

EI-497/DR. VOZCHAN PARSEGIAN

EI-497

DR. VOZCHAN PARSEGIAN (originally HOVSEPIAN)

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ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Dr. Parsegian is the husband of Varsenig Parsegian, Interview EI-498. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 7/22/1998.

SIGRIST: Good evening, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, July 11th 1994. I am in the town of Brunswick, just outside of Troy, with Dr. Vozchan Parsegian, know as Lawrence to some. Dr. Parsegian was born in Turkey, came to the United States in 1916. And he was eight years old at that time. Anyway, thank you very much for having me out. And, if we can begin with you giving me your birth date, please.

PARSEGIAN: Yes. May 13, 1908.

SIGRIST: And can you tell me where in Turkey you were born.

PARSEGIAN: In Van, the city of Van, which is one of the ancient capitals.

SIGRIST: And where is that in, in Turkey?

PARSEGIAN: It's just east of Lake Van, eastern Turkey. The year I was born was the year, by the way, that the Armenians and young Turks forced the sultan to give them a representative government. So there was happiness the year I was born. But the happiness did not stay long.

SIGRIST: Yeah. Can you tell me a little about the city when you were born. What was going on in the city for industry, that sort of thing.

PARSEGIAN: Well, my mother and father were, had both been in the missions, the missionary schools, the German and American mission schools. They had gotten their education and some training there. And my earliest memory is of my mother being the cook at the

American hospital, where Dr. Ussher [i.e. Clarence Douglas Ussher], the wonderful Dr. Ussher presided. And my father was a carpenter, had been trained as a carpenter. And he had had rather poor luck in business dealings, so he finally decided he had to come to the States with the idea of bringing us here eventually.

SIGRIST: Can we talk a little bit about the city of Van...

PARSESIAN: The city.

SIGRIST: ...and what the city looked like.

PARSESIAN: Well, the, the city of Van, the old city is a very crowded, commercial, bazaar type place with sections devoted to Turkish groups, the population in importance to Armenia. But outside the, the old city, to the east of it, is what they call the "garden city," which is still part of Van but it's more open. And the hospital was there, the missions were there. And the, I remember the home where we were. Street had a little brook into which I fell and had to be saved. And the street where we lived, a little in

from the street, next to an orchard which was an abundant source of fruits. And my mother was pretty well set as the cook for the hospital, except it was pretty hard work getting there in the winter months and so on. There was the annual preparation of food for the winter with the large jugs, clay pots, meats that were prepared and kept in fat. And the, there'd be liquors and wine as well prepared. And it was a tolerable situation.

SIGRIST: Can you describe the house that you grew up in?

PARSESIAN: As I remember it, it was a fairly conventional home. I remember the large pole that was standing in the corner, to which the mule had been tied. And the mule kicked my grandmother, which put an end to her life. And the, the stone, uh, the big pole fell on her when the mule pulled away. And the rooms, it's a home, was one level home in which there was a central area where there would be a little container of coals from, it would be from the wood that partly burned, charcoal like, which would be the "kursig," we would call it. This would be under a little table-like thing but with a large quilt-like cover over it. And at night we

SIGRIST: You said it was one room, the house, or was it...

PARSESIAN: Well, I remember the room with the kursig...

SIGRIST: Right.

PARSESIAN: ...(he laughs) where we sat. And I'm sure there was a kitchen type of arrangement next to it but I, I don't remember the details on that.

SIGRIST: Was the house right in town or was it outside of it.

PARSESIAN: It was in town. It was just in a little from the main street. It was perhaps, I seem to remember that the distance was about maybe a couple hundred feet in from the road through a little walkway and then just along the edge of the orchard.

SIGRIST: Now, was there property that went with the house? Did you have a backyard, a front yard?

PARSESIAN: No, I don't remember any property that was part of our house. I just remember the orchard, the walls of the orchard and the house. I do remember, well, I do

remember this, see, there was, I guess there was this, at least in 1915, there was a second floor because I remember steps going down. I remember that because I had a sword that had been given to me by an officer and that was on our wall. And I remember at one time, when I was having trouble with the boys, my playmates, and I went in and grabbed the sword and came out swinging it to frighten them. (he laughs) And, and I remember that there were steps going down to the ground. So there must have been some arrangement of second floor. But those, the kursig room and that particular incident don't tie together in my mind.

SIGRIST: Could you spell kursig for us, please,?

PARSESIAN: I guess we could call it K-U-R-S-I-G.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

PARSESIAN: Kursig. K, yes.

SIGRIST: Tell me how many people lived in your house.

PARSEGIAN: Well, we had the father and mother, and in 1915, well, just, we had my sister and myself, and then while Grandmother lived, and then Father and Mother.

SIGRIST: Whose, whose mother was your grandmother?

PARSEGIAN: Father's.

SIGRIST: And what sticks out in your mind about your grandmother, other than her unfortunate death.

PARSEGIAN: I remember her mostly as the usual mother-in-law who dictated what was to be done in the house. And I do remember the orders that she would give to my mother. And then I do remember the time when she had the accident and was in bed. And she called my mother to her and gave her all the instructions that she could think of on how to do things, how to carry on. (he laughs) And that stays in mind. I don't know how much of that is in mind from my mother's telling, though, versus my actual remembering it.

SIGRIST: What did your grandmother look like?

PARSEGIAN: I, I guess a typical elderly person with head covered usually. And not particularly bright. And somewhat on the sorrowful or sorry side of temperaments.

SIGRIST: Is there, is there a story or an anecdote that comes to mind about your relationship with your grandmother, something, a story about, something the two of you shared somehow?

PARSEGIAN: No, I don't have, I don't remember anything that I myself shared. I, I remember just these little incidents of seeing things happen but nothing that was between the two of us.

SIGRIST: What was your grandmother's name?

PARSEGIAN: I don't remember that, oh, I don't remember that.

SIGRIST: Let's talk about your father for a bit. What was his name?

PARSEGIAN: Sahag. He was...

SIGRIST: Can you spell that?

PARSEGIAN: S-A-H-A-G.

SIGRIST: Thank you.

PARSEGIAN: He, as I said, had been also trained at the missionary school in carpentry and a good man. And a little on the, on the trusting side, which didn't help him in his business. So that it was a matter of trying partnerships that didn't work until he was quite disgusted. And, also, the military situation was such where they were taking the men into the Turkish Army and what happened to them when they went was always a question mark. So he decided that he would come, just about when my sister was born four years after I was born. And I remember the last parting. That was, that, oddly, remains fairly strong in mind, in memory.

SIGRIST: What sticks out in your mind about that?

PARSEGIAN: He promised that he would send candy, and that is what I remembered. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about your father's background, what his parents did and that sort of thing.

PARSESIAN: I know, know almost nothing about his parentage. I know more about my mother's because we were, my mother had been the daughter of a very large family in an area called Moks, M-O-K-S, south of Lake Van. It was a large family that had had good relationship with the Kurds, who were neighbors, until the war fever began to build up. However, they had lost the parents to the massacres, the occasional massacres that had come. Her mother had the reputation of being quite a horse woman. The area was in the mountainous regions of Moks. I remember so clearly we used to go there for, for vacationing, summers. My sister and I would be taken there riding on saddle, inside saddle bags on a mule. And we would arrive there and be welcomed and then we would enjoy the place. Except that my mother's sisters couldn't understand why we didn't go so much for the honey and cream that they would provide for us each morning. We would awake to the honey and cream but we just didn't take to it, which surprised and displeased them. I remember the one boy, one brother of my

mother's, who had taken to smoking and to the degree where he died at fifteen. The other brother, who had been a very wonderful person according to my mother, I never did see. And her mother and father I never did see. Her sisters are the ones I remember. I remember the playing in the fields. One of the boys was a playmate and we would throw stones up to knock down walnuts from the tree. Only, we stood at opposite sides of the tree and I got a stone in my cheek which (he laughs) stayed with me for quite a while. I remember the taste of the water that would, springs that would come from the ground. Each spring was a different taste. I almost seem to think that I can remember the taste of each. Undoubtedly, flowing through the different kinds of mineral, each developed its own taste. So those I remember.

