he was a nomad. He raised sheep. And Sultan Hamid, the sultan about 1890 or so, he organized the Kurds, gave them a cavalry, to attack the Armenians and Syrians, the non-Mohammedan people, to attack the Christians. The Kurds happened to be Mohammedans. But I have a mixed feeling about them. There were very nice Kurds, and there were those who were bad because they would, they were given a cavalry and ammunition, and also if you can take somebody away from, this man's house from him, it's yours.

LEVINE: What about the Turks? Did you ever know individually any Turks that were kind to Armenians?

MELCON: Yes, yes, yes. There was, see, the Islam, they don't have religious orders. Like there's no bishop or cardinal and so on. Everybody's equal. It was, Imam is the, who holds a certain position, not religiously, politically. From then there's also the seph . . . I forget some of these names. Anyway, the Imam was held in high regard. And he led the prayers in the mosque and so on. And this imam, this particular man who was held in very high regard, he had an infect eye, and

someone said to my father, "Why don't you go see if you can help him out a bit?" My father went and saw the eye was inflamed. He washed it with boric acid solution and so on, and in a couple of days the eye cleared up. So that man was very good to us. In fact, he helped my father escape through the Kurds. The individual man in the Turk we saw was all right. We got along nicely, at my age, twelve. And when the, 1915, when they began to deport the Armenians, they led people, Turks, to go and confiscate whatever you can, and this is what happened. It's just like a shark, when a shark smells or sees blood, he gets excited. This is what happened to the Turks. He got something for nothing. There are a lot of stories, too, how ferocious they were on the marches. My, we lost eighteen people on this so-called march. This is something that the average person couldn't care less.

LEVINE: When you say, "we lost eighteen," were you on that march?

MELCON: No.

LEVINE: No.

MELCON: No. Okay. I'll get to that, too. This imam had

written on our door, had it written on our door, "Leave this house alone." I remember that. So as a result, all the other houses were searched and people driven away. They left us alone. And some, and because of that, now, we had gathered all the family into our house. There are some caves in this city, underground caves, the tunnels. I don't know why they were there, but my mother used to take the young men and women in our family, hide them in there when they were, that's why the Turks, they searched the house, they wouldn't find anybody.

LEVINE: Well, talk about that march of eighteen people. Your father was among them? Is that where he was saved from?

MELCON: My father was among them. He survived.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. And that was through the intervention . . .

MELCON: No, no, no, no. My father used to say that there were eight hundred people on this march, men, only men, to be taken into the valley to be killed, shot. And I never, I figured maybe he's exaggerating. Well, right now there's a book, not written by an Armenian, it's written by the American Consul of Harput, Turkey, the

consul. He saw it, there's a book called The Killing Fields. That's the name of the book. In it it said, it mentions eight hundred people, mentions my father's name, "a young pharmacist came out alive." Didn't know, of course, young, in those days you were a young pharmacist.

LEVINE: How did your father come to come out alive?

MELCON: Okay. Maybe I'm not making it clear. Of the eight hundred people that were sent into the valley and actually literally shot, his nephew was next to him.

LEVINE: Oh, fell on him.

MELCON: Fell on him. And he says, now they were out of ammunition, the Turks, soldiers, they came over with bayonets. Well, he just saw this thing in the dark, he ran away. And luckily they didn't see him, or if they saw him I don't know what happened. And he came back to our city, and this imam helped him find the Kurd to take him across to the Russian side. Now, another little history. Harput was the eastern army headquarters of the Turkish army, because two hundred miles away, maybe a hundred and fifty miles away was the Russian border. So they had, this city was very

highly fortified and a lot of soldiers and so on. And his, another very interesting thing. Because of this eastern headquarters being in Harput, the western powers were keeping an eye on it. There was a so-called English trade mission that was a German gymnasium, school. The French had another school, keep an eye on each other, and the Americans had actually established a college. So it was really a cosmopolitan area. And they were keeping an eye on each other, and also on the Turkish Army.

LEVINE: I see. Now, do you remember any stories about your father as a pharmacist? Did he act as a doctor in some regards, as a pharmacist?

MELCON: Yes. Well, it says there was only two doctors and one pharmacist, so his job was really to act more or less like a doctor. It's coming to this country soon, too. When you have time I'll talk about what's happening here. Yeah, he was, oh, now, there are titles to indicate your position. In effendi, the title effendi is Greek. It means if you're an educated man, if you have gone to college and have a lot of money, you will have effendi. If you have lots of money but average education, you're R. ( they laugh ) You see? And my

father was called Melkon effendi, all the time. Even here today some people call him that.

LEVINE: So your family was relatively comfortable?

MELCON: Yes.

LEVINE: In Turkey.

MELCON: My mother's people were very comfortable, very, very comfortable. They had a lot of farms and so on. But that was all gone, confiscated. And my father's people were average. They were the so-called intellectuals, if you will. There was a professor, there was a pharmacist, two instructors in the school. And my grandfather had his own small school. So they were comfortable, yes. So I have always wondered how did we live after 1915? How did my mother manage? Apparently there must have been some money somewhere. At age twelve I didn't know those things. We didn't have TV and so on. And we were well-off compared to the average person, yes.

LEVINE: So that after 1915 when your father went over the border into Russia, you, your brother and your mother . . .

MELCON: Were left.

LEVINE: Were left, and living in Turkey until 1922.

MELCON: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we pause here, we'll turn over the tape, and resume momentarily.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

LEVINE: Okay. We're resuming now on Side B. I wanted to ask you, what do you think it means to you to have been born Armenian before the genocide, seeing, being there at the time that, your father escaping narrowly and all that. What effect do you think that's had on your life?

MELCON: Now?

LEVINE: Yes, since that time.

MELCON: First of all, the fact that I was old enough to come to this country at a certain age, I could recognize conditions over there, the mentality of the people, and also here. It's like a bridge. As far as Armenians were concerned in Turkey, we were very

highly regarded and awfully jealous of us.

LEVINE: Why was that?

