EI-498
VARSENIG BOYAJIAN PARSEGIAN
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ORAL HISTORIAN'S NOTE: Mrs. Parsegian is the wife of Dr. Vozchan Parsegian, Interview EI-497. Paul E. Sigrist, Jr., Director of Oral History, 7/23/1998.

SIGRIST: Good evening, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Monday, July 11th, 1994. I'm in Brunswick, which is a town outside of Troy, New York, with Varsenig Parsegian. Mrs. Parsegian came from, to the United States in 1912 when she was seven years old. You came from Turkey?

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Right. And she is Armenian. Anyway, thank you very much. And if we can begin with you giving me your

birth date, please.

PARSEGIAN: July 28th, 1905.

SIGRIST: And what city in Turkey were you born in?

PARSEGIAN: In Harput. H-A-R-P-U-T.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me a little bit about the city, please.

PARSEGIAN: Harput is in the interior of Turkey and it was one of the cities where a culture of its own grew. They were very nationalistic but also lean toward intellectualism rather than revolution. And there was a community of missionaries, American missionaries, who brought in the Euphrates College. But my family, beginning with my grandfather, was not affiliated with them although he was an educator of the national schools there. And the family has always been very proud of the fact that we are the grandchildren of Boyajian, Mardios [ph] Boyajian, teacher of the Armenian schools.

SIGRIST: And Boyajian being your maiden name.

PARSEGIAN: Boyajian.

SIGRIST: Can you spell that for us on tape?

PARSEGIAN: B-O-Y-A-J-I-A-N. It simply says the family of dyers. Because these people came from the lake area where wool grew for the rugs. And they had the secrets of the dyes.

SIGRIST: Tell me, is that what your father did for a living?

PARSEGIAN: No.

SIGRIST: No.

PARSEGIAN: With my father it had ended because education has come into the home.

SIGRIST: What was your father's name?

PARSEGIAN: Balbazar [ph]. I guess that's a Biblical name, Balbazar [ph]? It's the equivalent of that,

anyway.

SIGRIST: And tell me what he did for a living.

PARSEGIAN: Various things. Of course, he first went to school and learned the language well. He knew Turkish very well. Then hard times came and he had to turn to something else. He did designing of garden for recreation purpose and also for livelihood. And early in his life he came to the United States to get a fortune so that he could go back and live well. But the fortune was dissipated the first time. He came back a second time and got some money and came back. And there he was massacred in the 19--, 1895 massacre of Armenians. Then he decided, "This is no place for me." So in about 1910 he came back a third time. He used to say that he kissed me, the youngest one in the family, there were four girls and a son, and said, "This little one I'm not going to see again in this country. I will see him [sic, her] in America." Now that story has been story to me so many times that I really don't know whether it's because I have been told or I remember. It seems to me

that I remember that a man went away and everybody was crying because he was being smuggled out of the country. He came without a passport.

SIGRIST: Did he ever talk about, for instance, the experience during the 1895 massacre?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, he did, yes.

SIGRIST: Is there any thing specifically that you can remember?

PARSEGIAN: They, he told us about the time that they came and broke down the door and asked him to say in Turkish, "I give up Christianity and I accept Mohammed." If he said that three times, as all the men were made to do, then he had to wear a turban and he had become "turkified" as far as the Turks were concerned. But he said that lasted only two days, but it did start a fervor in the men population to get out. They had to get out. And the America was the only way. Passport weren't being issued. Therefore he had to be smuggled.

SIGRIST: Can you elaborate on that. When you say "had to be smuggled," what do you know about that experience?

PARSEGIAN: Only what he told me, what my parents told me. It seems that they traveled by night and hid in places during the day. And they were always taken by people who called themselves "smugglers." These, these people knew the rules, the places. And so this is how he did a very scary sort of thing but he got here.

SIGRIST: Tell me what your mother's name's is.

PARSEGIAN: My mother's name is Elmas, E-L-M-A-S.

SIGRIST: And her maiden name?

PARSEGIAN: Keljikian, K-E-L-J-I-K-I-A-N.

SIGRIST: And tell me a little bit about her background.

PARSEGIAN: My mother came from a family of merchants, but they were merchants doing business transporting things

on horses. And that, too, had to do with smuggling because they brought horses, sold them in Harput and then they went over to Mus, which is a large city, and Tiflis.

SIGRIST: Do you remember, give me a sense of what your mother was like as a person.