SIGRIST: What was your mother's name?

PARSEGIAN: Shooshanig, S-H-O-O-S-H-A-N-I-G, which means lily.

SIGRIST: And what was her maiden name?

PARSEGIAN: Uh, I should, I should remember that. That may come to

me later. I don't remember. (microphone disturbance)

SIGRIST: Okay, well, we can, (trying to correct the microphone disturbance) would you mind backing the chair up a little bit because I think that, the thing is the cushion is going to pick up.

PARSESIAN: Oh, that, yeah.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your mother's temperament was like.

PARSESIAN: My mother was the driver in the family. She was the one who had the feeling for progress and work. My father, as I said, was the retiring sort, quiet. And, but my mother, she used to tell about how she decided that this was the stone that the builders had rejected which she would help to make the head of the corner. (he laughs heartily)

SIGRIST: Which sort of adds a little extra something when think about your grandmother trying to sort of run the household and your mother having similar ideas.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes, yes, yes. She was a hard worker. She knew

what she wanted and she was bound to get it. So when
my father did leave and came to the States, I remember
the silver, the little silver spoons that came from my
father for the two of us, one each. And these
spoons...

SIGRIST: You mean your sister and you.

PARSESIAN: For me and my sister. That was very precious. I
remember, oh, referring to other life, other
conditions in the city, I remember the time neighbors
with whom I was visiting persuaded me to drink a
little of the wine and then to act drunk when my
mother came. And when she came, she really thought I
had been drinking too much. So there were first some
words about it (he laughs) until we revealed to her
that it was all a joke. (he laughs) But there was
good relationship with the neighbors, close
relationship, mutual help.

SIGRIST: Is this all an Armenian neighborhood that you're living
in?

PARSESIAN: This was in an all Armenian neighborhood, yes.

SIGRIST: Was the city divided ethnically that way? The Armenians in one place, the Turks in another?

PARSESIAN: Well, within the old city there were the, the divisions, very rigid divisions. But in this "garden city" I don't remember that there were any Turks there. That was pretty much left to the Armenians and the missionaries.

SIGRIST: I'd like you to talk, if you can, about the importance of the missionaries in everyday Armenian life. You mentioned that your father learned his carpentry from one.

PARSESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: It must have been an important force.

PARSESIAN: It was. It was a very important force. It was the German and American mission. The German part of kind of became reduces and the American became stronger. As I said, the, the mother and father did go to the school. They were brought there as orphans although at

the time there may have been one parent living. But they decided that that was the place to, for education. Then, when my turn came, they had training. As I said, Mother was trained as a cook and Father as a carpenter.

SIGRIST: Did the missionaries function sort of like the settlement houses in New York? I mean, were they sort of a, to provide education and entertainment and that sort of thing.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes there was, was. In a number of areas of Armenia, the missionaries had actually promoted the making of needlework for sale that they would sell. And the money would be brought back to the community. And I don't remember a specific thing of that kind where I was. I do remember, when I went to kindergarten at the same mission school, I do remember the Christmas celebration and the music from Haydn's Surprise Symphony that had been translated into Armenia, Armenian, for the enjoyment of all of us. It still comes back to me very strong.

SIGRIST: When you said you remember the Christmas celebration,

what, what seemed different or unusual about that that stuck out in your mind?

PARSEGIAN: Well, it was the warmth of it. I don't remember the tree, a tree particularly. I don't remember any one thing particularly except that it was a joyous occasion for play, and the music to dance to. And...

SIGRIST: And this was different than how Armenians celebrated Christmas usually?

PARSEGIAN: Well, I, I the music certainly was different. The enjoyment, I would say, was undoubtedly the same. But the, in the missions where we were, it was a general happy day for the children and all. And parents, I seem to remember that the parents were also there during part of it.

SIGRIST: Was one particular religious sect more important in terms of the missions that the others? What...

PARSEGIAN: Well, when I was born my grandmother saw to it that I was taken very quickly, within weeks, to the mother church for christening so that there'd be no question

about my being (he laughs) a member of the mother church. The influence of the Protestant church was very great. However, in my case, in the case of my mother in her later life, it was always appreciated as something that was very beautiful but there was always the feeling of it is not my church. And so the ties were there, the appreciation for it was there and the pleasure of having been part of it was there.

SIGRIST: Was the mission, the one that your family was connected most strongly with, was it one separate building, was a series of buildings...?

PARSESIAN: I seem to remember only a large hall for the Christmas celebrations. I don't remember the external features at all.

SIGRIST: And this is, you said, where your father learned his trade. What, what kinds of things were taught in the missions?

PARSESIAN: Oh, I think that there were quite a few trades taught. I, I expect tinsmithing was undoubtedly very strong. My uncle was a tinsmith. He...

SIGRIST: Your father's brother?

PARSESIAN: Yes, my father's brother. And I don't know whether he got that from the missions, however, or from other training. I don't associate him with a mission at all.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit, you started talking about school, you said you had begun kindergarten, tell me what the experience was like going to school.

PARSESIAN: There isn't much in memory of the actual teaching and the processes. I have very faint memories of those.

SIGRIST: Could your parents read and write?

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes. They were, they were both, I would say, they were educated probably the equivalent of seventh, eighth grade. That's the impression that I have as to where they were.

SIGRIST: Did they speak Armenian? Turkish?

PARSESIAN: Yes, Armenian. This was one of the features of the

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people of Van. They refused to speak Turkish. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: It probably got them into trouble later on.

PARSESIAN: That's what got them into trouble, yeah.

SIGRIST: So, Armenian was spoken in the house. What was your sister's name?

PARSESIAN: Her name was Varsenig, which happens to be my wife's name, too.

SIGRIST: Could you spell that, please?

PARSESIAN: V-A-R-S-E-N-I-G.

SIGRIST: And is there a story or an experience that you remember about you and sister when you were a child, something that might have happened?

PARSESIAN: Not, I don't remember too much. I remember the trips going to our mother's family home in the summer. And I remember the experiences when, particularly one

summer when the hospital had closed for the summer and there was a young man who had had a very badly infected leg. And the question was, what shall we do with him with the hospital closed. And then Mother decided that he would be taken with us to her family home for the summer. And I remember the, this was very vivid in memory, he was riding on one mule and my sister and I were in saddlebags on another. And the mules had a way of walking along the edge of a precipice, which frightened the daylights out of the young man. I still can here him yelling his fear. (he laughs) And, but that, that was vivid in memory.

SIGRIST: What is the terrain like around this place?

PARSESIAN: Mountainous.

SIGRIST: And you mentioned storing food for the winter. I mean, did you have snow and hard winters?

PARSESIAN: Yes, the snow, the winters were very harsh. And my mother particularly had to walk through the dark of the early morning to get to the hospital through snow.

And there were wolves around at night, so it was, it was kind of a difficult experience in that respect.

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about the clothing that people wore in this part of Turkey?

PARSESIAN: Well, I know that I wore a dress. (he laughs) And the clothing of anybody else I have no memory of. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Was, were the fabrics homespun?

PARSESIAN: I seem to remember that there would be occasional looking at fabrics that had come from somewhere, so that there was, apparently a buying and selling of things that had come from abroad or elsewhere. But I don't remember weaving. I don't remember anything in detail.

SIGRIST: That wasn't part of your home life there.

PARSESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: What about appointments in the house? For instance

furniture and rugs, that sort of thing. Where did they come from?