MELCON: Because the Armenians were the shopkeepers. I don't mean just shopkeepers. Wholesalers and so on. The Armenians were in control of the government. The Secretary of the Treasury was an Armenian, the postmaster was an Armenian, although they were in Turkey, see? And we were causing the Turks to be jealous of us. But we were, pardon me for saying this, equal to the Jews then and here. That is, we were privileged, having a lot of things that the average person didn't have, and that was where, people didn't like that. But we were very happy, and we didn't have to apologizer to anybody that we were Armenians. Nobody looked down on us. Some sections of Turkey, more or less bear Bosporus, there were Greeks in the same way. They were Greeks. They were there for centuries before. I'll tell you a story as to what happened to Greece and the Armenians when the Turks came. Genghis Khan, where right now they're glamorizing him as a man of action, in our history, in our textbooks, he was the most bloodthirsty person in existence. And I keep saying God wanted to punish the

people, he created Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan pushed ahead the Turkish people, see. The Turks are not Mongols. They are Turanians. When he came from the north, the north of China, today's Mongolia, he kept pushing the Turkish people ahead of him. It didn't happen overnight, but eventually Turks came into Asia Minor, if you will, that is, Persia, Syria, Armenia, Greece. It didn't happen overnight, too. A couple of centuries. And the Armenians were in this Caucasian area for three thousand years. We can prove that. It's (?), we can prove it. Eventually they took over the country, and they started moving west toward Greece. It took them three hundred years to try to capture Istanbul from the Greeks. In the meantime now we were under their control. And the Arabs, when the Arabs, when Mohammed started his religion, after his death his prophets spread his religion throughout the area. They conquered Iran, Persia, forced them to become Mohammedans. And the Arabs came to Armenia, and they realized they can't stay there too long, because the Arabs liked flat country, warm country. Our area is full of mountains. After fifty years they left and went back, and the Turks took over. The Mongols were looking for a religion. They were

Shamanists of some sort. They came to the Armenians to see what Christianity was, and they seemed to like it. Then the Roman Franciscans went to them and said, "No, no, no, ours is the religion, not theirs. We've got the true religion. And the Mongols said, "If this is the case, we don't want either one of you." And they turned to Islam. Now, if the Mongols had stayed Christians, remained Christians, history would have changed completely. Who knows these things.

LEVINE: Very interesting. Okay. Let's go on, then, to, is there anything else that you would say about your life with your mother and brother? What was your brother's name, by the way?

MELCON: Like I said, Norair, which means Man of the Era, Norair. N-O-R-A-I-R. You have to pronounce those letters as pronounced in Spanish. Norair, which means Man of the New Era, because he was born in 1913. By that time the Turks had, deposed the Sultan, and now there's equality and freedom for all ethnic groups. That was why my father, ( he laughs ) my uncle named him Norair.

LEVINE: I see. Well, you mentioned that you were born on

Christmas. How did the Armenians celebrate Christmas when you were a boy? Do you remember any of that?

MELCON: Oh, it was a big holiday. It was the biggest holiday.

LEVINE: Was it celebrated in much the same way we do it here, or . . .

MELCON: Well, that always amazed me. We had a Christmas tree here, right? There were no Christmas trees, no pine trees, in Armenia. Or, for that matter, any of Syria. And it was the Germans in the war of 1890, 1898, when they had occupied France, and the German soldiers didn't know what to do, so they went into the fields and cut some of those pines and brought them and hung lights to them to celebrate. We didn't have that. We had, it was more or less visiting each other, spending days at end in church, and gifts, yes. Small gifts they used to give out to us. Later on when the war ended, school opened, and we had some people from the United States to come. Again, these were the Protestants trying to convert the Armenians. And one of my schoolteachers, I know this, was dressed as a Santa Claus, he's got a beard. And his shoes, I noticed his shoes are the same shoes he had on in the

morning. ( he laughs ) Oh, now, a bit of an aside. In Hawthorne where we lived, there was a Hawthorne Gospel Church, a very evangelical church. Some years ago, while I had my store, a young man came in, presented his card. Reverend So-and-So. I forget his name. But on the lower right hand side it said, "Formerly missionary to the Greeks." Reverend So-and-So, formerly missionary to the Greeks. I said, "Reverend, this is ridiculous." "What's ridiculous?" "You went to Greece to teach them the religion when Paul was there two thousand years ago?" ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Well, let me ask you this. What was, how did the first World War affect you?

MELCON: Well, if it wasn't for the first World War we wouldn't be here. We were very comfortable. My father had a store. My relatives all were well-to-do. So we were driven away to come here, because there was nowhere else to go.

LEVINE: Well, now, your father left first.

MELCON: He was forced.

LEVINE: He was forced to leave.

MELCON: Yeah.

LEVINE: Now, did you, were there any other ramifications for you directly of the effects of the war?

MELCON: The effects of the (?) war was that my brother and I were without a father. My aunt's children were orphans. Their father was killed. The other aunt's children were orphans. Their father was killed. We were all in our teens. So we played together. We didn't know the difference. We didn't have a father. That's the ramification. It turned out to be a matriarchal society. And we were not allowed to go far outside of the area where the Turks were. It isn't that they would do anything to us, it's just that you stay where you're safe. Now, another very interesting thing, my aunt, that is, this is my, I'll show you a picture, one of my mother's sisters, they had a big house, and their father was killed, and they had a lot of money, and they had a dog. This dog, his name was Jolly, he was happy. He was a beautiful dog. This dog used to follow me from my aunt's house to my house. When he saw our house, he went right back. That dog was watching me. These are the things that I haven't forgotten, see.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. I've read about Armenia on several occasions, but it's been described as kind of a fairy land.

MELCON: To me it was.

LEVINE: What made it so special and beautiful?

