

EI-499/BARSAMIAN

EI-499

JOHN BARSAMIAN

BIRTH DATE: SEPTEMBER 25, 1906

INTERVIEW DATE: JULY 12, 1994

RUNNING TIME: 57:40

INTERVIEWER: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR.

RECORDING ENGINEER: SAME

INTERVIEW LOCATION: TROY, NEW YORK

TRANSCRIPT PREPARED AND REVIEWED BY: PAUL E. SIGRIST, JR., 7/1998

RUSSIA VIA TURKEY (ARMENIAN), 1923

AGE 17

SHIP RECALLED AS "THE KING GEORGE"

SIGRIST: Good morning, this is Paul Sigrist for the National Park Service. Today is Tuesday, July 12th, 1994. I am in Troy, New York, with John Barsamian. Mr. Barsamian came to the United States from Turkey in 1923. He was not quite eighteen when he came. And he came through Ellis Island and stayed there for four days, correct? Also, the listener to this tape will hear a refrigerator in the background. Anyway, thank you very much for letting me come out. Can we begin with you giving me your birth date?

BARSAMIAN: January, no, September...

SIGRIST: September.

BARSAMIAN: September 25, 1906.

SIGRIST: Can you tell me about the town that you grew up in?

BARSAMIAN: Well, I grew up, was in Novorossiysk in Russia. I went to school for a while. And then they had a war. And then they had a revolution, a Russian, Bolshevik Revolution. And my father left Turkey to, uh, Russia. And then Russia, we had a revolution, then we come back to Istanbul again. Was good for a while until 1923, when the young Mustafa Kemal [Kemal Ataturk, in power: 1923-1938] took the government over. It got rough. So, so my father told me to go to America. And...

SIGRIST: Tell me what you remember about being a little child.

BARSAMIAN: Not a hell of a lot, to tell the truth.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what kinds of food you ate when you were a little boy?

BARSAMIAN: (he pauses) We had, all I can tell you, we had a lot of Armenian pilaf. We had a lot of lamb, yogurt...

SIGRIST: Do you know how people made yogurt?

BARSAMIAN: Uh, yeah. They get, they get the milk and boil it. And then they had the, they make their own yogurt in homes. My mother used to make it. I could make it today if I wanted.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your house looked like?

BARSAMIAN: They were all, they were all one story, couple large rooms with like a bedroom but no bathroom in the house. There was no running water.

SIGRIST: Do you know what the house was made out of? What did they make the house out of?

BARSAMIAN: Oh, they were made good. Out of wood or brick. I don't remember to tell the truth, but they were strong houses.

SIGRIST: Did you go to school when you were a little boy?

BARSAMIAN: Yeah, I went to school for a, for a while. The reason is they don't have too much education there, I don't have it now, because we traveled from Russia to Turkey, from Turkey back to Russia, and the Revolution, Bolshevik. And we, we couldn't go to school.

NEW YORK  
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SIGRIST: How long did you stay in Palermo before the ship took off for America?

BARSAMIAN: Two days.

SIGRIST: Two days. Do you remember anything about the other ports that you stopped in?

BARSAMIAN: Well, we stop in the Pirea [sic, Piraeus], we had bad weather. We got soaked so we didn't see too much. I, I got so, we got so soaked. By the time we got back to the boat, we were all drenched. So we, we forgot what we see in the Greece.

SIGRIST: Do you remember where you slept on the ship?

BAR SAMIAN: (he laughs) Uh, what, what do you call it? (he gestures)

SIGRIST: Like bunk beds?

BAR SAMIAN: Beds, bunk beds, that's it. Bunk beds.

SIGRIST: What, what class were you traveling?

BAR SAMIAN: Uh, what do you call that? Not first, second, third...

SIGRIST: Steerage? Steerage? You were in third class or below that?

BAR SAMIAN: Below that.

SIGRIST: The steerage class.

BAR SAMIAN: Well, I won't, I don't know what that means to me, uh...

SIGRIST: It was the cheapest way to go.

BAR SAMIAN: Yeah, right.

SIGRIST: Right. Were you all in one big room?

BARSAMIAN: Uh, the men were separate, the women were separate, yeah. But they did have a first, second class. The boat had it.

SIGRIST: Do you remember eating on the ship?

BARSAMIAN: Tell the truth I don't remember. I'll be frank with you.

SIGRIST: How long did it take to go from Palermo to New York?

BARSAMIAN: (pointing to his immigration papers on the table)  
Well, there it is. I was there in June. There it is.

SIGRIST: We're looking at his immigration papers.

BARSAMIAN: See, June.

SIGRIST: You arrived in Palermo on June 15th.