PARSESIAN: I have, the only memory I have is of that kursig, that metal container of coals with the little table-like cover and the quilt-like large cover spread over that. And I, I remember that. And I remember the wall where my sword hung. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: I was just wondering, you know, your father being a carpenter, I was wondering, if perhaps he was responsible for the furniture in your house.

PARSESIAN: No, I don't remember anything on that.

SIGRIST: Tell me a little bit about what people ate at that time in that part of the world.

PARSESIAN: Well, we had meat pretty regularly. It was lots of fat, as I said, it had been stored in.

SIGRIST: What kind of meat?

PARSESIAN: Uh, mostly sheep, I expect, lamb. And there were

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vegetables. I don't remember those in particular. I mentioned that we did have wine.

SIGRIST: Who did the cooking in your house, your grandmother or your mother?

PARSESIAN: The mother. The grandmother died fairly early, so she was not in there, in there very long. And I do remember that Mother cooked but details of the kitchen I have no memory of.

SIGRIST: And there isn't, perhaps, one single dish that she made that sticks out in your mind as being something you looked forward to or...

PARSESIAN: Well, the, the, the dish made from yogurt and wheat was very popular in Van. It became, that made for quite a story when we got to Yerevan later on, which I may mention. But I, I don't have any thoughts of specific foods.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE ONE

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BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

SIGRIST: All right, why don't you tell me about when you first became conscious of some kind of unrest in the city.

PARSESIAN: Well, we were aware of that when the Turkish Army arrived and the city was under siege in April.

SIGRIST: This is April of 1915.

PARSESIAN: 1915. And then Dr. Ussher, you ought to sometime read his book, AN AMERICAN PHYSICIAN IN TURKEY. [full title: AN AMERICAN PHYSICIAN IN TURKEY: A NARRATIVE OF ADVENTURE IN PEACE AND IN WAR, out of print at the time of preparing this transcript, 7/1998] It's a marvelous description of that period and his personal experiences. (microphone disturbance) The, I remember that there was much commotion. I remember walking through the streets and hearing the bullets and seeing people duck, so that I remember myself ducking when we heard the sounds. I was taken to play with Dr. Ussher's son, young son, younger son, at his home for safety. But that didn't last long, and I've

found out since why not. Because in his book there are pictures of what happened to his home. The bombs wrecked it completely, so it was no place for safety. I remember the people scurrying back and forth and Mother being very much involved with the hospital. She had as assistance, I remember him, a man who was dumb. He did not have speech or hearing. And the, and she, and he was her assistant and she would take care of him. And I remember his behavior. And Mother tells of the time when he would implore God, "Why is this condition this way with me?" Well, then, that continued on. I do remember the hospital being very, very busy. Then, when the siege was over, somehow the Armenians survived that month. They survived by organizing everything between the Germans and the Americans and the professionals, Armenian professionals who were there. They, they just managed. The real leaders had already been killed. They had been told to go to a place for a meeting with officials ostensibly to find some compromise but they never returned. So that now it was the second level people, some professionals, pharmacists and so on, who are left there. And the situation was such that the survival of the group depended on

organization. It was immediately arranged so that there was a mayor. And Dr. Ussher's older boy, who had translated the Boy Scout's Code to the Armenians, now was in charge of keeping the streets clean and orderly and helping to do whatever was needed for the general public. He organized a young peoples, young mens group for that. The women became the ones who were entrusted with the collection, looking for the bombs that were dropped. The city of Van, the old city, is hard up against the Rock of Van, which is quite an ancient fortress, above which is quote a fortress. And the Turks had their old cannon on that rock. They had the big round balls, this was the very oldest of the old bombs, which would be hurled down onto the city with fuses to blow up after they fell. And the city was divided up into sections and individuals were given wet rags and pails to stand and wait, watch for these ball, these balls to fall, to grab that fuse out of the ball and to use the powder for fighting back. One of the pharmacists, according to Dr. Ussher's book, developed the process for producing black powder. And so between these they had the fighting material. And then they had all kinds of tunnel digging. It's so exciting to read his

book. Well, I remember much of that. Then I remember the time when the Turks left. And then I was with a group that went to the Turkish part which had been deserted by them. And here we went there to see what we could get from what they had left. A chicken, I collected shells, empty shells (he laughs) and so on, and one chicken. And brought, I remember bringing that home. This would be about the end of May in 1915.

SIGRIST: When you said that the Turks had left, I assumed these are, these were residents who were Turkish who got out of there because the Turkish soldiers were...

PARSESIAN: The Turkish soldiers left. They left their womenfolk and the children. And then it was that a very sad thing happened. The American missions felt it their duty to also help the Turkish women. And the conditions that they, that Dr. Ussher describes existing in their homes was so bad. Disease very quickly, typhoid, came over them. Mrs. Ussher and Dr. Ussher both caught typhoid. And Mrs. Ussher died and Dr. Ussher was sick to the point where when we did finally flee he had to be carried. Well,

the, he describes the difference between the
two cultures. Whereas in Van the Armenians had been
able to organize so completely, so effectively, the
women who were left were impossible to deal with for
cleanliness, and they would remove, actually deny
their babies their food, what little food that they
could find. It's a very sad description of what was
there. And they paid a heavy price for trying to help
the Turks. But that was the, what I do
remember, our going hunting for what was left, and then,
of course, the other is from Dr. Ussher's books.

SIGRIST: What's happening to your mother and your sister all
during this time?

PARSESIAN: Well, my, I don't remember, have any memory of what my
sister was doing (he laughs), but my mother was a very
busy woman in the hospital.

SIGRIST: And, of course, this is how she's supporting you,...

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: ...working in the hospital. Did she ever tell any

stories about things that happened in the hospital at
this time, or things that, that, that made an
impression on her?

PARSESIAN: Well, there were. She would recite many experiences
with the soldiers and officers, see...

SIGRIST: Any that you can remember specifically?

PARSESIAN: Well, there were a couple nurses there. These were
nurses who later came to the States. One was a very
strong, tall woman and the other more frail. But the
two of them were working together at the hospital.
And Mother would tell the story about how they had to
really overcome some of this, the patients, because of
the pain and the violence that some of them would
show. And they would also have some Turks there
because the, Dr. Ussher insisted that it was to be
medicine for anyone who needed it. And so there
were the experiences with the Turks and the Armenians
both in the hospital. But, the stories she did tell
were largely of fine, young men here and a fine boy
there and that sort of memory still clings.

SIGRIST: Was food difficult to find at this...

PARSESIAN: I don't remember any food problems.

SIGRIST: So life, more or less, went on as usual.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Of course, you knew that there was something bigger...

PARSESIAN: Well, we knew that people were getting killed. People were getting killed in the city so that there was devastation of sorts there. But I was spared much of it and until, we survived that siege. But it was within another couple of months that the Turkish Army, oh, we were saved. The Turks left because the Russian Army was approaching. Then what happened was the general, the Russian general was in Van for a while. Then they proceeded west. This is all from the book, uh, proceeded west. Until it developed that a huge army was about to be sent against the Armenians and the Russians had been ordered to the eastern front. They were doing so badly that they had to leave Armenia to return to

whatever else they could, uh, have to, they would have to do. So word came that things were going wrong. And then the general himself issued orders everyone must flee. And that gave us about a day's notice to just up and leave. And I remember that quite well. I don't, I don't remember I had anything more with me than what I was wearing. And my sister, Mother and I, we started off on a cart, sitting on top of a which that was loaded with somebody else's furniture or old whatever it was. And that didn't last long. We had to, after a while, take to foot. And the rest of the flight had to be on foot.

SIGRIST: Did you know where your destination was going to be or was it just a matter of getting out and then worrying about where you were going to go later?