MELCON: It was beautiful in my eye, and it was beautiful in the eyes of other people of my age. They came to this country and they were immediately foreigners, but they were, where they were, they have everything they wanted. The winters were horrible, very cold, but the summer was very nice and comfortable. This was the fairyland, because they had everything they wanted. And for six hundred years under the Turkish domination, we were left alone most of the time. And now, as I said, Turkey, the Ottoman empire, was divided into different ethnic groups. In your ethnic group you had your own church, you had your own school, you had your own language. The Turks considered the Armenian ethnic group the loyal group, because we didn't want any problems. We didn't want independence, so to speak. It happened later when, in time, when Greece broke away from Turkey, Bulgaria broke away from Turkey, and Roumania broke away. The

Turkish Empire was disintegrating at the edges. It was too big of an empire. It was the biggest land empire there was. The Armenians said, "Well, what's wrong with us? Why don't we want our country back?" They started to agitate. Not much, just enough to get the attention of the Turks. This is when the genocide started because, if you look at it this way, here's Turkey. Here's the Caspian Sea. Here's the Bosporus, here's the Black Sea. And all this area is disintegrating. And we were right here. Our area, we were right here. If we ever wanted independence, we would have cut Turkey in half. That they didn't tolerate. Another very important thing is there was no minerals, nothing valuable for the so-called western people to come. Now, just as an example, you take Africa. The French, the Belgians, the English, Germans, colonized the area. One particular country they left alone. You know why? There was nothing. That was Ethiopia. There's nothing in Ethiopia, no minerals, nothing. So they didn't care. That's what was happening to us. And one time Lloyd George of England had said, when the Armenians were pleading, "Please help us." He said, "Look, our navy cannot climb the Ararat." Ararat is right in Armenia. Okay.

That's the background.

LEVINE: So how did you and your mother and your brother, what were the circumstances under which you left Turkey for Syria?

MELCON: When, finally after came out Ataturk, toppled the Turkish government, he took over, and started the New Republic of Turkey, and he burned the city of Isminia, it's called Ismir, Isminia. He burned the city completely down, because he wanted to start all over again, and it was a Greek city. And I remember a lot of Greek people coming to our area. There was no place to sleep. We used to sleep in the streets. We used to try to get him to come here as much as they could. Anyway, that's, the point was he wanted to cleanse. Ethnic cleansing is nothing new. He wanted to cleanse the non-Turkish people out of Turkey. Up till 1922 we couldn't even try to get out. They wouldn't let us. He said, "All right. Whoever wants to go, go." But they had to sign an agreement they had no claims. They had to sign . . .

LEVINE: So you had to leave everything.

MELCON: Leave, well, whatever you could carry but, I mean, you

had no claim on the property. This is what happened. Now, there were horse-driven caravans, wagons. In our group there were twenty of us coming together from Harput to Aleppo. It took us fifteen days because the horses had to be dressed and so on. When I went back, would you believe from Harput to Haleb is a two-day trip? It took us from Harput to the (?) back here, three days. In 1970, in the cab it took us three hours. So we, when you stop and see what, at age twelve we were, we knew we didn't have a father at the time. We knew he was somewhere, and we were looking for him, and we had to behave, and rules were very strict. You speak when spoken to. We had to behave properly.

LEVINE: How would you describe yourself as a twelve-year-old boy?

MELCON: In what way?

LEVINE: In other words, if you were an outside person looking at you as a twelve-year-old at the time when you left.

MELCON: Well, since there were a lot of us at that age group, I was one of the people who were in the dreamland, so to speak. We went to school. I wasn't the brightest,

but I wasn't the dumbest. And, somehow, I don't know how my mother had that money, or she managed to live comfortable, so we were considered more or less privileged. Next door in our area there was the Near East Relief Society, tried to go to the area and gather all the Armenian kids and bring them into an orphanage. So there were a lot of orphans, maybe two thousand or so. They, eventually, in 1922, went to Greece, Syria, France. We lost contact. But considering myself with them, I was quite privileged.

LEVINE: Okay. So you were able, you were free to go in 1922.

MELCON: Yes.

LEVINE: And you went by wagon on a . . .

MELCON: Yeah. Horse-driven, yeah.

LEVINE: And then where did you settle in Syria?

MELCON: Okay, good. My grandmother's, maternal grandmother's brother happened to be in Aleppo, or Aleb, Syria. He had been there for fifty years or so. He was well-established. He had his own children and so on. And he, and he was in the textile business, the wholesale textile business. When we came to Haleb we stayed

with him one or two nights in his house somewhere. Then he found us an apartment, and this apartment was all of our group that had come together, and we were all given a small room. That was our room. Each one had, we had about six or seven rooms. One kitchen, one toilet. And that's it. We lived there. When I, like I said, when I was back, when I went to India and saw the, not that they're, but the . . .

LEVINE: Primitive.

MELCON: Yeah, conditions, and all the soiled food, water and everything was, you know, what is the word?

LEVINE: Muddy?

MELCON: Mud, mud, yes. We had mud too, but we didn't, we didn't seem to notice the mud. We used to come home and wipe our shoes. But over there, I noticed now, I said, "How can they live like this?" We did it, too.

LEVINE: And what about your schooling during this period?

MELCON: In Harput we were in, we had teachers, all women, no men. We learned, you know, arithmetic, reading, the alphabet. That's it. Now, the Armenian alphabet is a very unique alphabet in the sense that it's, it was

devised in the year 500, so they have the experience of other alphabets. It's got thirty-six letters, and the position, the sound of the letter never changes, like in English, you know. C, B, R, I, E, F. You have, let me see if I can find what I'm trying to say.

LEVINE: In other words, the I could be pronounced E or I, but in Armenian it had to be one.

MELCON: It had to be one. And you've got to see what position it was, one sound only. And I learned that alphabet in one day. Our teacher had it on the book, on the blackboard. I remember it today, that alphabet, very distinctly. I'll show you in our book. And then in Haleb, I don't know, we were, who these people were, there were some Jehovah's Witnesses type of a school, and this is where we learned a little bit more than we had learned . . .

LEVINE: In Armenian?

MELCON: Yes, yes, yes. Everything is in Armenian. And our education stopped when we came here, and in Mexico we had nothing to do. We couldn't go to school because we were not Mexicans. My father's brother in Fresno,

California, had a newspaper, and he used to send us, this newspaper to us. It was bi-weekly. So I read that in Armenian, and I also read the Bible in Armenian, ( he laughs ) and that was our only education. So when we got here in 1926 they put me in the eighth grade.