PARSEGIAN: My mother was orphaned very early and she, she had two brothers. One brother's wife died, leaving several children. And it was more or less designated that this girl should take care of these children and mother them. And that was her life.

SIGRIST: So she really sort of took charge of the family then.

PARSEGIAN: Took charge of the family but unfortunately had no education. My mother used to say that when my father decided to come to America, the first thing he did was taught her how to read and write. He said, "The letters I shall send to you will be only for your eyes. Therefore, you have to learn this." And that's how she learned Armenian

reading and writing.

SIGRIST: Do you know how your parents met?

PARSEGIAN: Oh, the old fashioned way. There's an eligible young girl. (she laughs) There's an eligible young man. And the families agreed on it.

SIGRIST: Were they both from Harput?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Both families were from there.

PARSEGIAN: One from the upper city and the other from the lower city. Harput is a...

SIGRIST: Is there a social distinction between these?

PARSEGIAN: No, no. It's just that the level of the land was upper and lower.

SIGRIST: I see. Did your mother ever relate to you any stories about your birth?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, many times. It seems that they had three daughters and a son. And when she became pregnant, they did hope for another boy. But as it happened, a girl was born and the whole clan was disappointed because this was a big burden. These were in days when they didn't have enough as it was, then a fourth daughter. So the story goes that my older sister would say, "What are you going to say the child?" And someone said, "We will name her Teskana [ph], which means go to your reward fast, drop dead." (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you spell that, please?

PARSEGIAN: (she laughs) I couldn't.

SIGRIST: Can you say it slowly?

PARSEGIAN: Yes. Tes, T-E-S, which means soon. Kana is go, Ka, N- A. Teskana [ph]. As was the practice there, children were christened the first week of their birth. And my mother's sister took me and the godfather met us at the church. My older sister

tells me that each time she asked my aunt, "What is the baby's name going to be?" she said, "Teskana [ph]," teasing the child. But she had made up her mind that she had a favorite teacher. Her name was Varsenig. And that she would insist that this child's name is going to be Varsenig. So when they got to the church and the godfather was there and in the baptism they ask, "What does a child need?" And it is, of course, hope, love, belief. So when the priest said this, she waited to precede my aunt in giving the name. But as it turned out, they had already alerted the godfather that it was going to be Varsenig because of this child. Now Varsenig was a very interesting person who worked in the missionary school but she refused to change her church. Her brother was a professor there. They were a very good family. And in later years, I met her in America. And she did me the courtesy of saying, "I am glad you have my name because like me you have become a teacher."

SIGRIST: That's a great story. (they laugh) Tell me a little about what you remember of everyday family life in Harput. For instance, let's start with the

house. What memories do you have of the actual house?

PARSEGIAN: Really none. I don't remember the house. But I do remember that there was a piece of land where four mulberry trees grew and in the morning my mother would pick the mulberries for our breakfast. And also, there was a faucet there. So when we were thirsty we could run and drink that water. The house was located near the church, the Armenian, Sup [ph] Hagop.

SIGRIST: Spell that, please.

PARSEGIAN: Sup [ph] Hagop, H-A-G-O-P. It's vivid in my mind that my mother used to go to church practically everyday. But she really was not a religious woman. She was not a church woman. It was one of those things that by habit she did. And where her place was, each one had to have a place in the church of their own, they had a little cushion they kneeled on, there was a railing from the upper balcony to the altar. My nose came right to the place where I couldn't see above and I couldn't

see below. And it had been a dream of my life to go back and see that railing because now I had overgrown that railing.

SIGRIST: Do you remember anything else about religious life? For instance, do you remember practicing your religion at home somehow?

PARSEGIAN: No, no. Ours was not a religious, it was a nationalistic family. It was nationalistic. But we prided ourselves in my grandfather's uncle. Grandfather's mother's brother had been a clergymen. Now don't ask me what kind of clergyman. It was, of course, the national church, the Orthodox church. And he had taught my grandfather how to read and write with the Bible. That was the one book they had on which my grandfather learned reading and writing. And that, of course, kept him close to the Bible. But it wasn't that kind of a sophisticated, "Bible says," "Bible says." We never had that sort of thing. But the Bible was the book you read because that was where you could get the knowledge of reading and writing.

SIGRIST: So it had a very practical purpose in the house.

PARSEGIAN: It had a very practical purpose.

SIGRIST: Do you remember as a child perhaps a little poem or a nursery rhyme or a prayer that you learned as a child in Armenian that you still remember?