PARSESIAN: We, it was all heading east and then part going north and part going southeast, going to Iran or up northeast towards Russian Armenia. We, Dr. Ussher's group also took to the north, as we did. So we were with that group, although not in close contact with them. Dr. Ussher, as I said, had to be carried on a lift tied between two horses and, until he got to

Igdir. And at Igdir, according to the story in his book, there we were asked by him to go to America with him because he had this feeling of responsibility toward the hospital staff. So we were able, we would have been able to come to America early, at that point, but through the trip, through those two weeks or so that we were walking, my sister was lost. It happened that an officer who knew my mother saw a soldier who had a donkey and commanded the soldier to be responsible for my sister, to take her to Yerevan. We would meet in Yerevan. And we, I've forgotten now, it must have been near Igdir when we first found that there was, when we were first accosted with the, Dr. Ussher's group and so on. We looked for our sister. We found the soldier, and the officer was there but no little girl. And what had happened to her, well, he said, "She insisted on leaving me. I couldn't keep her." And I do remember the beating that the officer gave the soldier with a whip. He really whipped him for having left a child. So Dr. Ussher's group then went off and we were in Yerevan. We arrived there with the diseased conditions and crowding and everything there.

SIGRIST: Is this, is this just like a great column of people traveling...

PARSESIAN: Oh, it was, yes. Yeah, we were, well, the first night, or during that period I remember her giving a gold piece for a piece of bread, loaf of bread, which was so hard that I couldn't eat it. So we had to leave that. Another night she gave a smaller piece for a shawl to cover me with. We had hailstones that drew blood. And we had to drink the water that we walked in and had to simply put, pass the water through whatever rags we had to give it some clearing. So we, we suffered during that week. And, as I say, the food situation, we learned hunger. In Yerevan, when we did get there, again it was a case of my mother now hunting through the crowds for our sister. And it was a matter of each morning getting up and wandering around to look for her. (he laughs) I remember saying to my mother that, "She's lost but you can give me her love." (he laughs) And, but that didn't seem to satisfy her. And we continued that search, and I forgotten how many days, until one day we saw in the distance we saw something red on a pole. We went to it. It was her dress, with Russian

soldiers. The Russian soldiers were playing with her.
And they had hung the little dress to dry. (he is moved)
My poor mother. (he pauses) So I remember running,
grabbing the child and the soldiers laughing. (he is
moved)

SIGRIST: Your mother must have been just overjoyed because I'm
sure she probably...

PARSEGIAN: Ah, yes.

SIGRIST: ...had given her up.

PARSEGIAN: Yeah. And I remember so well the evening prayers of
the soldiers. (he is moved)

SIGRIST: So seeing the Russian soldiers was sort of a feeling of
safety...

PARSEGIAN: Oh, yes, yeah.

SIGRIST: ...for people. I mean, that was a relief to get to
that point.

PARSESIAN: Right.

SIGRIST: Did they help to make things more comfortable for the
in coming refugees?

PARSESIAN: No, I don't remember any of that. All I remember is
the evening prayers, so, so beautiful. And the
incident of finding our sister.

SIGRIST: Did you stay, where did you say you are? You're in
Yerevan?

PARSESIAN: Yerevan.

SIGRIST: Did you stay there for any period of time?

PARSESIAN: Well, then it was a questions of what do we do? We
have arrived and we've survived so far. But disease
is everywhere, cholera, typhoid. The food carried
disease. And the strangest thing happened. My sister
and I stopped eating. We would not take fruit.
We would not take bread. We would not take anything.
Just stopped. And one day we saw a family eating
bread dipped in garlic and vinegar and we said we

want that. And we lived on that for two weeks.

SIGRIST: Who was left in the town? I mean, were there residents in the town? Was there an Armenian population...

PARSESIAN: Oh, this was now in Yerevan where the crowds had come in and multiplied the population. Yerevan was just a small city but now the hundreds and hundreds, by the thousands were now piling in. And so these were what brought the difficulty for the local people. They couldn't manage it. But then my mother went to the archbishop who was in charge of the orphanages of the church, excuse me, and she asked for work. And (he laughs) he wanted to know, here was this little woman, "What have you been doing?" "Well, I was cook at the American hospital." "What do the people in Van know about food? All they know is this food prepared from yogurt." (he laughs) My mother tells the story, she stood up to her full five feet and a few inches and said, "It was with that food that we held back the Turks." (he laughs heartily) And the other incident was the bishop would reach over, as was the custom, for the person to kiss the ring, and she refused to do it because she had had Protestant

influence. (he laughs heartily) "Oh," he says, "so you're Protestant." This is the story as she tells it. And, but he did give her work as cook in an orphanage with the two of us with her. And that's where we were for the next year.

SIGRIST: And so you, you had beds and you had a place to stay. And your mother lived in the orphanage, too.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: I should think that the orphanages would have been very full at this time.

PARSESIAN: They were. They were full, and I remember the place, a wooden structure of a kind of a large, open area. I remember the, the place where we had our food. And she took over in a real way and made sure the food was prepared so that the orphans who were there could enjoy it. And she found that she really had to defend the interests of the orphans against some of the teachers. And...

SIGRIST: Defend in what way?

PARSESIAN: Well, for example, the girls would walk into the kitchen where she would be in the morning and cry because they had been told by some teachers to empty the night pans. And, and then she chased them out, said, "Get out of my kitchen." With, after having handled that, and then went to the teachers and had them understand that this, these children were already orphans.

SIGRIST: Who were in the teachers in the orphanage?

PARSESIAN: Well, there were, there were some teachers who were the natives of Yerevan. But one teacher my mother brought in who had been one of those from Van. She had been a teacher. And this proved to be a serious mistake (he laughs) because this woman had no sense of humanity about her, and she became one of the sources of trouble for my mother. I remember the time when we were told by her that there was to be no laughing, no noise in the orphanage. And, so this became a matter for confrontation with her and my mother. "But how can you dare to say that? I brought you here and now you are denying them the joy of just

laughing, " and so on. Then, also, there was some
thievery of the blankets and things by some of the
teachers, which they discovered. It turned out there
was a supervisor who depended on my mother to tell her
how things were in the orphanage. And then they
would make the corrections as she reported things. So
this, this was quite helpful. And also my mother
would regularly see the archbishop, and each time she
went he would reach his hand to be kissed. (he
laughs) And so she wouldn't do it. So the
Protestantism held her. The influence was there. (he
laughs) Well, we were there for a year.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything about being the orphanage, an
experience that you had in that situation? Something
that might stick out in your mind about everyday life
in that, in that circumstance?

PARSESIAN: Well, the, the food was there. I remember the problem
we had with glasses of hot tea and having to pour them
into the saucers to be able to drink. The, the
children, the relationship of the children with each
other was beautiful, as I remember it. And there
was, was some instruction, periodic going to the baths

for a bath, open, combined group bathing. And weekly that would be, I guess. There would be singing. There would be some instruction. I don't remember details on those very much, but I do remember when the barber was going to come to cut our hair, the girls didn't, objected to my getting my long hair cut. (he laughs) The boys, there were, the older boys and the younger boys and there were some, I guess, who were in their teens who were beginning to feel their maturing. And I remember one time when, that was play, when these older boys would call us to their place and then expose their genitals to us. (he laughs) That was big fun. And, those little incidents, I don't remember too many. We have a beautiful picture of the, of the orphanage taken on a staircase, with my mother up there with the teachers and I sitting quietly by myself and my little sister sitting close to me. But she was so disturbed about that one teacher that she dug her eyes out of the picture. (he laughs heartily) So we have the picture but with that woman's eyes not there. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Deep rooted hate. Tell me, in the orphanage did you stay with your mother at night or were you in the boys

sections and your mother had her own quarters?

PARSESIAN: I think, as I remember it, we had a room where she was with us. That's how I remember. I don't remember being with the other children.