LEVINE: Uh-huh. Well, let's finish with the Syrian experience. What, just a kind of a summary, what happened to you and your family during those two years while you were in Syria?

MELCON: Yeah. Okay. As I said to you, we have ethnic groups, right. In Syria we were Armenian ethnics. We mingled with the Armenians. We went to Armenian schools. We spoke Armenian. We didn't learn one word of Arabic. And we were, as if we were in Armenia, so to speak, you know. School was six-day-a-week school, very strict. When we came home and I guess by seven, eight o'clock when the sun was gone, we went to bed.

LEVINE: Did you hear from your father during those years?

MELCON: We heard from him in 1920. He had written a letter to us. Incidentally, as I said, we have a different alphabet, right? The letter had to be written in

Turkish, which they used to use the Arabic alphabet. The letter had to be sent open so that the censors would read it. We knew by 1920 that he was in this country, and we were looking forward to coming and meeting him. When they opened the door and let us go, we did. And we waited two years in that area. Finally we got an affidavit he had sent to this consul in Aleppo indicating that he's got money, that we will not be in any way a public charge, that he was a pharmacist. On that strength, we got a passage, a visa, a passport, so to speak, to come to this country, outside of that quota. And from Haleb to France took us so many years, days. If we had taken the ship from Beirut straight across, the last port of entry was this, we would have gotten back. On that technicality they kept us in Ellis Island because, yeah.

LEVINE: Tell me about your leaving, your leaving for the United States. Do you remember that? Do you remember . . .

MELCON: Well, we were anxious to go, yes, yes. Now, on that trip that came from Harput to Haleb, and the caravan, there were some of our relatives, too. And they

landed in Haleb. Some of them went to Istanbul because they had relatives over there. One of them went to Armenia. They had relatives over there. We stayed behind because we, you know, our father, the only relative we had was here in this country. And we got to know a lot of people, schoolmates. In fact, there's one of them, he's in Fresno. He's about a year older than I am. ( he laughs ) Now and then we talk to each other.

LEVINE: So when you left for the United States, you went to France? You went . . .

MELCON: We went to France, only to France.

LEVINE: To France.

MELCON: We stayed from the ship that took us from Beirut to Marseilles, it took seven days. And then from Marseilles, we stayed overnight to get on some sort of bus or train, I forget now, to take us to Paris. Now, who managed these things, how my mother must have done it, and the Traveler's Aid Society, people had, used to do it, too. So we waited in this Compagnie Generale Transatlantique, that's the fancy name of the company that had the steamships.

LEVINE: Do you remember the ship you went on?

MELCON: Paris. It's here.

LEVINE: Oh, the Paris. Right, okay.

MELCON: Okay. Now, we waited seven days for the Paris to come and take us to the United States. Why this arrangement was made is beyond me, and that is what is the background of our problem being here eleven months.

LEVINE: Now, where did the Paris leave from?

MELCON: Le Havre.

LEVINE: Le Havre, okay. And do you remember anything about the voyage itself?

MELCON: Well, I remember the ship. Maybe one night out it was very stormy, very stormy. But it was, it was very comfortable. It was a huge ship. And there are first class passengers, second class, third class and steerage. We were second class passengers. We were given a room with our own bath, toilet, and three beds. That was on board ship. We were very comfortable.

LEVINE: Now, and so then do you remember the ship coming into the New York Harbor?

MELCON: Yes, yes.

LEVINE: Did you see either the city of New York or the Statue of Liberty while aboard the ship?

MELCON: Well, the thing that amazed me is when we came past the Statue of Liberty and the ship had to stay in quarantine, had to be anchored for the inspectors come in. I thought there were two Statues of Liberty. I see only one. I was amazed. Now, on board ship they came, the quarantine people, to make sure everybody's in good shape, healthy and so on. And they had interpreters for every ethnic group that was on board ship. There was one Armenian who spoke to my mother who was well-dressed, and he said he was very proud of the fact that we were, you know, presentable. And this is another interesting thing, too. Anyone who claimed, I don't know if it's true now, anyone who came to this country then had to be literate in sort of a language. And they used to give the Armenians the Bible. And some people who couldn't read or write, Armenians, they used to open it up, and read

the, recite the Lord's Prayer, or count numerals. "Okay, you're all right." It didn't take long for the ( he laughs ) immigration people to realize, so they used to give the book upside down. They gave it to my mother upside down, and she turned it upside down. They said, "All right, you can read." That's what happened.

LEVINE: Okay. So why did you think there were two Statues of Liberty?

MELCON: We had pictures, you know, huge pictures in travel agencies. Perhaps I saw one on this side, and one on, and I assumed there were two Statues of Liberty.

LEVINE: Okay. Why don't we pause here? We need to change the tape. And then we'll resume with Tape Two.

END OF SIDE TWO

, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: This is Tape Two, and I'm speaking with James Melcon. And we were just about to talk about your arrival at Ellis Island and your initial impressions, and any description you might remember about the place in 1924.

MELCON: I remember we got on the ferry to come to Ellis Island from the Paris, the ship. How we met, how we got on that ferry, I don't know. But I do remember arriving here at the shore, come up these main stairs, to the main hall. On the left-hand side there was a desk with an officer and, seeing our papers, he directed us to another place where my father was waiting for us. This is where I saw him.

LEVINE: Tell me about what you expected to see.

MELCON: I, well, I expected to see a big man with a big moustache, and so on. And I saw a man about five-eight in height, slightly stooped, and no moustache, and that was my father. Now, his, the tragedy of it is that since we did not grow together, my brother and I, he was our father, but he wasn't our dad. There's a distinction. That is, we never played ball together or things. I respected him very, very profoundly, and I loved him, too. But there was arm's length. There was a line we couldn't cross. Because, by that time, you know, ( he laughs ) I was now, by this time, fourteen years old, and he's an older man. He came, well, after eleven months on this Ellis Island, we

came back. And now things were different. We got off the ship, and they took us to the customs office down on Valley Park [Bowling Green], which is now an Indian museum, an American Indian. He took us downstairs and bought us a hot dog. ( he laughs ) And, for the first time, I tasted a hot dog, and an ice cream soda. That's it.