PARSEGIAN: Yes. I, I learned this song, a lullaby to a child. Maybe that was sung to me, which persisted in my life until I had my own children. And my own children had that same lullaby. And every once in a while, when I am by myself now, to sort of gather the whole background together I sing that song.

SIGRIST: Would you sing it for us on tape?

PARSEGIAN: With this voice? (she sings in Armenian)

SIGRIST: Thank you. What does it mean?

PARSEGIAN: "My darling, sleep so that I can sleep, too. Be peaceful so that I can have that peace of sleep."

SIGRIST: It's lovely. What else do you remember about the experience of living in Turkey? Do you remember children's games perhaps?

PARSEGIAN: In, I remember the kindergarten I went to. And, strange as it might seem, my older sisters had gone to the Euphrates School, which was the missionary school. But there was nationalism awakening at that time and the women got together and said, "We must organize a kindergarten for our own church, our own way." Evidently, that was their reawakening that came. So they started a kindergarten, and that kindergarten was the one I went to. And it was, well, there I learned how to write with matches "Varsenig" and I made a mistake. One of the letters was not the right letter. And when they told me I had misspelled it, I began to cry. Success was very important. (she laughs) That I remember. What else do I remember....

SIGRIST: Do you remember, do you remember games or forms of entertainment that either you with your playmates or you with you family might have done?

PARSEGIAN: Yes. Ours was a large family. My father's sister's children and my mother's brother's children and so on, so we met for the holidays. And we celebrated in our own way.

SIGRIST: Do you remember how you celebrated Easter perhaps?

PARSEGIAN: Every Easter I got a red dress. What the significance was, I don't know. Easter was the time that you got your one dress. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Can you talk a little bit about clothing at that time and if you have any recollections of how you got your clothing and what it looked like?

PARSEGIAN: It seems to me I had regular children's clothing. We wear...

SIGRIST: Do you know if it was made at home or...

PARSEGIAN: Oh, my, my grandmother was a weaver and she wove the material for the family needs. My mother knew a little sewing. She was clever with her needle.

And I think she utilized those materials.

SIGRIST: Which mother is the grandmother, your father's or your mother's?

PARSEGIAN: My father's. My mother was orphaned very early, orphaned in the sense that her mother died early. Tell me about what you remember about your father's mother.

PARSEGIAN: She was a, I see her at the wheel. It was, you know, that shuttle moving and the foot. She was quiet woman, hardly a word out of her. But that's about all. The only thing I have been told, that my grandfather and my grandmother walked hand and hand the day they were being deported, or the large march, because a cousin of mine was standing, he said, at the window watching this caravan going by. And he saw these two, man and woman, hand and hand at the age of ninety, going to their slaughter. Oh, I do remember one thing that happened. As I said, my sisters went to the Euphrates Schools. My brother went, I don't know where he went before but at the time I remember

he was at a Turkish military school. The idea was that to live here you have to do something to protect yourself. But fortunately, or unfortunately, he was also with a group of young revolutionaries. This is something that's stuck in my memory, sometimes comes even as a nightmare. He had no right to carry a revolver but he had one. He was taking me somewhere from our home to my aunt's house or somewhere, and there was not much habitation there but the Turkish school was there, the military school was there. He hid me behind the bushes. He hid me behind the bushes. he took his revolver and he gave it to me. And he said, "You are a brave girl. You hold this until I get back." And he went to the school to do what errand he was going to do and came. I remember the horror. I remember the fear. I remember the fright. And that has never left me.

SIGRIST: When you were living in Turkey, of course, you were quite young, were you conscious of the conflicts between the Armenians and the Turks?

PARSEGIAN: Yes. I remember one Sunday morning my mother had

gone to church and we four girls were at home. A Turkish woman came by and my older sister opened the door. When she saw it was a Turkish woman, she shut the door. As she shut the door, the woman's face was between the door and the opening and her eyes popped out. I remember that very vividly. And then we opened the door and it was a beggar. A beggar had come asking for bread. But the fear of the Turk was so strong that we had dome this.

SIGRIST: Can you name your sisters and your brother, please?

PARSEGIAN: They are all gone. Do you want them?

SIGRIST: Yes, I do, please.

PARSEGIAN: My brother's name was Hovanes, which is John in English.

SIGRIST: And if you could spell the names, too, please.