SIGRIST: And these, these hundreds of refugees, or thousands of refugees who have come into this city, were a lot of the orphans at the orphanage made up of these refugees?

PARSESIAN: Yes, they were all collected.

SIGRIST: So they're all Armenians in this orphanage.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Where did the adult refugees go to stay? Did they set up some kind of temporary quarters for them?

PARSESIAN: The adults, of course, these were orphans, which means the parents were not living. But what else had happened to them, I don't know.

SIGRIST: I can only imagine that this city, or this town, would have been changed dramatically by the influx of all these people coming in.

PARSESIAN: It was completely upset, completely upset. And the curse that one would give to the other woman would be, "I hope one of the refugees comes to your house." That was some, conditions were that bad for everybody. Later on, my wife [Varsenig Parsegian, Interview EI-498] will tell you about the time she was in Yerevan back in, later, much later in 1935, and even then it was just a city of thirty thousand. And so you can imagine what would have been the situation in 1916, '15.

SIGRIST: Sure. Just chaos, with all these people coming in. We're going to pause just for a second. I'm going to put another tape in, and then we'll get you out of Yerevan and on your way to America.

PARSESIAN: Fine.

END OF SIDE TWO, TAPE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: Okay, we're now beginning Tape Two with Vozchan Parsegian who came from Turkey in 1916 when he was eight years old. We were in Yerevan and you stayed there about a year, I believe.

PARSESIAN: Yes. And then Mother began to feel that we had to leave for our America. We had not heard from our father.

SIGRIST: When was the last time you had heard from him?

PARSESIAN: When we had been in Armenia, sometime during the, before, probably before the siege. I remember getting letters at the time and, and I remember receiving, when we did get a letter in Van, I would take the letter and pace back and forth as though I were reading it. And my mother used to tell that, and I seem to remember it, when I would walk back and forth and keep saying "Ahaday, ahaday, ahaday

[ph]," whatever that meant, as though I were reading his letter. Well, we did not hear from him again and Mother was quite concerned. But she decided that we had to get to America. Now, the thing about Mother was this, she had been so frugal, she had always kept with her a belt of gold coins. That was what she depended on. And she was now going to make the most of that to finally get us to America. And when she went to the archbishop and said that she wanted us to leave, he tried to persuade not to. He said, "Why do you go? There's education here." "No, I want American education for my children." (a telephone rings in the background) Somehow that thing was very important to her, whatever it meant. And, so in time he became persuaded that she would not stay and made arrangements so that she would leave. Meanwhile, Mother also found a husband and wife who were desperate to get to America. And they made arrangements so that she would be sister to the man and we her children. And we would arrive in that family arrangement. And that was the way we got our passports. In fact, there was also another man and wife that my mother helped with some money. She helped both couples with some money. And the, we started off as a group of, that would be eight; my

sister and I, my mother and then the two, that's five, and then two more, seven. The seven of us. And I remember how we were going to go on the train, and the two men had to rush in and pull us, pull us children in through the window with the crowding of the train being so bad. And this is how we headed north from Yerevan. And apparently the train, I remember we were in Sweden. Exactly how we go there, by train, of course, we could only go so far. And then there must have been a boat. And then from there we also somehow landed in Liverpool, England.

SIGRIST: When you left Yerevan, do you remember, or do you remember your mother talking about, what you had with you that you could take to America?

PARSESIAN: I, we, we had nothing, really, except perhaps clothing that we were wearing and I'm sure some other clothing. And that was it. And, the, the money that she had.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything of the trip to Sweden, or what you had to do to get to Sweden?

PARSESIAN: I, I don't remember any of that. And I don't remember

anything, I do remember Liverpool, taking a boat there.

SIGRIST: Was Yerevan a large enough city where she could have gotten together all the necessary papers and all of that sort of thing, being located in Yerevan?

PARSEGIAN: The, well, I'm sure through the Russian, that was where the archbishop had to come in to, to help...

SIGRIST: To help facilitate the process.

PARSEGIAN: ...with the Russian. All of it had to be under Russian help.

SIGRIST: I think it's interesting, you have such a vivid memory about so much of it and yet there's this big gap actually...

PARSEGIAN: Yeah, there is.

SIGRIST: ...because that must have been quite a trip, to go from Yerevan to Sweden.

PARSEGIAN: Yes, yes. I remember only the crowding, crowding everywhere we went. But in Liverpool was where we finally took a boat.

SIGRIST: What was the name of the ship that you came on?

PARSEGIAN: I, I don't, I don't have the name of the ship. It was one that had the steerage. And we were in the steerage.

SIGRIST: How long were you in Liverpool before you got on the ship?

PARSEGIAN: I seem to remember it was just a matter of a few days.

SIGRIST: Do you remember being in Liverpool, seeing things that might be different to you?

PARSEGIAN: No, no. Only that that's where we took the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you know where along the line your mother finally connected with your father? I mean, did he know you were on your way to America?

PARSESIAN: No, no, no. Oh, two weeks before we started on our trip to America, we got word that he had died. But that made no difference to my mother about coming to America. So that was all we heard. He had died.

SIGRIST: Where was your father in America?

PARSESIAN: Up in the Boston area.

SIGRIST: And what was he doing when he was here?

PARSESIAN: Well, then we learned later that he had had an accident. He had been sick much of the time. His back had developed some infection from the accident. And he died a miserable death and was buried in a pauper's grave.

SIGRIST: Of course, as you say, you didn't know this then.

PARSESIAN: And I remember my mother, though, when we got here, finding a batch of his letters that had never been mailed, and weeping over the beautiful love letters.
(he pauses)

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SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being on the ship.

PARSEGIAN: It was (he laughs) crowding, crowding, crowding. And somehow managing to have some food now and then and waiting to see what would happen next.

SIGRIST: Do you know where you slept on the ship, what it looked like?

PARSEGIAN: No, I don't remember that. I remember our sitting at, on the floor eating something. And that was all. Nothing else about the trip.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long it took?

PARSEGIAN: I suppose, again, a week or so, probably the thing.

SIGRIST: What about from Yerevan?

PARSEGIAN: Yeah, that, that, of course...

SIGRIST: That's got to be a span of time.

PARSEGIAN: That, that, of course, was undoubtedly a longer period.

But it's strange that it's a blank and all I remember
is the crowding.

SIGRIST: Now your father, your mother knew as much as your
father had died. She knew that but she decided to
come anyway.

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Had she other friends or relatives in the United
States?

PARSEGIAN: Had an uncle here.

SIGRIST: Was this her brother?

PARSEGIAN: His brother.

SIGRIST: His brother.

PARSEGIAN: His brother. He was the one who was still alive and he
was, had not proven to be very helpful. He was the
one who had failed to mail those letters. And then he
had done worse we found when we got here. He met us

at Ellis Island and took us to New York City, there were a couple of other men with him, and took us to a restaurant. And I remember the restaurant on Lexington Avenue. And they asked us what did we want to eat. And, again, we asked for that same dish prepared with yogurt. And we finished that. "What else do you want?" "More," and so on until we finally got up to the Boston area. And there we found that our uncle had bought a house that we were now going to live in. He was unhappy. Oh, it wasn't just seven of us. It was eight because we brought with us the girl that our uncle had been engaged to. And when he saw her, he was disappointed. He had planned to marry my mother. And she would have of it. Well, they did get married, they did move away. But we had some unfortunate court cases because it turned out that our father had insurance of a thousand dollars with her [sic, his] wife and children as beneficiaries. And because of the loss of contact, the uncle had betrayed us and declared that we had been lost. And he had taken the money and bought the house. And we went through the unfortunate experience of having to go through a court case. And the court decided that the house belonged to my mother. It was a miserable old

house, but a house. This was in Chelsea, Massachusetts.