BARSAMIAN: 15th. And we got, arrived, arrived here in the States July the 4th, the 4th of July day.

SIGRIST: You arrived on the 4th of July of 1923.

BARSAMIAN: The reason I remember, we got in Ellis, Ellis Island.

They was told, "Today is a holiday, the 4th of July."  
I don't know what was, it means. And, fortunately  
there was Armenian interpreter. He worked there. He  
came to me and he says, "What's the matter, son?" I  
says, "I don't know." He says, "Have you got enough  
money?" I says, "Yeah, I got money. I got about  
three, four dollars my father gave me." He says,  
"That's not enough money." He says, "We're going to  
wire your uncle in Troy so he'll send money, about  
fifty dollars, so you can buy your ticket and you can  
go back to your family." So I never forget, I was  
there four days. On the fourth day he came, the same  
gentleman, the Armenian. He says, "We got the money.  
There's the ticket. We're going to send you." And  
then I had about four, five tags on my coat. But I  
don't remember how I got, I left Ellis Island. I  
remember how I got to Grand Central. But I remember  
they put me in a train. And I got here in Troy about  
midnight and my family met me in Troy.

SIGRIST: Do you remember seeing the Statue of Liberty when...

BARSAMIAN: Yes, yes.

SIGRIST: ...the boat docked? What do you remember about that?

BARSAMIAN: Uh, I was told that we was just going to arrive in the  
port. We was going to arrive at the Statue of

Liberty. And we were all, the boat took slowly, and we see the big Statue of Liberty standing in, in the island. It was about five o'clock in the evening. It treated well good. I tell you, I like that, very nice. We had a lot of fun in there, in Palermo.

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there four days. On the fourth day he came, the same gentleman, the Armenian. He says, "We got the money. There's the ticket. We're going to send you." And then I had about four, five tags on my coat. But I don't remember how I got, I left Ellis Island. I remember how I got to Grand Central. But I remember they put me in a train. And I got here in Troy about midnight and my family met me in Troy.

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BARSAMIAN: Uh, I was told that we was just going to arrive in the port. We was going to arrive at the Statue of Liberty. And we were all, the boat took slowly, and we see the big Statue of Liberty standing in, in the island. It was about five o'clock in the evening. It me.

SIGRIST: Did you know these people?

BARSAMIAN: No. I never see them but I see them through the pictures.

SIGRIST: Where did they take you?

BARSAMIAN: They take you in their home. They live in Troy at Ninth Street. When I got there in 1923, they live there in Ninth Street. They had a nice apartment, running water, bathroom, part electric and part of gas in those, and I told be careful the gas. Don't touch it. They usually put a light on for me at night time and put it out themselves so they won't get (?).

SIGRIST: How did you spend your first night in America? Did they have a dinner for you?

BARSAMIAN: Oh they, they gave a dinner and talk about my parents now and all that. But I was like, I was too tired, lonesome, missed my parents, you know.

SIGRIST: Were you put into school or did you get a job?

BARSAMIAN: I got a job.

SIGRIST: What was the first job you got?

BARSAMIAN: The first job I got was in a fruit store. The reason I got a job in a fruit store was because my cousin used to worked there. And then they was going to leave Troy and go to Northampton [Massachusetts]. They had better field. So they never, hell of a time to get him. He says, "I'm going to go. Why don't you work here?" And he spoke to the owner. Fellow says,

"Okay." But I couldn't say a word of English. A week later, I arrive, a week later they gave me the job in the fruit store. Well, it was a combination. They had a fruit store and a grocery, ice cream, in the old days. And they got me job. I work with them.

SIGRIST: What kinds of things did you have to do with that job?

BARSAMIAN: Well, at first I had to clean the windows, mop the floor here and there because I couldn't say a word. As I got along, people would come in. They'd want a bread, I'd know where the bread was, where the milk was and where was bananas and stuff were. I work with them eight, nine years.

SIGRIST: Oh, a long time.

BARSAMIAN: They were nice people. They were good to me. In fact, they signed the petition for my parents.

SIGRIST: When your parents came in 1929?

BARSAMIAN: That's right. I left that firm in 1932 or '33. I work for nine, between nine and ten years I work for them.

SIGRIST: Do you remember what your salary was with them when you first started?

BARSAMIAN: Eight dollars.

SIGRIST: Eight dollars a week? (Mr. Barsamian nods) Now, did you have to pay any kind of board out of that? Did you have to, were you living with your uncle and aunt?

BARSAMIAN: For my aunt and my cousin, yeah.

SIGRIST: Did you pay your aunt some money out of that?

BARSAMIAN: Uh, no. They didn't want no room and board, no.

SIGRIST: How long did you live with your uncle and aunt?