LEVINE: Well, tell me more about Ellis Island. What else do you remember about it?

MELCON: Ellis Island was, well, it was rather comfortable because we, they had rooms for you, family rooms. Not just one family, two or three families lived, you know, not lived, stayed there in the day time. At night . . .

LEVINE: Did you sleep there as well?

MELCON: Yeah, that's what I'm coming to. At night anyone over twelve had to go into the main sleeping section. So my mother was with the women, we were with the men. And the, first these dormitories were almost like prisons. They had, well, how can you describe? Two beds here, one on top of the other, and two beds here, and a door that would lock. But eventually they did

away with that. They have tremendous day rooms with double beds, bunk beds. My brother and I had one. He was upstairs and I was downstairs. It didn't matter.

And then the thing, though, that really was happy was the showers, very hot showers, and all the water you wanted. And to us water was a very, very precious thing, water. We had to go up from the well and bring it up. And the meals were good, although we were not used to the meals, a lot of beef and so on, we had breakfast, we had dinner or lunch, and then the dinner, with lots of ice cream and so on. After that the men were separated, and women went to their section, men to another section, until late at night toward ten o'clock. Now, they used to put groups together in, according to your ethnic and national background. All the Englishmen this way. All the Frenchmen this way, you know, put them together.

LEVINE: To sleep, you mean.

MELCON: Yeah. The first day this man, all the Englishmen, and a few people walked up, and a black man walked up. He says, "You can't come in." He says, "Yeah, I'm an Englishman. I'm from Jamaica." ( he laughs ) That I always remembered. Oh, we had never seen a black man

as we saw, as there are here today. There were a few black soldiers in the French Army. There were, they were soldiers, they had uniforms. They never mingled with us, we never mingled with them. And the ship one time stopped at Alexandria. This is where we saw black people mingle with the white people. And when we came here, in my eighth grade there were two brothers and a sister, they were black. And they were very nicely accepted, because the boy was a good football player. The word "nigger," never heard of before. I never, I didn't know the meaning of it, until I realized the meaning of it. And, oh, I can't . . . Go on.

LEVINE: So you were saying they separated each ethnic group out so that there was a, there was a section within each room?

MELCON: Not necessarily a section. No, no, no, no. Since there was one big, huge room with beds, they just put all the Greeks together, all the Armenians together. It didn't necessarily mean that you were separated. It's just that the beds were close to each other, that's all. And there were, I was amazed there were some Swedish people, or blondes, and they used to walk

naked in front of their children. That, I could never understand. And this one particular group, there were some, it had to be Hasidic, Hasidic Jews. They used to put on their, whatever you, the leather, they tie, and then the leather around their arms, and then tie and bring it up to here. And then they wear something on their foreheads, and they used to pray. This is the first time that I realized that these people are Jews. I had never seen Jews either. And every morning they used to do that. They used to put on the shawl and all that, which was very interesting for me. There were also some Armenians that came and went. Now, on the way, when we left, eventually, Ellis Island to go to Mexico, I'm sure the Traveler's Aid Society had taken over. The ships stopped at Havana for a few hours to load or unload, and two men came on board. Somehow my mother speak, my mother heard them speak Arabic to each other. And she said that she was an Armenian to them, in Turkish. "Oh, you're Armenians, good." They took over, and the ship landed at Vera Cruz. They took us to their hotel. They had a small hotel. They kept us overnight. And the next morning we had pilaf, you know, the (?) stuff, which I hadn't had for years. Next morning they put us on the

train to Mexico City. See how . . .

LEVINE: Yeah.

MELCON: There's a guiding hand.

LEVINE: How was it, what was your attitude, or your mother and father's attitude, toward being detained at Ellis Island for such a period?

MELCON: I mean, to me it was, what could I say to my brother? We just, of course, my father used to come twice a week to pay us a visit. We were anxious to get out of the place, but what else could you do? We were, and there was no choice. The choice was being deported back to Syria. They didn't want us. Or to risk being here, and my mother, my father tried to get us to go, accepted into Bermuda, they wouldn't accept us. So how he managed to get us into Mexico was beyond me. We were in Mexico temporarily.

LEVINE: Well, now, did you go to Mexico because you were at a standstill here?

MELCON: Yes, yes, yes.

LEVINE: Now, say it again, because I think we may have said

this more clearly off tape than on, but it was, your father was able to come because he was a pharmacist, a professional?

MELCON: No, no. Until 1920 the immigration regulations were very relaxed. Anyone could come in. The doors were wide open. After 1920 the immigration laws were getting stricter. And they were more or less against the Mediterranean people, dark-skinned people. The Irish, the Swedes, the English, could come wide open. But those of us from the Mediterranean area, there was strict quotas. So my father had just managed to be outside of that, but the reason we were able to come was that he was a pharmacist. The regulations said a pharmacist or doctor or dentist could bring their family outside of the quota. And that period between 19, June 5th and the 26th, that regulation was changed.

LEVINE: And you were en route.

MELCON: We were en route. But the question, the question was what was your last port of entry. It was Le Havre, June so-and-so. It was too late. That was five days after the regulations. But look here, look. Our

passport says Beirut, oh, no, it doesn't count, (?), on that technicality. Just playing on words.

LEVINE: Okay. So then you got to Mexico, and you were then there for about ten months.

MELCON: Yes.

LEVINE: And what was life like there?