SIGRIST: Before we get too deep into what happened when you got here, let me just get the boat docked in New York. Do you have any recollections of the boat actually coming into New York Harbor or seeing the Statue of Liberty or...?

PARSESIAN: No, no none of that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember any at Ellis Island other than the...

PARSESIAN: Again, the crowding, the crowding. And the question of whether we will be admitted because that's the time when the eye, diseases of the eye, kept so many out of America. And, fortunately, we were in fair health.

SIGRIST: What was the uncle's name?

PARSESIAN: Mardios [ph] Hovsepian. My, my father's name, by the way, was Sahag Hovsepian. Josephson would be the equivalent.

SIGRIST: Could you spell the Armenian, please.

PARSEGIAN: H-O-V-S-E-P-I-A-N, Hovsepian. And we'll come later to where the change was.

SIGRIST: So, so his brother met you, took you out for dinner in New York.

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Is there anything that sticks out in your mind about seeing things in that short amount of time being in New York, or getting your way up to Boston, that you had never seen before?

PARSEGIAN: Well, yes. First, New York City is a big city. And now there were no more, no longer the crowds of the kind we had been living with. I, I don't remember the trip from New York to Boston. Somehow so many of these things have gone from memory. But I remember when we got to this house, how immediately it was a matter of how do we improve on this situation, how do we help, how do we start working. And my mother immediately got work in a shoe factory, Walton Shoe

Factory.

SIGRIST: This is in Chelsea also?

PARSEGIAN: In Chelsea. And, as I've been writing in another connection, the, she became good friends with Mr. Walton. Mr. Walton regarded her very highly because whenever there was a strike, he could depend on my mother. He would send his automobile for my mother. And, of course, she had to learn the hard way what it meant to be a scab and so on. So anyway, she went to work in this factory and she made six dollars a week, and then we had to learn to live with that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember exactly what she did in the shoe factory?

PARSEGIAN: Yes. She was working with the heavy lasts that were really much more suited for a man working with them than a woman. particularly a small woman. It was hard work. And, of course, this is where she began to learn America; Italian, Irish, refugees like herself. That was America.

SIGRIST: You mentioned that, that she was dependable labor for this gentleman and that he would bring her in...

PARSESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...if there were union problems. Did she ever talk about any specific experiences, or do you remember a specific experience of when she did that and something might have happened?

PARSESIAN: Well, she used to very often recite the experiences they had where it was almost a fight on occasions for the piecework that would pay a little better. Apparently there were some variations of the job, and here everyone was out after those better conditions, better work, a little more money. And so it was a constant fight, competition for that little extra advantage.

SIGRIST: Did she ever bring work home that you can remember?

PARSESIAN: No, we did, she did do work at home. We, we did quite a lot of curtain work.

SIGRIST: Curtain work being what specifically?

PARSEGIAN: Uh, I guess what it amounts to is getting ordinary curtains and then doing needlework with them, decorative work.

SIGRIST: Was that something that the children also participated in?

PARSEGIAN: No, no, I don't remember doing any of that. She would do it. Other women would join in. My wife will be able to tell you much more about those things. But then I got to working, well, I got to school, my sister and I.

SIGRIST: Tell me about going to school and what it was like to be plunked into an American school and...

PARSEGIAN: Yeah, here we were without language, and it was terribly difficult to know what to do. They put us in a special class and tried to push us with the English and to see how far they could go with getting us into the right grades where we would be, to which we

belonged by age. And they did remarkably well. It was
Williams School, across the tracks and the park to the
big Williams School which they bragged about being
the biggest school this side of the Mississippi. And
the teachers were kind. There were occasions, I
remember how terrible it was for me when I couldn't
seem to get her permission to go to the toilet and wet
myself and felt the deep shame from that and so on
that never left me. (he is moved)

SIGRIST: Were there lots of immigrants in the same situation...

PARSEGIAN: Yes

SIGRIST: ...in school, for instance, would you be in a class
with lots of different immigrant children of different
ages?

PARSEGIAN: In the first school, first classes that we went to, I
guess we were pretty much all immigrants until we
could join the other classes, which we I think did
fairly quickly, actually. And then it was a matter
of just going through the routine and learning what,
what education could be like because I had not

really had any schooling that amounted to anything up to that point. I remember the, it was a new experience for me to see a Negro.

SIGRIST: What did you think when you saw a black person?

PARSESIAN: Well, I was, my reactions were not particularly negative except when I saw one black and one white, so close that they were breathing into each other's face. Somehow that made a big impression on me. I, they tell me about my personal habits having been so peculiar. When, when a very little child, I would rub, try to clean whatever I was going to drink from with my dirty clothes. (he laughs) And so on. And that impression carried even to that period of the two breathing each other's breath. (he laughs) This was the thing that struck me as something to wonder about, and not just the black and white. And the, well, we did, we did managed to get to the fifth and sixth grades...

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about learning English specifically and what, what obstacles you may have had to overcome to do that.

PARSEGIAN: Well, as I remember, the fifth grade was a difficult year for me. The, in the sixth grade I had been taught enough of the education so that I could really be almost naughty in the class playing and so on. And in the seventh grade, I suddenly got back to my normal self, quiet, studious, and well behaved to the point where the teacher made me her favorite as she would tell my mother when she would come and visit the school. When I got to the eighth grade, I found another wonderful teacher who assessed that I was one year behind the others in age and class. And she was bound that she was going to get me advanced. (he laughs) She helped. I remember the time when she told me that she wanted me to be promoted in the middle of the year. And I hoped she might have be able to do that. It was a commercial class. And in Chelsea the population is almost completely Jewish. and so the competition can be rough in school. I remember, though, that I was better than the girls in shorthand, which created quite a stir because boys were not supposed to be smarter than girls at shorthand. But this teacher took such joy in that. And then I remember the time when the grades began to come in and she looked

at the first one and she called, says "Vozchan, the grades have come in. One came in but it's only a B." (he laughs) But then it turned out that the others were A's, so I got promoted anyway. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Because the American missionary schools were so important in Turkey, had you learned any English prior to coming to this country?

PARSESIAN: No. There may have been a word like "God" and, I remember there were some words we used to use...

SIGRIST: Something religious?

PARSESIAN: Yeah, that was about it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your first English word or phrase was here in the country that you learned?

PARSESIAN: No, I don't but I do remember when I became puzzled about the custom of the country when a boy larger than myself stopped me and wanted to get into an argument. And then we began to fight. I put him down. And there were some people standing around. And when I

had him down, and apparently what they were saying was, "You've got him down. Now let him go." And they began to call to me to do something. And then I was so struck with this question of what have I done. All I've done is put him down. (he laughs) And the question of this custom in this country, and another time when I was headed for the factory to meet my mother when she would be coming home, and two boys, one with stick, stopped me and banged me on the head with a stick for no good reason. And my mother from a distance saw that and how it tore her heart. (he laughs) Well, then it was a matter of growing up in this home to try to improve on things. We did have our first Christmas, though.

SIGRIST: Oh, describe that for me.

PARSESIAN: It was Christmas time and we knew how to enjoy Christmas. The house had a tree in front, not a particularly attractive tree, but it did have one branch that I could cut off. And we brought that branch into the house and we had our first Christmas in the States with cotton for decoratives. And that, that was real joy I remember.

SIGRIST: Talk to me about how your mother adjusted to America.
For instance, did she learn English?

PARSESIAN: Yes, she gradually learned English and we began to do
the best we could for on the house. It was a two
family house. We had tenants in one and we were in
another. Then, and I began to try to work the garden,
or what was supposed to be a garden. But it turned
out to be all ashes, and so I had a miserable time.
And we would look over the fence next door, which was
a corner house, which had a beautiful garden,
green, and big house, and just longed for the time
when we might have some soil that we might plant in.
We did finally buy that house. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Where is your uncle during all of this? When did he
fade out of the picture, if he did at all?