BARSAMIAN: About three months.

SIGRIST: Then where did you go?

BARSAMIAN: And then I had aunt on the following (microphone disturbance), on the following street. They made arrangements for me to go with my aunt. I went over to my aunt's house. They gave me a room. Oh, they had a nice house. Hot water, cold water, you could take a, uh, but I didn't care so much. So I had a cousin of mine, well, cousin to my mother. Second or third cousin. He was around a tailor shop. His name was Minas [ph]. I said, "Minas [ph], do me a favor. If I'm in a room, I can be much comfortable." He says, "All right. No problem." Well, there was lady up on Ninth Street who had two, three extra room. She

took me and gave me the room. A dollar and a half a week. A dollar and half a week just to stay there. Soon as my family left for Northampton, soon as I left my aunt, when I moved in my room, I'd get, in the morning go down the restaurant and have my breakfast because I work there. And during the day I usually eat in a restaurant. And in the night time (?). To keep myself healthy and well, I had a friend of mine make me join the Y.M.C.A. And I'll join the Y.M.C.A. I should go over there and take my bath, clean myself. And it got so I began to like the Y.M.C.A. And my mail came through the Y.M.C.A., although there was Ninth Street but I used to hang around in the Y.M.C.A. The reason I hang around over there, they had an (amateur?) club. I joined the (amateur?) club, although I didn't speak much English, you know. And then we used to go down (?) to the (?) Park, uh, Lake for recreation. And I was a member of the Y. almost ten years after my family came.

SIGRIST: Tell me how you learned English?

BARSAMIAN: Going to night school.

SIGRIST: Describe for me what it was like going to night school.

BARSAMIAN: Not easy. Well, I know a little bit because Eng--,

you see, when you live in Istanbul, you have then the three or four languages. First, the Armenian, I know that. The Turkish, you have to know that because it's, and the Greek you learn because you play with the boys. And the French, also popular in Istanbul. So, if the intelligent man, intelligent boy, I'll say, who has no problem, they should know those four languages. Not all but some, to tell their name, where their going, come from, want they want and all that. So I, see, when I came here, I needed a haircut. So, where I work here there is a barber, barbershop next door. They were French, French Canadian, French. Would you know I could speak a little French. We got to be great friends. And the next, uh, and the next store were the Greek shoeshine shop those days and hat cleaners. They don't have that today. And, you know, I was, I know Greek a little bit, become friends. Right next door there was a (?) lunch. They was Greek people, come from Salonika and they had an American restaurant. Soon as they found out I come from Istanbul, oh, we become great friends and I had no problem for food at night time because they would cook Greek food and Turkish for themselves and save some for me. In the meantime, I begin learn about what string bean was, what the steak was, what the corned beef was, I pick up it. But first six, ah, first six months I did have a problem but after no problem.

SIGRIST: Did you find, when you were in Troy, that, that people made fun of you because you were an immigrant?

BARSAMIAN: Uh, no. I didn't (?) anybody (?). No. And I went to night school for about two or three years. And in the meantime I went to Troy College. I took a little math for two years, although I didn't know too much English but Mr. Backisto [ph], who trade where I work, he knew I was and talked to me. So somehow I went up, I went up about two nights, uh (correcting himself) two years of night schools lady up on Ninth Street who had two, three extra room. She took me and gave me the room. A dollar and a half a week. A dollar and half a week just to stay there. Soon as my family left for Northampton, soon as I left my aunt, when I moved in my room, I'd get, in the morning go down the restaurant and have my breakfast because I work there. And during the day I usually eat in a restaurant. And in the night time (?). To keep myself healthy and well, I had a friend of mine make me join the Y.M.C.A. And I'll join the Y.M.C.A. I should go over there and take my bath, clean myself. And it got so I began to like the Y.M.C.A. And my mail came through the Y.M.C.A., although there was Ninth Street but I used to hang around in the Y.M.C.A. The reason I hang around over there, they had an (amateur?) club. I joined the (amateur?) club, although I didn't speak much English, you know. And

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SIGRIST: Tell me about becoming a citizen and what you had to go through to get your citizenship papers.

BARSAMIAN: In my day it was easy. I think it was, first papers

were one dollar, two dollars. But two years you go over and get second, second papers, and the fifth you go in front of the judge. I'll never forget, I went in front of the judge, Judge Russell. He asked me a couple of questions. "Who is the president? Who is the governor? And who is the mayor? Who makes law?" Congress. About four or five questions. He says, "You're doing fine." Signed the papers. And then, in fact, after that I become two witnesses for my people who want to become a citizen.

SIGRIST: How did you feel when you became a citizen?