MELCON: It was pleasant. Mexico City, at that time, the climate was beautiful. It's not warm, it's not cold. You knew it was going to rain for about fifteen, twenty minutes every day, you knew that. And the streets were nice and wide. The hotel we lived was a comfortable hotel. I'll tell you about the rent. And we used to walk in the street and we used to go down to the Zocalo, the main drag. And that's all we did. And, like I said, I read the newspaper. My brother's, my uncle's newspaper, or the bible. Now, next door, oh, the hotel, we were paying fifty pesos for rent. My father used to send us fifty dollars every month. Fifty dollars became a hundred, a hundred and two pesos. So fifty pesos went for our rent, and the other fifty two pesos were what we lived on, avocados, tortillas, whatever. The hotel had

three floors, and then it had a flat roof, and it was like a little roof garden. There were certain rooms at the edge of this hotel, and we had one room next door to another room, and so on. And my mother, one day she was humming to herself some hymns from the bible, and this woman, she said, "I hear the, I recognize the tune, but what language is this?" We told her we were Armenian. It didn't mean a thing. Eventually we got to know each other, and she was taking care of me, my brother, my mother, to make sure that we were taken care of. She was an English, her name was Annie Carlisle, from Pennsylvania. Why she left Pennsylvania, and she was living in Mexico, we don't know. But she had, apparently she had money. Through her we met some, again, people, who were, you know, Americans are great. They want to go out and convert people. There was a Baptist mission. To her, I mean, the man that used to run the mission, Mr. Nau, didn't go to that school or compound and play with the typewriter and things of that sort. This was our life in Mexico. We didn't, we made no attempt to learn Spanish, because we didn't need to. Of course, we picked up some Spanish in the street, enough to get along, but we never made an attempt to learn Spanish

because we were going to see my father in New York City. That was our whole future.

LEVINE: What was your father doing? Was he a pharmacist in New York?

MELCON: Yeah. Yeah, he had a small store on Lexington Avenue and 123rd Street. The name of it was The Home Pharmacy, and he had a partner, and the partner and he couldn't get along because the partner wanted to sell narcotics, and my father said, he just wouldn't get involved in that, so they broke the thing up. And he was working as an employee pharmacist. By that time we were here anyway.

LEVINE: Well, tell me about leaving. How did you come to leave, then, Mexico?

MELCON: Again, at age twelve, thirteen, you depend on somebody else, our mother. How we managed to get the passage is, again, I don't remember. There was a, I think that organization still exists, the Traveler's Aid Society. I think they had taken over. They're the ones who somehow managed to put us on the train to come to Vera Cruz to wait for the ship called Sibony to bring us to Cuba, and from Cuba, a couple days, a

month later, to New York City. Now, we're walking the streets in Vera Cruz by the dock. A policeman come over. "What are you guys doing?" "We're waiting for the ship." Whatever we could say in Spanish. "Okay, all right." Now, we had a bag full of coins, American coins, because my father had sent some passage money. We had gone to the bank and cashed the check, took oro americano, American gold. So this was about two hundred dollars in gold pieces, American. Gold was, you know, if this man had caught the gold on us he would have taken it. Okay, he didn't. Then we came on board ship. My mother said, "You'd better go to the bursar's office and deposit it for safekeeping." I gave him the money, they gave us a receipt. When we came to New York City they give us American dollars instead of gold. ( he laughs ) We didn't know the difference.

LEVINE: So what, then what, do you remember what ship you were on when you came to New York City the second time?

MELCON: Sibony. S.S., I don't know, it was one of those banana ships. S-I-B-O-N-Y, Sibony. Now, this was a ship that had one class only, and then upstairs. And the deck below was where the crew was, the ship's

crew. And we didn't have enough money for the three of us to be on the first class. So we were, my mother was up there. We were with the crew. We slept in there at night, my brother and I. It was only a three-day trip anyway. That was very interesting.

LEVINE: So then did your father come to Ellis Island?

MELCON: We didn't have to go to Ellis Island.

LEVINE: You didn't.

MELCON: No. ( he laughs ) We are Americans. He was a citizen. And this is when we got off at the Battery Park and he took us to the customs office, or building, bought us a hot dog and so on, and that's it. And we came, oh. It was July, just about this time, two days before the July celebrations. The sesquientennial, the 150th anniversary celebrations. That I remember. Then we moved, my father had a place in West New York, New Jersey. So, right across the way, he found a three-bedroom. Yeah, a three-bedroom apartment. We were there for about a couple of years. And September 15th I started working in the drug store at the soda fountain, and I've been working ever since.

LEVINE: But not as a soda jerk.

MELCON: Well . . . ( they laugh ) No. You know what happened? It's interesting. This was a Liggett, one of the Liggett, Liggett drugstores, Rexall, they're gone. Upstairs on the second floor there was a, these people used to do transactions in the stock market with ticker tape. One of them told me, he says, "Son, are you going to go to college?" I says, "I'd like to." He says, "You know what? Why don't you go to night school and save some money, because there's a depression coming." He told me this in 1929. ( he laughs ) He knew there was a Depression. And I did. For three years I went to night school. I was making twenty-eight dollars a week. I saved, part of it for college and pharmacy, well, three hundred and twenty-five dollars is the semester tuition. It wasn't too bad. I have a letter here, I mean, where someone charged my father three hundred dollars as a retainer in a, for a . . . ( he shows the letter )

LEVINE: Huh.

MELCON: In 1924, you know how much money that was?

LEVINE: Yeah.

MELCON: ( he laughs ) That's equal to maybe fifteen thousand today. Well, how we managed to get, I don't know, but he did manage to get the money. When we got here, eventually, in 1926, he had borrowed money from friends without interest, without any receipt, so that he could send us the money to Mexico so that we could get on board ship. So that when we got here, my brother used to work in the morning and deliver the newspapers before, before going to school. And I used to work every night on the soda fountain, six to eleven every night. That's how things happened.

LEVINE: Were you living as part of an Armenian community when you were here?

MELCON: Yes, yes. It's, yes. The same way in Mexico, there was also a small community developing. But when we came here in West New York there were, oh, right now West New York and Union City and Hoboken are Hispanic. In those days the Armenians, the Jews and the Italians were in that area, you see? And so, of course, in high school, in grammar school, there were friends we had who were not Armenian. But at home all

our relatives, friends and acquaintances were all Armenian, because my mother didn't speak English.

LEVINE: How did the schools differ here from what you had experienced in Turkey?