PARSESIAN: He faded out fairly quickly by going to California.

SIGRIST: He took, he finally did acquiesce and marry the woman
that had brought.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: And then, did they set up housekeeping?

PARSESIAN: Yes, they set up housekeeping but did not stay long in the Boston area, in the Chelsea area. They decided that California was the place for them. He, he was a tinsmith who was a very capable tinsmith, quite bright, able to make a living. But he was the difference of day and night between him and my father. It was such a joy to me when some people who knew my father, particularly one man who was a very religious man, he was a Pentecostalist actually for all the years I knew him, he had named my father "Christos."

SIGRIST: When your mother got to Boston, did she do her best to try to piece together what your father's life must have been like? I mean, did she try to find people who knew him?

PARSESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: I mean, was that of a concern to her, what his life

might have been like?

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes. That was of concern. And we did find, but again it was, it was all gone. He had simply left those beautiful letters.

SIGRIST: You said that your father, (correcting himself) uh, your uncle had ideas about marrying your mother when she got here,...

PARSESIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...did she know of those ideas prior to getting here?

PARSESIAN: I don't think so because up until we learned of my father they could not have been that.

SIGRIST: Did you learn of your father's death from the uncle?

PARSESIAN: No, no. We had, I've forgotten how we got word. It was somebody who had come back who knew him. That was what we, how we heard of it. Not from him. There was no letter that I recall.

SIGRIST: Can you just tell me a little bit about this woman you're bringing for your uncle? I assume she's a young girl, and just a little bit about her and what she might have been thinking about all this.

PARSESIAN: She, well, she was a nice enough person. I remember her as being a very nice young woman. She had not been close to us in Van but apparently there had been the engagement arrangement before my father and uncle left for America. And it was that that my mother was respecting with respect to the girl and what would happen to her. So we, she was not with us during the flight. We met her in Yerevan and, and it was there that there was talk about her being engaged and going to America. And she, I don't remember her having much to say about the marriage. She acquiesced. She had come for that. I think she sensed what was going on with him, that he was not so keen for her but they went through it. I think it was the shame of not going through it that did consummate the marriage. But they left and disappeared from us. And, incidently, our son was in California, tried very hard to find some word of them and we've not been able to find any word of them. So

when they left Chelsea, that was the end of our relationship.

SIGRIST: Did your mother buy the house from your uncle or did you rent it from your uncle?

PARSESIAN: No. When the court decided that the house belonged to Mother, then, of course, it was, the title was ours.

END OF SIDE ONE, TAPE TWO

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO, TAPE TWO

SIGRIST: How long after you got to America did all of that happen?

PARSESIAN: It happened fairly quickly because my uncle did not stay in the area very long. And I would say, oh I'd say it probably took a year or so for it to be completed.

SIGRIST: Your mother went through such a tremendous variety of experiences, most of them not very good, right after she got here.

PARSESIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: How did she feel when she got here? Was she still glad that she made that decision?

PARSESIAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: Within the first couple of years, though, at that time did she regret that she had come over here?

PARSESIAN: No. She, she was so determined that her children would get American education that she was willing to take anything. And that's how we survived. But she worked many years at that factory and it was, well, I remember the days when she would drag herself, when she could hardly walk. But then something terrible happened to us. We used to get milk in the big metal containers with the heavy wooden plug because making yogurt was so important for our diet. So we'd buy it by the two gallon, two or more gallons in there.

And one day I put the can on the stove as I was leaving for school without removing the cap. I came back from school. There was a woman there who was with us, living with us. I came back from school. I guess I probably was about ten years of age at the time. And I saw what I had done and I took the can down and began to apply the tool for removing the wooden cap. And the thing exploded, and the boiling milk was all over me and all over the room. The woman was there. She pulled the clothing from my body along with the flesh. And I got, fortunately there was an Armenian doctor, Dr. Nelchardian [ph], who was called. And when Mother got home she saw what had happened. I was, my head and my face and all and arms were all completely scalded. (microphone disturbance) And the doctor was really concerned. It was a very serious burn. Mother watched as he bound my arm. (he gestures to his arm) This is the scar left from it. But my mother refused to let him bind my face. She knew enough about the hospital experience to refuse to bandage the face. And so it was left raw. And the boric acid ointment and whatever else that she applied would be applied over the raw face. And, you see, the face recovered. Only here (he gestures), where I

scratched it, did it show any affect. They were
sure that one eye was gone and not sure of the other.
When the doctor came in the morning, she had been all
night giving the rest of my body alcohol rub. And
when he walked in and saw me silently sleeping, he
was sure I was dead. But I was six months in bed.
So this was quite a trial.

SIGRIST: Tell me what's running through your mind in terms of,
this is happening fairly, a couple years after you go
there, what are you thinking as a young man having
experienced something like this and having been
uprooted from what you knew.

PARSESIAN: I think it was just a question of accepting it and
learning and learning what it was all about. I don't
remember having any intense feelings of rebellion at
all. No very intense feelings of any sort, but
recognizing that this is life. This is what it
takes. I worked hard. My mother was working very
hard. But I was a good son and appreciative of what
was happening. Well, then she married again, a man who
had known my father. He and a friend had been in
South America and they arrived. A good man. His name

was also Sahag, and Parsegian. They were married. A younger sister was born from that marriage. And it was a fair marriage, not a good marriage. He again was not an earner. He had a job that again paid very little and so Mother had to continue to work. And then there were occasions when the children should be disciplined differently from the way we were. And Mother would have none of that.

SIGRIST: Do you remember a specific instance of that happening, something that either or your sister did and, and...?

PARSEGIAN: It would be a matter of, a trivial matter of behavior, maybe more noisy than we should have been. Nothing that was very dramatic. Nothing that you could say was really wrong or should not have been. And yet she was so sensitive, over sensitive about her children. And he was used to the old ways of bringing up children. Good man, a good man but just different ideas.

SIGRIST: What were those old ways, as you say, specifically like...

PARSESIAN: Well, the matter of how you accost somebody. For example, when you see somebody, greet a visitor, have you done it just right? (he laughs) Have you paid the courtesies that are due? And nonsensical things as an American would see it. But, again, it was part of the question of he wanted us to be at our best as well. So that there was also this feeling for us. But, again, largely because Mother had to work and it was a matter of living under tension all the time because of that.

SIGRIST: Did he legally adopt you?

PARSESIAN: Yes, he legally adopted us, therefore the change of name.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you felt when your mother remarried. Of course, you had vague recollections of your father. What, what were your feelings when she chose this man and...

PARSESIAN: There, there was no particular, there was no objection that I can recall. There was simply the hopes that we would have a father. And he was a good man and now we

had a sister, a second sister who was much younger and we could almost be father to her and protect her. And then, sadly, he was working on the roof of the house and fell and broke his back and died. And that was a tragedy that hit us.

SIGRIST: What year was that?

PARSESIAN: Oh, golly, I, I can't remember. I'd have to dig up the records to find that. My sister was, uh, well, no, I can't, I can't recall. I can't put the figures together.

SIGRIST: So here is yet another tragedy...

PARSESIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: ...that, that your mother has, has endured.

PARSESIAN: So it was, so he died. And then Mother continued. Meanwhile, we were doing better at school. But Mother had her eye on this house next door and she had saved enough money so that we could put down a first payment and so on. And we did move into this good

house, which had actually three, two apartments and one small apartment. And then that began to give us a little bit of prestige as regards being American, it was living with America customs and so on.

SIGRIST: The first step to "making it."

PARSESIAN: Yes. Meanwhile, I had become involved with the Adventist church almost across the street in Chelsea. And I became a very fervent evangelical. (he laughs) And here were our friends, others who were all, this was the First Day Adventists, not the Seventh Day type. And I was a very serious young man and at seventeen years of age I was elected a deacon of the church. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: How did your mother feel about this?