BARSAMIAN: Oh, you have no idea. We were weightless, like in the air, oh! It was, everything was free, I mean, you know, everything was nice. No, nothing to worry about, don't worry about the police, no worrying about anything. The dollar was yours. You could go into any store you wanted. All the freedom. (he laughs)

SIGRIST: Tell me about when your parents came here, tell me about how they adjusted to this country.

BARSAMIAN: They had no problem adjusting. They had no problem. See, if people come from Istanbul, they're a little educated. Not like, you know, Turkey or in Russia or other places. Istanbul is a, it's a good, you know, good country, well educated, intelligent a lot of people. In fact, over there they have three or four

colleges.

SIGRIST: It's a big city.

BARSAMIAN: Yeah. I think one they have in Turkey, Robert [ph] College is for the American people for, to engineering. And then they have a military school. Oh, Turkey has, you know, in fact, the Armenian people had four or five schools, high schools, colleges. In fact, the Armenian people in Istanbul, they had their own, they had their own hospital. They were wealthy.

SIGRIST: Now, when you came to Troy, did you start going to church?

BARSAMIAN: Uh, not in the beginning, but later I did. Later I did.

SIGRIST: Was there a big Armenian population in Troy?

BARSAMIAN: In Troy? At that time I think it was three, four hundred, maybe five hundred Armenians at that time. I would say maybe five hundred. Maybe a thousand, I don't know. There was a whole lot of Armenians. I never count them but I know there was a lot of Armenians in Troy.

SIGRIST: Did you ever want to go back to Turkey?

BARSAMIAN: No, after coming here.

SIGRIST: What about your parents? Did they ever want, once they got here did they ever want to...

BARSAMIAN: Oh, they, they love it. They love it, yeah.

SIGRIST: Is there something that your father or your mother taught you when you were a child, like a way of living, that has carried you through your whole life?

BARSAMIAN: No, but we talk about relatives, how they missed it. How they used to get together, cousins, uncles, so forth, yeah.

SIGRIST: That was important to your mother and father, to have their family around them?

BARSAMIAN: Yeah.

SIGRIST: Did your mother and father have other family that they brought over after they got here?

BARSAMIAN: No.

SIGRIST: They were the last.

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came, yes, but on my, not on our side.

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SIGRIST:sand people working in a six story building with a (common mail clerk supply?), when he sees the directors of the Administration Building, so forth, so forth, you know, and the couple that always worked for the department, the payroll department, about fifty, sixty people (?) Surprise for him. When they see my wife. So I said, "What are you doing here?" She says, "They invite me to, to a party." Let me see, your first name was...

SIGRIST: Paul. Paul.

BARSAMIAN: Paul, oh, (referring to Mr. Sigrist's business card) you gave me. I'm not sad that I came here. I enjoyed this country here and they were good to me. And I was good to the country. I pay my taxes. I obeyed the law.

SIGRIST: Mr. Barsamian, I want to thank you very much for letting me ask you questions.

BARSAMIAN: You want to hear more? (Mr. Sigrist nods) Then, then I got married.

SIGRIST: What year?

BARSAMIAN: 1933.

SIGRIST: What was the name of your wife?

BARSAMIAN: Virginia [maiden name: Tashjian]. And then we have two children, a boy and a daughter.

SIGRIST: And what are their names?

BARSAMIAN: Names Albert and Mary.

SIGRIST: How many grandchildren do you have?

BARSAMIAN: Two, Tommy and Bonnie. They're both doing good.

SIGRIST: Great.

BARSAMIAN: My son went through the college, law school. He's an attorney at law right now. Uh, my daughter went to school, high school, so forth. (unintelligible) She married a fellow by the name of Kalto [ph]. He's

attorney for the city of New York. My granddaughter  
is become lawyer in New York City. My other  
granddaughter become a banker.

SIGRIST: They all did well.

BARSAMIAN: And I lost my wife three years ago.

SIGRIST: What was her maiden name?

BARSAMIAN: Tashjian. (he reaches for paper and a pencil)

SIGRIST: Spell it out. (Mr. Barsamian hands him the paper)  
That's spelled T-A-S-H-J-I-A-N. Had she come from the  
other side or was she born here?

BARSAMIAN: She come the other side.

SIGRIST: Mr. Barsamian, we need to end now, but I want to thank  
you very much for letting me come out and do the  
interview.

BARSAMIAN: No problem.

SIGRIST: I appreciate it.

BARSAMIAN: I hope you liked what I said.

SIGRIST: I liked it very much. This is Paul Sigrist signing  
off with John Barsamian on July 12th, 1994, a Tuesday

morning. (a knock at the door)

BARSAMIAN: Oh, come in.

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