MELCON: Very easy, compared to the strict schools we went to. It was a snap for me, except the arithmetic. See, where we were, they didn't teach you the arithmetic later on in life. It didn't take me very long to learn the English language. Maybe it's not very good the way I speak, but I knew the grammar very well, and I did pretty good. Remember, when I finished high school I was nineteen years old. I'm a dumb kid, because usually the average boy graduates at eighteen. You see, I had lost, in fact, I lost two years of school, I still got over. I also say to myself, I keep saying to myself if we had left in 1920, about that time, oh, some of our relatives who had left earlier came to this country in 1920 with my father. And today they're different people. Their English is different, their language is different, and they're, three or four are lawyers, one or two are doctors. I keep saying to myself, between 1920 and 1926, if we had been here, who knows what would have happened.

LEVINE: When did you meet your wife?

MELCON: ( he laughs ) Oh, my wife, it's really a story. Her sister was a nurse who was taking care of my uncle, that is, my mother's brother who was sick. And through her, it was beyond that. My wife's sister, the nurse, and my wife, were living in New Orleans. And, let's see what happened. They had two or three sisters in California. The oldest one, Elizabeth, hadn't heard from my wife Sophie for a while. So she goes into the telephone directory in Los Angeles, looks up, finds an Armenian name, and calls him up and says, "Would you kindly look up these people?" ( he laughs ) What a coincidence it happened to be my cousin. ( he laughs ) All right. This is how they got to know each other. And now Sophie is living here in Staten Island with my wife. Oh, and Sophie is my uncle's nurse, helping out. So my cousin says, "You know, there's a real nice girl I want you to meet." Meaning my wife. All right, but she didn't want to make it obvious. She had a little gathering of young people, five men, and about two or three girls. And I was working in the drugstore. I got a bit late, I got there about eleven o'clock. I walked in and I saw

her. I says to myself, "That's the girl."

LEVINE: Love at first sight? Is that it?

MELCON: Exactly, exactly. ( he laughs ) That was in 1947. Well, 1946. And it didn't take long for us to get married.

LEVINE: Wonderful. How about children? How many children do you have, and what are their names?

MELCON: I have one daughter, her name is Sarah. And three boys, James, Charles and Stephen. Now, Sarah, I didn't pick that name, Sarah. My daughter and her husband picked the name Sarah, and I was very glad they did that, because it was my grandmother's name, but I didn't want to influence them. After they had the name, I says, I'm happy. That's my grandmother's name.

LEVINE: You mean your own daughter chose her name at some point? Is that what you said?

MELCON: Yeah. Well, they were married, my daughter and her husband. They decided this, my brother's granddaughter's name is Sarah, Sarah. They decided, you know, the baby's born, they're going to give it a

name, they decided Sarah. And I didn't say one word about it until they came home with the baby. "This is Sarah." Oh, that's great, that's mine. The other one is James. I don't know why they named it after, it really wasn't after me because my father's name is Yacub, which is James. They named it after him. And Charles is my grandfather's name. Garabed is Charles. And Stephen is one of my father's uncle's names. So it turned out to be like that. And, now, the number two boy, we call him Mike, not Charles. His name is Charles. Because he was a big baby when he was born. And my wife couldn't call him Chuck. She didn't like that idea, Chuck. Charles was too effeminate, so they called him Big Mike. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: And did, does Mike have children?

MELCON: Mike has, Jamie, my son, we call him Jamie, he's not married. He's about forty-three years old. He had a problem. He's a hermit. He likes to be alone. He had a girlfriend from high school. They lived together for ten years, and then broke up. Mikie or Charles has two boys and a girl, beautiful kids. But I'm not saying it because I'm the grandfather. That little girl, Cory, I keep telling, why don't you send

this kid to school to be a model, a beautiful girl. The other one, Stephen, the youngest, has again two boys, and a girl. Now, Mikie's wife is Italian, and she's bringing them up as Catholic. What can you do about it? You can't do a thing about it. She's the mother. The other one, I think she's Swedish, Irish background. And the kids are all blonde. ( he laughs ) It's really, look at my blonde grandson.

LEVINE: Okay. We're going to pause here and turn over the tape, and then we'll do some closing statements.

MELCON: All right.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

LEVINE: Okay. This is Side B of Tape Two, and I'm speaking with James Melcon here in July, in the Ellis Island Studio, on July 6, 1993. Okay. Why don't we, why don't you tell me now, how is this period in your life? What makes you happy today in your life?

MELCON: I am very happy because, I shouldn't say this, but after I got married my life changed completely. I,

you know, my luck changed. I was working first as a medical representative for a pharmaceutical company, and I used to work three nights a week in between, moonlighting, so that I could have enough money to live on. And after a while I said to myself, "This is ridiculous. Why don't I buy a small store?" Which I did. I bought a small, run-down place in Hawthorne, New Jersey. Well, after working day and night, day and night, without my wife complaining, I built it up.

LEVINE: This was a pharmacy?

MELCON: Yeah. And in 1987 I was forced to sell because I got into a head-on accident and broke my leg, so I sold the store almost like a fire sale. But the mistake I made was I sold the building, too. Anyway, in between that thirty-seven year period, I was very happy. The kids were growing, and my wife used to go back and forth to California to visit her relatives, and my health was good. I was in a small town, there were three drugstores, and I was well-known and respected, and I was happy. And after 1987 when I was out for a while, I'm not a, I have no hobbies. I don't play cards or that kind of stuff. So I was, I got a job here and there doing what they call relief pharmacist,

one day here, one day over there. And that's very bad, because it's like a woman going to a strange kitchen. You have to start all over again. For the last six years I've been working in a Hispanic area in Patterson, and I don't speak, or even make an attempt to speak to them. My job is my license to cover the store. And there are three or four other people taking care of the sales, and my job is, as I said, to keep, make sure that the store is a pharmacy. And, oh, now, a pharmacy must have at all hours a licensed pharmacist all the time as it's open, but it also must have one who's in charge of the store as far as the legal questions are concerned. They asked me to take over that responsibility. I said, "I'm too old for that." So I'm just like, I'll go to work now Friday and Saturday. The hours are long. It's usually ten-hour days, but I don't mind. And the pay is pretty good. And I'm happy. I have no, except for that broken leg, which has healed now, I have no high blood pressure, no heart condition, that's it. I'm happy in that sense. We have a very nice house, very comfortable. It was designed, the house was designed for seven people, because when my mother and father lived a block away from our house, I bought him a