PARSESIAN: Well, she, by then I had pretty much taken over the running of the house. We couldn't play cards. We couldn't go to the movies. We couldn't do this. We couldn't do that. It was mostly a matter of what we couldn't do. (he laughs) And I lived by that and

insisted on their living by it, which didn't help
any. (he laughs) This continued and I really was very
much part of that church, more than the native borns
by far. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: It must have been an unusual circumstance for an
Armenian to go to, (he laughs) to be in a First day
Adventist church.

PARSEGIAN: And the strange thing is that my mother did not
particularly want us to go to an Armenian church,
which didn't have services occasionally.

SIGRIST: Why do you suppose that is?

PARSEGIAN: She knew the young minister. (he laughs heartily) They
had been young people together, so anyway.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me, we have about ten minutes left, and
I'd really like to hear about the first job you ever
got that you were paid for.

PARSEGIAN: Well, the first job I got was my mother had the feeling
that while she wanted American education, she said,

"The first is for you to learn a trade." And, so I learned auto repairing.

SIGRIST: How did you do that?

PARSESIAN: Well, we found a place where I got a job as an assistant to learn and found this group that would curse and swear and cheat and so on and it became a terrible experience for me. And when I'd complain to my mother, she'd say, "You stay there until you learn that trade regardless of whether you like it or not." So I learned that.

SIGRIST: Why auto repair, of all the trades that you could have learned?

PARSESIAN: Well, someone said that that was a good thing to learn, advice.

SIGRIST: Were you in high school at the point or were you out?

PARSESIAN: I was in high school at the time. And then what happened was this. One day, while I was repairing a car, oh, I finished high school. And I was still at

it with the auto repairing, didn't know what else to do. And while repairing that car of a man who just happened to stop in with some little work, he asked me, "Have you gone to school? What is your education like?" And I told him that I'd finished high school. "Well, are you going to do any more?" I said we didn't have any money for any more. "Why don't you go to a, to the Lowell Institute School? It's free and you can learn engineering."

SIGRIST: What was the name of the school?

PARSESIAN: Lowell Institute School.

SIGRIST: Lowell Institute School.

PARSESIAN: So he took the trouble to come to the house to explain to us in details how to go about this. And we found out that Lowell Institute School was an evening school within the M.I.T. [i.e. Massachusetts Institute of Technology] buildings. And how proud we were when I drove my Model T with my parents, Mother in it and sister. And we drove by M.I.T., this is where I'm going to go to school. Well, I finished the two year

course and by that time I learned enough about M.I.T. to enter the regular four year program. And in time I worked into physics. And then that was the beginning. Then I, in between I had, uh, my own auto repair business. At nineteen I had four people working for me and so on. Well, I then passed into the education. I got into M.I.T., and by that time I had had enough of the Adventists. And also, while it, and then I did enter M.I.T., I did meet my wife and we became interested in each other. She was a teacher of the deaf at the time.

SIGRIST: What is your wife's name?

PARSEGIAN: Varsenig, V-A-R-S-E-N-I-G. And her maiden name was Boyagian.

SIGRIST: B-O-Y...

PARSEGIAN: B-O-Y-A-J-I-A-N. So that was the first experience at M.I.T. We finished that in physics. And then that was in the depths of the Depression, 1933. Then I went without any more help, no jobs of any kind, continued to take on another year of study at Central

Institute For The Deaf in St. Louis, where I went.
But at the time I fortunately also found my way to
Washington University in St. Louis to take graduate
courses there. And then I was a Second Lieutenant at
the time, the Civilian Conservation Corps opened up
an office and I could be a reserve officer there, go
on active duty. And then a job in New York with an
instrument company. And then I felt the need for more
education, went on to a doctorate in nuclear physics.
Then got into nuclear work, and then got into a lot
of other things besides. I was Director of
Research of the New York operations office of the
Atomic Energy Commission, 1950 to '54, and got much
involved with the nuclear issues. By that time I had
decided that education was where I belonged and I got
an invitation to come to Rensselaer Polytechnic
[Institute] and I became their first Dean of
Engineering. They had just reorganized the school and
wanted to get into the nuclear age. So they wanted
somebody who had had engineering experience but was in
nuclear physics besides. So this is how I came to
R.P.I. [i.e. Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy,
New York] to start my new career and their new way of
life as it turned out, too. I've been much involved

with many of the nuclear issues. I've appeared much, many times with the, for hearing with the joint committee of Congress on atomic energy issues. I worked nine years for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Committees on nuclear issues, and so on and continued on. And then got into many of the Armenian issues, questions and the many activities I guess we don't have room for.

SIGRIST: Well, I would like you to mention on the tape your involvement with the oral history project that you did with Armenian people, if you think that would be of interest.

PARSESIAN: Yes, well, around 1965 the Armenian communities began to be quite concerned that so little had been said about the massacres, about the Genocide. And there began to be public preparation for observances. The dioceses, by that time, I was close to the mother church and the diocese in New York City. We decided on the observances to be a concert that we would give at the Empire State, (correcting himself) uh, what's the big center, music center in New York City?

SIGRIST: Carnegie Hall?

PARSESIAN: No, uh...

SIGRIST: Lincoln Center.

PARSESIAN: Lincoln Center. We had a big event (microphone disturbance) there, and I was the one who helped managed that. And I was one who gave the six minute talk. There was only a six minute talk to be given. The rest was going to be music. So we had that and it was quite impressive. But we began to worry about the monuments that had been left behind in Turkey, which had become the next victims, planned destruction of the churches that go back centuries. And also about recording the events of the massacres. So a group of us got together, about six of us, and organized the Armenian Educational Council Incorporated. The first, we wanted to do something about the monuments in Turkey but we didn't know what to do so that had to be left. This is in 1966. But then we said we could get started with oral history. The Jews already had been active with that. And we wanted to do the same. And so we set up, my wife

and I and some friends, we explored how to set up questionnaires and so on and we began that program of oral history of those who had lived through the massacres. I have some two hundred or more tapes of those. But then others got started with that and we helped a couple groups with some financial help to get them started. And they took over that part, so we're not doing that anymore. Now it's a question of how do we use these effectively. And then a young man came (microphone disturbance) from Germany who is an architect who had set up a group there who were also worried about the monuments in Turkey. They needed money. And at the time the Educational Council had some thousands of dollars, which were from royalties from my books that I had been author and co-author of. And we supported them, and that became a twenty year project. But then I was about to retire from my professorship at R.P.I., and so I began to plan on making use of R.P.I. as home base for this. And it worked. It turned out that R.P.I., when they learned about this project, the architecture school wanted this to be centered at R.P.I. And I was the only one available to work on this without salary. So that's how a twenty year project began. But the

twenty year project, international project, produced seven volumes of material on the architecture of some nine hundred forty sites; monasteries, fortresses, churches of many kinds. Forty two thousand images in microfiche and documented, which are now located on the shelves of well over a hundred of the major research libraries of Europe and the United States and Canada. So that has been something that we've been very pleased about.

SIGRIST: Well, I'm very pleased to have found you. And it's been a great interview, but especially to get that last bit of information on tape because I think people using our collection would like to know about this. In just a couple seconds, is there something that your mother taught as a child, a philosophy, a way of living, that has stayed with you your life?

PARSEGIAN: Oh, to just do your best, to just do your best. And the morality and ethics and so on that we grew up with I hope stays.

SIGRIST: Dr. Parsegian, thank you very much for letting me talk to you for two hours now about your, about your

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experience. This is Paul Sigrist signing off with
Vozchan Parsegian on Monday, July 11th, 1994 here in
the town of Brunswick outside of Troy. Thank you,
sir.

PARSEGIAN: Thank you.