PARSEGIAN: H, uh, capital H-O-V-A-N-E-S, Hovanes. And the sister's name is Satenig, S-A-T-E-N-I-G. And the

third one is Aznive, A-Z-N-I-V-E. And, of course, my name is Varsenig.

SIGRIST: Are you the youngest girl?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, I'm the youngest.

SIGRIST: Armenians have such wonderful women's names. They're just beautiful names. Can, do you have any recollections of your relationship with your brother and sisters, or any kind of, maybe a story that sticks out in your mind...

PARSEGIAN: Well, when my father was away in my earliest years, you see, my brother, being the man of the family, was the one who felt responsible for me. So I grew up really accepting him as the father image, the father. And he kept to that, so that later on when we came to America, I never did quite succeed in accepting my father as the father. Still, he was the father figure. As I told you before, my mother was a quiet woman. She kind of let my oldest sister run the roost. She was the dictatorial older sister, and she kind of kept the

mother image. She, she is the one who named me Varsenig and she used to say, "I am your mother, I am your mother," which had its negative and affirmative. As for Paris, did I mention her, the third sister was Paris, P-A-R-I-S, she was the gentlest, sweetest, nicest person that anyone could ask. As for the last one, Aznive, she is living, past ninety, but unfortunately she has become Alzheimer's.

SIGRIST: Was their one sister, or your brother, that you were particularly close to as a child?

PARSEGIAN: The oldest sister had me, sort of, in her group all the time. She decided for me. She thought about me. And it was a relationship that worked for a while because she was so devoted to me. But came a time when we all grow up. And when I began making my own decisions, there was a break that was not a good one.

SIGRIST: Yeah, well, let's see, you father, he left. Is he in America just prior to your coming or is he in Turkey? I got a little confused because I know he's

going back and forth.

PARSEGIAN: Two years before we came, he kissed me and said, "I'm not coming back again." And he came, and at first he worked in a shoe factory.

SIGRIST: This would be in 1910, probably.

PARSEGIAN: About that.

SIGRIST: Where did he go to? Where was the shoe factory?

PARSEGIAN: We lived in the Lynn, Massachusetts area.

SIGRIST: So he went to the, to the Boston, the greater Boston area.

PARSEGIAN: Boston area, yes.

SIGRIST: Was there a large Armenian population there?

PARSEGIAN: In Boston?

SIGRIST: Yes, in that part of the world.

PARSEGIAN: The people, the people from Harput somehow gathered in the Boston area because they knew each other.

SIGRIST: So his countrymen were there.

PARSEGIAN: His countrymen were there. When we came, and there was a family here. There were not many families here. The men came early and then went back and got married and so on. So my mother sort of was a mother of the area for these people. If they got ill, they came to our house. Sundays the table was set but these bachelor people, these bachelors, homeless ones working hard but having no families, would come. It was always the center for them to gather.

SIGRIST: That's an interesting point, that entire communities were made up of sort of transient males who were just here to make money and either go back and then marry or just go back and stay probably in some cases.

PARSEGIAN: Well, that was so with my father, you see. That's

why he came three times. He never intended to stay here. They loved the land. They loved the place. They loved the culture, their Armenian culture that they had developed. It was only after the massacre that they saw there was no way out.

SIGRIST: And, of course, your family is, you're over here at that point, so your immediately family anyway missed a lot of it.

PARSEGIAN: We were, we were the first of our family to settle here as a family. The rest came after the holocaust.

SIGRIST: Which began in 1915.

PARSEGIAN: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: Tell me, your father is in America. How is your mother supporting the family for the two years while he's over here?

PARSEGIAN: My father sent money.

SIGRIST: Do you remember if you had any ideas of what America was when, when you were in Turkey?

PARSEGIAN: I had no idea what was, I had no idea what was happening.

SIGRIST: Do you remember the point where your mother came to you and said, "Well, we're leaving for America," or "We're about to go,"?

PARSEGIAN: No, they were hastily doing things and I really wasn't a part of that. Just get ready. They, they used to have these, what do you call them, coaches, you know, pulled by horses. And the people who led us out, by the time we came out we had passports. Passports were issued to us. And then they piled in whatever we needed in that coach. And then we rode in the coach and stopped every night at an inn. And they, my mother would build a fire, they had those fireplaces, and cook whatever she was going to cook. And we got all the way to Samsun, that's a Turkish port. And at Samsun we got on a boat and went to Istanbul. From thereon we were taken care of. My father supported us

all the time.