house in West Hawthorne, New Jersey, when my mother died. And I said to my father, "Come stay with us." "Oh, no, no, no, no." But every now and then he used to say, "I think I'll sleep on the couch tonight." He didn't want to go to the house all alone. So I said, "If this is the case, why don't we have a big house where you can have your own place?" And to my wife's eternal credit, she didn't object to it. She took care of my father for six years, like a good daughter should. We built a house, four bedrooms, and three boys in one room, my wife and I in another room, our daughter was in another room, and my father had his own room and bath and so on. And he lived six years, and my wife took good care of him. And since he's gone, and I'm now free, we got a beautiful house. It's hard to keep up, though. Rents, I mean, taxes are very high. It's a nice section of town. We're only fifteen miles from New York City. And if we ever sell, where are we going to go? Oh, right now this store where I work there's a very beautiful Colombian girl. She's in charge of really managing the store. She's just getting married. She's lucky. She found a place for a thousand dollar rent. She has to pay all the utilities. See?

LEVINE: Well, tell me what coming to this country means to you now? What, maybe this is a question. How do you consider yourself now? I mean, you are Armenian, and you're also an American.

MELCON: Right.

LEVINE: How do you balance that?

MELCON: I asked my father, yeah. I asked my father, I said, he is (?), "Dad, why did you come to this country when the war had ended? You were a licensed pharmacist. You could have gone back to the city or somewhere else in Turkey, and opened up a store." He said to me, "I came to this country," he says, "because you," meaning me and my brother, "could breathe the free air." For quite a while all of us, not just me, an awful lot of us, wet want to be "American," quotation mark. And in class, in college, Levine became Lee. Mr. Lukovsky became Whitman. Batagliano became Matley. You see? And me, too. I changed my name until after I was working as a medical representative, and nobody could understand, pronounce that name. So I changed my name, legally. It's my, James Legion Melcom. Okay. That's all right now. And my kids have that name.

Now when I see, after World War Two, everybody's proud of the fact that somebody came from somewhere else. We didn't want to talk about it. But things have changed. And my grandchildren are very happy. They've been here three times to see the Ellis Island, to see the ship. Now, with this maybe they'll be even happier. Oh, I put this, I went to their class and spoke to them about Ellis Island. They were so thrilled that I spoke to them. I can see it somewhere. ( he rustles some papers ) Their grandpa came through Ellis Island. ( he laughs )

LEVINE: Oh, that's good.

MELCON: Let me make another slight aside. When, the first time I spoke to these children. This is my grandson. ( he shows photograph ) He's about six or eight years old, about that age group. In the class there were two Chinese or Asiatic-looking boys. And I said, "Johnny, what's that Chinese boy's name?" He looked at me. Chinese? He didn't understand what I meant. He didn't see him as Chinese. You see? See how things have changed. He didn't see him as Chinese, yeah.

LEVINE: That's a beautiful comment, really.

MELCON: Uh-huh. But the only thing that right now I object to is not necessarily Hispanics, people who come over here, they learn, within twenty-four hours they have a green card, an unemployment, I mean, a welfare card. We had to work hard for it. And, of course, when you talk like this you give yourself away, but the fact that I had to work six days a week, my brother had to get up in the morning and deliver newspapers, eventually became a colonel in the air force. He's got a distinguished service medal. He's got a citation from President, uh, Reagan, after his death. These people come here, they speak their own language. Here a lot of Hispanics, and a lot of Bangladesh people come in. They speak their own language. The Hindus with that dot, you know, and all that. And I don't object to that. I said, "Why don't they, what's going to happen to this? The complexion, the character of the country, is going to be changed." Of course, we'll adapt to it, you know, my grandchildren will adapt to it, but am I to make the decision? No. But I'm very happy where we are, of course. I've been France, England, Russia, Armenia,

Egypt, Israel, Mexico. This is the only place, I can't possibly live anywhere else. I can't. The freedom there is. You can do, now, we were in Armenia, there's a lake, which is the only thing they have of water. This man is rowing the boat, and he's a big, tall blonde. He said to me, in Armenian, "How do you like our country?" I said, "Oh, it's a nice country, but you're not Armenian, are you?" He said, "No, I'm a Lithuanian, Lithuanian." But he learned Armenian, he speaks Armenian. Then we went up to this small church which is twelve hundred years old. This little girl is selling candles, a blonde girl. And I spoke to her, in Armenian, of course. She says, "(Armenian)" She says, "My mother's a Russian, but I'm an Armenian." ( he laughs ) So, just one more thing about the word Armenian. We ourselves don't call ourselves Armenians. We're high, our high. Like the, what is it, the Swiss, the Swiss (?) is not Swiss (?), it's Helvetia. Finland is not Finland. It's Suomi. There was a, way back, maybe two thousand or three thousand years ago there was a group of people who lived in the area, and they called themselves Hiasa. In time, people from Macedonia, Armenian, a group called Armens came together, and eventually they

mingled. But they will not give the word, give up the word Hi. We're Hi's. We're not, other people call us Armenians. The Greeks call us Armenian. In fact, they started calling, and because they're people, Amins came over. So that's how we are.

LEVINE: Oh, wow. Well, I want to thank you. This has been a most informative and interesting interview, and it's really a wonderful addition to our collection, so I want to thank you. This is Janet Levine. I've been speaking with James Melcon, who came from Turkey, and is a Hi, and I want to thank you for being here. This is July 6, 1993, and we're at the Ellis Island studio, and I'm signing off for the National Park Service.

MELCON: Before you sign off, could I ask . . .

LEVINE: We're adding something here.

MELCON: I just wanted to tell my children to be proud of their background, whatever they don't know, I will eventually teach, but to be very proud of the fact that they're Americans, because there's no other place in the world except here.

LEVINE: Thank you.