END OF SIDE ONE

BEGINNING OF SIDE TWO

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your family took with you when you left? What did you, what did you carry with you?

PARSEGIAN: This is interesting. My mother took three kilims, kilims are without nap, rugs, sort of a dowry for each one of the three girls. I don't know where the fourth one came in, but there was none for the fourth one. (she laughs) And then she, she took sets of towels, towels for each one of the girls; bath towel, hand towel, wash towel. And then some dishes. We had wooden spoons and forks, wooden, which they had been using there. But

bedding, because when we stopped at these inns, there was no bedding. She spread a, the bed things and the quilts and we slept every night with the bedding. And that bedding came all the way to the United States.

SIGRIST: Tell me, do you remember leaving Harput specifically, like saying "good bye" to any relatives or...

PARSEGIAN: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Now whose traveling? It's your mother. And did your brother come too?

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: And then the four girls.

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Anybody else?

PARSEGIAN: Yes. My cousin came. She was a, of marriageable age, so she came with us although she didn't have a

specific man in mind. The men wanted these women to come, so we brought her. And the there was a couple, no, not a couple, a mother and a son. Her husband, of all places, lived in Troy, New York. So the first name of a city that I remember is this woman is going to Troy, New York. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: And all these years later, you know, you ended up there.

PARSEGIAN: But they had gone. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Does anything, you're talking about staying at these inns and your mother rolling out the bed, how were you fed? Were you fed at these inns, do you remember?

PARSEGIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Did you take food with you?

PARSEGIAN: She had such things as rice and bulgur, which is the wheat germ that was very popular, and whatever she

could find wherever we went. But she had some of the staples with her.

SIGRIST: Do you know if your mother had money with her at all?

PARSEGIAN: No, we were coming to a father who would provide for us and she never worked for a living. And she, right up until he last days, money didn't mean much. She was sort of, I remember that money in our home had a different meaning. Money meant just to get the things that you need. Education, education, education was the thing the whole family harped on. No, although she held the purse. And even after we came to the United States and my father gave her spending money, there was always her purse under her pillow. And the rule of the house is "You need money, you go and take it from there, not from anybody else." And no accounting. But I don't remember ever going and taking money.

SIGRIST: Your needs were probably very simple at that point.

PARSEGIAN: Very simple, and we knew that there wasn't too much

so each one helped the other.

SIGRIST: So you go by coach, eventually arriving in Istanbul.

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Istanbul?

PARSEGIAN: About a week. And...

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about being in the big city?

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Of course, Harput is a big city, too, I realize but Istanbul is a bigger city.

PARSEGIAN: No, Harput could never come up to Istanbul. I remember there were other people going. And the big worry was, "Am I going to pass?" because if you had this eye disease you had to go back. The rule was you couldn't come in. I remember one man was told to take a certain pill so that if there was anything wrong with his eye, it would be all

right before he goes. So instead of taking the amount that was prescribed, he took an awful of it and he became violently sick. So (she laughs) we knew there was this.

SIGRIST: Was there a large processing center in Istanbul where you had to go and be examined and all that sort of thing?

PARSEGIAN: No, I don't remember, no.

SIGRIST: So you board a ship in Istanbul. Is that the ship, oh, I'm sorry, Samsun, you went to Samsun first.

PARSEGIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Right. Sorry about that. Do you, do you have any recollection of the boat trip from Samsun to Istanbul?

PARSEGIAN: No, I don't.

SIGRIST: You just know that it went there.

PARSEGIAN: It went to Istanbul.

SIGRIST: The ship that you got on in Istanbul, was that the ship that you eventually came to the U.S. on?

PARSEGIAN: You know, I really, no, it wasn't. We went from Istanbul to Naples. And I remember we were sitting in the, at the harbor (a telephone rings in the background) waiting for the next boat to come or whatever it was. My, my sister had a mirror, and somebody stole her mirror. And it became quite an issue. Everybody was scared. "This is the country (she laughs) of the thieves! This is the country of the thieves," because they had stolen a mirror.

SIGRIST: Do you, do you remember the name of the ship that you got on in Naples?

PARSEGIAN: I don't know. No, I don't.

SIGRIST: Does anything stick out in your mind about being, you told the story about the mirror and, did the ship stop anywhere else along the way before it got to

Naples?

PARSEGIAN: (she pauses) No, I don't remember. I don't think so. But in Naples was the ship that we took that brought us to Ellis Island.

SIGRIST: What do you remember about the voyage, well, you had to go through the Mediterranean, but across the Atlantic, too. What stick out in...

PARSEGIAN: No, that didn't make an impression on me. What made an impression was we came steerage. And that's the way people used to come. And we would use the bedding that my mother had or maybe she preferred it that way, I don't know. But as a family we had an area and we slept. But they gave us the food, of course, on the boat.

SIGRIST: Do you, was it one big room where everybody was gathered? Is that how you traveled?

PARSEGIAN: As I, as I remember each one took sort of an area but it was one large room. Another family would be nearby.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollections of being in other places on the ship?

PARSEGIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Up on deck or someplace like that?

PARSEGIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Did you get seasick?

PARSEGIAN: I don't remember.

SIGRIST: And not about the other members of the family? Mom didn't get sick that you remember.

PARSEGIAN: Not that it made an impression on me.

SIGRIST: Do you know how long the journey took?

PARSEGIAN: It could have been a week to ten days. I don't know. I'm just guessing at that.

SIGRIST: And it probably could have been quite a bit longer if you count from Harput until the time you got to...

PARSEGIAN: Oh, yes. It took us from Harput, according to my sisters and my mother, a whole week to come with these stops. And then a week in Istanbul. And then a day at Naples, so it must have been a long way.

SIGRIST: Yeah, a few weeks, probably, by the time it all ended.

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: Do you remember when the ship arrived in New York Harbor?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, yes. They pointed out the Statue of Liberty, which didn't have any meaning to me, but this was something to look at. But I do remember that the doctors were standing in line, you see, because this eye examination was so important. And we filed by. And when he came to my sister, the one who is sick in the hospital now, Aznive, he said, "(Turkish)," which is a Turkish way of

saying, "These are Armenian eyes." They, so we passed by. We were all right. And as we came to the other end, my father had designated a friend of his to meet us. He came and met us and they put tags on us, "Lynn, Massachusetts, Lynn, Massachusetts." Now, I don't know where the man took us. In those days, you could go by boat to Massachusetts and by train. I don't think we had buses. I don't know how we got there. And I don't know about where my father picked us up but we did go to the house. And the house was 430 Boston Street, Lynn.

SIGRIST: All of the eye exams and everything you're talking about happened at Ellis Island?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: Do you have any recollection of what time of the year this is that you came?

PARSEGIAN: I think it was November.

SIGRIST: So it was late in the year.

PARSEGIAN: Yes, late in the year.

SIGRIST: And does anything else about Ellis Island stick out in your mind, being there, maybe what it looked like or maybe something you saw that you had never seen before?

PARSEGIAN: A boy was eating something and we had never seen that before. And we were looking at this boy eating this thing. And his mother reached over and got one and gave to my sister, and she said, "No." It was a banana. I know it must have been November because when we were walking out with this man, whether it was at Ellis Island or some part of New York, a woman walked by, by us and then she returned. She took her coat off and gave it to my sister and went on. It's, it's a view that I don't forget.

SIGRIST: Well, you came from a country with a warmer climate and you were probably dressed...

PARSEGIAN: She was probably shivering. (she laughs) I don't

know.

SIGRIST: (he laughs) So this designated [person came and claimed you,...

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: ...brought you to Lynn, Massachusetts...

PARSEGIAN: He didn't bring us to Lynn, Mass. He must have put us on the train...

SIGRIST: Brought you to wherever.

PARSEGIAN: ...or possibly the boat, because there was a boat that used to go overnight. But how he, we got there I don't know.

SIGRIST: What's the first thing that you remember once you got to Lynn?

PARSEGIAN: The house. It was sort of a tenement house, three stories, and there were bedrooms, separate bedrooms. it was a three bedroom house. Of

course, my father and mother occupied one. And my brother slept in the living room. And we, two and two girls. I think that was how it was.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing your father for the first time?

PARSEGIAN: No impression at all, no impression. It's strange how the father image disappears when someone else has become the father.

SIGRIST: And, of course, your brother is with you so...

PARSEGIAN: Yes, yes. My father was a loving father but not demonstrative. And many times we would ask him, "Can we do this?" Can we do that?" He would say, "Ask your brother. Ask your brother." Why, I don't know. But he was a quiet, thinking person. Lynn has a very beautiful, had, a cemetery. In the springtime he would take us children Sunday morning to the cemetery. And we, and he would just look at this and look at that, pause somewhere and allow us to run around, run around. And the summertime, we went to the woods with him. He would

just lie on his back and take in the surrounding. And while we picked, say, blueberries or something like that. This was his father-way of doing things.

SIGRIST: Very sensitive.

PARSEGIAN: Very sensitive, very poetic, very understanding, very lenient. But then there was no, nothing that we did that he could have been otherwise. (she laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about being out into school and what you remember about those initial impressions of being put into school.

PARSEGIAN: The first school I went to was a one room school with a furnace. And they had to feed the coal in to warm that one room. And we were all put there together. Maybe the others were beginners, too. So the four girls were put there. My brother was inclined to art and he was separated from us. But the four of us were in that one room school with the others. Very quickly the older ones moved on and the last two were together all through school. It

was good, it was good.

SIGRIST: What difficulties might you have had at that time, if any?

PARSEGIAN: We talk about prejudice. I, I never had any prejudice. The interesting thing is the one prejudice that I've had in my life as an outsider, I feel bad talking about it, when we were in that one room school the head of the music department of the whole city of Lynn used to come. And he would get me, a little girl, and get me to sing. And he would listen to the melodies, whatever he was going to do. Later on he was my professor at Boston University. And whenever, in the rest of the time right through high school, when there was any musical event, he would pick me out. And we went to the St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Lynn because that's a sister church to the national church. We, not having a church, we were told to go there.

SIGRIST: To the Episcopal...

PARSEGIAN: Yes.

SIGRIST: St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

PARSEGIAN: Yes. And he would, every once in a while my brother played the violin, get me to sing at church with the violin, Armenian song. He was very much interested in that. While I was in junior high a new music teacher came. And miracle of miracles, her name was an Armenian name. Miracle of miracles, I was the first one kicked out of every musical event. it turned out that her father was a minister in the Armenian church, which her mother was non-Armenian. I don't know where she got this dislike. Maybe she disliked my person. Maybe she disliked me for some other reason or it was a larger picture of the Armenian. So, that's the one prejudice in my life that I've had. Otherwise, right through school, college, teaching, I've had no prejudice against me.

SIGRIST: What about learning English? Did you have any experience...?

PARSEGIAN: That was a very fortunate thing. My mother decided that, though we were in America and would have to learn English, the language of the home was to be Armenian. So nothing but Armenian was spoken. And she herself did not learn English until later years. So, we spoke Armenian at home. (she pauses) Then, what I did get in English was the pure English that I got in school. Years later, when I applied for my teaching job, I was accepted purely because my English sounds are supposed to be perfect Bostonian. And that was because, I was told, there was none of that broken English at home. So many, in so many homes of Armenian, the mother was just as anxious to learn English and her children followed the broken English that had grown. So that was a plus. My mother learned Armenian [sic, English] after my father died and she was about sixty five years old. She went to evening school. She learned the English. She applied for her own citizenship on her own schooling. So, when she was going to get the citizenship papers, she went before the judge. And the judge, of course, asks questions. She had taken witnesses with her, my two sister, my older

sisters. And she couldn't answer something the judge asked. And she looked at my sisters as though asking for help. And they giggled instead. They giggled. The judge reprimanded them.

(imitating the serious tone of the judge's voice)

"This woman has sacrificed her life and she has gone to evening school to learn while you went and got your schooling. And now you dare laugh." And really, that was a lesson that we all learned, that chastisement from that judge. In the meantime, of course, she got her citizenship papers and she was very proud to be Red Cross worker during the war and so on.

SIGRIST: Did you ever feel like you sort of straddled two worlds? You have Armenian spoken in the home. I assumed your parents probably maintained a certain amount of old world ways, just an assumption. And yet you're in school. Your young enough where the adaptation is probably easy for you. Did you ever feel like you sort of two different people, that you...?

PARSEGIAN: No, but a peculiar thing happened. Certain subjects that I learned in Armenian, I think in Armenian

when I approach those subjects. Other things that I learned in English I think, of course, with English. Now, the theory is that we have an area in the brain for the first language that takes its place. and all subsequent languages are places that have to be found in the brain. I feel that mine doesn't function that way. There seems to be established two areas equally because I think of things Armenian with the Armenian language and the things that I learned in English in the English language.

SIGRIST: These two completely separate...

PARSEGIAN: Completely separate. Now, I know some people who translate the English, (correcting herself) rather the Armenian, to find the English word for it if their Armenian has been first or visa versa. Never happens to me. It's stable.

SIGRIST: I think it's a very interesting point that you were mentioning that, you know, your English was so good because you didn't speak it at home. I mean, this is, this is very telling of the immigrant

experience to some extent...

PARSEGIAN: Uh huh.

SIGRIST: ...you know, how people of your generation coming in, you know, you're just young enough where the adaptation is probably much more smooth than it might have been for your older sisters, something like that. And that you, you know, that you have your American self and your Armenian self. In our last few minutes, can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved in teaching. And when did that become an interest for you?

PARSEGIAN: Very early. I used to recite Armenian poetry for the Armenian meetings. They used to hold these meetings to keep the Armenian culture, and so on.

SIGRIST: Were these like ethnic societies that...?

PARSEGIAN: Yes, no, political parties, political parties. And I used to recite for them, sort of. Then I went to School of Speech Arts and I became a professional reader, professional because of

it. What was the point?

SIGRIST: You were talking about how you got involved in teaching.

PARSEGIAN: So when I was graduating from college, it was bad times. I, I didn't know what I was going to do. My family had supported me through high school, so the idea was that I would have to go to law school to get something that would be meaningful. Why we were in the process of thinking about it, a friend of mine who used to come to the college for other things, said, "What are you going to do when you graduate?" I said, "I don't know. I'm considering law school." She said, "Would you like to teach?" I said, "Yes." So she introduced me to the principal of the School For The Deaf, where they needed people who had perfect mouth positions for lip reading. And also perfect speech so that the deaf children could read the lips.

So, it turned out that the principal of the school was of the famous Adams family and she took to me, "my little Armenian girl," you see, "my little Armenian girl." And she made it possible for me to take the

teaching job without any of the teacher education courses. I made that up later. So, from there I went on to be a correctionist and now I'm kind of fiddling with linguistics.

SIGRIST: What is a correctionist?

PARSEGIAN: Well, if a child stutters, stammers or has a split lip or whatever.

SIGRIST: How did your parents feel about, about your teaching career, your aspirations towards a teaching career?

PARSEGIAN: Oh, they were very proud. My first check my father took to the bank and he cashed it. And the bank clerk said, "Who in your family gets a check from the Boston school system?" "My daughter." As I pointed out, in our home it was not money. Money was for people who couldn't do anything else. Education was first. And in those days, my three sisters went through high school. Two of them went into art. The third one became a public stenographer, in those days you know.

SIGRIST: Followed a more, sort of, practical is the wrong word but it was more, sort of, practical craft or...

PARSEGIAN: Well, Armenian girls did not go to college in those days. Armenian girls did not become public secretaries, so, no, my parents were very glad that we could do that and that they could help us. But we were never rich. As a matter of fact, we never even owned a house.

SIGRIST: Did your parents ever want to go back to Turkey?

PARSEGIAN: No.

SIGRIST: Even for a visit, to see...

PARSEGIAN: No. My father had a bad, bad experience and my mother used to say, "When I set foot in this land, I lived a hundred years." There was a hundred years difference in her opinion.

SIGRIST: Is there an Armenian poem, you mentioned you used to recite poetry in Armenian, is there an Armenian

poem, fairly short, that you could recite for us so that we could just hear the flow of the language on tape?

PARSEGIAN: (she recites a poem in Armenian) The translation is that when my, the world over, when children go to school, what is the first book they read? A, B, C. A, B, C. Such as Byron, Hugo, Schiller and Durian[ph] is the Armenian poet. When they bloomed, what did they read for their first lesson? (Armenian) It's A, B, C.

SIGRIST: Thank you. Is there something in your to this day that is inherently Armenian?

PARSEGIAN: Oh, yes.

SIGRIST: One thing. What is the strongest, inherently Armenian thing about you?

PARSEGIAN: I love Armenia, the land of the Armenians. I love it. When it became Soviet and when I had the money, when it became independent and I had the money, I went back and forth thirteen times because I loved

that people. I love that land. I love it now. I'd love it under any circumstance. I love my people.

SIGRIST: Well, Mrs. Parsegian, thank you very much for letting me interview you. It was a surprise. I'm glad I asked.

PARSEGIAN: You're welcome.

SIGRIST: This is Paul signing off with Varsenig Parsegian on Monday, July 11th, 1994 in the town of Brunswick just outside of Troy. Thank you very much.

PARSEGIAN: Well, I'm looking...